Connolly's Untimely Meditations: Complex Temporality and Creative Emergence in a World of Becoming

Smita A. Rahman

In his wonderful recent book Resounding Events: Adventures of an Academic from the Working Class (2022), which is at once a memoir and something far more, William E. Connolly provides us with a rich and textured account of his both his academic work and key events from his personal life, enriches us with his insights, and nudges us to rethink many of our conceptual assumptions. As a former graduate student of Connolly's, it is almost impossible for me to read it without recalling sheets of the past, pulling up fragments of a graduate seminar discus- sion on Citizen Kane and Gilles Deleuze from two decades ago, and thinking once again about bumpy temporalities and multiple force- fields of chrono-time. One of the many striking things about Resounding Events is Connolly's decades-long engagement with Nietzsche (the full extent of which is outside the scope of this brief essay), whom he continues to converse with and draw inspiration from. Nietzsche's insistence—always poetic, often strident—on disruption, contingency, and creative affirmation in a tragic world, is often either in the back- ground or the foreground of Connolly's writing, even as he finds new voices to add to the conversation—James, Spinoza, Bergson, Deleuze, Sophocles, Hesiod, and Whitehead—to name but a few. In reflecting on Connolly's legacy, and particularly his repeated engagement with temporality, what immediately resonates and bubbles to the surface is a formulation in one of Nietzsche's earlier works that captures both his and Connolly's contributions on the subject. In his foreword to the "Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," an essay Nietzsche wrote to depict his feelings of torment about Germany's feverish cultivation of history, he described his own work as untimely. For Nietzsche, to be untimely meant "that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come."[1] In this essay, I argue that Nietzsche's project of working counter to our time, actively and creatively working on issues in and of our time on a variety of registers and for the benefit of a time to come, reso- nates profoundly with and captures the sweeping scope of Connolly's immense

contribution to political theory.

Connolly's untimely meditations continue in his most recent work, Resounding Events, where he notes that "as the Anthropocene rattles a set of assumptions in the Euro-American canon, we are pressed to think anew about how the politics of regional exploitation and accelerating climate change intersect."[2] It is all there in the untime- liness of that urging—the pressing on our time and interrogating the increasing fragmentation and rupture of its foundational narratives, the attention to key issues of exploitation (and yes, the ressentiment and fascist drives they engender in the present), and for the benefit of a future whose horizon of expectation is already shrunken by acceler- ating climate change. But Connolly's work is also untimely in a more conceptual sense, namely in its attention to temporal complexity and its conjunctions, resonances, and dissonances, and how it actively works to decenter and displace the dominant Euro-American temporal framework which remains stubbornly linear and sequential. In what follows, I focus on this latter aspect of conceptual untimeli- ness in Connolly's work through a brief reading of three of his books— Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, and Speed; A World of Becoming, and The Fragility of Things. In these texts, Connolly deepens and enriches our understanding of time beyond the dominant linear and sequential framework of progressive determinism, expanding to sheets of the past, memory traces and scars, and multiple overlapping force-fields of chrono-time, all of which fold contingency and creativity into the political and are alert to the bristling disruptions of thought and emer- gent possibility.

When I first arrived at Johns Hopkins in the fall of 2000, Connolly was working on the book that soon became Neuropolitics. Our seminar readings were a heady mix of innovative research in neuroscience, all things Gilles Deleuze, and cinema. To use the phrase that was in heavy usage in our seminar discussions, he certainly had all our "neurons firing together and wiring together" in these conversations, and the book that emerged from these conversations a couple of years later continues to jolt and shape my creative thinking. In Neuropolitics, Connolly explores what he terms "the body/brain/culture network" to highlight the insufficiency of intellectualist and deliberative models of thinking that in his words "underestimate the importance of body image, unconscious motor memory, and thought-imbued affect."[3] In seeking to fold these elements into a more complex and creative mode of thinking, he turns to a deep exploration of memory in both its layered recollection of pastness, and its role in the infraconscious, where affect and sensation play a key role. Paying close attention to sedimented memory traces and how they affect thought and judgment necessitates a re-examination of the dominant image of time in Euro- American thought itself—an image of time that is linear, sequential, and determined by progress. Connolly draws on Deleuze and Bergson to craft a more complex time-image highlighting, for instance, how flashbacks in film bring out, to use a phrase

from Neuropolitics, "fork- ings in time that challenge our linear presumptions."[4] From Deleuze, Connolly draws out the concept of non-chronological "sheets of past," and from Bergson's writings on perception and time as duration, the insight that memory's operation requires assembling a sheet of past for recollection to draw from. The linear presumptions of the domi- nant image of time in the Euro-American image of time in the Western tradition are thus consistently challenged and decentered by memory traces, which highlight the presence of the past—indeed of multiple pasts.

Memory assembles sheets of pasts in ways that are virtual and nonchronological and below the level of conscious reflection. A response is then forged by the connections between an affectively imbued encounter, a sheet of past assembled by memory, the present event, and a possible future.[5] Attending to this assemblage of the tenses therefore allows a more creative dimension of thought to emerge. It calls to mind Nietzsche's playful and creative insight in Thus Spoke Zarathustra: "[S]till is the bottom of my sea, who would guess that it harbors sportive monsters?"[6] Like Nietzsche, whose Zarathustra finds disruption and play where others only see stillness, Connolly challenges stolid and ossified models of thought with a creative re-working of how thinking itself operates. The sportive monsters of thought sparked by affectively imbued encounters play creatively over the pages of Neuropolitics as they thread a pass, catch a defender off-guard, and shoot over forks and rifts in time (just as Connolly once did as a young basketball point guard, a formative experience that he recalls in textured detail in Resounding Events). The sportive monsters that Nietzsche finds gamboling in the depths of the sea where others only find stillness, also resonate with Nidesh Lawtoo's wonderful recounting of Homer's depiction of the Protean myth, where the shape-shifting and occasionally prophesying god of the sea tries to herd his sportive seals.[7] In Connolly's protean world, even as early as Neuropolitics, time is rendered "as becoming, replete with the dangers and possibilities attached to such a world."[8]

These ideas are pushed even further in Connolly's subsequent book, A World of Becoming, where he extends his reflections on tempo- rality beyond the human to a world of creative evolution. Here the forks and rifts in time are expanded well beyond human perception and memory to the contingency and creativity of the universe itself, which is composed of multiple force-fields in slow or rapid motion that display a capacity to transmute and change. In Connolly's words, "We participate, rather, in a world of becoming in a universe set on multiple zones of temporality, with each temporal force-field period-ically encountering others as outside forces. And the whole universe open to an uncertain degree."[9] We therefore act, and sometimes must do so militantly, Connolly urges, in a world that exists beyond our mastery, and beyond that of divine providence. Crude notions of linear time marked by regulative and deterministic ideas of progress, or steered forward by religious faith, cannot

come to terms with a world of becoming that is tragic, contingent, and replete with emergent possibility. Theorizing time as becoming requires acknowledging how multiple force-fields of fast and slow time intersect, weaving in and out of each other, encompassing individuals, oceans, asteroids, and more. Anticipating later moves towards the planetary and even the cosmological, in this book Connolly moves the conception of tempo- rality well beyond its often human-centered focus on lived experience. Decentering and disrupting the dominant and anthropocentric time-image leads to the anxieties that often accompany the rupture of deeply held, but wholly insufficient, foundational narratives, but also to a set of hopes that Connolly articulates in the following way: "that coming to terms with force-fields of multiple types with different degrees of agency moving at different speeds can help us to nego- tiate more wisely relations between the human estate and the larger world."[10] An ethic of cultivation is crucial here. For Connolly, such an ethic requires working on the affective register, often below the level of consciousness, often through micro-level techniques of the self. Such an ethic of cultivation, which is key aspect of the militant pluralist assemblage that Connolly considers key for political action, must also be expanded and deepened to reckon with a world of becoming. He notes that our sensitivity to the world can go beyond sensory expe- rience to come to terms with the multiple modes and degrees of agency that compose such a world. Doing so necessitates re-thinking agency itself—to think in terms of enhancing our relations with modes of agency that exceed our own. In a particularly Nietzschean vein, Connolly writes that doing so "can contribute new powers to thinking in a world that exceeds the modern myths of the masterful human agent… the universal moral subject, and the arbitrary, exclusive human carrier of nihilism."[11]

The multiplicity of overlapping force-fields of chrono-time that characterize a world of becoming take center stage in The Fragility of Things, which explores this world of contingency. In this later book, Connolly argues that the ethic of cultivation must now be folded into several different registers—local, familial, workplace, corpo- rate, global, and planetary. The fragility of things requires multiform activism in a world where humans are, in his language, "both imbri- cated with and overmatched by a cosmos composed of multiple, inter- acting force fields moving at different speeds."[12] Multiform activism requires a sensitivity to the rich variety of non-human force-fields that impact political and economic life, jostling and disrupting other force- fields as well. Acting and intervening in such a world necessitates a two-pronged approach—slowing down at key points to increase our sensitivity to the rich variety of non-human forces in our perception and expectation, and speeding up changes in identities, faiths, political and economic practice to engage in democratic activism on multiple fronts. Doing so therefore necessitates challenging anthropocentric hubris and being open to how non-economic and non-discursive systems impact economic, cultural, and

political life and how these shocks and disrup- tions can create new patterns of thinking and give rise to new forms of intervention. In temporal, or untimely terms (in time, out of time, for a time to come), it means thinking about solar energy fields, the slow movement of tectonic plates that generate earthquakes and volcanoes, the vectors of viral transmission, climate change, capitalist evolution, and more. Connolly suggests that creativity might mean "action by the present upon ambiguities arising from the past oriented toward the future in a way that is not entirely reducible to the past as either implicitly in the present or an aggregation of blind causes that produce the future."[13] In other words, acting in an untimely way in the present by exploring the tensions and ambiguities of the past for the sake of the future without reducing either to the other, and by expanding sites of democratic activism beyond the human to the non-human forces that exceed us.

Connolly calls for a creative and uncanny element to be intro- duced into freedom itself and for qualifications and hesitations to be folded into the concept of agency. Actions cannot be determined or contained by intention alone, but rather intentions composed and refined creatively until they can be consolidated into action. In Connolly's words, [W]hen creative freedom is underway in an unsettled context, we may find ourselves allowing or encouraging a new thought, desire, or strategy to crystallize out of the confusion and nest of thoughts that precede it. An agent, individual or collective, can help to open the portals of creativity, but it cannot will that which is creative to come into being by intending the result before it arrives. Real creativity is thus tinged with uncertainty and mystery.[14]

Such creative acts are shaped and perhaps even conditioned by the past, but they cannot be contained by simple notions of causality or determinism. They involve a gap in which the present acts on a past that presses on it, but this does not mean that the present is simply obedient to or determined by the pressure of the past. Creative freedom opens the door to the possibility of action, encouraging new forms of vitality to emerge, and does so reflexively and with an element of care for the world. Under conditions of neoliberal capitalism and relentless processes of climate change, Connolly argues that militant action is needed to slow down and rework processes of production and prac- tices of consumption and speed up shifts in our orientations towards identity, production, consumption, and what he calls the "shaky place of humanity in the cosmos."[15] Thus, the task is to urge creative freedom and action along multiple sites and registers of democratic activism. An ethic of care, an ethos of agonistic respect towards others, and the creative work of assemblages incorporating both the human and the non-human are necessary.

Near the end of the book, Connolly turns once again to Nietzsche— this time in conversation with Alfred North Whitehead—to rework the debate between secular, linear, and deterministic images of the world on the one hand, and providential and punitive images on the other, to account for a world that is made up of "interacting force-fields set on different scales of chrono-time

composing an evolving universe open to an uncertain degree."[16] Nietzsche, he argues, is a modern source of such a vision, if you leave aside his concept of eternal return, whose long cycles of return are too predictable and stable for Connolly. However, Nietzsche's conception of eternal return does have an element of contingency in it, which Connolly underplays in his reading. As I have argued elsewhere, eternal return... affirms becoming, not the fixed order of things, its constant flux and emergence, the compass of which is grasped in a moment that says yes. It does not belong to the realm of a stable nature governed by fixed and permanent laws, it affirms life in a world that is ever-changing and always becoming, in a decisive moment of action. If time is eternal, but an eternity which is composed of infinite becoming, it is never the return of the same.[17]

In so interpreting Nietzsche's concept, I follow Gilles Deleuze who argues that "we misinterpret the expression 'eternal return' if we understand it as 'return of the same.' It is not being that returns but rather the returning itself that constitutes being insofar as it is affirmed of becoming and of that which passes."[18] In my reading, eternal return as Connolly characterizes it does not consist of long cycles of repeti- tion, but instead folds contingency into itself in its profound under- standing of time as becoming. As such it may be more compatible with his creative reworking of time than Connolly realizes. Still, despite the inherent contingency folded into it, Nietzsche's concept of eternal return relies on a vision of human agency that is too narrow for the world of becoming that Connolly wishes to engage and activate.

Nietzsche's vision of the cosmos as tragic, contingent, ungoverned, and exceeding the mastery of both providence and human control remains compelling and foundational for Connolly, even though he departs from it in some ways. For one, Connolly is much more democratic in his view that modes of creative intervention are avail- able to more than just a select few and, unlike Nietzsche, he is more optimistic that political activism can make a difference in the world around us, particularly against the onslaught of climate wreckage. From Whitehead, whose orderly Newtonian world was shattered by quantum mechanics, Connolly draws on "potentia" which never disappear and remain active from time to time, finding an element of conditioned creativity in Whitehead's process that allows for emer- gent possibility in the planetary.[19] Thus, while Nietzsche emphasizes the aesthetic element of becoming in creative acts of self-overcoming, for Connolly, the human and non-human dimensions of becoming are emphasized more in Whitehead's thought. Drawing on both allows Connolly both to cultivate an ethos of existential gratitude across the multiple force-fields that characterize a world of becoming, and to push back against the ressentiment and authoritarian tendencies that the fragility of things can engender in a cosmos that exceeds the mastery of the human and the providential. For Connolly this grati- tude for life is decidedly non-theistic but still involves a reverence for the world of becoming.

To conclude this brief exploration of Connolly's creative and layered untimely meditations, it is worth returning to the untimely question he posed in Resounding Events about the Anthropocene rattling assumptions in the Euro-American canon, which presses us to think anew about how the politics of regional exploitation and accelerating climate change intersect in our present. It is clear that the Anthropocene has exposed the insufficiency of the dominant models of linear and sequential time structured by either faith in progress or transcendent divinity to account for the complexity and contingency of the cosmos. Connolly's articulation of time as composed of a multiplicity of force-fields of chrono-time existing and overlapping at different speeds comes a lot closer to capturing the creative emergence and the fragility of such a world of becoming. So, consider the Euro-American canonical temporal framework rattled. It remains crucial, however, to continue to do the work of decolonizing and globalizing the time-image by attending to the multiplicity of cultural constructions of time, versions and fragments of which exist around the globe—some more closely tied to clock time than others, some insistently cyclical, and others that introduce mystical elements of disruption into their midst.

In some of my own work in the Islamic tradition, I have found a rich variety of material that engages with temporality, from the four- teenth-century historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun whose cyclical theories of time and historical change account for the waxing and waning of political power tied to group solidarity, to Sayyid Qutb's strident quasi-anarchist writings in the tradition of political Islam, which contain at their core an understanding of time as renewal that remains stubbornly non-linear. In this vein, in recent years many of us have emphasized how important it is to "globalize" political theory and decenter the Euro-American tradition, which too often sets the table at which other cultural traditions must sit, asking the ques- tions to which they must respond. Too often this results in separating "comparative political theory" from theory itself, as if all theory is not engaged already in acts of comparison. Worse, it sometimes leads to the category of "non-Western political theory," which exists only by its negative relationality to the West, which is also treated as mono- lithic in such a construction. Rather than retreat into these unproduc- tive silos, if we seek to truly rattle these frameworks and intervene in creative and untimely ways, then it is important to see theory itself as an activity that not only responds to local political problems and contexts, but also speaks to others across time and space. In a recent book, we have argued that "political theory is most vital, urgent, and inclusive, when it attends to the very specific local problems that give rise to it" and that it is important to see "political theory as an active and immersive practice, which consistently seeks to find new ways to illuminate global questions and explore their intersection with the local."[20] It therefore remains vital and necessary to move beyond the Euro-American tradition and to explore the ways in which other tradi- tions theorize globalizing forces that intersect with local politics and processes and with cosmic ones in multiple force fields of chrono-times.

Following Connolly's untimely meditation to think in new and creative ways about how the politics of regional exploitation and accel- erating climate change intersect, immediately brought to my mind the beach town of Cox's Bazaar in my native Bangladesh. Cox's Bazaar exists in both a space and time of multiplicity. Lapped by the waves of the Indian Ocean, it is the longest unbroken stretch of beach in the world, but also houses one of the largest and most cramped refugee settlements on our planet. Temporally, it intermingles past, present, and future in both fluid and dissonant ways. Its name itself insistently recalls its colonial past—it was named after Captain Hiram Cox, an officer for the East India company, who was sent there to settle refugees from the Arakanese kingdom in neighboring Burma (now Myanmar), in a resonant echo with the Rohingya refugees who now also occupy its present.[21] Its futurity is apparent in the shiny new hotels and resorts lining the beach in hopes of attracting international tourists, and in nearby Chittagong which houses many of the garment factories that produce fast fashion for global markets. At once in time, out of time, and for a time to come, Cox's Bazaar exists literally at the waterline of climate change, where oceanic tides and river swells regularly engulf the local population with disastrous consequences, threatening their very existence.

Cox's Bazaar also sits near the border that Bangladesh shares with Myanmar, where almost a million Rohingya refugees fleeing genocide are now housed in the world's largest refugee camp.[22] They live crowded together in squalid conditions under the flimsiest of shelters, where diseases are rampant and drug addiction has taken hold. The UNHCR, various NGOs, and environmental groups have recently urged the prohibition of plastic in the camps as tons of plastic waste are choking the nearby Bakhali River.[23] At the water's edge of climate wreckage, congested with plastic waste and over-develop- ment, housing refugees who have long overstayed their welcome, Cox's Bazaar exists in a political space and time that is fertile for what Connolly has called aspirational fascism. After six years with no diplomatic solution in sight, these refugee camps engender ressen- timent and sometimes outright hatred among the local population. Bangladesh's recently deposed authoritarian government, which was led by PM Sheikh Hasina and her party, The Awami League, cleverly utilized that ressentiment. A few months before her deposition last August by a nationwide student-led uprising, PM Hasina said that "Local people of Cox's Bazar have now turned the minority due to the influx of Myanmar nationals. They are damaging our environment."[24] The backdrop to all of this was of course the systematic erosion of Bangladesh's fragile democracy. Before it was finally overthrown by what The Economist called "a vast display of people power on the streets of Dhaka," the Awami League government held power for a decade and a half.[25] During that time, it passed draconian laws restricting free expression like the Digital Security Act, which silenced a

generation of creative bloggers and thinkers. They consistently deployed the repressive RAB, the Rapid Action Battalion, against all forms of opposition. The RAB became notorious for disappearing dissidents and remains sanctioned by the United States for its repres- sive activities and gross violations of human rights.[26] Since its deposi- tion and the installation of an interim government led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Muhammad Yunus, more evidence of human rights violations have emerged, including the discovery of the notorious Aynaghar (House of Mirrors), where many of the disappeared were unlawfully detained for years.[27] Just seven months before it was finally deposed, the Awami League government "won" another five-year term in elections that the US State Department condemned as "not free and fair."[28] It is important to note that the Awami League government was kept in place for decades by local industrialists and global inves- tors who demand cheap t-shirts from Bangladesh's garments factories to constantly feed the ravenous global appetite for fast fashion, who continued to support it despite its eroding popularity, widespread human rights violations, and creeping authoritarianism. It remains to be seen what future economic and political reforms will bring to Bangladesh in the coming years, but the challenges posed by demo- cratic erosion and the demands of global capitalism remain significant. This brief exploration of the intersection of regional exploitation and the acceleration of climate change in Bangladesh is but one story among many. Against the onslaught of climate wreckage, it might seem irredeemably optimistic to search for "potentia" and look for moments of creative emergence in a world of becoming. But what other choice is there? Retreating in the face of aspirational fascism and the rapid erosion of democracy is not an option for most of us, no matter how contingent or precarious our lives are. The need for multiform activism of the kind that Connolly endorses is clear in Cox's Bazaar, as it is all over our fragile planet. Now more than ever it is essential to rattle and decolonize core narratives and insist on the importance of the local in the context of the global, to act in ways that can slow the tides and militantly rework the ethos of capitalist consumption and production, to actively cultivate an ethos of generosity that can push back against ressentiment and the fascist drives they engender. For those urgings, and for so much more, I am indebted to and grateful for William E. Connolly's untimely meditations.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, Nietzsche: Untimely Meditations, edited by Daniel Breazeale, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.
2. William E. Connolly, Resounding Events: Adventures of an Academic from the Working Class (Fordham University Press, 2022), 37.
3. William E. Connolly, Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 10.
4. Connolly, Neuropolitics, 96.

5. Connolly, Neuropolitics, 97.
6. Connolly, Neuropolitics, 96.
7. Nidesh Lawtoo, Steps to Planetary Mimesis, invited talk at “Theory in Bold Strokes: Legacies of William E. Connolly,” Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, November 16, 2023.
8. Connolly, Neuropolitics, 144.
9. William E. Connolly, A World of Becoming (Duke University Press, 2011), 6–7.
10. Connolly, A World of Becoming, 15.
11. Connolly, A World of Becoming, 31.
12. William E. Connolly, The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism (Duke University Press, 2013), 7.
13. Connolly, Fragility of Things, 74.
14. Connolly, Fragility of Things, 75.
15. Connolly, Fragility of Things, 136.
16. Connolly, Fragility of Things, 149.
17. Smita A. Rahman, Time, Memory, and the Politics of Contingency (Routledge, 2015), 60.
18. Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche & Philosophy, translated by Hugh Tomlinson (Columbia University Press, 1983), 48.
19. Connolly, Fragility of Things, 153.
20. Smita A. Rahman, Katherine A. Gordy, and Shirin S. Deylami, “Introduction: What Does it Mean to Globalize Political Theory?” In Globalizing Political Theory, edited by Smita A. Rahman, Katherine A. Gordy, and Shirin S. Deylami (Routledge, 2023), 2.
21. Tim Steel, “The Legacy of Hiram Cox,” The Dhaka Tribune, February 19, 2016. https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/heritage/121097/the
22. -legacy-of-hiram-cox, Last accessed on May 24, 2024.
23. Connolly, Neuropolitics, 96.
24. “Plastic use must be stopped in Cox’s Bazar and Rohingya camps,” TBS Report, The Business Standard, February 25, 2023. https://www.tbsnews .net/bangladesh/plastic-use-must-be-stopped-coxs-bazar-and-rohingya-camps-590622.
25. “PM Hasina: Myanmar conflict makes Rohingya repatriation diffi- cult,” Dhaka Tribune, March 4, 2024, https://www.dhakatribune.com /bangladesh/341008/pm-hasina-myanmar-conflict-makes-rohingya.
26. “Bangladesh has ousted an autocrat. Now for the hard part,” The Economist, August 8, 2024, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/08/08/bangladesh-has-ousted-an-autocrat-now-for-the-hard-part.
27. Tirana Hassan, “US stands firm on sanctions on rights abusers in Bangladesh,” published in Asia Times, in Human Rights Watch, April 13, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/13/us-stands-firm-

sanctions-rights-abusers-bangladesh.
28. Faisal Mahmud and Masum Billah, “Hasina’s gone, but fate of Bangladesh’s forcibly detained uncertain,” in AlJazeera, September 10, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/9/10/hasina-gone-but-fate-of-bangladeshs-forcibly-disappeared-hangs-in-balance.
29. Kanishka Singh, “US says Bangladesh Elections were not free and fair,”
30. Reuters, January 8, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific
31. /us-says-bangladesh-elections-were-not-free-fair-2024-01-08/.