Beyond the Spatial? A Temporal Perspective. A Review of Sarah Sharma’s *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*

**Johannes Grow, Virginia Tech** (jgrow1@vt.edu)


**Introduction**

Declarations such as “time is speeding up” or “the world is getting faster” are becoming increasingly common in everyday discourse. Articles, such as “Slow Down: How Our Fast-Paced World Is Making Us Sick,” assume that the world has sped up to such an extent that we must take steps to slow ourselves down, to recalibrate ourselves in order to prevent the “psychological and social stressors,” which, according to Buzzell, affect us all on a daily basis.¹ We live in a supposedly “hyper-mediated” world in which we must keep up or, failing that, become sick, inefficient, etc. It is this very assumption of speed that Sarah Sharma’s *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* seeks to challenge. Indeed, Sharma calls for “critiques of a tacit acceptance that the world is getting faster by examining instead how the discourse of speedup is part of the problematic cultural context in which people understand and experience time.”² Rather than assuming that the world continues at a similar speed for everyone, Sarah Sharma investigates a multiplicity of temporalities within the global capitalist system. In other words, she investigates how the discourse of speed “ privileges certain populations and disavows others while it upholds normalizing conceptions of time.”³

In an attempt to provide answers to these questions, Sharma introduces the reader to her concept of “power-chronography.” Sharma bases this term on a conception of time as “lived experience,” a time that is always political and is produced at the intersection among various “social differences and institutions.”⁴ Through a methodological mixture of ethnographic interviews, discourse analysis, political economic analysis, and critical theory, Sharma is able to trace the various trajectories of discourse that support certain subjects and devalue others within a “temporal normativization” framework.⁵ The main chapters in her work consist of a series of ethnographic investigations of different temporal and spatial subjects ranging from those bodies of “temporal worth,” who welcome the biopolitical intervention, to those subjects who are divested from the “temporal architecture” and yet remain within the jurisdiction of biopolitical regulation thus forming the very foundation upon which the privileged temporal architecture rests on. Her book paints a vivid picture, with each of her ethnographic chapters connected to the next, illustrating the connection across both levels of temporality and spatiality.

This Foucaultian move allows Sharma to differentiate between various kinds of “temporal labor” in order to elucidate the intersection of labor and biopower and thus illustrate the resulting temporal differences that are at the foundation of the current neoliberal global economy. Sharma successfully highlights this temporal difference through a contrasting of the jet-lagged airline business passenger in her first chapter...
and, in her intriguing second chapter, the taxi driver who lives at the “margins of temporality.” Indeed, rather than time speeding up, Sharma points out that because the taxi drivers support and keep up with the temporal needs of others (such as the business man or the jet-lagged traveler) their sense of temporality is quite different. The control of time is vital for both the taxi driver and the frequent business traveler, yet what separates them is the biopolitical investment that not only supports temporal architecture of the business traveler but also adds to the illusion that these subjects are self-sufficient and are in control of their own time. This illusion hides the reality that their time is completely dependent on other subjects. In this case, the taxi driver or hotel maid are necessary to support the temporal architecture, oftentimes at the detriment of their own bodies.

The result of this dependency is reflected in the “cab lag,” or, in Sharma’s terms, “a condition of labor of where people exist in a differential and inequitable temporal relation with another group with whom they are expected to synch up.” Thus, these bodies, (e.g., housemaids, city workers, taxi drivers) are required to “synch up” with those bodies that exist in the privileged realms of temporality; these impoverished bodies live in the margins or the boundaries of time. The differences, then, among these various groups all living under global capitalism are connected through time, rather than space. In addition to both the marginalized bodies of the taxi driver, the housemaid, or the security guard and those privileged bodies that rely on the maintenance of the temporal architecture, are those bodies that live within a “temporal normativity.”

In the latter half of her book, Sharma investigates the “most normal of time, the most structured of temporalities.” Indeed, different from the privileged frequent business traveler who relies on a temporal architecture to keep up with time and the temporal “bare life” that composes the temporality of the taxi driver, the desk worker or the sedentary body lies within a “temporal normativity.” That is to say the temporal order, which is home to millions of nine to five workers, consists of those who are “both a sped up capitalism subject of global capital who needs to slow down and a slowed down body who needs to get up to speed.” In order to maintain their sedentary lifestyle, and thus remain valuable to the capitalist global economy, these workers must be “recalibrated,” not only to lessen the negative health effects of a sedentary lifestyle but also to become more efficient. Sharma contends that the corporate yoga instructors, as temporal mechanics, are those who, through the recalibration of the desk worker, renew the desk worker as a biopolitical subject. Yet, this biopolitical intervention is hidden under the guise of a discourse that provides workers the ability to “slowdown” and recuperate. Indeed, desk workers must take care of themselves in order to reproduce these conditions of social reproduction. An important aspect of this discourse is the emphasis on a neoliberal hyper-individuality. That is to say, the employer allows time for yoga as part of the biopolitical intervention, but the desk worker must take it upon him or herself, as a “good” individual, to pay for the yoga in order to “slow down” and thus remain productive and thus maintain the system. In addition to the increase in a discourse concerning the need for us to slowdown, Sharma notes that there has been a concomitant increase in discourse that extols the importance of “slow living.”
Specifically, a discourse based on various local and slow food movements that supposedly protect the subject from the constant speedup of life.

Yet, Sharma argues that despite the emphasis by the “slow lifers” on the resistance to both the speedup of time and money, they nonetheless occlude, perhaps because of their obsession with the spatial instead of the temporal, the myriad temporalities of difference. Sharma notes that spaces of “slowness” are reserved for those who have the privilege to slowdown. Her examples of the Caretta Shidome and the “Slow Food Movement” in San Francisco are prime examples of the spatial nature of the slow movement. Indeed, the discourse that requires individuals to “step out of time” only further normalizes the present temporal order. Only those subjects who have the material means to “slowdown” are thus able to “transcend” time. For Sharma, the emphasis on “slowness” organizes the relations of space as well as the structure of time which “naturally” occludes those subjects, for example wage laborers and night-shift workers, from inhabiting these spaces of “slowness.”

In addition, Sharma adds that we must not solely focus on the speedup of time, but rather she argues that we must recognize how our own time management impacts, and at times constricts, the time of others. Indeed, Sharma provides an insightful and timely critique of the current obsession of the speedup of time and increasing globalization of the world. Moreover, through a thoughtful engagement with Foucault’s theory of biopower, Sharma uncovers the continuing unevenness of globalization and a multiplicity of different temporalities of socio-economic realities hidden by this cultural fixation on “speed up.”

Yet, the conclusion of the book leaves the reader wondering if her thoughtful and provocative discussion of multiple temporalities ever actually escapes the spatial fixation that she accuses the speed theorists of maintaining. Sharma presages that “a temporal perspective does not try to create more free time; it strives to free time from this fixation.” Nonetheless, her examples of the taxi driver, the Caretta Shidome, and even her starting point, the Shibuya Station in Tokyo, remain trapped within specific spatial contexts. It would seem that the inability to discuss these “spaces” without falling back on a discourse that is saturated with images of the spatial is indicative of the challenge of overcoming our fixation on, in Sharma’s terms, “spatial pluralism.” Thus, despite the novel approach presented in *In the Meantime*, spatiality remains crucial to Sharma’s argument. Can we become more temporally aware without grounding our discourse in the spatial? To that end, then, rather than freeing us from the spatial fixation completely, the next step would perhaps be to highlight the importance of temporality without completely discounting the role of the spatial. Although she does analyze “politics of differential time,” one has to wonder about similarity of politics across various temporalities and spaces. For example, what connects if anything, the protesters in Missouri, Ferguson to those protesters in Hong Kong when they simultaneously employ the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture?

In general, Sharma’s call for a collective sharing of time, a reimagining of the temporal that would free it from our individual fixations on having too little time, and thus
incorporate those who live in the shadows or margins of our global, temporal, capital world, is an ambitious and laudable project. *In the Meantime*, then, provides, through a mix of personal anecdotes and interviews, an engaging account from both the margins and heart of global capitalism.


3 Sharma, *In the Meantime*, 9.

4 Sharma, 15.

5 Sharma, 15-16.

6 Ibid, 63.

7 Ibid, 79.

8 Ibid, 83.

9 Ibid, 83.

10 Ibid, 100.

11 Ibid, 84.

12 Ibid, 84-86.


14 Ibid, 150.

15 Ibid, 146.