

Subjective Time and the Challenge of Social Synchronization

Gabrielle Roy's *The Road Past
Altamont* and Catherine Bush's
Minus Time

In his inquiry into different conceptualizations of time, Christopher Dewdney raises a question about how we, as individuals, might hope to reconcile the fact that “our collective sense of the present, the one we all agree upon, is not the same as our private sense of ‘now’” (10). Our experiences of time are deeply personal even while they are tied to social life. The tensions that can arise between these different layers of temporality lead to what Daniel Coleman describes as a sometimes fraught negotiation of our conceptual images of time, or chronotopes: “We construct chronotopes in an ongoing dialogue between individual and collective experience, and much of our personal sense of belonging has to do with the fit between our individual time-space maps and those of the communities in which we live” (231). This matter of “fit,” as well as the articulation of different temporal structures themselves, is intimately connected with our everyday use of narrative. In his seminal study *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur asserts that “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative” (1: 3), and that narrative itself is the only thing which allows us to take “the subject of an action, so designated by his, her, or its proper name, as the same throughout a life that stretches from birth to death” (3: 246). The perception of any constant identity or relationship is possible only through the perception of continuity, the perception that past events are related to present and future events, and that one moment in time can be understood in terms of another. The upshot is that our distinctive experiences of time, which are shaped largely through social relations and tensions, equate very closely to our distinctive identities. Thinking through the complexities of

subjective time—a task to which thoughtful literary narratives are especially well suited—allows us to understand how subjective time is shaped by, and lies in tension with, broader forms of social and temporal relations.

In this article I offer two case studies on the above concerns by reading the tensions between subjective time and sociality in Gabrielle Roy's short story cycle *The Road Past Altamont* (*La route d'Altamont*, 1966) and Catherine Bush's novel *Minus Time* (1993). While the two books examine strikingly different temporal circumstances—francophone settler culture in early twentieth-century Manitoba and the implications of orbital space travel for a Torontonian family near the end of the twentieth century—both works clarify the ways in which broad social temporalities must be understood through individual temporal experiences, as well as the ways in which subjective time, and thus the very notion of identity, must be understood through the context of social factors which include not only cultural chronotopes, but other forms of social circumstance such as the need for intimacy with others, the flux of familial relations, and the ambiguous effects of new technologies. I suggest in particular that the desire for various levels of social synchronization is key to reading subjective experiences of time, that certain forms of social tension on the level of the family, the society, and even the ecosphere, can best be understood as forms of desynchronization, and that fleeting moments of partial synchronization are deeply necessary for fostering intimacy and connection between individuals, even while total synchronization remains not only elusive, but in fact by definition impossible.

Why examine these two particular texts? Following A. A. Mendilow's distinction between "tales of time" and "tales about time," Paul Ricoeur argues that "[a]ll fictional narratives are 'tales of time' inasmuch as the structural transformations that affect the situations and characters take time. However only a few are 'tales about time' inasmuch as in them it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations" (2: 101). Mark Currie, however, points out that the above distinction requires the critic to make a risky judgment about which concern is primarily at stake in a narrative; he suggests that instead of asking whether a particular narrative is "about time," critics can more productively ask what a given narrative *knows* about time (111). While *The Road Past Altamont* and *Minus Time* could largely be understood as narratives "about time," there is no question that each book knows something significant about time, and about the difficult relationship between subjective time and social synchronization

in particular. The sustained focus on this problem within the two texts deserves illumination, and becomes especially revealing when the books are read alongside one another. Even while the works share a similar conceptual problem, they respond to very different cultural moments: the boundary between modernism and postmodernism for Roy, and the late stages of the postmodern era for Bush. While both works speak to the particular social concerns of their respective eras, they also allow for strikingly compatible conclusions about the paradoxical human need for forms of social synchronization that can never be maintained, suggesting that the troubled desire for synchronization remains a vital concern in the investigation of identity and subjective time despite the radical cultural changes visible across the span of the twentieth century.¹

Like Gabrielle Roy herself, the protagonist Christine in *The Road Past Altamont* is born in Manitoba early in the twentieth century to francophone parents who had immigrated to the prairies from Quebec. While some critics refer to the book as a novel, it is usually seen as a short story cycle, in that the four sections, which examine four different periods of time in Christine's youth and young adulthood, are comprehensible on their own but are best understood as building on one another to establish a fuller perspective on Christine's growth into adulthood and her decision to become a writer. (As such, the book is a *Künstlerroman*, if we allow that a work which leans more towards the short story cycle form can still usefully be described as an "artist's novel.") Critical commentary has often focused on Roy's representation of the prairie landscape, but the subjective experience of time in informing both personal identity and intimate social relations is also a central theme. As Christine gradually comes of age, she learns through interactions with those close to her that the temporal bonds which tie family members and friends together simultaneously preclude the possibility of complete temporal coexistence. While individuals are connected to one another by virtue of the fact that everyone ages, by partially overlapping lifespans, by the inevitability of death, and by social customs that create a sense of community in a particular time and place, each of these commonalities also ruptures interpersonal relations: no two people are exactly the same age, no one's lifespan overlaps completely with anyone else's, the timing of death is unique to everyone, and, especially in modernity, the social customs to which one is accustomed shift over time, separating oneself not only from those who are younger or older, but also from one's own past way of life.² This knowledge of temporal connections and ruptures in turn

becomes a form of self-knowledge, informing the discoveries that Christine makes about her own identity as a young but developing person navigating complex relationships with the people around her.

David Williams sees *The Road Past Altamont* as an “imagist novel” (178) that transforms problems of time into spatial figures such as the tapestry—which symbolizes the way that Christine’s mother, or “Maman,” narrates the family history—and the womb, which symbolizes Maman’s realization that the aging individual metaphorically gives birth to her ancestors and her children through hard-won comprehension of the needs and anxieties of people of different ages. For Williams, the “linked story form” allows the novel to create “its series of lyric instants” (178). Seeing the book specifically as a short story cycle, though, can further draw out the temporal aspects of the form. Gerald Lynch argues that the form of the short story cycle itself is “a distinctly Canadian genre” which “allows for a new kind of unity in disunity, reflecting a fragmented temporal sense” (18). He points out that the popularity of the form

coincides with the arrival of the modern world, when the revolutionary impact of Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein was being cumulatively felt and all traditional systems were coming under a destabilizing scrutiny . . . including the tradition of the realistic-naturalistic novel. Viewed in this context, the short story cycle can indeed be considered as a kind of anti-novel, fragmenting the continuous narrative’s treatment of place, time, character, and plot, and often offering simultaneous multiple perspectives in a manner paralleling that of cubist painting. (23-24)

J. N. Nodelman briefly mentions that Lynch’s argument could be applied directly to *The Road Past Altamont*, but does not comment further on the implications of this fragmented temporal sense, deciding instead to focus on the various modes of spatial transport in the book—including stilts, horse-drawn carts, trains, and cars—which cause people to conceptualize and interact with the landscape in particular ways. Lynch’s generalization on the short story cycle does accurately reflect the fragmented temporalities created by the way in which each of the four stories that constitute *The Road Past Altamont* covers an isolated period of time, even while the stories taken together develop a more unified sense of Christine’s growing comprehension, a formal trait that is entirely appropriate to the representation of temporal bonds that connect people even while they divide individual experiences. The form of the book mirrors its thematic preoccupation with subjective temporalities that are both fragmented and coeval. Still, this does not make it an anti-novel as such. Modern and postmodern novels, after all, had carried

out similar rejections of continuous linear narrative by the 1960s. Rather, the form of *The Road Past Altamont* disrupts the conventions of continuity that were tied more specifically to nineteenth-century novels invested in what Lynch calls “the realistic-naturalistic” tradition, and in this way the form also mirrors the experiences of the characters who find themselves living in a world where the social conventions of the previous century have given way to shifting and complex new realities. Monsieur Saint-Hilaire complains that his grandchildren “weren’t unkind or heartless but suffered from the malady of the times: a fondness for speed and cars and motorcycles and also for spending money as quickly as they could . . . and that he felt too old now to be able to adapt himself to the frenzy of the day” (71). His comment is appropriate not only thematically, but also formally insofar as it appears within a short story cycle that eschews a regular narrative progression in favour of the modernist “frenzy” of a more rapid pace of change.³

While the spatial metaphors that Williams sees as the key to the book’s commentary on time are indeed important, the very notion of identifying what he calls “the ultimate spatial form for time” (187) risks moving the conversation away from properly temporal concerns and toward debates over the significance of different spatial images.⁴ Hence, Williams’ argument that the image of the womb makes Roy’s modernist vision of time quintessentially feminine. Hence, too, the long-standing critical debate over whether time in the book is best understood as cyclical or linear. Nodelman points out that, for M. G. Hesse, “time is conceived as a cycle, so that the future contains the past while the past anticipates the future,” while for Paula Gilbert Lewis the characters’ desires for cyclicity “imply a lack of any forward movement” along the linear path of time (qtd. in Nodelman 219). Nodelman refers to “Christine’s deepening sense that life is a great circle,” but suggests that the debate remains open, that the central question in the second story of the book, for instance, is “whether our passages across the landscape are cyclical (in the sense that we can experience several different times of our own lives, and those of others, at once) or linear (meaning that the past is forever lost, and the generations cannot truly connect)” (219). Williams correctly sees this choice as a false one, arguing that “time is neither cyclical nor linear but both: the round womb of time gives birth again to linear development” (187), a comment which reflects the widely understood conclusion in the critical study of time that, in Barbara Adam’s words, “all social processes display aspects of both linearity and cyclicity, and that we recognize a cyclical structure when we focus on events that repeat themselves and unidirectional

linearity when our attention is on the process of the repeating action” (519). Roy draws our attention to both of these aspects in turn.

In some ways, then, the more interesting approach does not have to do with identifying the type of spatial image that best represents the book’s concern with time, but rather examines the properly temporal concerns of troubled simultaneity and synchronization. Amidst the fractured and divided temporalities that Christine encounters in her relationships with her mother, her grandmother, and her elderly neighbour Monsieur Saint-Hilaire, she develops a deep desire for her own life to be *synchronized* with the people she loves, a contradictory desire that is associated with sorrow and solitude as much as it is with intimacy and connection. The temporal gap between individuals takes its clearest form as a gap between generations, and becomes the concluding thought to the first story in the collection, “My Almighty Grandmother.” In this story the six-year-old Christine stays for part of the summer with her grandmother, who has become elderly and forgetful. When her grandmother uses spare household materials to make an elaborate doll for her, Christine is delighted at the act of pure creation, and begins to wonder about the relationship between the youthful, active grandmother of the past, and the increasingly frail and incapacitated grandmother of the present. Looking through an old album, Christine finds a photograph of her grandmother as a young mother: “This old photograph fascinated me so much that I forgot everything else. Through it, at last, I think I began to understand vaguely a little about life and all the successive beings it makes of us as we increase in age” (29-30). Christine’s realization that the experience of temporality makes “successive beings” of individuals is, paradoxically, also the realization that the *same* person undergoes remarkable changes over the course of a lifetime. When Christine takes the album to her grandmother’s bedside, “to show my grandmother the portrait she no longer resembled,” Maman appears at the doorway wearing “a sad and very tender little smile.” The story ends with Christine (the adult narrator) thinking back and wondering: “But why did she look so pleased with me? I was only playing, as she herself had taught me to do, as Mémère also had played with me one day . . . as we all play perhaps, throughout our lives, at trying to catch up with one another” (30).

This final line of the story presents the irresistible but impossible desire to “catch up with one another,” to achieve interpersonal synchronization, as an expression of the tension that arises through the human coexistence of temporal intimacy with temporal solitude. In her study of time and feminist theory, Rita Felski suggests that the term “synchronous nonsynchronicity”—a phrase

that she borrows from Ernst Bloch—may offer “the most promising way of approaching the cultural politics of time. Quite simply, it acknowledges that we inhabit both the same time and different times: individuals coexist at the same historical moment, yet often make sense of this moment in strikingly disparate ways” (3). A key point here is that temporal identities, like other forms of identity, are always partial. As Christine realizes, though, it is not just that people make sense of their historical moment in different ways, but that individuals actually experience different times within the “same” absolute moment by virtue of their own temporal situatedness. The state of synchronous nonsynchronicity, while paradoxical, accurately reflects the internally conflicted sense of subjective time in a social world. Indeed, after the first story ends with Christine’s supposition that people endlessly try “to catch up with one another,” the remaining stories in the cycle confirm that the attempt to synchronize amidst inevitable nonsynchronicity is a project that does in fact continue “throughout our lives.”

If the first story identifies the need for temporal alignment in the fostering of human intimacy, the second story, “The Old Man and the Child,” confirms the impossibility of synchronization. Christine, now eight years old, becomes friends with the elderly Monsieur Saint-Hilaire, though to Christine he is simply “the old man.” When he invites her on a day trip by train to Lake Winnipeg, which Christine has never seen, she is exhilarated. Upon arriving at the beach, the old man explains that the lake “was older than the soil of Manitoba and that it would still be there when millions of years had passed. For the eternity of time, he told me” (61). To sit in front of the lake, then, is to encounter eternity, yet even in the face of the ultimate human commonality—the knowledge that one will die while the world carries on—Christine is struck by the gulf of time separating her from her companion. After writing a figure eight, her own age, into the sand, she experiences a sensation of distress: “I suppose I could not bear the joy of being at the beginning while he was at the end” (77). The old man then whispers his own age to the girl, which she writes alongside her own “as a sum in arithmetic.” The temporal gap between eight and eighty-four is then displayed for her, in the most transient form of writing, in the sand before the eternal lake:

I was stricken by what remained to me and seemed to separate us from each other by a stretch of time even more mysterious than the extent of water and earth. . . . I was rather disheartened, I think, by a sense of the inequality and injustice of life. Why, I wondered, did we not all reach the same age at the same time.

“It would be dull,” he pointed out, “all the old folks together—or only the young.” (77-78)

While the desire for temporal alignment is an ache that never goes away, the old man's comments begin to reflect the fact that absolute synchronization, completely shared experiences of time, would also mean completely shared narratives, and therefore shared identities. The unbridgeable temporal gulf between Christine and the old man is part of what it means for each of them to have their own identities, and the ache for synchronization is thus the confirmation of subjectivity. Our experiences of time are our stories, and even while we all share the experience of temporality itself, the infinite variations in personal temporalities establish our identities as individuals.⁵

Importantly, though, this story does offer several forms of synchronization to Christine and the old man, even if these remain partial and temporary. First is the obvious but important sense in which the two companions are able to spend time together, conversing, interacting, and experiencing the world simultaneously. Second, as Williams points out, by telling Christine stories about his travels in Europe, the old man “offers her another way of ‘catching up with one another’ through time. For his stories of the many countries to which he has travelled inspire in her a desire for imitation” (182). Many years later Christine will be in a position to replicate some of these travels, just as Maman relives her own mother's experiences of old age as she begins to become elderly herself. While this eventual reliving is among the most nonsynchronous forms of synchronization, it speaks to the exemplary power of temporal alignment through storytelling. Narratives, or personal articulations of time, not only shape phenomenological experiences into coherence, but also transmit subjective temporalities into the consciousness of those around us, allowing for intimate sharing of personal temporal experiences, even if the sharing may occur across a wide gulf of absolute time. The final form of synchronization in “The Old Man and the Child” occurs as Christine and the old man share their final moments together before the lake. Throughout the earlier parts of the story the two of them had become drowsy at different times—Christine nearly falls asleep on the beach only to have the old man wake her to walk into town, then the old man falls asleep at a restaurant while Christine watches nervously from across the table—but as the story draws to a close, the two achieve a momentary alignment when, “[a]lone now on this long beach before immensity, we slept shoulder to shoulder” (83). In the face of eternity, and through a basic human act of replenishment, the two become synchronized, even if this moment of alignment is a small part of their extended temporal experiences.

By the eponymous final story of the collection, “The Road Past Altamont,” Christine is entering adulthood herself and is driving her mother along the unmarked prairie roads that seem to intersect at random across the landscape, until the pair stumble upon a series of hills surrounding the tiny village of Altamont. When Maman reminisces about the hills in the region of Quebec where she had grown up, Christine is dismayed that her mother is so deeply attached to a period of her life to which Christine has no access: “I was astonished to see Maman pass over her adult existence in Manitoba to go to the most remote part of her life in search of those images, unknown to me yesterday and now seemingly more pleasing to her than any others. I was perhaps even somewhat vexed” (112). The concern wears at Christine throughout the story: “come to think of it, it was only since the reappearance of hills in our life that I had noticed that attention to voices from the past that I found so bewildering and that took her to some extent away from me” (125-26). Maman’s reminiscing about times that occurred prior to Christine’s existence separates the two of them, even while they sit together travelling in the same car.

Once again, though, the story juxtaposes these unsettling forms of temporal disconnection with opportunities for temporal alignment. One such opportunity, a massively social one which is tied to the passage of the seasons, occurs when a large group assembles at Uncle Cléophas’ house for harvesting: “These people . . . came from every corner of Canada, I should perhaps say of the world, for that was the most astonishing thing of all, that men of such diverse nationalities and characters were gathered together in our remote farms to harvest the wheat” (122). And once again storytelling emerges as a binding force, as the men “were never so tired that they did not attempt, when night came and the whining of the machines was silenced for a few hours, to share something unique to each of them that might draw them for a moment closer to each other” (122). While the old man’s story at the beach had itself fostered a form of temporal alignment, the harvest gathering shows how an instance of temporal alignment—in this case one tied to seasonality and communal food production—can foster other forms of social connection. The ache for synchronization sees one of the fruits of its fulfillment here, as the participants are drawn closer to one another through actual shared temporal experience as well as the more abstract shared temporalities of storytelling. Christine reflects that “[i]t is from those evenings, unfolding like competitions of songs and stories, that my desire, which has never since left me, to learn to tell a story well undoubtedly dates,

so much was I impressed at that time by the poignant and miraculous power of this gift” (122). The adult Christine, we learn, has become a writer, and the narrative reflections that constitute *The Road Past Altamont* represent her articulations, in form and content, of the gradual temporal shaping of her own subjectivity as well as the larger family history through which her temporal existence takes shape.

The intergenerational experiences of Christine and her mother, alongside the memory of Christine’s grandmother, open up the remaining opportunities for nonsynchronous synchronization. Maman recalls that, as she grew older, she began to resemble her own mother both in appearance and in personality. “Only with middle age did I catch up with her, or she caught up with me—how can you explain this strange encounter outside time? . . . Besides, I’m no longer angry about it, since, having become her, I understand her” (130). Here the old man’s hint to Christine that temporal difference constitutes identity reaches its logical conclusion, that “catching up” with another person means that one *becomes* that person. The transformation is not literal, of course, but confirms that to the extent that sharing the temporality of another person is possible, such an experience forms a connection as intimate as the sharing of an identity. Even while Christine and her mother drift apart towards the end of the story when Christine travels to Europe “to learn to know myself and to write” (145), Maman leaves her with a final insight on temporal identity and intimacy. The period of adulthood, Maman explains, in which “parents truly live over again in their children” even while they also relive “the lives of [their] own parents” is “perhaps the most illuminated part of one’s life” (135). Through carefully constructed narrative, the artist illuminates the ways in which subjective experiences of time effectively constitute identity, always partially overlap the temporalities of others, and draw us inevitably toward one another even while they hold us at a distance. Just as the implications of the modernist frenzy of changing social temporalities become most clearly meaningful to the extent that they are actually embodied through individual experiences, so too can subjective experiences of time be understood only through an examination of the broader social circumstances within which they take shape.

Catherine Bush’s novel *Minus Time* also offers a nuanced investigation of the interactions between several of the issues important to the discussion of time, subjectivity, sociality, and narrative: the ways in which personal identity is shaped by past events; the fragmentation and internal conflict to which an individual’s sense of time is often susceptible; the problematic negotiation

between personal and collective chronotopes and the impossibility of separating one from the other; the difficult but important feat of aligning one's temporal maps with those of one's family and peer groups; and the consequences of conflicting visions of temporality for people and the rest of the biosphere.

The novel tells the story of Helen Urie, a young adult in Toronto whose mother Barbara is famous not only for being a Canadian astronaut, but for attempting to set a new record for the amount of time spent living in space. The title *Minus Time* refers to the anxious duration of the countdown before the space shuttle launch (as in the phrase "T minus three minutes") but also takes on a figurative association with the intense temporal anxiety and sense of loss surrounding Helen's realization that her mother "had left the planet and they had no idea when she was coming back again. . . . The time and space that lay between was not traversable. She was speeding into the future" (6). Looking up at the overwhelming Florida sky into which the spacecraft has disappeared, Helen experiences a mixture of elation and panic: "She had concentrated so hard on the launch and now she'd surged beyond it. In that instant, everything had changed. Her life, too, split into before the launch and after. She wanted to reach for the sky and howl out loud like a wolf—*what now?*" (6). The liftoff itself becomes a watershed moment of the kind articulated in many works of literature, figuratively launching the emotional arc of the story. For critic John E. MacKinnon, the novel's title refers to "an interval in Helen's life" that holds "her future in abeyance, as if suspending her in time" (107).

This sense of trauma causes Helen to look for meaning in the events leading up to and following the launch, and to single out those whom she sees as complicit in forming the temporal chasm. She comes to identify as antagonists everyone and everything she deems responsible, from her mother, whose life ambition to become an astronaut has interfered with her ability to spend time with her children; to her father, who copes with family stresses by spending years in distant countries helping the victims of natural disasters; to the alienating socio-technological infrastructure that carries her mother indefinitely into space even while gradually poisoning her home through chemical spills, species loss, and interpersonal fragmentation. "You've got these video screens all around you," Helen's brother Paul explains about watching the shuttle launch, "and the launchpad almost looks like it's balanced right on top of the digital clock on the ground in front of you, the clock that shows the countdown. It *is* scary, in a way" (41). As a metaphor for pervasive technoscience, the countdown clock forms the unstable ground

upon which the key moments of the family's lives precariously sit. The clock's starts, stops, pace, and authority are outside the family's control, yet they govern the creation of personal temporal chasms and lead seemingly towards widespread ecological apocalypse. Helen decides to collaborate with Elena, an animal rights activist who wants to construct a "huge clock or some kind of timer that would count out each time another species disappeared" (214), a project that emblemizes the fraught relationship between technoscientific tools and the actual people whose use of such tools both causes and condemns ecological destruction.⁶

While the consequences of technologically mediated temporality may affect everyone, they do not do so even-handedly, and contested temporalities within familial groups are susceptible to similar imbalances. Despite being subjected to the same brief media spotlight as the rest of her family, Helen's feeling of alienation from her parents continues to grow: "Time itself seemed suddenly compressed and uncontrollable. Faster, faster. Didn't everyone feel it? Was I the only one whose stomach was being turned inside out?" (137). She accuses her mother of having "hurled us with you into the dangerous future" (178), while Paul describes their relationship with their perpetually absent father as an asymptotic line graph: "It's like these waves on a graph and they keep getting closer and closer as they run toward infinity but they never touch. That's what it feels like" (231). The space agency, meanwhile, warns Helen that because astronauts and their families inevitably change over the duration of their separation, she should expect a traumatic experience when her mother eventually returns to earth: "Only it wasn't exactly a return: The woman who left did not come back. Those she'd left behind were not the people who came to greet her" (322).

The tension culminates in Helen's angry confrontation with her mother—a conversation which is both intensely personal and mediated by the technology of the space station videophone hookup. When Barbara insists that it will remain "possible to be close to you, even from here," Helen replies, "What if I don't see the future the way you do? . . . I *do* have some sense of the future—but what if I see it being here, right here? . . . We have to change things here, the whole way we think about things here. I don't think it's good to act as if everything might get better by being someplace else" (276). Growing desperate, Barbara says "I would give you a whole new world if I could," but Helen shouts back, "I don't want a whole new world. . . . Don't you see? I want this one. I want a future here" (277). For Helen, the anxieties of increasing technological alienation, looming ecological collapse, skewed

social chronotopes that treat individual people as momentary objects of interest, and discordant familial visions of temporality have culminated in a personal temporal crisis. Attempting later on to catch a glimpse of the space station as its orbit passes above her, Helen walks “through a wilderness of satellite beams and radio waves, somewhere beyond Sudbury, through a world that seemed to her like a map of voices in the darkness, lost voices. . . . Time itself seemed vaporous, lapping in small waves around her” (326).

Despite this sense of conflict and fragmentation, the concluding scenes of the novel emphasize the potential for stability, reconciliation, and solidarity. This shift occurs partially on a personal level, as Helen finds within the resiliency of narrative identity an ability to locate a stable sense of self emerging from her own past, a past that trails behind her “like comet trails, vaporous and filled with detritus. In the present, receding into the future, she still multiplied and divided, seeing through several eyes, longing for too many things at once, but in the past she was singular; her past made her singular, it was hers and no one else’s, and whatever else happened, she still carried it with her, like a portable home” (308). But the most meaningful shifts towards solace occur on a social level within Helen’s immediate family, and, like Gabrielle Roy, Bush accomplishes this transition through images of synchronization. Growing accustomed to her father’s presence after his unexpected return, Helen feels that “already something like habit was binding itself between them, dissolving the time that separated them into almost nothing” (282). Sharing an intimate moment with her lover, Foster, Helen’s “skin grew as springy as moss, as if touch itself could redefine the two of them, hurl them into the present, clear some space and time for them” (313). Barbara makes the metaphor explicit when she asks Helen to look up towards the night sky that evening and locate the space station, promising to return the gesture: “Whatever happens, I’ll look down tonight. Your night. We’ll synchronize our watches” (334). The intentional unification of the watches marks a deep alignment in temporality and purpose, even while the phrase “Your night” acknowledges that the two people inevitably remain partially absorbed in asynchronous registers of time. The fact that they can experience precisely the same minute even while occupying different portions of the day-night cycle—a cycle so disrupted by space travel that Barbara experiences sixteen sunrises each day (55)—indicates that temporalities, like other aspects of identity, are always partial, and that meaningful alignments can occur even while some aspects of temporal identity remain divergent. Just as the concept of synchronous

nonsynchronicity is key to *The Road Past Altamont*, where subjective temporalities remain separated even while the ache for alignment is soothed momentarily through shared times and shared stories, so too is it central to understanding Helen's experience and her musing that "[i]t was as if they were all still walking through their own version of minus time, toward the moment of cumulative choice" (334).⁷

The final scene of *Minus Time* depicts Helen arriving at the lake that has been selected as the family meeting point, while Barbara floats overhead: "The dark lake and dark sky shone before her like a doorway, shimmering in time. . . . *A small step into tomorrow*" (338). Paul and David arrive to join her, and the novel ends: "She held out her hands to them, and stepped through the doorway" (338). The triumph suggested in the story's conclusion is a result of all four family members finally inhabiting the same subjective moment, sharing a sense of companionship, purpose, and movement into the future. While temporal alignment on the broader social and ecological scales remains worryingly elusive, synchronization is achieved, even if only momentarily, within the familial circle. While *Minus Time* contends with temporal relativity in ways that were unforeseen in past eras, the novel supports Ricoeur's view that "the major contribution of fiction to philosophy does not lie in the range of solutions it proposes for the discordance between the time of the world and lived time but in the exploration of the nonlinear features of phenomenological time that historical time conceals" (3: 132). More than this, the novel articulates how phenomenological time and historical time are themselves internally contested and unstable, bearing witness to the difficulty and the importance of enacting fleeting moments of synchronization.

In trying to understand how individuals experience time we are led inevitably back to considerations of social relations, ranging from the intimate workings of families and peer groups whose temporal experiences fluctuate within synchronous nonsynchronicity, to the accelerative impulses of modernity and the ingrained configurations of social power that operate on systemic and cultural levels. While John Urry, a theorist of networked "instantaneous time," speaks of "the simultaneous character of social and technical relationships, which replaces the linear logic of clock time" (189), inquiries into the experiences of subjective time and social synchronization reveal not only that linear time continues to exist in negotiation with other experienced and technologically mediated forms of time, but also that simultaneity in social relations is fragmented, and never absolute. Gabrielle Roy's and Catherine Bush's texts respond to very different social and cultural

circumstances, meaning that these two books “know” different things about the particular configurations of temporal experience that arise, respectively, at the transition from modernism to postmodernism and in the late stages of the postmodern era. Significantly, despite these different vantage points, both books support the notion that the impulse to “catch up with one another”—to “synchronize our watches”—is ultimately unfulfillable as it is tied irrevocably to the tensions and fractures of social existence, and to the inevitable separateness of human subjective experiences. But at the same time, these stories tell us that the desire to synchronize remains a key expression of human intimacy, and makes available many of the fruits of sociality. Even if social synchronization is always partial and ephemeral, it fosters vital moments of shared purpose.

NOTES

- 1 While the broader field of critical time studies must account for many different aspects of temporality, such as the ways in which time functions culturally as a form of power, or the ways in which categories of identity such as gender and race are tied to experiences of time, this article offers a model for one way that the critical study of time can respond to the particular concerns of subjective time and social synchronization within texts that emphasize these concerns. My forthcoming book *Timing Canada: The Shifting Politics of Time in Canadian Literary Culture* illuminates the wider range of possibilities afforded by critical time studies.
- 2 In his impressively systematic study, Hartmut Rosa argues not only that social acceleration is quantifiably real, but that it constitutes the primary mode of experience in contemporary society—that “the experience of modernization is an experience of acceleration” (21).
- 3 Franco Moretti argues that the *Bildungsroman*, as a story of youth, became the “symbolic form” of modernity in the nineteenth century largely because modernity “perceives the experience piled up in tradition as a useless dead-weight, and therefore can no longer feel represented by maturity, and still less by old age” (6). He traces the disappearance of the *Bildungsroman* form primarily to the onset of the First World War, whose social trauma presented an “insoluble problem” to the *Bildungsroman*: “The trauma introduced discontinuity within novelistic temporality, generating centrifugal tendencies toward the short story and the lyric” (244). In this sense, the use of a short story cycle to articulate new socio-temporal realities in the twentieth century is entirely appropriate. And yet, Moretti’s insight that the *Bildungsroman* structure itself is “intrinsically contradictory” because it is based on “dynamism and limits, restlessness and the ‘sense of an ending’” (6) suggests that the transition from the *Bildungsroman* toward forms that more strongly emphasize discontinuity was more of an evolution rather than a complete break. The focus on youth in a *Künstlerroman* such as *The Road Past Altamont* also mirrors the focus on youth in the classic *Bildungsroman*, suggesting that in the transition from modern to modernism, and perhaps to postmodernism, youth remains among the most appropriate figures for examining rapidly changing social circumstances.

- 4 To an extent, my comment here echoes Henri Bergson's assertion that the conventional view of time as a linear sequence results from our problematic tendency to conceive of time in terms that apply properly to space (232). While Bergson's solution is to emphasize the subjective experience of duration, his approach risks assuming "that time is only an effect of consciousness" (Easthope 184). By focusing on the temporal quality of synchronization rather than spatial images of time, while still accounting for factors beyond individual consciousness, I aim to draw from the most useful aspects of inquiries into subjective as well as social temporalities.
- 5 Commentary on this scene has usually focused on Christine's question of whether they are looking at the end of the lake or the beginning, and the old man's response: "The end or the beginning? Such questions you ask! The end or the beginning. And if they are fundamentally the same. . . . Perhaps everything finally forms a great circle, the end and the beginning coming together" (68). As I have suggested, while cyclical aspects of generational time are deeply important in the book, the temptation to point to quotations such as this one as identifying a strictly cyclical (or otherwise spatial) mode of time is of limited use.
- 6 Elena's project anticipates online "clocks" that display live counters of species extinctions, remaining global fossil fuel supplies, increasing global average temperature, and so on. Other conceptual clocks that seek to recalibrate our sense of ecological or deep time include Michelle Bastian's proposal that we might look to leatherback turtles as a kind of living clock, since their existence through both deep time and contemporary rapid change involves complex interrelated time scales that are "more accurate for the times we live in" (41); and the Long Now Foundation's 10,000 Year Clock, currently under construction inside a mountain in Texas, which is intended "to creatively foster long-term thinking" (Kelly n. pag.).
- 7 Commenting on the iconic sound of Big Ben in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Ricoeur asks whether we can say of the characters, at the moment the clock strikes, "that the hour is the same for all? Yes, from outside; no, from inside. Only fiction, precisely, can explore and bring to language this divorce between worldviews and their irreconcilable perspectives on time, a divorce that undermines public time" (2: 107). As Bush's novel shows, though, the proliferation of global travel and digital communication makes apparent the fact that people inhabit different hours even from the "outside." The divorce between personal temporalities is compounded by the relativity of time itself, and while the visible impact of such relativity on human affairs is a fairly recent development, fiction's toolbox appears up to the task of articulating these complications.

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