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Memory, Time, and Plurality: Reimagining narratives for transformative futures

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Exploring the intricate relationship between memory, time, and plurality offers a profound understanding of how future narratives are constructed. This paper delves into cognitive processes such as episodic foresight, unravelling the mechanisms through which memory facilitates mental time travel and influences our envisioning of diverse futures. By challenging the supremacy of linear time, a concept deeply ingrained in colonial and patriarchal paradigms, we can uncover inherent constraints that exclude diverse narratives.

Drawing upon concepts like revolutionary time and interlocking time zones, this paper advocates for a radical reimagining of narratives that transcends temporal constraints and embraces plurality across past, present, and future. Through examples from popular culture, including the television series *Bridgerton* and *Anne with an E*, this paper illustrates the transformative potential of inclusive storytelling in subverting dominant narratives and fostering societal change. Ultimately, the argument is made that by actively remembering and re-embodying pluralism in our collective past, we can forge futures that are inherently more inclusive and diverse.

KEYWORDS: futures, foresight, temporality, time, storytelling, narratives, memory, cognitive science, plurality, past, pop culture, *Bridgerton*, *Anne with an E*

RSD TOPIC(S): Methods & Methodology, Society & Culture

Presentation description

The way we conceive of time shapes how we understand the world around us. It influences who can contribute to the past, participate in the present, and create the future. In the linear conception of time that dominates Western society, we see time as a single line marching forward from a fixed origin. It imposes a singular narrative that precludes the recognition of plurality in existence, thereby suppressing those who diverge from the dominant narrative by negating their past and the prospect of reclaiming it. This includes women, Black people, Indigenous people, people of colour, and 2SLGBTQ+ people. By enforcing a disembodied approach to thinking about and creating the future, linear time further oppresses those we are already marginalised. If we wish to restore plurality in our present and future, we must begin to see linear time for what it is: one of many human-made tools to measure change and what it is not: an unalterable natural element. In doing so, we must also consider other concepts of time that will allow plurality and the possibility for genuine transformation.

By examining the constraints of linear time and exploring the possibilities offered by non-linear concepts, it is possible to nourish a continuous pluriverse across the past, present, and future. Revolutionary and interlocking time are particularly effective in subverting the oppressive nature of linear time and enabling us to retrieve stories and knowledge that have been cut from the dominant narrative. By embracing these alternative temporal frameworks, we can move beyond the constraints of linear time and imagine more radical and liberatory futures.

Futures thinking through the past

To comprehend the ways in which conceptions of time affect our capacity to engage in plurality, it is crucial to explore how memory facilitates mental time travel to both the past and the future. On the surface, it may appear that the evolution of memory was meant to aid in remembering survival-critical activities, like returning to a food source. However, cognitive scientists have argued that memory ultimately developed in humans to support something much more likely to help us stay alive: futures thinking. The highly generative futures thinking process, episodic foresight, is thought to occur through the repurposing of elements from episodic memory (memories of specific events and

experiences) (Suddendorf & Corbalis, 2007). Converging evidence has shown that episodic memory and episodic foresight are supported by the same neurocognitive processes (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010). This close neurological relationship may explain the sensation of pre-experiencing, often accompanying futures thinking that seems to enable us to consider and evaluate future options with seemingly visceral information (Atance & O'Neil, 2001).

Pre-experiencing future events without the risks and pressures of them presently unfolding is an important advantage. As Suddendorf and Renshaw (2013) summarise, "...our ability to anticipate the future enables us to plan and prepare for events that may never have been experienced before, thereby increasing our chances of survival and reproductive success" (p. 23). The infinite recombination of episodic memories makes it possible for humans to mentally time travel anywhere along the temporal spectrum, including time frames in which we have not yet or no longer exist, such as before and after our own birth and death (Suddendorf & Corbalis, 2007). This ability is powerful, as it seemingly allows us to think into the future with unlimited results.

While episodic memory is considered the predominant foundational material for futures thinking, familiarity with the future event in question impacts the involvement of semantic memory (or general knowledge). When research participants are asked to construct future events that are familiar to them, they rely on material from similar events from their past (episodic memory), but when they attempt to construct future events that are very different from what they know, they tend to draw more from their general knowledge (semantic memory) (Wang et al., 2016). The ability to draw upon both types of memory appears to further expand the limits of how far into the future we can imagine, with the farthest projections of the future pulling from semantic memory when necessary.

Considering its role in futures thinking, access to a large and diverse memory store should enable us to conceive of and consider more future options. Simple enough, but futures thinking is also a socially and culturally mediated activity, and as such, it is subject to constraints. When we plan (futures think), we employ highly cultured tools such as language, calendars (Baumeister et al., 2016), life scripts (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010), and conceptions of time. While these allow us to organise and share our visions of the future, they also constrain our ability to think about futures that are very different

from what we know. For example, cultural life scripts (i.e. cultural expectations of the order and timing of significant life events) can guide us to futures thinking over long periods of time. By providing a “culturally transmitted temporal structure” (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010, p.275), they help us construct self-narratives beyond time horizons in which we normally think (de Vito et al., 2006). For example, through a life script, a young child can think well into adulthood and consider possible futures of education, career, marriage, and even having their own children. Yet these scripts also constrain our thinking in that they emphasise events that align with the established narrative of the dominant culture. In this way, culture imposes a future in its own image, assuming the universality of what is desired and what should come to be.

This is also true of conceptions of time, especially linear time. Linear time assumes a uniform and unchanging progression of events (Söderbäck, 2019). Because it is always marching forward and cannot go back to retrieve what might have been lost along the way, just like a cultural life script, linear time is limited in the stories it can tell. In fact, it can only tell one type of story: that which supports the narrative of the culture that conceived it. As we have seen, memory forms futures thinking, and so access to diverse knowledge (semantic memory) and stories (episodic memory) is crucial to enabling pluralistic futures thinking. Unfortunately, producing and accessing more knowledge and stories alone cannot induce plurality when the structure upon which these are formed (linear time) simply does not allow it.

Conceptions of time that oppress and those that liberate

The concept of linear time emerged during a time (the Enlightenment era) marked by "dominance, violence, and aggression" (Musanga & Mutekwa, 2011, p. 1300) towards other cultures, societies, and genders. Söderbäck (2019) argues that linear time is built on patriarchal values, in which emerges narratives in which white, straight, cis-gendered men are subjects. In these narratives, men, by transcending their own bodies, can think of and create the future, while others are relegated to the embodied labour required to uphold this story (Söderbäck, 2019). Linear time has and continues to render women, racialised people, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalised groups history-less in the dominant narrative and thus excluded from the future (Söderbäck, 2019). If we are to bring back to life what has been lost in the societal narrative and restore plurality, we

must reconsider the foundation we have chosen for knowledge and stories, that is, time itself. First, we must time travel to the past to understand where and why plurality was first lost under the linear regime. From there, we can begin to understand our present state of a deprived history, and finally, we can explore what is needed to create true transformation and newness to restore a richness of possibility.

Under the linear regime, the only way to participate in the dominant narrative is to become like it and make contributions in its likeness. In a society ruled by white, straight, cis men, these men are also the model, and they remain so even as others become their equals (Söderbäck, 2019). This makes it necessary for women to become like men in order to become agents of their own futures. An illustration of this is the birth control pill, which allowed women control over their reproductive choices and, thus, their futures. However, it required them to subvert a uniquely female biological process, making their bodies more like those of men (Tennent & Fleming, 2022). The same is true of people of colour and immigrants who can only join linear time and contribute to history when they look, sound, and act like white people and of 2SLGBTQ+ people when they adhere to patriarchal structures and heteronormative behaviours such as monogamy and marriage (Söderbäck, 2019). The result of all this disembodiment is linear time depositing in the present a multitude of people and cultures without their differentiated history and agency in their futures.

When discussing the pluriverse (a world of all possibilities), the conversation is often around how we might create or increase plurality. Yet the plurality of experience, hopes, and dreams has always been, so this is not what needs to be created in the present. A pluriverse depends on something more nuanced. That is, not that diverse experiences, hopes, and dreams merely exist, but rather, they are meaningfully cultivated, realised, and allowed to transform each other and, in co-transformation, create genuine newness. As such, a pluriverse cannot be formed in the present or conjured only in the future. Cultivation takes time, as does realisation and transformation, and as such, plurality must equally exist in the past. Felwine Sarr explains this requirement in an essay entitled “Reopening Futures”:

It is also a question of allowing for the plurality of histories. It is impossible to conceive of a single history for all human societies. It is about leaving behind the Eurocentrism tied to linear, progressive schemas of History, and of dropping

Europe's master-narrative, whose model and the world's other peoples are condemned to adopt or unhappily repeat. It is about accepting the plurality of collective ways of being, the multitudinous forms of societal life, the diverse modalities for producing being that we call cultures - and it is about accepting the possibility of there being many worlds within the world. (Sarr, 2023, p. 119)

Unfortunately, this is exactly what linear time does not allow. Consisting of stages that cannot be reversed (Musanga & Mutekwa, 2011), linear time lays down the track of one history with no way of returning to remix or add to it. So, while Sarr (2023) notes it is "impossible to conceive of a single history for all human societies" (p. 119), linear time forces us into dissonance within an impossibly singular history. When our collective memory is limited to a singular narrative, we risk falling into a pattern of forgetting and repetition (Söderbäck, 2019). To subvert the linearity of time and its entanglement with colonialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, it is necessary to both remember, that is, expand our collective memory, and re-member, to bring back to life and re-embodiment past experiences (Söderbäck, 2019). In doing so, we must also come to recognise that linear time is not an inherent or natural unalterable element but merely one of many human-made understandings and measures of change. Linear time is but one temporal tool among many, and we must question its suitability for building the worlds we aspire to.

Time in the African context is an interweaving of presents, pasts, and futures. It is not a linear progression where each moment erases and replaces the previous one, leading to the existence of only one age within society (Musanga & Mutekwa, 2011). Instead, each age bears, alters, and maintains the previous ones. In the book *Revolutionary Time: On Time and Difference in Kristeva and Irigaray*, Fanny Söderbäck develops a concept of time with similar principles. Described as a movement of perpetual return and renewal, Söderbäck's model ("revolutionary time") "allows us to redeem the past and the present without instrumentalising them in the name of a future always already defined in the present" (Söderbäck, 2019, p. 12). Revolutionary time is rooted in cyclical time, but it is not simply a repetition of the past. Instead, it involves differentiation, alteration, and displacement, making it a driver of change and transformation. In revolutionary time, a return to the past is possible, and so is a plurality of histories, and in returning to re-embodiment what was lost, a pluriverse can be restored across all time zones.

Concepts like the interlocking time zones and revolutionary time allow for the recovery of different points of origin from which we can extrapolate the present and the future. These recovered points of origin also create new knowledge (semantic memory) and new narratives (episodic memory) that can be remixed to create novel images of the future. In this way, when the chosen conception of time aligns with the cognitive mechanics of memory and foresight, a return to our bodies is made possible. More broadly, we can understand the criticalness of the return to the body as a basic building block in plurality through the study of all-natural bodies. Nature, the only true creator of new things (Söderbäck, 2019), demonstrates the difference between multiplicity and genuine plurality through asexual and sexual reproduction. In asexual reproduction, a single individual can reproduce without the involvement of another, resulting in offspring that are genetically identical to each other and the parent (Chen et al., 2019). While efficient and rapid, it does not create new genetic diversity and cannot transform when faced with change. Linear time is likened to asexual reproduction in that it reproduces itself from what it was before. While it is viewed as creative and progressive, it is most successful in stable contexts; it lacks differentiation and the potential to create newness.

Where asexual reproduction recreates the same from one, sexual reproduction involves two individuals combining genetics to create something that is distinct from either parent. In the infinite possibilities of recombination, offspring in sexual reproduction are also distinct from each other, resulting in diversity and the capacity of a species to evolve. Fundamental to the transformative potential is that it requires a plurality, not just multitude, of at least two, or as Söderbäck puts it, “[b]eginnings are always at least two in number” (p. 273). Sexual reproduction’s requirement of diversity to create more diversity is similar to what Söderbäck argues is required of the kind of plurality that will allow for free and transcendent futurity: *sexuate difference*. *Sexuate difference* is the fundamental difference between male and female genders (or, as per Söderbäck, any individualities that are fundamentally distinct from one another), which goes beyond biological distinctions to encompass social, cultural, and psychological differences. *Sexuate difference* is not about opposition, but rather, a tension between two or more that is capable of generating newness. Conversely, the tension of linear time stems from

within itself from the need to maintain a singular narrative despite external pressure to diversify.

When we return to the body, sexuate difference (and thus plurality) is possible. In talking about returning to the body, we are also talking about a return to stories. Stories are, of course, of bodies. When we apply the concepts of sexuate difference and plurality in storytelling, we are not just talking about bringing different bodies into a story but a return to different bodies in their own stories. It is these different bodies in their own different stories that interact with each other to create and transform and, in this way, perpetuate new points of origin from which a pluriverse can form. Because the media we produce (books, film, etc.) is a record and, in a sense, our collective memory from which we can recombine and future think, we must embrace sexuate differences in the stories it captures.

Reimagining popular narratives and the achievement of plurality

Bridgerton is a historical romance television series created by Chris Van Dusen and produced by Shonda Rhimes. Set in Regency-era London during the early 1800s, it follows the lives and romantic pursuits of the Bridgerton family and their peers. The series steps outside the norms of its genre in its use of colour-blind casting; that is, actors of all races and ethnicities are cast in roles that traditionally have been played by white actors. The colour-blind casting is intentional and aims to provide a more diverse and inclusive representation of history that reflects the world we live in today. While it uses the past to critique and challenge the present and allows for underrepresented groups to see themselves reflected on screen, it is debatable to what extent it allows for a more diverse range of stories to be told. It engages elements of revolutionary time, especially in encouraging plurality through utopia, yet it is also at risk of historical denialism and superficial representation, which ultimately restrict its transformative potential.

While the series does not present a perfect society, *Bridgerton* offers a sort of utopia in its simple eradication of racism in a reimagined Regency-era narrative. As a positive, a metamodernist utopia such as this can catalyse longing and exploration of alternative states (Šporčič, 2022), providing an occasion for viewers to consider new possible pasts and, therefore, new plurality in the present and future. For example, extrapolating from

Bridgerton's racially equal world, one can imagine other-world Prince Harrys and Megan Markles that might be fundamentally different from who they are in our current universe. While utopia helps us envision plurality, plurality actually drives us closer to utopia. It provides the many possibilities needed for everyone to develop to their full potential and realise their identities, which is, at the crux, a utopian state (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2023). Furthermore, envisioning a utopian world that embraces plurality can inspire an ideal state of mind (internal utopia), fostering personal transformation that breaks free from linear time's narrative (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2023).

While increasing BIPOC actors in leading and supporting roles is seen as progress, alone it does not offer a true victory. The impact of *Bridgerton's* engagement with utopia in promoting plurality is complicated by the risk of historical denialism (Kulak, 2022) and reinforcement of stereotypes (Šporčič, 2022). Because the series ignores the dark chapters of Britain's slavery past and offers far too simple a reason (romantic love) for the racial equality depicted in the story, it is at risk of undermining efforts to address racism in society (Kulak, 2022). Furthermore, while colour-blind casting allows for diversity, continued colour-blindness after casting may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes (Šporčič, 2022). For example, the contrast of Marina's sexualised character (played by a black actor) with Daphne's virginal character (played by a white actor) may unintentionally provide yet another version of an already deeply ingrained racist story. In reimagining narratives, it is crucial not to re-open a societal memory, only to let it reconsolidate in the sameness as the established dominant narrative. In order for such a reopening to be advantageous, a revolution of the nature that Söderbäck describes is necessary to ensure a reimagining leads towards creating something truly innovative.

Overall, *Bridgerton* offers an exploration through utopia that invites viewers to question and contemplate alternative states. While perhaps too simplistic considering what we know of the period, the series offers an explanation of hope, which is an essential aspect of the future and of plurality. Kruger and De Klerk (2020) poetically sum it up as: "In remembering, memories of the past become present. Simultaneously, they become components of the future. In this sense, we remember a future for ourselves that exists in hope." (p. 136).

While not as widely viewed, the story behind the Canadian TV series *Anne with an E* (Anne) (Murdoch & Calvert, 2017), *Anne of Green Gables*, by Lucy Maud Montgomery, has been widely read with translations in over thirty-six languages (Qiao, 2021). In *Anne with an E*, the writers deliberately reopen the original narrative not only to add diverse characters but also to bring back lost stories. These include stories about Indigenous Peoples, residential schools, Black maritime communities, 2SLGBTQ+ people, and trauma from orphanhood. This has the effect of bringing back missing bodies to Montgomery's original fiction, thus restoring the sexual difference that is needed in the body to make the stories about them irreducible to each other. It is the interaction and tension of these irreducible stories that create a space for continued transformation and plurality. For example, in the reimaged TV series, the story of the beloved protagonist Anne Shirley-Cuthbert has an opportunity to interact with both her own trauma of being orphaned (which is barely mentioned in Montgomery's original text) and Ka'kwet's experiences with residential school. In these interactions, the stories transform each other, and the spaces between them produce entirely new stories.

Closing remarks

The path to transformative futures lies in actively remembering and re-embodying pluralism in our collective past. As we navigate the complexities of memory, time, and storytelling, let us heed the call to reimagine our narratives, forging futures that honour the richness of human experience and pave the way for genuine transformation. Examples such as *Bridgerton* tend to reduce or *make like* in integrating BIPOC bodies in white stories, but true diversity in storytelling requires BIPOC bodies in BIPOC stories, and only then do we meet the need for new points of origin and transformation of the dominant narrative.

And yet, I argue that this is not enough. For those of us whose stories have made it into the dominant narrative, we have a responsibility to not just re-examine them but to dissect them mercilessly. It is our responsibility to pull through the threads of the stories and bodies that have been intentionally cut away. This re-opening should not be feared as a loss or a forgetting of the past but rather as an opportunity to write the fullness of the story. In *Anne with an E*, Anne Shirley-Cuthbert is not reduced but rather allowed to be even more herself within the stories that surround and involve her. Like

Anne, each of us is also more ourselves in our interconnectedness with each other, and in our full knowledge and expression of ourselves, we become irreducible. In the tension and spaces between the multitudes of irreducible selves and stories exists the newness we need for the future.

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