



Reviews

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Diletta de Cristofaro, *The Contemporary Post-apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, £29.99 paper, £100.00 cloth). Pp. 195. ISBN 978 1 3502 3593 9, 978 1 3500 8577 0.

Elizabeth Freeman, *Beside You in Time: Sense Methods & Queer Sociabilities in the American 19th Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, \$26.95 paper, £102.95 cloth). Pp. 228. ISBN 978 1 4780 0633 0, 978 1 4780 0504 9.

These recent books by Diletta de Cristofaro and Elizabeth Freeman represent divergent approaches to literary time studies. In fact, one might say that these two books do not mean the same thing when employing the word “time” or its cognates. In Cristofaro’s analysis, time is structured by grand narratives, most often teleological, of apocalyptic end points, religious, political, or environmental. Temporal organization begins at the level of metanarrative. For Freeman, time is far more intimate, tied to individual feeling and the sensory experiences of the body. While Freeman is also interested in shared temporality, her sense of the collective originates from the individual body and its affective relations to others. What Cristofaro and Freeman have in common is a belief that time is always political, and that these politics can be illuminated by observing how time is represented and created in literary works.

Cristofaro begins her study with a rewarding exposition of the meaning of “apocalypse” from its religious origins to its contemporary, usually more secular, usage. As Cristofaro explains, the idea of apocalypse was always political, as the biblical Book of Revelation originated in the context of resistance to the Roman Empire. The anticipation of judgment and a better world to come explicitly refutes the extant political order. This prophetic text established the narrative form that would evolve into more secular but equally teleological interpretations of history, including those of Hegel and Marx. While apocalyptic narratives have often been associated with resistance to power, their “moral dualism” of conflict between good and evil means that they also have the potential to support oppressive regimes such as those of European colonial expansion, a process that Cristofaro calls “profoundly apocalyptic” (12). Cristofaro astutely points out that the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel finds meaning in the wake of this apocalyptic tradition, which has continued to flourish in the neoliberal age. Cristofaro focusses on novels that undertake “the deconstruction of traditional apocalyptic logic” through “critical temporalities” (158), forms of insurgent narrative time that reveal how apocalyptic beliefs have buttressed the ideological structures of Western modernity.

The novels that make up Cristofaro’s post-apocalyptic canon include parodies and satires of organized religion and of American nationalism as well as less ludic critiques

of “the capitalist world system” and sense of doom embedded in Anthropocene climate change (23). Tom Perrota’s *The Leftovers* spoofs popular evangelical expectations of a coming rapture, while Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* undercuts the “exceptionalist mythology” at the heart of both post-9/11 millennial rhetoric and popular zombie apocalypse scenarios (67). In *Cloud Atlas*, David Mitchell develops a complex temporal layering, apparently beginning with a cyclical storytelling structure evocative of Nietzsche’s theory of eternal recurrence, only to undercut this with less deterministic jumps and interruptions in narrative flow. Cristofaro observes how a metaphor articulated by the character Timothy, “Time’s Boomerang,” suggests a novel form of temporal movement that is neither cyclical nor linear (108). What appears to unite these disparate narratives is a common sense that post-apocalyptic scenarios always manifest the contradictory understandings of time, progress, and crisis that structure and imperil our own pre-apocalyptic world. All of the novels discussed in detail are also, as Cristofaro acknowledges, the works of authors with reputations for mainstream literary fiction. Cristofaro’s choice to focus on “British and American non-SF authors” allows for a deep immersion in the intriguing contemporary phenomenon of ostensibly more serious writers dabbling in genre fiction. This decision does mean, however, excluding many intriguing writers who do identify their work with the science fiction genre (such as N. K. Jemisin and Kim Stanley Robinson). As Cristofaro acknowledges in her conclusion, the construction of an archive inevitably makes claims about the nature of the past and the future. Cristofaro hopes that her archive of post-apocalyptic novels will “counter power’s deterministic apocalyptic history and support the readers’ agency to shape the future” (168).

While Cristofaro’s analysis undoubtedly contributes to this inspiring goal, a more broadly democratic approach might have incorporated not only popular genre fiction, such as science fiction and horror, but also comic books (such as Kelly Sue DeConnick’s feminist *Bitch Planet* series) and video games (such as Naughty Dog’s immersive *The Last of Us*). Post-apocalyptic narratives have flourished in all of these areas of cultural production, and scholars have developed critical tools for analyzing these media as important narrative forms (Colin Milburn’s work on “technogenic life” is one relevant example).¹ What’s more, Cristofaro might have discovered significantly different modes of critical temporality by expanding the scope of her analysis beyond North America and Britain. As the Nigerian science fiction and fantasy author Suyi Okungbowa has observed, “the baseline for the definition of abnormalcy” in most post-apocalyptic fiction is an economically privileged one that fosters a sorrow for the loss of things that most of the world has never possessed.² Less privileged groups would be less likely to long for a return to the past than they would be “to look *forward*, towards a future time when all they have ever known will change for the better,” a scenario portrayed in Okungbowa’s *David Mogo: Godhunter*, a novel excluded from the scope of Cristofaro’s study both because it is unabashed genre fiction and because of its setting in a post-apocalyptic Lagos rather than in the

¹ Colin Milburn, *Respawn: Gamers, Hackers, and Technogenic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

² Suyi Okungbowa, “Post for Whom? Examining the Socioeconomics of a Post-apocalypse,” *Strange Horizons*, Fund Drive 2019 issue, <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/post-for-whom-examining-the-socioeconomics-of-a-post-apocalypse>.

wealthier countries to the north and west. Expanding the scope of the study to encompass more popular and more globally diverse texts and media would only enhance the critical potential and value of the trenchant paradigms and methods Cristofaro has developed in her fascinating account of elite literary fiction in a small part of the world.

Despite not including a reference to literature in the title or subtitle, Freeman's book is also organized primarily around close readings of a series of novels. Freeman is well known as a cultural historian and theorist of time, having penned the classic monograph *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010). While that work ranged widely across film, video, sculpture, and other art forms, *Beside You in Time* takes less of a cultural-studies approach and focusses more on literary analysis. Although queer theory remains an important component of Freeman's methodology, perspectives drawn from critical race theory have now become more prominent than they were in her earlier work. What remains consistent is Freeman's practice of using the word "queer" expansively and elastically to refer to strange phenomena of many sorts. In this respect, she keeps company with other well-known theorists of queer temporalities, such as Carolyn Dinshaw and Dana Luciano. For most participants in this loosely affiliated and diverse critical school, the fact that queerness cannot be precisely defined is the term's greatest strength.

Freeman is more forthcoming, though not necessarily more exact, when coining her own new expressions, such as "sense-methods," which are "temporal encounters" between bodies in which time is experienced as "a visceral, haptic, proprioceptive mode of apprehension – a way of feeling and organizing the world through and with the individual body, often in concert with other bodies" (8). The language of sensation used here pervades the entire book, as Freeman links intellectual and cultural constructs with the libidinal energies of the body. Even when Freeman does turn to historical time, her emphasis is on how "the sensate body is itself a method of knowledge and transformation" (89). Within this theory of "sense-methods," the "time-sense" is one register, "a method for creating sociability" between bodies (9). These definitions risk circularity, given that Freeman has already defined all sense-methods as "temporal encounters." Freeman redirects this apparent confusion of categories with subsequent definitions of sense-methods as "bodywork, of inarticulated or unspoken, carnal forms of knowledge, intervention, and affiliation inhabited and performed either in groups or on behalf of them" (10), and then as "a queer theory of relationality and sociability" (12). These proliferating characterizations suggest the richness of Freeman's theoretical apparatus as well as the difficulty readers might encounter in pinning down precisely what the terminology refers to.

By deferring any definitive position, Freeman mimics the elusive strategies of the texts she analyzes. Resistance to the normative use of language is an important part of her agenda. Readers familiar with Foucault's *History of Sexuality* will anticipate Freeman's identification of sense-methods with Foucault's utopian notion of bodily sensation outside discourse. However, Freeman in fact wants to distinguish her own argument from Foucault's work on the body as well as from his influential theory of biopower. Whereas Foucault's discursive systems allow little possibility for resistance to power (at least as Freeman glosses Foucault), Freeman depicts the libidinal body in informal coordination with other bodies as preceding discourse and thus as a site not only resistant to power but also possessing "a relationality that does not always refer to or result in a stable social form but instead *moves*, with and against, dominant timings and times" (12, original emphasis). Thus, despite the various efforts at definition, it turns out that sense-methods are like queerness in that their

potentialities depend upon their ability to elude capture by systems of power and knowledge. This emphasis on a fluid relationality applies equally well to Freeman's analysis of the literary texts she considers and to her own theoretical lexicon.

This brief introduction to Freeman's ideas should make clear that *Beside You in Time* is considerably more recondite than Cristofaro's book. Nonetheless, when readers get into the close readings that make up the bulk of Freeman's discussion, they will find that she is a lucid and illuminating literary interpreter. The first chapter following the introduction situates Catharine Maria Sedgwick's novel *Redwood* in relation to Shaker dance, a form of bodily movement that provoked anxious and racialized commentaries from contemporary observers. The next two chapters continue the analysis of temporality and racialized thinking with a focus on African American life writing, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*. With reference to Twain and Hopkins, Freeman trenchantly exposes the connections between colonialist conceptions of racial identity and mainstream historical thinking. The final two chapters address the chronic time of illness, as represented in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha," and the sensuous temporality of ecstatic religion, as depicted in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. This last topic brings the discussion back, full circle, to the analysis of Shaker dance in the first chapter, suggesting the interconnections between all of the topics discussed.

Through this series of literary interpretations, Freeman educates the architecture of four temporal orders of bodily control: the order of secularity, the order of chattel slavery, the order of academic history and periodization, and the order of chronic time. In each case, Freeman shows not only how power instantiates itself through the imposition of temporal orders onto the felt experience of embodiment, but also how bodies can resist exploitation and appropriation through the subversion of these orders. Narratives of chronic time, for example, can be read as "stories of attrition, erosion, exhaustion, and decline that are also stories of endurance, protraction, persistence, and dilation in spite of it all" (127). In her conclusion, Freeman emphasizes that the liberatory potential of these practices of timing can only arise in social contexts. The orientation of bodies toward one another in time can support oppressive systems of biopolitics and ideological historicism, but it also unleashes the possibility of collective rhythm that can "conceptualize social formation beyond and beside the linguistic, as an embodied and affective process" (190). The concept of "sense-methods" is thus meant to inspire embodied sociability in the present time.

Taken together, these two books demonstrate the diversity and creativity of contemporary academic theorizing about time. They will both be essential reading for scholars working in the area of time studies, whether in specifically literary contexts or more broadly.

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Michella M. Marino, *Roller Derby: The History of an American Sport* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021, \$35.00). Pp. 296. ISBN 978 1 4773 2382 3.

Since its modern inception from the mind of Leo Seltzer in the 1930s, roller derby has existed in a space between sport and entertainment where American notions of gender