Chapter 4

Polyrhythmic Temporalities
(Confounding the Artifacts)

The gods confound the man who first found out
How to distinguish hours! Confound him, too,
Who in this place set up a sun-dial
To cut and hack my days so wretchedly
Into small portions! When I was a boy,
My belly was my only sun-dial, one more sure,
Truer, and more exact than any of them.
This dial told me when 'twas proper time
To go to dinner, and when I had aught to eat;
But nowadays, why even when I have,
I can't fall to unless the sun gives me leave.
The town's so full of these confounded dials
The greatest part of the inhabitants,
Shrank up with hunger, crawl along the streets.

—The parasite’s complaint from Aulus Gellius
(1927, 247 [second century, 3.3.6–14])

By now it should be apparent that the clock and the Gregorian calendar are culturally conceived tools that direct thought about time. With the expansion of European influence, they have become global. This chapter examines their coexistence with other forms of conceptualizing time to demonstrate that temporality cannot be discussed solely in terms of the clock or the Gregorian calendar even in those societies that seemingly have wholeheartedly adopted these cognitive tools. Instead, one must grapple with the intersection of multiple social rhythms and cultural temporalities. Even though the tools for reckoning time are clocks and calendars, the time they indicate does not uniformly dictate rhythms and cycles throughout the world. This produces
entanglements of the logics embedded in globally distributed objects with local practices. Often, these entanglements generate strategies for reconciling social rhythms defined by objects of time and social rhythms that are out of sync with these objects.

Others have made the point that time consciousness existed before the widespread use of clocks and the Industrial Revolution (Glennie and Thrift 2002, 2005, 2009; S. Stern 2003; T. C. Smith 1986). Moreover, both the ethnographic and the historical records show that long after the widespread adoption of the clock, other modes of time consciousness remained (Birth 1999; Bruegel 1995; Glennie and Thrift 2009; Pickering 2004). Similar points can be made about the Gregorian calendar, namely, that awareness of other cycles coexists with it, without the calendar mediating the knowledge (Birth forthcoming). Thus, clocks and the Gregorian calendar coexist with other temporalities, even though clocks and the Gregorian calendar emphasize a self-referential uniformity of time.

Bachelard’s concept of rhythmanalysis provides a framework for conceptualizing multiple temporalities. In the last chapter of *The Dialectic of Duration*, Bachelard (2000 [1950]) suggests that the study of time must avoid the confusion of time with uniformity, but instead emphasize the phenomenology of rhythms. Broaching the topic of the nature of time from a phenomenological perspective, Bachelard argues that rhythms are a fundamental element of all existence, and that one of the challenges facing people is the development of an awareness of the interaction of all the rhythms in which their lives are enmeshed. Moreover, he argues that happiness is achieved through living in consonance with these rhythms (2000 [1950], 152). The problem is that the timescapes of many people (and of Gellus’s parasite quoted at the beginning of the chapter!) are dominated by what Bachelard calls “superimposed time”—concepts of time that are imposed on the flow of existence. To Bachelard, this creates tension between the rhythms that exist and the superimposition of artificial times that are uniform and homogeneous.

Lefebvre adopted Bachelard’s concept of rhythmanalysis to analyze the “bundle” of rhythms associated with physical, biological, psychological, social, and cultural processes (2004, 9). Rhythmanalysis for Lefebvre does not separate the rhythms in