

Time and Aluna

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In parts of Indonesia, two of the waxing nights of the moon are called the “little pig moon” and the “big pig moon”; the eleventh and twelfth nights of its growing. They are so called because these are the nights when pigs and piglets get moonstruck, tickled pink by moonlight at night and squeakily overexcited, they bust out of their pens and go for a cavorting, giggly, piggy scramble in the fields.

Like so many cultures, Lakota Indians traditionally measured the year in moons: “the Moon when the Chokecherries are ripe,” (mid-August) or the “Moon of the Snowblind” in late January. The calendar of the Malagasy people in Madagascar offers the Gourds-Flower Month and the Bulls-Seek-Shade-of-Sakoa-Tree Month and then the Guinea-Fowls-Sleep Month.

A particular landscape, and specific animal appearances give these calendars the character of that precise locale. Through these names for months you can “see” a landscape. The dominant calendar, though, numbered and abstracted from nature, characterizes neither time nor space: through 07/03/07, what can you “see” except a global suburbia? In Rajasthan, in India, the moment when the herds return at evening is called “cattle-dust time”. Cow-time is local, social and embedded in nature’s processes. Whereas clock-time is global and applicable anywhere, cow-time is local to the very udder-hour.

To me, time is a deeply political subject, but seldom recognized as such. A choice to call this day 07/03, 2007 AD imposes a western Christian world-view. The myriad diversity of different cultures’ ways of looking at time is

made into a monoculture. It is the cocacolarisation of the calendar, a globalisation, which, by the way, began early: the first article printed on Gutneberg's press was a calendar, not a bible.

The mono-time of modernity is largely removed from nature. Synthetic, it is increasingly the same, standardized as a supermarket. (In a cityscape, this sameness of time is more apparent than in the countryside. The seasons have far less effect in urban centres, and the stages of the moon are barely noticeable.)

I read a recipe for "summer pudding" recently which began: "seasonality not being what it used to be, there is no reason why you shouldn't make this pudding... all year round." The rose-growing season is a wistful anachronism since roses can be bought at any time. To live in a synthetic present is to live not in the fullness but in the emptiness of time.

In Britain, the cycle of the year was once ribboned with carnivals, time was varied, elastic, coloured and seasonal. Nature-based, these festivals were often timed to coincide with a full moon, so the natural world provided a common time. Carnivals, all over the world, are festivals for the commoners, as opposed to the pageantry of dignitaries. Carnivals are celebrations of the bottoms-up gusto of the commons. Crucially, they were often held on common land: they were rites of commonality, of the common people sited on common land and marking common time. But these customs disappeared as a result of enclosure more than anything. With the loss of common land, up and down the country, the festivals of common time were gone. Another example of the politics of time.

Within Britain, the rise of Puritanism, urban and money-oriented, also oversaw the cancellation of fun. The Puritans, famously, banned Christmas and Mayday. Thereafter, the Industrial Revolution ensured that time – a thing which once people had the presumption to think they owned themselves – would be owned by the wealthy capitalist factory owners insisting on owning

their workers' time, and symbolizing this with clocks above the factory gates. (These clocks were loathed by working people and were regularly smashed.)

Across the world, missionarying Christianity attempted to impose its rhythms of church festivals and to ban the potlaches and full moon celebrations of local people. When missionaries arrived amongst the Algonquin peoples of North America, the Algonquin called clock-time "Captain Clock" because it seemed to command every act for the Christians.

To force someone to use your clock and calendar is one of the most subtle but profound aspects of imperialist power – colonialism of the mind. When ancient China had colonized some new region, the phrase they used to describe this act was at once sinister and telling – the people of the new territory had "received the calendar."

The leaders of the Zapatista peasant uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, were alert to the politics of time, insisting that their time was not the time of the Westernized, modernizing Mexican government. The Zapatista leaders took their orders from the peasants, a process both very slow and completely unschedulable. "We use time, not the clock. That is what the government doesn't understand."

What's the time?

A dishonest question. A political question. There are thousands of times, thousands of ways of counting it and imagining it. But after the great breakthrough in timekeeping, making clockwork of sufficient accuracy to discover longitude, the seas became navigable. Britons ruled the waves and through this ruled both empires of land and empires of time, for it was due to Britain's maritime supremacy that Greenwich was accepted worldwide as the zero meridian. Ruling the seas meant ruling the standard of world time – *the* time which is so highly political, and so seldom recognized as such. British time, London time became the norm, the standard, the original, from which all other cultures' time diverged, all others were non-standard, ahead or behind

the base-line. The French, alert to the relationship between time and power, continued, until 1978, in law to call GMT “Paris Mean Time retarded by nine minutes and twenty-one seconds.”

Tellingly for the place which was so ineluctably tied to the history of imperialism and consequently linked, whether it likes it or not, to the slave-trade, the chief clock at Greenwich in 1852 was called the “master” clock and it sent out signals to other “slave” clocks at London Bridge. Today, at Greenwich, there is a plaque (in a dismally unprominent position on a run-down housing estate) which quietly commemorates Greenwich as a key site in the slave trade in African people which, it says, “was to enrich England for centuries and correspondingly destabilise and impoverish Africa.”

So why Aluna? Why the moon? Why the river?

If there is a universal, common calendar, it is the moon. It is also the ultimate commons, it belongs as much to you as it does to me, as much to a mother in Bangladesh and to a dentist in Bilbao.

If there is a universal image for the flow of time, it is rivers, the “now” of the river’s current leading into the sea, so often pictured as time-everlasting, as Byron called the oceans “the image of eternity.” And the Thames also is one of the last common spaces of London. So a moon clock by the river, powered by the tide – the tide? Time and tide rhyme in the mind of humanity – in English, the word tide can be used for both the sea’s tides and certain specific times; noontide, eventide, Whitsuntide and Eastertide. The word tide is etymologically related to the word time in Old English. “Current” refers to both time and tide.

There is a deep reflexive relationship between societies and their way of seeing time. Time for the rigid Order of the sixth century Benedictines declared that time should be rigidly ordered. Time for Chaucer and the authors of the medieval books of hours, was characterized by a soft, rural patience. To the seventeenth century Puritans, time was as drear as they

were themselves, and they forbade the colour of common life and dressed the calendar in black. In the days of empire, time was considered absolute and the definition of time belonged to the rulers, for them to impose all over the world. The contemporary idea that time is money is a portrait of today's overworking, overconsuming society.

What Aluna does is to challenge with beauty. Emphasizing not the past empire but present cultural openness. A clock of the moon suggests the heart of common time, nature's time, that moon which belongs to everyone, of every race and every religion. And Aluna is also specific to place, to this exact place, where the sweet Thames runs softly in the true fullness of time, the now of the moon.

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