History without Chronology
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But . . . if I were asked to help make the people of the world receptive to the demands of a time-compact order, I would first try to make history appear irrelevant. It is much easier to secure cooperation among people without an understanding of history than those with many and usually antagonistic histories.

—J. T. Fraser (1987: 314)

A civilization which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress.

—Alfred North Whitehead (1925: 59)

The epigraphs from Fraser and Whitehead speak to the emergence of a historical thinking that operates today. I connect our current worries about the place of history and the humanities to Fraser’s worry that history appears irrelevant. History is the chronological structure that has naturalized our understanding of the world according to a linear, homogenizing time—Fraser’s time-compact order. This irrelevance is a logical progression of the discipline from abstract criteria that separate human experience from historical reality. Fraser’s nightmare of compliance brings
to mind the novels of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. Yet it also speaks to scholarly work, such as that of Gumbrecht, Hartog, G. H. Mead, Nowotny, Runia, and others who bring up the increasing presentism that characterizes the twenty-first century. We increasingly live in a world where we are locked in the perpetual present of the time-concept order. Massimiliano Tomba echoes Whitehead in the following rather graphic statement: “With the early image of the Robinsonades, the hostile behaviours of individual atoms were hurled into a meta-historical state of nature, thus creating a logical-historical circularity capable of immobilising transformation and producing the elements of economic and political modernity: individuals. This image has acted beyond all expectations, bringing about the complete animalisation of the human who lives in a world without history” (2013: 61). Today, we seem to be locked into this world of immobilized transformation. In the name of innovation, search engines use data from pasts to generate and fulfill human desires, while technological “advances” seem to improve what we have; both further lock us into a future perfect.

The more I have worked on time in modern society, the more I feel as if I am writing about a history of what has been forgotten in our craft of history. One can interpret Fraser’s warning as a danger for society with a poor sense of history. Few historians would disagree. But I would suggest that the problem is within history itself; we seem to be caught within a loop of our own making. History is built on a structure that abstracts our work (despite usually “well-intentioned efforts”) from human activity, even though the discipline claims to speak about and for the human. Yet this poor sense of history can also emerge from a history abstracted from human experience. Historians (and humanists) have had the luxury of juxtaposing our work against the sciences and technologically oriented fields; thus we believe that we speak for the human and the humanities—or so we argue. This too is an example of the boundary work, the operation of the gesture of exclusion. Just as the break from the past (the before) authorizes the new (the same),
history uses this gesture to maintain the fiction that it too is not a technology but an advocate for the past (human) against the new (technology). Yet I hope that the previous chapters have shown that the merger of chronological time and history has created a technology that has masked the mechanical conceptual framework of our world. The danger of this acceptance can be illustrated by Hans Saussy’s observation on writing as a technology: “The more pervasive a technology, the more it is apt to become invisible, to take charge of the thinking of those seeking to think about it and school them in the selectiveness of its perceptions” (2016: 63). Self-reflection is insufficient.

History has a rich literature of protestations that we are critical and reflexive. Chris Lorenz (2014: 57) has an apt analogy. It is as if historians can will away the 130-year coal fire in Xinjiang province (that will require 30 years of cooling) by exhorting, “Fire, go out! Just go away!” Often, we invoke important historians to critique a part of history only to discover that the critique reaffirms the overall historical structure. Marx, Benjamin, and Braudel are three examples; they are recognized, often respected. Yet the discipline has rendered their work into segments that support the linear narrative rather than to using their ideas to increase the complexity and significance of many histories that are evident. We end up with exasperated comments that lament that chronological, objectivistic history is still the norm. More recently, the forum in the American Historical Review (Akyeampong et al. 2015) on change provided a good example of this resiliency. Excellent historians, together in a state-of-the-field discussion, concluded with the standard—continuity and discontinuity, an idea that assumes and supports the status quo.

To move beyond this circularity, it is important to remind us of Certeau’s inversion: “To ‘historicize’ our research in placing it back into a contemporary configuration on which it is dependent, and to ‘dehistoricize’ mystics in showing that one cannot reduce it to a past positivity” (2015: 9). This is a recognition of the ways that our current history, though historical and performative, has
been accepted as natural and objective. An example of this process of inversion is Richard White’s *Remembering Ahanagran*, a fascinating account of his family’s past in twentieth-century Northern Ireland. Superficially, it is an account of White’s journey into his family’s past. Yet it is also a story of the different pasts that exist—White’s, his family’s, the community’s, and Northern Ireland’s, Ireland’s, and England’s:

I [White] did not understand the Troubles, I didn’t understand Kerry, and I didn’t understand how time worked in Ballylongford…

When I try to fit these stories into a history, I encounter pasts that do not speak the same language. They do not follow the same rules. . . .

But in Sara’s stories the past is not a single frame. There are different pasts that hang like two pictures on a wall. One frame is the everyday. Within it everyday acts are repeated endlessly. And when acts are repeated, there is no need to specify the time of each act or indeed, the separateness of each act, or who, exactly, performed it. . . .

The everyday does not include the extraordinary. To account for the extraordinary, Sara and Kerry have another way of remembering: the Times of Troubles. . . .

What history keeps distinct, this common memory of the Troubles joins together. . . . The monks died in 1580. Eddie Carmody died in 1920. . . . The frame of the Troubles is to understand the dying differently. There are not multiple deaths in the Troubles, there is but one death endlessly repeated. It is a heroic death, and it cries for vengeance (1998: 35–37).

This passage illustrates Certeau’s inversion, that we historicize our research and dehistoricize our objects of research. The issues I address in the following chapters are evident in this passage. We see the gesture of exclusion at work: for history as chronology, White’s description can be static society, a story of the repetition
of daily life of his Ireland. Moreover, the repetition of the deaths in 1580, 1920, and so on proves the backwardness (a lack of historical understanding) of the inhabitants and the need for power (British imperial) to maintain the order—that is, the unevenness or hierarchy of the imperium over the colony. But on the other hand, we see the possibility of understanding pasts without that gesture of exclusion. White’s account does not flatten lives into a chronology based on dates; he struggles at first but ultimately does not force others into his chronological time. Instead, he describes some of the understandings and uses of pasts that highlight how people act and relate, the process of living. Their time is configured according to their lives and events; time is internal. The constancy of daily life and the recurrence of the extraordinary demonstrate entropic processes—death and decay exist—as well as the modes of maintenance that often lead to change. The Troubles show a different understanding of duration—not as successive events between two dates but as a moment when past and present are the same. It is not that the inhabitants don’t understand that things happened, but what is remembered is not distant (a dead past) but still a part of the present. The value here is in family and community. But we also see different times that are layered: the time of history (i.e., the British imperium), the juxtaposition of migrants to the US and their return home, the Troubles, and the everyday. There are points of conjunction, and often they remain separate. Perhaps this is how life operates.

The following chapters will take up these issues, which question the normative units of the historical tool kit, the “fact,” the nation-state as unit of analysis, the emphasis on material and measurable things, and notions of change. I hope that the next chapters, at the very least, unmask the masquerade of chronological history and open the possibility to expand the ways that scholars approach pasts, from knowledge of the past to understanding of previous happenings as relational; it is guided by human activity rather than abstract categories.