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ARTICLE

Introduction to "Chronotopes of Gender"

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Abstract
The authors in this special issue explore the ways in which chronotopes are often gendered and gender performance is chronotopic. Articles examine a diverse range of discourses—tradwives, Chinese beauty influencers, paleofantasy health trends, Kiowa War Mothers, and Swahili-language Islamic marital advice—and unpack the ways that notions of gender rely on particular constructions of the "here-and-now" in contrast to various "theres-and-thens." As this special issue demonstrates, one is not just a gendered subject; one is a particular type of gendered subject, and those types are embedded in imagined times and places.

Keywords: chronotopes; gender; language; politics

Introduction

The anthropological study of gender has, time and time again, made one fact clear: although the regimentation of gender is perceived by many actors as static and universal, it is in fact deeply culturally specific. Gender ideologies are interwoven with other fundamental elements of social life, including economy, politics, religion, kinship, and axes of social differentiation such as race and social class. What it means to be a gendered person can therefore vary radically depending on time and place. This special issue, Chronotopes of Gender, goes a step further to suggest that notions of "time" and "place," rather than a mere backdrop for variation, are a part of that variation.

The articles in this special issue highlight the ways that ideologized notions of time–space—chronotopes—invoke understandings of gender at the same time that they render gender socially meaningful in the first place. A chronotope is an ideological assemblage that, as Agha (2007, 321) puts it, "formulates a sketch of personhood in time and place." The concept of the chronotope draws our attention to the fact that in discourse, time and space do not proceed in regular, linear increments but rather figure as densely interwoven clumps: bracketed-off sociopolitical landscapes populated by

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particular types of people with particular narrative possibilities. Mikhail Bakhtin, the originator of the concept, wrote that "the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic" (1981, 85); here we argue that the very categories of "man" and "woman" are chronotopic as well. Chronotopes' "sketches of personhood" are often highly gendered, and that (implicit or explicit) gendering in turn shapes both how gender is performed and how chronotopes are mobilized in discourse.

The concept of the chronotope has been taken up in many different ways. Some scholars have focused on chronotopes as nested and overlapping scalar phenomena (e.g. Woolard 2012; Blommaert 2015) while others have emphasized the contrastive nature of chronotopes in creating and maintaining social difference (e.g. Stasch 2011; Delfino 2021). As Dick (2010) suggests, it is useful to distinguish between *cultural chronotopes*, which are stereotyped space–times invoked in discourse, and *event chronotopes*, which are the ideologically bracketed-off moments within which speech events unfold—though, as Agha (2007, 2015) points out, the two overlap and are often calibrated to one another (see also Perrino 2011, 2025; Koven 2025).

In this introduction, we lay out some of the general ways in which cultural chronotopes are gendered, and consider how gendered performance is itself implicitly chronotopic. Ultimately, we argue, approaching gender chronotopically and chronotopes through a lens of gender enriches our understanding of both.

Gendered chronotopes

As we consider the links between chronotopes and gender, we are indebted to the work of scholars such as Dick (2010), Wirtz (2011), Rosa (2016), and Delfino (2021), who approach chronotopes from a raciolinguistic perspective. In their work, they observe that racializing discourses are often linked to notions of pastness or futurity and particular "heres" and "theres." Chronotopes of liberal modernity define imagined subjects of progress, enlightenment values, and moral virtue, laminating time, space, and sketches of personhood to produce "the modern, Western liberal" and "the backwards, peripheral other." These personae are, these scholars have argued, highly racialized—and, we add, they are also gendered, as suggested by Susan Gal's (1978; see also Gal and Irvine 2019) work on "peasants" and "workers" in a Hungarian village in Austria.

The here-and-now/there-and-then contrast is thus made meaningful through the populating of those time–spaces with racialized, classed, and gendered figures of personhood. In the articles that make up this special issue, gendered personae are clusters around which chronotopes of tradition, messianic pasts, and even prehistory emerge. Across these papers, gendered personae and socially-valued performances of gender emerge as part of a "dialogue across chronotopes" (Wirtz 2016) contrasting tradition to modernity—and in many cases as part of a reactionary project of restoring the former. Tradwives (Tebaldi) and "paleo" influencers (Kramer) express a desire to return to a "golden age" of the past; Swahili marriage manuals invoke the valorized age of the Prophet Muhammad (Thompson); Kiowa War Mothers bring the pre-reservation world to life through their singing (Yamane).

The contrast between public and private (Gal 2002), frequently aligned with and maintained through gender roles, could be considered chronotopic as well. Through relations of constructed coevalness (Silverstein 2005), diverse settings can be viewed

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as essentially "the same" domestic or public domain, while very similar settings can be framed as starkly different. Gender can serve as an anchor for these processes of adequation and distinction (Bucholtz and Hall 2005): that which is feminine–domestic–private and that which is masculine–productive–public seem to "naturally" fall into separate spheres. These articles highlight the semiotic work that goes into producing such distinctions, as they explore how a range of actors negotiate between "public" domains—social media, performance events, circulating texts—and the intimate "private" spaces of bedrooms (Wei and Georgakopoulou), bodies (Kramer), marriages (Tebaldi and Thompson), and maternal love (Yamane).

Cultural chronotopes are infused with gender—but, in a circular fashion, they are also a resource for defining and regimenting gender. The articles in this special issue thus explore yet another way in which gender is performative: it does not just constitute itself, it serves as a vehicle for the constitution of the broader sociopolitical landscape.

Gender performance as chronotopic

Prior work on chronotopes has also explored the ways that self-construction is done within and through chronotopic work. Some scholars have looked at chronotopic calibration in autobiographical narrative, analyzing the different spatiotemporal boundaries that speakers draw around the here-and-now as they constitute themselves as individuals (Davidson 2007; Woolard 2012; Koven 2025). Others have paid attention to the role of contrast in processes of self-definition, showing that identifying as a certain "type" of person involves not just sharing traits but inhabiting the same conceptual time–space (Delfino 2021; Perrino 2025). As Pritzker and Perrino (2021, 367) put it, "narrators 'zoom in' and 'pan out' of both time and space, expertly weaving personal experiences together with real and imagined cultural and social histories in order to situate themselves." Gender performances therefore engage in what Rosa (2016, 107), following Povinelli (2011), calls "social tense," or "the legitimation of contemporary circumstances by implicating them in relation to other past, present, and future circumstances."

One is not just a gendered subject, one is a particular *type* of gendered subject, and those types are embedded in times and places. The articles in this special issue look at a wide range of examples of self-definition through chronotopic contrast and calibration: the "before" and "after" of the Chinese beauty influencer (Wei and Georgakopoulou); pre-reservation versus post-reservation Kiowa lives (Yamane); bad modern feminism versus good traditional wifehood (Tebaldi); a hardy prehistoric life versus a sickly modern life (Kramer); a desirable and holy marriage versus an unhappy one (Thompson). What is being performed is not just the self but the world that the self can exist within: the gendered figures in these articles set up chronotopic differences as objects of desire, calling for moral projects of restoration of tradition, the nation, or gender itself.

Identity performances thus make reference to specific chronotopes, but there is also a second-order level of self-construction: different chronotopes appeal to and are legible to different groups of people, and thus invoking particular chronotopic configurations is another aspect to the performance of self. Again, this has already been noted in the domain of race and ethnicity. Dick (2010) shows that nonmigrants in a Mexican city deploy the modern-versus-traditional chronotopic contrast differently

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from migrants. Rosa (2016) argues that the chronotopic associations of Spanish and English are different for Latine Americans than they are for Anglo-Americans. Gal's (1978) work, while not specifically referring to chronotopes, shows that gender can also play a key role in whether the modern–urban–professional or the traditional–rural–laborer world is more appealing. The same imagined time–space is not equally legible or desirable to all.

The articles here deepen that discussion, exploring a variety of ways in which gender shapes differential uptake of chronotopes. Media texts are directed toward different audiences, presupposing different sets of desires: the Chinese Gen-Z girl who wants to learn how to be "pretty" (Wei and Georgakopoulou), the Western men who feels unmoored in a (post?)feminist world (Kramer) and the women who serve them (Tebaldi), the East African man who wants to be a good Muslim husband (Thompson), the Kiowa mother who wants to revive pre-reservation traditions (Yamane). And, as these articles show, audiences do not blindly absorb media discourses; rather, they self-reflexively opt in and out, adopting and transforming discourses in ways that serve their own desires and fears.

Conclusion

Agha (2015) calls for a shift from discussing chronotopes as countable "things" to a focus on processes of chronotopic formulation. The articles in this special issue do precisely that, calling attention to the seemingly mundane texts through which actors construct gendered chronotopes that do deep political work. Catherine Tebaldi analyzes the online presence of four "tradwives," digital influencers who embody various eras of the imagined prefeminist past and call for a return to that idealized world. Elise Kramer looks at representations of cavemen in US popular media, tracing the ways that "paleofantasy" in health fads relies on an image of the ancient past that erases women. KD Thompson examines Swahili-language Islamic marriage advice, arguing that prescriptions for appropriate marital behavior are embedded in a contrast between the age of the Prophet Muhammad and the modern West. Maxwell Yamane considers how Kiowa War Mother songs connect post-reservation and pre-reservation life via a through line of maternal care. Wei Wei and Alexandra Georgakopoulou apply small stories and positioning analysis to the RedNote posts of Chinese beauty influencers, exploring how these young women construct a shared chronotope with their viewers as they show how to embody the "pretty girl."

These authors unpack the complex, recursive processes of world-making and remaking that happen in and through everyday life, using the chronotopic qualities of gender as the focal point. For the actors we study, chronotopes of gender have radical transformative potential, possessing the ability to make men into ideal husbands; women into ideal housewives; plain girls into pretty girls; cultural resilience into a mother's song, and the end of civilization into a minimalist running shoe.

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