One obvious benefit of a multinational, multidisciplinary reflection upon the terms “trace” and “temporality” is to expose the limitations in our everyday understanding of them. The editors of this compendium of essays originating from the 15th Triennial Conference of the International Society for the Study of Time have introduced and organized the essays in a way that seeks to show the full richness of these terms.

As a starting point, the editors choose a reflection on the English word “trace” by Frederick Turner, in which he considers the way that the Ndembu of Southern Africa think about tracking and connects their views to ideas of temporality found in European poetry and thought, particularly those concerning the relationship between the known and unknown. This essay provides a suitable lead-off for the following authors, at least two thirds of whom are based in the humanities and social sciences, where temporality, as distinct from time, is a major preoccupation.

As Turner and others point out, the word trace can be used as a noun, or as a verb that describes the tracking of past events on the basis of present “evidence.” The forensic features of tracing are not as obvious in synonymous nouns such as “vestige” or “relic,” which suggest a more passive, or nostalgic reflection upon the same evidence. The philosophers and psychologists in this volume, such as Peter Øhstrøm and Thomas Ploug, John Kafka, and Carlos Montemayor, amplify these active features in their discussions of the epistemic role that traces play in our understanding of temporality.
Kafka and Montemayor both point out how the psychological sense of the present is dependent upon an active view of traces as stepping stones from circumstances beyond our control to ones that may come under our control. In considering people’s ability to make sense of the present, both authors demonstrate how dependent thought processes are upon one’s sense of the recently past and the imminently future. Øhstrøm and Ploug present a similar case in their detailed historical review of A. N. Prior’s argument for presentism—the philosophical theory that all our evidence for what has happened and what can later happen is visible in traces that meet in the present and have the potential to branch out in future directions that are only evident in the nexus of the present.

Øhstrøm and Ploug’s essay exposes the lack of contributions from authors who eschew presentism and subscribe to eternalist or “block” views of event ordering, in which a trace is viewed simply as one section of a historical path (or “world line”) that is spatiotemporally extended in the timeless manner of a road connecting two places on a map. The lack of representation for this very pervasive view in philosophy and physics is an unfortunate shortcoming of this volume, mainly due to the turnout of contributors to the conference.

A more successful feature of this book is the relationship it shows between trace and narrative. Traces are, of course, object collections theorized to evidence some past story, and as demonstrated by the changing estimates of the Earth’s age over the past 150 years, the story told by a trace is always susceptible to revisions that can be substantial enough to completely undermine the original theory. In that sense, traces may be regarded as little more than present narratives. Jo Alyson Parker ably demonstrates how a playwright like Tom Stoppard can exploit an audience’s present understanding of earlier events and subsequently undermine it, thus presenting the continuum of events in a play very much as they appear in life—tantalizingly unresolvable.

Arkadiusz Misztal examines similar characteristics in the work of Thomas Pynchon, drawing attention to his mischievous undermining of our faith in effective forensic examinations of the past, particularly in respect of the evidence apparently presented by photography. Our faith in forensic argument is further challenged by a real-life story presented by Rosemary Huisman, who examines the legal history of an Australian immigrant appealing a deportation order. The final ruling on this case still appears somewhat open and subject not only to interpretation of the law but also to oscillating views on the fraught issue of migration itself. Both essays suggest that the phrase “beyond reasonable doubt” may be overly ambitious in respect of truly understanding the past.