

**Paul Giles *The Planetary Clock: Antipodean Time and Spherical Postmodern Fictions*
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Paul Giles has had an incredibly prolific and successful career as a literary academic. As an Americanist, he has reminded the institution of American literature precisely what it has neglected because of the American system—namely its transatlantic connections, and, more recently, after moving to the University of Sydney, he has also reminded it of its transpacific connections. He has explored these areas in a prolific, comprehensive, and learned series of books. These books are remarkable, not just for kicking on so much but being so scrupulous, getting the details right, being so well written, and being very generous in their citations of specialists who have worked in a far narrower field than Giles has, but whose critical explorations have provided the foundations for synthesis such as the ones he has undertaken. Giles's achievement is a lesson to the critic that one can be ambitious without being sloppy, and that one can be conceptually daring yet still explore concrete ways, archives, publishing, history, and the nooks and crannies of critical reception. For all the heady originality of the book's sweeping argument, the text is always kept on an argumentative throughline, and potential tensions all make sense within the book's determinate frame.

Manifestly the third in a trilogy starting with *Antipodean America* (2013) and *Backgazing* (2019), examining respectively the American, modern, and postmodern valances of Antipodean cultural space, *The Planetary Clock* in a more fundamental sense is in line with Giles's entire oeuvre, which searches out vertiginous connections among bodies of constituted knowledge not usually brought into alignment with each other. The major reason this knowledge remained unaligned before was because of presumptions that were above all temporal: that Australia had nothing to give to the idea of modernism, for instance, or that the United States, as a settler colony, was, like it or not, a part of modernity, whereas an Australia presumed to be safely provincial and derivative was not. With that in mind, any acknowledgment of temporality and the global are codependent.

The Planetary Clock explores time in several ways. In terms of climate change in the Anthropocene, are we running out of time? In terms of planetarity, is our planet both a global spatial totality and a vulnerable and temporally precarious physical formation? But Giles also explores modern concerns regarding time, and literary discussions about the impact of Albert Einstein and the theory of relativity, and of the use of time as a motif in major modern writers. There is another way that time comes in here though, summarised by Johannes Fabian in his formulation of the denial of coequality to a certain culture. According to Fabian, largely Western cultures say that the non-Western peoples they conquered and subordinated did not have any history, did not have any time, and that their conquest was justified because they did not have access to the tragedy and privilege of historical time. With less politically powerful settler colonies such as Australia, this formulation becomes different. Settler Australian culture cannot be seen as being utterly outside of history, as Indigenous Australian culture was, but it could be castigated as being behind the times.

One of the burdens Australianists in the United States, such as myself, have historically had to assume is a defence of Australian literature against the charge of being behind the times, and to point out that Australia is in fact, up-to-date. (This has changed since the Internet and more Americans going to Australia, as both of those factors have made people realise that Australia is not at all behind the times.) I wonder if this out-of-date attitude was there from the beginning, as

it were, or if it has come in a bit later; was this mentality present in, say, 1850 or even 1900? I suspect that the long-serving conservative government in Australia from 1945 to the early 1970s, in an era where other Anglophone nations had generally progressive politicians leading them, may have contributed. Britain had Harold Wilson, America had John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and in Canada, there was Pierre Trudeau and even relative liberals like John Diefenbaker and Lester Pearson, but by the early 1970s, Australia still was led by the legatees of the Robert Menzies government. It could be that the progressive Gough Whitlam government of the mid-1970s, at least in the way its arts funding policy assisted the Australian film boom, is what achieved the most in making the casual world observer aware that there *was* an Australian culture contemporary with the rest of the world. But the issue might simply be more structural than this. The ability of Americans to say Australians are behind the times is an aspect of hegemony—the power to say that politics weaker than your own are not on the same planetary clock.

This spatial-temporal issue can become purely temporal when applied to the periodisation of literary history, and Giles, in using the term “postmodern” for a period still including the present, raises this issue. Mitchum Huehls, in his review of Giles’s book on American Literary History, criticises Giles’s use of the term postmodernism. I remember around 2008 or so thinking about when, roughly, the postmodern era would end, and coming up with the round date of 2020. I could not have foreseen Covid (which Giles usefully addresses as a spatiotemporal phenomenon on his first few pages) but that forecast was not inaccurate. Certainly, to call a fresh 2020s cultural phenomenon “postmodern” is no longer viable, but Giles is not wrong to speculate that we are still in long postmodernism (357), even if denominated postmodernism is as over as the nineteenth century was in 1901. Certainly, the perception of the postmodern serves Giles well in bringing together a heterogeneous group of authors such as John Barth, Richard Powers, Ian McEwan, and Gerald Murnane, all of whom have in different times and places been seen as vital to any sense of contemporary writing, but whose advocates have been so different in mode, style, and generation as to virtually be in a different universe. Giles’s analysis of these writers, hovering in mode between synopsis and exegesis, is supple, informative, thorough, and holds the reader throughout. If the postmodern, as a label, helps bring not just this writer but the bodies of work around them into meaningful dialogue, it is still a useful label.

What Huehls is perhaps demonstrating, though, is that postmodernism does not have the utility of modernism as a descriptive mode; and partly this is because so many kinds of cultural objects could be postmodern, but very few, even those procured in the modern period, were accorded the label of modernist, which was an *appellation contrôlée* reserved for those very few cultural products deemed sufficiently transgressive, or avant-garde. Postmodernism, perhaps, has become a victim of its very generosity and inclusiveness in scope—although I still suspect it is as legitimate to call some phenomena of the 2020s postmodern as it was to call some phenomena of the 1960s or even 1970s (such, as, for instance, Murnane’s first two novels) modernist. What is particularly rewarding about Giles’s framing of the writers mentioned above is that their political and conceptual challenges are foregrounded. Giles, for instance, notes that Murnane was displaying “a sardonic awareness of how the Southern Hemisphere has been marginalized according to Western norms” (239). Postmodernism, by capturing the entire world in its mesh, can allow for the discernment, and calling out, of such invidious asymmetries. In particular, Giles understands that the postmodern relativisation of hierarchies carried with it the “sinister corollary” (9) of enabling neoliberal commodification.

The “juxtaposition” (355) of the postmodern era with an Australian context, is very nearly equivalent to the post-Mabo era. Giles writes well on Indigenous writers such as the Waanyi novelist Alexis Wright. Though the with-it Australianist might flinch a bit at seeing Wright and

Les Murray on the same ideological plane, and although Giles might have, for example, a greater tolerance for Murray's "Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle," than I currently do, Giles has a longer perspective than most and can retrieve commonalities while more superficial observers might only discern antagonisms or different political emphases. One aspect of Giles's oeuvre that might prove controversial is his critique of land acknowledgments and other modes of "bleated acknowledgment of Indigenous presence" (45) as overlooking the way "any given country is a palimpsest rather than the sole property of any one people" (45). I agree, and add that this is particularly true of Europe, where the idea of original ownership can become both preposterous and politically torqued if back-imported from overseas settler colonial contexts. Given, though, the way the European colonisation of Australia unfolded—that it proceeded so quickly after the first contact—it is fairly easy to distinguish Indigenous from Settler historicity in Australia, in a way that is certainly not possible in England or France where waves of settlement lasted hundreds of years and were more cumulative and processual. Giles also, though, critiques land acknowledgments for diverting "attention away from the pressing political and economic issues associated with Indigenous society at the present time" (45). I understand why it is sometimes frustrating to see literary intellectuals so concerned, to use Marxist terms, about the superstructure rather than the base, and about symbolism rather than policy. But one might add that literary intellectuals, such as Giles and myself, are likely better at "superstructural" rather than "base" issues, and that solving "base" issues is probably above or below (however you measure it) our pay grade. A superstructural awareness of settler colonialism is needed precisely because, as Giles elsewhere argues in this book, there is not a determinate "present time" in which the pressing issues can be once and for all solved. (Giles's "present time," for instance, as his book was published in 2021, was before the 2023 referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, which certainly changed any sense of what the "present time" was in this respect.)

The entire thrust of Giles's book is to show that other temporalities always relativise every discrete sense of temporality. In general, Giles thoroughly sympathises with contemporary decolonial and anti-racist critiques, although he is too savvy and informed to echo their most simplistic registers. Giles's work champions those at the margin and decenters hierarchies. Indeed, books like this can show younger scholars that it is possible to be truly critical of hierarchical domination while also retaining a spirit of differentiation and pluralism in that critique. Giles is particularly salient in reminding us how African American writers such as Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison have engaged in multiple and speculative temporalities and praises Morrison's observation of a "retrospective remapping" (285) of deep time. Here I thought of the Wiradjuri writer Jeanine Leane's preface to the anthology of Indigenous Australian poetry she edited: *Guwayu, for All Times*, published in 2022. There, Leane explicates the Wiradjuri word *Guwayu* as meaning "all times are inseparable; no time is ever over; and all times are unfinished" (Leane xi). Leane's observation not only fortifies Giles's use of the rubric "postmodern"—as in this light the postmodern era will never fully be over, as eras are never over—but also sees the crisis brought about by settler colonisation as manifesting itself in more than one temporal continuum, that we can be in both 1788 and 2024 at once in terms of Settler–Indigenous relations. Giles, in the larger sense, is fully aware of this complication. Indeed, perhaps the only danger in the approach Giles takes is being so comprehensive as to perhaps preclude certain openings, much as occurs in the work of the social theorist Charles Taylor or the late political historian J. G. A. Pocock, although as the stature of the scholars mentioned here shows, this is an observation that is corollary only to a supreme academic achievement.

Giles never fails to astonish and impress with his comprehensiveness and percipience, the products of a superb ability to research and synthesise. Giles devotes an entire chapter to

contemporary music and opera—areas rarely the province of literary intellectuals today—but which Giles writes about (especially in his analysis of Harrison Birtwistle) with as much skill and discernment as he does in relation to visual artists such as Fiona Hall. The canvas of this book is sometimes vast, but this vastness is nearly always an asset, as Giles is reminding us never to leave things out and is using his matchless ability to research and analyse disparate cultural phenomena to enrich our comprehension of today's complex and multi-dimensional cultural world.

One of the effects of this remarkable and erudite book is to convince the scholar of world literature that Antipodean cultural production is not just something worth their while but is at the very base of an informed contemporary conception of what world literature should be. In this light, Giles does his best to see Baz Luhrmann's film adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as an Australian text, but it might be that the Australian valences in the film are more a directorial signature than an interpretive torque. But these sorts of battles must be fought to give Australian canons global visibility, and Giles is an adept and highly empathetic reader of Australian canons. Giles writes well about writers as different as Judith Wright (especially the later work, which has long merited more critical attention) Christos Tsiolkas, and Tim Winton, writers rarely considered together. In noting the religious or spiritual sides of authors as different as Murnane and Tsiolkas, Giles not only stays in touch with the religious themes of his early works of criticism (particularly his distinguished book on American Roman Catholic writing) but also frees Australian literature from a compulsory secularisation which is, for all its claims to modernity, only another sort of temporal provincialism. It is salutary to see a critic take religion seriously in combination with a progressive and cosmopolitan agenda that does not see religion as tantamount to residual conformity. This religious element is not just liberating but goes with, as Giles discerns, a certain spirituality latent in awareness of the Anthropocene and of Indigenous resilience. One feels, indeed, that what has happened in Australian culture in the past two generations has been a greater sense of alignment (and the recognition of such an alignment in the wider world) and that this was partially enabled by the collapse of an alternate Soviet time-scheme in which compulsory secularisation, modernity, and Settler hegemony was presumed, and in which many Australian intellectuals trusted too much as a conceptual given.

Giles indeed cites Timothy Garton Ash, who notes how, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, time in the former Eastern Bloc became Americanised in a way “unimaginable in Communist times” (317) and suggests that an Antipodean reordering of the world, concomitant with the Anthropocene, may equally upend temporal awareness. Though this might be a utopian conjecture, this book has the stature, authority, and “critical eclecticism” (354) to make this call. We are lucky to have such a book as *The Planetary Clock*: erudite, opinionated, congenial, inclusive, and no doubt, in the future, stimulating of many other explorations in such modes.

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