

Travis Chi Wing Lau

My deepest thanks to Gena and Kasia for having me on this panel alongside this great lineup of people I admire. It's a pleasure to have Anna here to help us think through what V21 might have to offer us working in the eighteenth century. A little about myself and my connection to V21: I'm totally one of *those* scholars that pushes the "long" part of the "long 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries," but this in-betweenness has forced me to think a lot about my scholarly investments in working across these historical periods and how sometimes periodization limits the questions we can ask and the objects with which we might engage critically. I connected with V21 through one of my dissertation committee members, Emily Steinlight, and I have since contributed to one of V21's *Collations*, an online forum that brings together 2-3 scholars, often with very different intellectual interests and at entirely different stages of their careers, to read and respond to new scholarship in the field.<sup>1</sup> V21's openness to what its Manifesto calls "multiple modalities of scholarship and collectivity" has been extremely exciting to me as someone who has been working through what ways we might reach beyond the academic audiences of journals and monographs.<sup>2</sup> Today, I want to reflect a bit on the limits and affordances of the V21 Collective's concept of "strategic presentism." I can't help but return to Lynn Hunt's 2002 short essay, "Against Presentism," written for the American Historical Association.<sup>3</sup> For Hunt, presentism risks "putting historians out of business" by reducing history to a study of sameness based on the search for our individual or collective roots of identity. Furthermore, she describes the worst presentism as a kind of "moral complacency and self-congratulation" perpetuated by scholars who try to claim the righteous high ground over the archaic, problematic past. In Hunt's view, presentism leads to a kind of selective history that sees what it wants to see because it wants to shore up "various kinds of identity politics" that might be better attended to by "sociology, political science, and ethnic studies." "We are all caught up in the ripples of time, and we have no idea of where they are headed," Hunt concludes.

I find myself perplexed by this assessment. I think the urgency to act and respond in our current turbulent political climate is born out of the fact that we as humanists *do* know where things are headed precisely because we work to understand how and why events in history have unfolded as they have. What really is the problem with finding sameness in the past? Why does continuity necessarily mean "temporal superiority," as Hunt puts it? In my understanding, opposing presentism doesn't get politics out of history. To quote Eric Rauchway, "Writing about the past as if it existed wholly on its own terms and did not lead to the present suggests that history is utterly useless today—a cozy pursuit that cannot disturb our assumptions about what is happening now. It makes history marvelously conservative... After all, all history gets written by someone, somewhen. Our paths to the past start in the present. A tiny sliver—and never a representative cross-section—of humanity has access to research libraries and proprietary databases, to publishers, to income and leisure time sufficient to pursue history as profession or avocation."<sup>4</sup> Pretending that historians are detached from present circumstance, for Rauchway at least, seems no more than pretense. Now, I don't know if I would go so far as to frame history as such a teleological enterprise that

makes all lines converge on our present, but I do think there's a disavowal of presentist commitments in the claim that we "study the 18<sup>th</sup> century for the 18<sup>th</sup> century's sake and only on its terms." If we ask our undergraduates to answer the "stakes" question in their own thinking and writing, why are we not beholden to that same question? I think students deserve an honest and nuanced answer to the question of *why does this matter*. (*It just is* and *because I said so* don't count). Framing it in terms of the present that they know not only encourages students to discover unexpected investments in what they're learning but also witnesses history as itself dynamic, living—perpetually rippling into our present and beyond, to repurpose Hunt's image.

The first thesis of the "Manifesto of the V21 Collective" takes to task Victorian Studies for having "fallen prey to *positivist historicism*, a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past." While I've heard a number of colleagues over the past day or two insist on the value of this ever-thickening description of the past, I think what is strategic about "strategic presentism" is that it demands that we "think critically about the past in the present in order to *change* the present."<sup>5</sup> I emphasize "change" because not only are we fleshing out continuities but learning to better conceptualize those continuities as the means by which we can begin to imagine different futures in a present that so often seems to be without a future (or at least a viable or sustainable one). I am also particularly taken with Anna's formulation of "active listening to the past."<sup>6</sup> In our eagerness to describe, to inhabit, to reproduce, to contextualize the voices of the past (even to the extent that we sometimes talk over them), what are we training ourselves to hear, to tune out, or even fail to hear all together?

*We have always been presentist*, Emily Steinlight frequently likes to remind me.<sup>7</sup> No, not all presentisms are created equal, nor are all presentisms strategic. But we are shaped and motivated by the conditions of the present, whether or not we acknowledge it. The act of scholarship is shaped and motivated by the conditions of the present, whether or not we acknowledge it. The institutions within which we work are shaped and motivated by the conditions of the present, whether or not we acknowledge it. And I don't think we should be ashamed of that.

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#### Notes

1 My collations contribution was on the book forum for Benjamin Morgan's *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature*. The forum was composed of reflections by Elisha Cohn (Cornell), Kate Flint (University of Southern California), and myself. See <http://v21collective.org/collations-book-forum-benjamin-morgans-outward-mind-materialist-aesthetics-victorian-science-literature/>.

2 See Thesis 10 of the Manifesto of the V21 Collective: <http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/>.

3 <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism>.

4 “Present Tense.” *The New Republic*, 2007, <https://newrepublic.com/article/61055/present-tense>.

5 David Sweeney Coombs and Danielle Coriale. “V21 Forum on Strategic Presentism: Introduction.” *Victorian Studies* 59.1 (2016): 88.

6 “Present Tense Futures of the Past.” V21 Forum on Strategic Presentism: Introduction.” *Victorian Studies*. 59.1 (2016): 100.

7 “We Have Always Been Presentist.” V21 Forum on Strategic Presentism: Introduction.” *Victorian Studies*. 59.1 (2016): 105.