

Waiting

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MELBOURNE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS
An imprint of Melbourne University Publishing Limited
187 Grattan Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia
mup-info@unimelb.edu.au
www.mup.com.au

First published 2009
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Text design by Phil Campbell
Cover design by Phil Campbell
Typeset by J&M Typesetting
Printed by Griffin Digital, SA

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Waiting / editor, Ghassan Hage.

9780522856934 (pbk.)
9780522856927 (pdf.)

Includes index.
Bibliography.

Waiting (Philosophy).
Existentialism.
Philosophical anthropology.

128.4

Preface

Like many academics I know, I have always fantasised about doing a collective research project with departmental colleagues. It is no secret that the academic working day in any university department today has intensified: teaching and administrative hours have increased, preparation time has increased, course information and reading material need to be made available to students in a far more formal, and thus labour-intensive, way on university websites as well as on other sites, and one has to constantly report on one's productivity as a teacher and administrator with an endless filling of forms. If a spectre is haunting the academy it is the spectre of the bureaucratic form finding ways to squeeze itself in the mail, through the fax machine, the phone, and last but not least by email. All form senders are very sensitive and considerate. They all start with 'We know you are very busy'. But somehow 'knowing that we are busy' does not stop them. And the forms keep coming. In the midst of all this, the academic has to also maintain a research profile. But even with this creative endeavour the form manages to intrude. One has to report on one's research productivity with an equally endless process of filling forms. As everyone now knows, reporting on research productivity can be, at times, so time consuming that it has the remarkable effect of decreasing the amount of time available to increase one's research productivity.

It is hard not to notice the individualising effect this intensification and form-alisation of academic labour has had on the workplace. Academics are often made to feel that the actual content of their creative intellectual pursuit is an individual matter of no concern to colleagues with whom they are working on a daily basis. They learn to think they can only get a sense of their work as a collective enterprise at national and international conferences. Beside the festive atmosphere linked to their very nature as ritualistic gatherings, conferences are increasingly becoming spaces of fantasy where academics feel recognised, and as such, feel they can be what they think they ought to always be: serious thinkers, debaters, manipulators and conveyors of complex thought, etc ...

It is in light of the above that the idea of a collective creative research project with one's colleagues assumes the dimension of a fantasy: a fantasy in a classical psychoanalytic sense, that is, a mode of imagining that highlights a mode of being free from the constraints of reality and emphasising what is perceived to be lacking in it. But to try to live a fantasy in a place where it is not lived creates a multiplier effect: there is the living of the fantasy, and there is the living of the fantasy of living the fantasy, so to speak.

Since joining the University of Melbourne in 2008, I have found myself in a privileged position as a research professor: not only am I relatively free from the tyranny of the form, but I also have more time to pursue my research fantasies. Following a conversation with the Dean of the Faculty of Arts in which the idea of a 'research-only week' came up, I thought that it would be good if I proposed a research theme to my colleagues from the School of Philosophy, Anthropology and Social Inquiry (PASI), set up some writing deadlines throughout the year until a draft is achieved, and then go on a one-week retreat in which we transform the drafts into a ready-to-go-to-the-publisher volume. I had developed an interest in the theme of 'waiting' while working on 'hope' (Hage 2003) and I had a sense of its 'catchy' value. And indeed, very quickly after I proposed the theme I had twenty or so people happy to work on whatever way 'waiting' connected with their research. From then on, people's enthusiasm meant that the book became a genuine collective enterprise. I no longer needed to be and I was not a driving force behind it. We all became familiar with each other's papers and were endlessly commenting on their strengths and weaknesses, formally during 'research meetings' and informally over drinks. From mid-2008 onward, and particularly during the retreat in early February 2009, the project carved for us an ongoing space of professionalism, collegiality, enthusiasm and fun ... and endless puns on the theme of waiting. There was also a brush with the tragic fires that ended up killing more than 200 people at that time. Our chosen hotel for a retreat was in Marysville, which ended up becoming what some called 'the ground zero' of the fire. It burnt literally the day before we were all ready to head there.

The project, and particularly the retreat, would not have been possible without the Future Generation Professorial funds generously made available to me by the University of Melbourne. I also want to

thank Melbourne University Press for their immediate interest in the volume and the idea behind it. Finally, I have to single out the work of Gillian Tan, who, besides contributing a chapter to the volume, has been responsible for, and has ensured with remarkable efficiency, the smooth running of the project throughout its duration.

Ghassan Hage
Melbourne
February 2009

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Introduction

Ghassan Hage

Waiting is such a pervasive phenomenon in social life that it can be seen, and indeed has been seen, as almost synonymous to social being. Pascal sees the very small moments in which we are waiting 'for this or that' as an indication that our life is worth living.¹ Waiting indicates that we are engaged in, and have expectations from, life; that we are on the lookout for what life is going to throw our way. Consequently, waiting pervades social life. And because of this, its analytical value does not lie in discovering that it is part of one social process or another. For example, to examine gift exchange and note that waiting is an inherent part of the phenomenon would not be much of a revelation. This is not because of something obvious about the relation between gift exchange and waiting, but because such a statement can be made about any phenomenon in social life from sexual relations to garbage collection.

However, there is a set of questions around waiting that can yield fresh, interesting and enriching analytical material. It comes from asking: what kind of waiting is exhibited in the phenomenon that one is examining? As John Rundell puts it towards the end of his essay: 'We all wait for futures—yet not for the same ones, nor in the same way, nor at the same tempo. Modernity, because of its multiple worlds and their temporal horizons, entails that waiting for the future

has multiple, clashing and even overlapping effects, affects and modalities.' But the differences in waiting are not just differences in individual forms of waiting, they are also differences in the way waiting is present systemically in society.

Waiting, for instance, emphasises a dimension of life where the problematic of our agency is foregrounded. Is waiting an exercise of agency or a lack of it? At the most immediate and superficial level one can rush too quickly to say that waiting is a passive modality of being where people lack agency. Waiting at the airport to board a late plane, waiting for an appointment with a medical specialist or waiting on the highway for a mechanic to come and fix our car all involve a large degree of passivity: things are beyond our control, out of our hands, and we can 'only wait' for what we wish to happen, as opposed to actively doing something or another to make it happen. Yet, as the many essays of this book amply show, there are many cases where agency oozes out of waiting. It is not surprising therefore that the question of agency in relation to waiting is a hotbed of ambivalence. Crapanzano nicely calls waiting a 'passive activity'², emphasising that it is something we do, though we can also easily see it as 'active passivity' for a slightly different but meaningful take on what is the same mode of being in the world.

The multiple and ambivalent forms in which agency takes shape in relation to waiting render it a particularly unique object of politics. There is a politics around who is to wait. There is a politics around what waiting entails. And there is a politics around how to wait and how to organise waiting into a social system. Waiting can, for example, define class and status relations in the very obvious sense of 'who waits for whom', which also means: who has the power to make their time appear more valuable than somebody else's time? This relation between waiting and class has been well analysed by Bourdieu in the context of Kabyle society.³

Clearly, people's modes of waiting are learnt socially and culturally. Queuing in Amsterdam is not the same as queuing in Caracas, and I won't mention places like Beirut where often the very notion of queuing does not exist. Here we can note that there is a sense where knowing how to wait in a queue means knowing how to suspend competition with one's fellow human beings. Not all people are capable of this suspension, and a degree of generalised economic

wellbeing, and a minimisation of a Hobbesian, wolf-against-wolf reality, is often a great help in fostering such dispositions: it is hard to make people queue before a truck with food supplies in the middle of a famine-struck region. This brings us to the fact that waiting is also intimately linked to economic factors: there is a political economy of waiting, not least because 'time is money' and waiting can be a waste of time.

Furthermore, waiting is not only shaped by the person waiting; it is also shaped by those who are providing whatever one is waiting for. There is a supply side to waiting linked to the scarcity of resources and the capacity to offer certain services. Waiting time is often seen as a key measurement of the lack of efficiency of certain institutions such as public hospitals, airports and other government bureaucracies. Sometimes it is a measurement of the scarcity of certain professionals, such as specialised medical staff whose efficiency is not being questioned. But too long a waiting time can also be seen as proof of a dysfunctional hospital, while too short a waiting time is perceived suspiciously, at least by some, in other cases: such as the time taken for a council to approve development.

Finally, it should be mentioned that socioeconomically and culturally defined modes of waiting are not just a question of the disposition of those waiting or the scarcity of what one is waiting for but a function of the technology that a society can deploy to regulate waiting. Such technologies involve the compartmentalisation of space and the provision of a space dedicated to waiting (waiting rooms, airport lounges etc). It also involves 'waiting technologies' such as call centres organising telephone communications, or the number-dispensing machines that allow people to avoid physically queuing, and with the help of beepers and screens work to make the process of waiting impersonal and independent of any human factors such as liking or disliking someone, and favouring or disfavouring them.

The above should be enough for an appreciation of the rich plurality of the social forms that waiting takes in social life and the social and political relations that shape and flow from it. While not claiming to be exhaustive, the essays in this volume, taken together and on their own, offer the reader serious access to the complexity of waiting and its differential intensities.

But there is another way of looking at waiting that raises a different set of analytical questions. These emerge when waiting is considered not so much as a phenomenon in its own right but as a perspective on a particular sociocultural practice or process. While, as I have pointed out above, noting that waiting is part of gift exchange does not add much to what we know about it, examining gift exchange from the perspective of waiting allows the analysts to start seeing dimensions of the exchange that had previously escaped them. The analytical power of waiting here derives from its capacity to highlight certain features of a social process that might have hitherto been foreshadowed by others or entirely hidden. Again, the essays in this book offer a wealth of evidence in this regard. The social phenomena examined throughout are not particularly unusual or neglected by social analysts: pregnancy, the immigrant's desire to return home, the European Community's struggle for legitimation, Serbian nationalism, social disintegration in Pakistan, the immigrants' experience of assimilation in Australia, the expectations around marriage in Macedonian culture, Victorian farmers' experience of the drought, the politics of climate change, the mobility of Tibetan nomads and the lives of Californian prisoners on death row. All are topics that have been examined by many writers. Yet, seen from the perspective of waiting, they yield new interesting perspectives on the phenomenon that help us further understand it.

The essays have been organised into three parts on the basis of the general problematic that they share and the modalities of waiting that they highlight. As always with such a clustering, it is partly arbitrary and is only one of many ways of offering some semblance of coherence to the flow. This is done only to help the reader in negotiating essays that are, despite their unity around the theme of waiting, very diverse in content, degree of abstraction and style.

Our waiting is big and small, grand and trivial. We wait for an ice cream and for the final judgment. The essays in Part I: *Between Social and Existential Waiting* aim to deal with this wide plurality in the modality of waiting, what Peter Dwyer in the opening essay terms 'existential' and 'situational' waiting. One is an attitude, a disposition with no necessary object. The other is social, relational and engaged. It is captured wonderfully by Dwyer's inspired choice of the photography of a mountain climber, hanging out there, relationally

attached to other climbers and intently waiting to know what to do next. It can be said that this differentiation between existential and situational waiting marks all of the essays in the volume. The question of what it means to call a form of waiting 'existential' is often raised. Like everything existential, it is hard to determine with precision, but we might want to convey the fact that for us humans, the very moment of becoming conscious of our existence comes with a question mark: 'And?' This is in the sense of 'So here we are. And now what?' 'What's next'? This sends us on an endless search for the meaning of life but it also makes us wait for the moment where waiting ends. Many religions embody an imaginary moment or space where the waiting ends, whether in the form of a coming Messiah, Armageddon or heaven and hell. The extent to which social waiting is simply a socialisation of this more fundamental waiting remains to be seen. An inkling of this problematic comes in Beckett's ever-so-relevant play *Waiting for Godot* and the compelling reading that John Cash presents us with in the second essay. Here waiting is a constant articulation of the existential and the social in the form of an endless waiting for sociality and communality set in the midst of a geography of meaninglessness and purposelessness. But if this 'mess' is endless, so is the occasional glimpse of the possibility of meaningfulness and sociality that both highlights the mess while maintaining human optimism in the possibility of overcoming it. In a sense, *Godot* in Cash's reading of it is a vision in which the social is always marked by a universal human quest and as such there is something about the social itself which is universal. Rundell's essay, on the other hand, tempers the universality that is present in both Dwyer's and Cash's pieces by historicising the very nature of existential waiting itself. For him, there is an important shift in the way we relate to the future, and hence the way we wait, in the move from the cyclical, and in this sense relatively predictable, temporality that marks the religious view of the world and the open-ended sense of contingency that comes with modernity.

The above problematic of the articulation of the historical with the social and the existential is nicely exemplified in Nadeem Malik's piece on the rising reference to Imam Mahdi in Pakistan. Interestingly for us, often referred to as the Lord of Time and the Awaited Imam, Imam Mahdi is the twelfth and the last of the Shi'ahs' founding

Imams. He disappeared at the age of five in the north of Baghdad in the year 868, never to be seen again, though the Shi'ah widely believe that he will return on the day of judgement. Waiting for Imam Mahdi is thus a centerpiece of Shi'ah religious belief. But the strength of Malik's essay is the way he shows how the waiting for Mahdi, which is existential in the first instance, gets historically articulated, first, to the more secular but endless waiting for economic development, and, more recently, to the equally secular but even more intense waiting for the end to social chaos and a return to law and order. Interestingly, the waiting for an end to social chaos is described by Malik as punctuated by moments of normality such as the pleasure of the family gathering that greeted him on the day of his arrival back home from Australia. This is highly resonant with Cash's interpretation of *Godot* as an endless waiting for a respite from 'the mess' punctuated by a fleeting sense of the possibility of this respite. By emphasising the articulation of economic, social and existential waiting, Malik also raises the issue that has already emerged in the essays by Dwyer and Rundell concerning the different temporalities of waiting. This differential temporality is particularly developed in the essays by Gillian Tan and Rosemary Robins. But both essays further complicate the picture by showing that social temporality is also articulated to the temporality of nature.

Tan's essay is a compelling exemplification of how the waiting of Tibetan nomads is a fusion of the existential, the social and the natural experience of time. It incorporates the form of nomadic movement to add further complexity to a waiting that is now perceived as a mode of relating to both time and space. Robins emphasises the different temporality that shapes the Victorian farmers' waiting for rain as they face prolonged periods of drought that alter their sense of nature and the natural cycle. There is a remaining belief in a cyclical time where rain is periodical even if irregular, and where a relatively secure knowledge of what to expect allows a secure form of waiting reinforced by the deployment of farming technologies that create a sense of control over time and space. This is contrasted with another form of waiting that accompanies climate change, and that Robins calls 'biding time', in which cyclic expectations are replaced by anxieties in the face of a changing and unpredictable nature. Both Tan and Robins highlight an inherent tension in all forms of waiting,

whether existential or social, and that is present in most essays. On one hand, waiting happens in time, in the sense that time and time frames pre-exist the subjects that are waiting within them. On the other hand, waiting creates time. That is, various modalities of waiting produce their own temporality that may or may not be in tune with other social and natural temporalities.

The papers in Part I highlight, very explicitly in the case of some, the relation between waiting and agency. Consequently, what distinguishes the essays clustered together in Part II: *Waiting, Agency, Politics* is not that they deal more than others with questions of agency. Rather it is because in those papers the question of agency is articulated, more so than others, to an implicit or an explicit politics and/or a mode of organisation of waiting. In Monica Minnegal's far-reaching paper, structured around her ethnography with the Kubo people of Papua New Guinea, the agents of waiting are seen as always linked to others in relations of 'attention'. They relationally wait for each other and in so doing wait on each other. Minnegal shows waiting to be a mode of being attuned to the others we are related to. This attunement is what allows for a fusion of 'waiting for' and 'waiting on'. Minnegal shows that the different modalities of waiting structured around the opposition 'waiting for' and 'waiting on' are themselves the product of social organisation linked to the division of labour. Making an innovative move reminiscent of Henri Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis*⁴, Minnegal shows that the temporality and relationality that are behind this mode of being attentive to the other have macro-social outcomes not only in shaping the reciprocal structures of society but in shaping its temporal structure, that is, its rhythm.

In my own paper, I am interested in the waiting associated with a state of 'stuckedness', a sense that one is moving in life. I also examine the ambiguous agency associated with an increasing celebration of 'stuckedness' as a form of heroism. Starting with the analysis of queues as modes of social organisation structured around the distribution of waiting time, I argue that the heroism of the stuck heralds a celebration and organisation of waiting in times of crisis. It signals a conservative governmentality that aims at de-legitimising impatience and the desire to disrupt 'the queue' even in the face of disaster.

Violeta Schubert's engaging ethnographic essay deals with the social disruptions created by those who fail to marry 'on time' in a Macedonian village. The essay is also interested in the relation between waiting and social control. Here the 'waiters' and agents of social control are the mothers who see the failure of their sons to marry on time as a breakdown of the fusion between biological and social trajectories instituted by society. The waiting mothers appear here as part of the governmental apparatus aimed at reproducing this fusion. In waiting for their sons to marry they are waiting to regain their own reputation, dented by the failure of their sons to follow the accepted socio-biological path, which translates as a national failure waiting to be transformed into a success.

The three remaining essays in this part examine further modes of articulation of waiting politics. Salim Lakha in his analysis of the immigrants yearning for 'back home' offers us a case where 'waiting' is a form of resistance. For Lakha, the desire and the waiting to return home is never simply a passive yearning, despite the changing configuration of the meaning of homeliness in a globalising world. It is an active mode of resisting the various assimilationist social processes to which the immigrant is subjected in the country of immigration and a mode of valorising one's own culture in the face of the host culture.

Hans Baer examines the relation between waiting and politics in the movements generated by climate change. Baer shows that political attitudes to climate change can be seen as an articulation of several modes of waiting: waiting for ecological disaster, waiting for governments to acknowledge climate change and act to counter it and finally waiting for a more popular awakening to the imminent dangers constituted by climate change. At the same time Baer shows that there are differences between the various actors not just in what kind of waiting they engage in but also in the intensity with which they do their waiting. This waiting intensity, he argues, can be correlated with the degree of power that each group has within the social and political structure.

Finally in Part II, Andrew Dawson provides an interesting case study of the way the myth of resurrection is experienced within Serbian nationalism. I have noted how the papers in Part I emphasise how waiting is an articulation of the existential and the social.

Nonetheless, by moving into the domain of politics we have found ourselves drifting towards and highlighting the importance of social waiting. Dawson's paper reminds us that this is not necessarily the case and that politics can be just as much a channelling of existential anxieties. This is particularly true of nationalism and particularly visible in the case of Serbian nationalism, as Dawson presents it.

Dawson shows the way Serbian nationalism is structured around the myth of a Heavenly Serbia. On one hand, Heavenly Serbia is what every Serbian is waiting for. On the other, Heavenly Serbia represents the end of waiting. In the end one asserts the existence of a Heavenly Serbia in the very process of waiting for it. This is the politicisation of a 'classical' existential structure. Pascal also argues that we derive more satisfaction from waiting for things to happen than we do from the things we are waiting for actually happening. The moment of expectation is more important than the moment of fulfilment. This is very similar to the theme later developed by Heidegger around the opposition between building and dwelling⁵, whereby, according to a well-known formulation, we do not build in order to dwell, we dwell in the very process of building. Likewise in Dawson's Serbia, Heavenly Serbia 'is' in the very process of seeking and waiting for it.

Moving away from the political, but only just, the final part, Part III: Waiting Affects, assembles essays that deal with the affective and ethical dimensions of waiting, subjects we have not touched upon so far, despite their importance and despite the fact that, once again, they are already present in most of the essays. That waiting is an affective mode of being hardly needs proving. It can easily be observed in intense modes of waiting. In fact, in psychoanalytic theories of the development of the personality, waiting has always been seen as foundational in the formation of the affective self, particularly at the moment of separation from the mother or the breast. It is not far from the truth to say that in psychoanalytic theory the self takes shape the very moment it starts waiting.

This is so in Freud's famous *fort da game*⁶, where the child aims to master the unbearable emotion of waiting for his mother. Faced with a situation where he is subjected to a process that is beyond his capacity to change, namely the disappearance of a desired object, his mother, he initiates a game which aims at a symbolic reversal of the

situation. The process of appearance and disappearance of an object is made to be the subject of his will. Subjectivity and creativity are here seen as emerging through the process of waiting for the mother.

Another important psychoanalytic domain for us is Melanie Klein's observations of the difference between the babies whose attitude in the face of the absence of the breast is in the form of an unbearable waiting: 'shock horror the breast is not here. The world is going to collapse' and the babies who are willing to wait without an undue sense of anxiety: 'the breast is not here but I am sure it is coming'.⁷ In both Freud's and Klein's works referred to here, and although they are each referring to a different stage in the development of the person, the person takes shape through the experience of a desire for an object that disappears. Consequently, all of these processes are one and the same, or at least part of the same, process: formation of the self, formation of the other, waiting, wanting and desiring. Already at this stage we can see how the relation between waiting and desiring, and the relation between waiting and the other, that is, the affects of waiting and the ethics of waiting, both take shape at the same time. This is certainly how the relation between love, patience and waiting on the other emerges in the first essay of this part by Christopher Cordner. Cordner depicts an ethical disposition toward the other where there is a fusion of both a waiting for and a waiting on the other. This is a kind of radical 'waiting on' marked by a form of love seen by Cordner as a fusion of a capacity for patience, a capacity to both be engaged in the world while knowing how to 'let go', and a capacity to meet the other as the other presents itself to us rather than as we want it to be. Love is also a core 'waiting affect' for Senka Bozic-Vrbancic in her essay on the European people's waiting for a 'lovable' European Community. In a way similar to Dawson's depiction of Heavenly Serbia above, but with an emphasis on affective politics, Bozic-Vrbancic shows how a waiting for a fulfilling Europe as both a loved and loving object fluctuate between the possible and the impossible. This waiting for love is also a waiting that aims at weaving the yet-to-be-loved object into a time in which past, present and future are themselves stitched together to create a lovable Europe.

From the relation between waiting and love, Maree Parry takes us to the relation between waiting and shame, the immigrant's shame

of non-belonging to an ever-promising multicultural Australia. This in a sense presents itself as the shame of an endless unfulfilled and unfulfilling promise of love. As Pardy nicely puts it: ‘The thwarted promise of multiculturalism—to belong in and through, not in spite of difference—transforms anticipatory, hopeful waiting to tedium.’ While for some immigrants the endless waiting to assimilate leads to a withdrawal from the game of assimilation and a refusal to play the waiting game, in the case of Bich, the Vietnamese woman carefully examined by Pardy, the endless waiting to belong produces shame, which in fact ends up creating a further investment in waiting. As Pardy shows, this ‘shameful waiting’ ends up being itself internalised and transformed into a disposition that is constitutive of the multicultural subject.

The last two essays extend the relation between waiting and affect into an examination of its relation to creativity. In Emma Kowal’s auto-ethnographic essay of the experience of pregnancy, affect emerges in the struggle of the mother to maintain her subjectivity as it is increasingly waiting for another being to come out of her own body, a being that is increasingly given a concrete content with the help of technologies such as ultrasound. The essay begins as an analysis of the way the pregnant woman’s waiting body is positioned between the temporality of the institutions that aim at managing pregnancy and the temporality of the body. But, rather than perceive these two temporalities as different but equally linear, the essay moves, with the help of Lacan, to become a study of the processes of retroaction and anticipation through which the subjects actively introduce the past and the future into their present. But in a very creative move, Kowal uses Lacan’s mirror stage to show how the waiting for giving birth induces a reverse of the Lacanian conception of the subject as moving in time from disintegration to imagined totality. At the moment of birth, the woman’s body is experienced as fragmenting as various ‘bits’ come out of it. It regains itself as waiting ends and the imperative of ‘keeping up’ with one’s child becomes a new mode of recentering the self.

In the final essay of the book, Tamara Kohn gives us an engaging look at the creativity of two men as they were waiting on death row in a Californian jail. In a way that speaks to Cordner’s notion of patience above, but in an entirely different context, Kohn manages to give us

an excellent empirical sense of what it means to 'live one's waiting'. This, in a sense, is the opposite of the religious attitude mentioned above that has us always positing a moment where waiting ends and which consequently makes us live our lives continuously waiting for waiting to end. To live one's waiting is to simply embrace it rather than wait for it to end. The power of Kohn's piece is that it shows us that it is precisely in this capacity to assume one's waiting that creativity takes place. The prisoners on death row become exemplary of the articulation of waiting as both an affect and an ethic.

We hope that the essays in this collection, on their own and in their totality, will give the reader a sense of the ethnographic, philosophical and sociological richness that can be generated from the analysis of various forms of waiting, whether the latter is seen as an act, an attitude or a social process. Needless to say, the essays, despite their variety, vibrancy, depth and strength, only scratch the surface of the phenomenon. They should nonetheless demonstrate that, as anthropologists would say, waiting is good to think with.

Notes

- 1 Pascal.
- 2 Crapanzano.
- 3 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.
- 4 Lefebvre.
- 5 Heidegger, pp. 347–63.
- 6 Freud, pp. 52–4.
- 7 Klein, pp. 290–305.