

# Journeying Towards Other Shores<sup>1</sup>

Samir Gandesha

This extraordinary volume of essays [*Untimely Passages: Dossiers from the Other Shore* by Jerry Zaslove] is structured by a constellation of *Stichwörter* (catchwords) and proper names that, taken together, form the politico-philosophical itinerary of a beloved teacher and colleague, scholar, public intellectual, art critic, community organizer, and virtuoso institution builder whose career spanned several decades at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. Jerry Zaslove was the founding director of the Institute for the Humanities at SFU. It will celebrate its fortieth birthday in just over a year. This is a significant legacy.

Readers of this volume will come across: exile, colportage, Panzaic Principle, pariah, parvenu, *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardness), materialism, chronotope, among others. They will also encounter, *inter alia*, proper names such as: Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor W. Adorno, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Sigmund Freud, Herbert Read, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Bohumil Hrabal, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jeff Wall, Karl Marx, G.W.F. Hegel, and Joy Kogawa.

The two most crucial such *Stichwörter* form the volume's title and are closely connected to two equally significant proper names. The first echoes *Untimely Meditations (Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen)* which was published in 1876. This was Friedrich Nietzsche's early aesthetico-philosophical quartet of essays which were to prove so influential for postwar French writers such

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<sup>1</sup> This foreword has been republished with permission from Jerry Zaslove's *Untimely Passages: Dossiers from the Other Shore* (Talonbooks, 2022). It has been edited and reformatted for publication.

as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. The second *Stichwort*, “passages,” is inspired, in part, by Walter Benjamin’s vastly ambitious and promising, though tragically unfinished, interwar magnum opus on the Paris passages or arcades, which is often referred to simply as his *Passagen-Werk*, or *Arcades Project*. In the image of the Paris arcades, Benjamin discerned capitalism’s dream about its own self-overcoming through a paradoxical form of awakening.

Against certain historicist or teleological readings of Hegel and Marx respectively, Nietzsche and Benjamin deliberately sought to rupture the temporal continuum of history. Like the Roman god Janus, these two master stylists of the German language looked simultaneously backward and forward; they looked to past ages as a way of imagining radically different futures that broke decisively with a present they found impoverished. With Jacob Burckhardt, Nietzsche looked back to the Renaissance of Machiavelli, centred on the virtuosity of audacious and innovative form-bestowing activity, and forward, through a kind of history writing motivated not by an antiquarian interest in the past, even less in the monumental representation of political power, but an enhancement and amplification of the feeling of *life* he would later call the “will to power.” In the baroque *Trauerspiel* or “mourning play,” Benjamin discerned a conception of “natural-history” and a powerful allegorical vision fastened upon disorienting dialectical images, in which natural events, like the setting of the sun, presaged historical ones.

As the essays in *Untimely Passages* demonstrate, Jerry Zaslove shared very deeply Nietzsche’s and Benjamin’s aspirations. Like them, and in a manner that few have the courage to do, he defiantly resisted an increasingly manic compulsion to fall into lockstep with the times, with the apparent unfolding of historical “progress.” And such dark, terrible times, filled with xenophobia, racism, the uncanny return of fascism, unceasing war, and impending ecological collapse, were eminently worthy, as Brecht might have said, of being out of step with. The red

thread running throughout this diverse yet eminently coherent collection of essays is precisely a utopic horizon that could not be more antithetical to a world characterized by “capitalist realism,” in which “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”<sup>2</sup> The times are dark, in part, because of the impoverishment of the imagination. The riches contained in this book constitute an antidote.

Zaslove’s *untimeliness* is perhaps best summed up by his embrace of a commitment to what he called, in connection with Herbert Read, “anarcho-modernism.” This peculiar term is not so strange or discordant as it may, at first, sound. Both anarchist politics and modernist aesthetics maintain an irrepressible impulsion towards independence and autonomy. This is an impulsion towards obeying no law than one’s own, be it the law that we legislate together collectively or the law fashioned by an artist (or artists) in their atelier.

The secret hope, of course, is that, as Marx put it in his *Grundrisse*, production would, itself, be organized according to the law of beauty, which is to say, beyond the estranged division of the world into artists and non-artists and the consequent ugliness of the seemingly inexorable law of value. Marx held out the promise that the law of the community would itself, one day, become beautiful, and embody harmony and peace. In this achievement, the negation would, in other words, finally, be negated. This possibility of living in a world that was “*anarkhos*” or beyond any form of alienated authority was, I think, Zaslove’s guiding spark, impulse, and spirit.

Anarcho-modernism, moreover, could be understood, to use a term Arendt borrowed from Bernard Lazare, as the “conscious pariah’s” rebellion against the necessity of conforming to a timeliness that would make us all into parvenus—those sad, tired souls trying, usually with the use of sharp elbows, to get ahead, no matter the cost nor the consequences. The contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> This widely cited apophthegm is attributed by Mark Fisher to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek; see Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zer0 Books, 2009), 2.

university, as Zaslove often made known, although not necessarily in so many words, is managed precisely by such types who will stop at nothing to advance their careers; conscious pariahs like Jerry Zaslove are few and far between and, doubtless, very much on the retreat. But if you look carefully enough, one can find them in the deep recesses of an institution that wants them gone. Just as it wanted him gone.

If he could be described, in his artistic, philosophical, and literary predilections and enthusiasms, as “cosmopolitan,” a word best used advisedly, Zaslove was very much what Kwame Anthony Appiah has called a “*rooted* cosmopolitan.”<sup>3</sup> He was grounded in the cultural landscape of his adopted hometown, Vancouver, the city in which he lived so much of his life. Like many of us fellow Vancouverites, he never lost an opportunity to register his profound “ambivalence” about the place. As one *passes* through the concrete and glass structures of the city, home to some of the most rapacious extractive industries on the face of the earth, the malingering symptoms of its violent roots in settler colonialism lurk around every corner from forced displacement and homelessness, bad drugs, brutally racist policing, and disposable architecture. As Zaslove showed over and again, “civilization” and “barbarism” could never be properly disentangled.

The idea of “passage,” is not just spatial but also, of course, deeply temporal. Just as we pass through the environs of the city, time also passes us by. But let’s be careful, however, not to understand time as simply passing in uniformly empty measures such as hours and days, months and years. Time is, rather, qualitative, filled with colour and darkness, melancholy, longing, expectation, and hope. Present time is always being interrupted by the repressed and unfulfilled time of the past. Such unfulfilled time was the time of the *vanquished*; compare Lucan’s epic poem *Pharsalia*: “The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the vanquished cause pleased Cato.” The

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<sup>3</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” in Martha C. Nussbaum, *For Love of Country? A New Democracy Forum on the Limits of Patriotism*, ed. Joshua Cohen for the *Boston Review* (Boston: Beacon Press), 22.

vanquished are not necessarily the *vanished*. The vanquished have not vanished precisely because they remain alive through their defeated hopes. Such hopes are bequeathed to us. Our solidarity with them is, therefore, anamnestic. The present is always, then, being disrupted by the utopian and redemptive longings of what both Martin Luther King Jr. and Walter Benjamin called the time of the “now” (*Jetztzeit*) that shatters those empty vessels and points somewhere else. This is what Jerry called “another shore.”

In that very special other shore called Prague, one also finds passages, which is to say, arcades, albeit ones that do not shine quite as brightly as those that so fascinated Benjamin. Václav Cílek, a friend of Jerry’s and a friend of mine, a veteran of the Prague Spring, a geologist by training, a surrealist by heart, and one of the most important contemporary Czech public intellectuals, would explain the significance of these arcades to visiting students in SFU’s Prague Field School that Jerry founded.

Cílek would explain that that the tourists walk through the passages like “this” (gesturing in a vertical axis); but we Czechs walk like “that” (gesturing in a horizontal axis). In Cílek’s psychogeography lurked an existential question that each one of the students had to answer for themselves. How would *they* walk the passages? North to south or east to west? How would *they* pass the time? Would they swim in their schools with the current or against it? In every aspect of his *Leben* and *Lehre*, his life and his teaching, these were Jerry Zaslove’s decisive questions.

To think of the passage of time and place together is to remember or hold in mind (*Eindenken*) that what is familiar or homely is always at the same time strange or uncanny. To truly experience home, one must also experience its loss, one must live the fate of the exile. “The past,” as L.P. Hartley wrote in *The Go-Between*, “is a foreign country; they do things differently

there.” To know our own place, our own shore, is to be oriented, as Zaslove reminds us repeatedly, to *another* shore, indeed, perhaps to *many other shores*.

In *Minima Moralia*, his brilliant collection of aphorisms on what he called “damaged life,” T.W. Adorno notes in connection with Nietzsche’s statement about his good fortune of never having owned a home: “For he who has no homeland, writing becomes a place to live.” While in interwar exile, staying in an incongruous and disorienting Santa Monica, Adorno ultimately disavows the idea that it would ever be possible to live in one’s writing. It must be said that Zaslove was never more alive than in his *teaching*, which was also, as one can see here, his *writing*.

Jerry Zaslove may have recently passed on to that ultimate “other shore,” but in the scintillating pages that follow, he is very much still alive to us his friends, his colleagues, his students. He is very much still alive, above all, to his readers on whichever other shores they may dwell and to whichever other shores they may, ultimately, be journeying.

**Samir Gandesha** was born in Nairobi, Kenya, and immigrated with his parents as an infant to Canada in the mid-1960s. Members of his extended family were expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin in 1972 and entered Britain as refugees. As an undergraduate, he studied at SFU, UBC, and the London School of Economics. He did his MA and PhD at York University in Toronto and was a SSHRCC Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley 1995–97, and was an Alexander von Humboldt fellow at Universität Potsdam, 2001–2002. He has been teaching at SFU since 2003 and has been on the Steering Committee of the Institute for the Humanities since 2004 and the Institute’s Director since 2010. He is Visiting Fellow at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), Mexico. He is co-editor with Johan Hartle of *Spell of Capital: Reification and Spectacle* (2017) and *Aesthetic Marx* (2017) both of which have been translated into Italian, co-editor of *The “Aging” of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: Fifty Years Later*, with Johan Hartle and Stefano Marino as well as *Adorno and Popular Music: A Constellation of Perspectives* (2019) with Colin Campbell and Stefano Marino. He is also editor of *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives*, which has also been translated into Spanish. Dr. Gandesha has delivered over 100 talks at universities across the globe.