

Amanda Nisi

Professor Katarina O'Briain

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The manipulation of Long and Short Temporalities in Bamewawagezhikaquay's "The Contrast"

Typically, time is linear and can be recollected through memory. While this understanding of time privileges forward human progression, Paul Huebener proposes that long/slow and short temporalities occur simultaneously in nature. Long time is a natural process which takes many years to progress and short time is a natural process that is quickly completed. Huebener's concept of Critical Time Studies enforces a critical understanding of time that operates socially as a form of power in the Western world (327). To support this concept, Huebener explains two incidents under the Harper Government in 2012 where deadlines shifted for political and economic gain. The first concerned the oil industry and the compression of time. The maximum period to review major environmental resource projects was reduced from six to two years (329). Speeding up the timeline of this review did not allow the necessary tests and requirements to be completed, and consequently, oil and gas were transported quicker than before. The second example concerned a delay of a carbon-pricing scheme which could cost the petroleum producers additional money (330). Huebener notes that when it comes to the "imposition of actual environmental regulations, the above emphasis on speed and acceleration disappears, giving way to plead for slowness and precaution" (330). Huebener demonstrates that time is manipulated for political purposes as deadlines shift for capitalistic gain.

Huebener highlights the political manipulation of time; however, this concept is not specific to the political domain. This essay applies these concepts within the realm of

literature, specifically the poem “The Contrast” by Bamewawagezhikaquay or Jane Johnston Schoolcraft. In this poem, Bamewawagezhikaquay’s speaker compares her happy childhood with her community before the European colonial settlement in America to the pain she and her community feel after the extractive action by the colonial settlers in power. Throughout the poem, the settler and the speaker each use Huebener’s idea of long and short time and the concept of physical and psychological pain measures these temporalities. While the settler’s long and short time represents destructive actions, the speaker’s time represents a kind and forgiving alternative bringing together personal and collective action.

Bamewawagezhikaquay manipulates time in her poem to show that this alternate peaceful understanding of time is outside and incompatible with the colonial ideology of dominance.

Bamewawagezhikaquay manipulates the time relating to the colonial settlers. As the poet emphasizes the cyclical and endless nature of bureaucratic processes, she displays the concept of long/slow time. The speaker explains: “The busy strife of young and old/ To gain one sordid bit of gold / ... And lawsuits, meetings, courts and toil” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 43-46). As Huebener explains that the bristlecone pine is one of the slowest growing trees (333) which represents long time, the endless and tireless pain of working for a bit of gold also displays this temporality. The structure of these sentences suggests an endlessly cyclical repetition of work and bureaucratic practices. The “lawsuits, meetings, courts” (46) are a catalogue of bureaucratic procedures where each element is plural. This plurality suggests that the pain of these procedures will never end. The word “and” which occurs at the beginning and at the end of line 46 also creates the effect of a repeating pattern. These stylistic elements suggest the slowing down or lengthening of time as work becomes cyclical and endless.

The speaker expresses a past childhood filled with many “happy days” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 6), where “Pains or cares we seldom knew”

(Bamewawagezhikaquay 11). However, this happiness transforms into “busy strife” (43) for a young and old indigenous worker. The word “strife” means “pain” (1.E. OED) and is also “a condition of antagonism” (1.A OED). Thus, the young and old workers experience pain through physical work and social or generational contention. This pain marks the idea of long times as “strife” becomes endless, entering the past, present and future. Charles W. Mills explains “settler time writes the future into the past as well as the present ” (301). Working for gold is work for the present and the future, yet the past is inextricably connected to the two. Through the never-ending strife caused by colonialism, the old indigenous worker becomes a literal representation of the past. This past is mapped onto the present with the young worker. Just as the bristlecone pine represents long time as it has been growing for many years, the pain or strife connected to endless colonial work represents this long time because this pain is continuously connected to the past, the present and the future.

Bamewawagezhikaquay sets up an alternative to this long time motivated by monetary wealth through a temporality motivated by personal and friendly relationships: “My only wish, to gain the praise / Of friends I loved, and neighbours kind” (30-32). Here, the speaker’s work or “efforts” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 33) are not connected to endless painful labour. Instead, the speaker wishes to “gain the praise” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 30) from loved ones. The word “praise” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 30) suggests respect earned over time. Then, the repetition of the possessive determiner “my” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 30) displays that the speaker works for her desire to earn recognition. Thus, contrary to the settler’s long time which emphasizes gaining monetary wealth, the speaker’s long time highlights the personal aspirations of those who care.

As Bamewawagezhikaquay develops this happy and personally motivated long time, the pain of saying goodbye to this past shows the shift from personal to collective action. Strongly privileging the personal pronouns “I” and “my”, the first 38 lines of the poem focus

on the speaker's childhood memory. However, after the colonial settlement, the phrase "How changed" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 30) marks the end of these personal pronouns. Instead of a personal pronoun which acknowledges the subject, the personal pronoun is replaced by the broad and dehumanizing label of "simple Indian" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 42). This shift shows the colonial settlers invoke one collective response to the pain caused by colonialism. For example, as the speaker says, "Adieu, to days of homebred ease" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 47), there is no personal pronoun. The subject becomes collective as all the Indigenous communities say goodbye to the world they know. The plural pronoun "we" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 49) in the final stanza highlights the collective Indigenous response to this colonial settlement as they prepare to "sail anew, to steer / By shoals we never knew were here" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 49-50). This collective action, which ultimately ends in the community welcoming the "proud Republic" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 54), is foreign, unknown and filled with fear. Through the pain of saying goodbye to childhood, the individual perspective becomes a collective concern connected to the fears of an unknown future.

As politicians speed up and slow down time for political purposes, Bamewawagezhikaquay similarly manipulates time. Bamewawagezhikaquay quickens the speaker's long time displaying that the happy, collective past is over and no longer possible during colonial rule. The speaker's childhood in St. Mary's woodlands evokes a pastoral ideal. The setting is simple, distant from the city, peaceful and natural: "Calm, tranquil—far from fashion's gaze, / Passed all my earliest, happy days" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 5-6). However, this pastoral childhood is explained as flying into the past (Bamewawagezhikaquay 12). Then, as the speaker explains her leisure time, the sentence structure is the same and is repeated three times: "Concerts sweet we oft enjoyed, / Books our leisure time employed / Friends on every side appeared" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 13-15). As a result,

Bamewawagezhikaquay acknowledges the fast-moving time and also speeds up the reading process itself. This quickening or manipulation of long time foreshadows the abrupt end. The past tense verbs located at the end of each line from lines 13-15 situate these happy actions and pastoral time in the definite and unrecoverable past. In explaining the “Native” American pastoral, Jennifer Elise Foerster writes: “The homeland is still linked to childhood and innocence, especially in that it has not yet been touched by the lies and violence of white encroachment” (137). The “Native” American pastoral, like Bamewawagezhikaquay's speaker's pastoral childhood, is a space untouched by colonial violence. However, once the speaker's childhood has been affected by this violence, this pastoral time is no longer allowed to exist as an inclusive and happy space. As Bamewawagezhikaquay speeds up time, the long time comes to an end suggesting that the ideal pastoral is not possible in the context of colonial violence.

While “The Contrast” exhibits long or slow time, Bamewawagezhikaquay also displays the short or momentary time. The pain caused by the settlers cutting trees and removing infrastructure reveals this short time. After the colonial settlement, the speaker says: “The world hath sent its votaries here. / The tree cut down- the cot removed,/ The cot the simple Indian loved” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 39-42). The verbs “sent” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 40), “cut” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 41) and “removed” (Bamewawagezhikaquay 41) establish the settler's intentionally destructive actions. The connotations of these words also assume a momentary or short time. For example, despite sentimental attachments, the cot is quickly removed. Also, in comparison to its growth, a tree falls instantaneously. If the tree's slow growth to maturity represents long time, then as the settlers cut it down, they are instantaneously removing the history which proceeds from this moment. Hubener's example of the bristlecone pine displays the simultaneous interconnectedness of long and short time. The tree is “among the slowest of all organisms”

(Hubener 333), but, it is also a part of the “same ecological world that enacts the faster, sometimes astonishingly rapid, temporalities of hurricanes, forest fires, and electrons” (Hubener 333). In Bamewawagezhikaquay’s poem, the rapid temporality is the colonial axe that cuts the tree. Thus, the catastrophically momentary action works simultaneously with long time and becomes the initial and intentional erasure of long time.

Bamewawagezhikaquay also manipulates time as the momentary short time slows down becoming entangled with long time. Mills comments on the interconnectedness of time, space and entitlement:

Whose space it is depends in part on whose time it is, on which temporality, which version of time, can be established as hegemonic. Space, time, and normative entitlement or normative illegality are thus all tied up with one another (301).

As the speaker says, “The tree cut down- the cot removed,/ The cot the simple Indian loved (Bamewawagezhikaquay 39-42), a dash connects the fallen tree and the removed cot. This dash physically entangles time and space. The tree, as a representation of long and short temporalities, becomes attached or “tied up” (Mills 301) with the cot, which in its horizontal length represents space. The short temporality of a falling tree slows down becoming attached to space and their interconnectedness adds to one longer and singular idea of time and space. As Mills explains, this entanglement directly relates to those in power.

Bamewawagezhikaquay uses this entangled time and space to show settler control. Even though the destruction of land and the removal of the cot are momentary, they represent an erasure of history so that a new colonial temporality can ultimately take its place. The settlers have power because they are able to inflict their momentary acts of violence.

The speaker’s reverie likewise includes momentary acts of violence. While Bamewawagezhikaquay manipulates time by slowing down momentary time by entangling it with space and possession, the poet does not alter the short time associated with the speaker.

By allowing a short time to be short, Bamewawagezhikaquay presents an alternate understanding of time in which pain occurs and passes. The settler's short time is associated with intentional harm and erasure of history, yet the speaker's short time is accidental and unintentional. Bamewawagezhikaquay's speaker explains: "If by chance, one gave me pain / The wish to wound me not again / ... That, to have been a moment pained, / Seemed like bliss but just attained" (17-22). This accidental idea of pain is an alternative to the intentional pain caused by the settlers and is within a momentary temporality. The speaker is pained for a "moment" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 21) and the pain will happen "not again" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 18). This momentary pain is then described as "bliss" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 22). As Bamewawagezhikaquay lets this temporality remain short, the oxymoron of blissful pain suggests that this pain is blissful specifically because it will end.

Bamewawagezhikaquay shows that this alternative understanding of time and pain is impossible after colonial settlement. The speaker's community reproaches wrong actions "as soft as song of birds" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 26) and "warmed by love" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 28). This loving corrective action opposes the settler's intentional, destructive and violent dominance. However, the next stanza begins, "Thus passed the morning of my days" (Bamewawagezhikaquay 29), suggesting that the happy morning which includes this rapprochement no longer exists. The time of day becomes a metaphor for colonial power so that colonial dominion dominates the speaker's afternoons and evenings leaving no space for a momentary understanding of pain or this sympathetic rectification.

In Bamewawagezhikaquay's poem "The Contrast" time is divided into long and short temporalities for the settler and the speaker. The long time of the settler's endless work is contrasted with the long time of the speaker who has years of happy memories before colonial settlement. Similarly, while the settler's momentary time is displayed as destructive,

the speaker's short time is an alternative. In all, as Bamewawagezhikaquay compares her past with her present, she manipulates time, displaying a kind and happy alternative that is not possible in a future filled with colonial dominance.

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