The Literary Present

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THE LITERARY PRESENT

BY PAUL K. SAINT-AMOUR

> Eek Plato seith, whoso can him rede . . .
>
> —Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*

I had planned to write about critical futurities. Not so much to make forecasts or appeals about the future *of* criticism. And not to look at the history of such forecasts and appeals in the past. I wanted to consider how, and why, and when *futurity*—the future as time, as event, as condition, as an orientation toward the oncoming that could have a history and an archive of its own—became a key concept in literary studies. I wanted, for instance, to retrace some of the many elements in Jacques Derrida's work—the archive, the nuclear, the democracy-to-come—that had put futurity into a new kind of play.[1] I also had in mind Reinhardt Kosselleck's notion of futures past, and its use in David Scott's work as a license to dust off forgotten genres for emplotting the future and to put them in place of discredited ones.[2] I had in mind, too, how queer theorists had portrayed futurity, variously, as a hetero-reproductivist no-fly zone for queer subjects and as the temporality par excellence of a queerness characterized by utopian political hope.[3] I had previously gathered some of this work under a constellation I called critical futurities, hoping to add to it my own thinking about the critical pressures exerted by apparently foreclosed futures.[4] I wanted to think about the conditions from which these various critical futurities had emerged, about where they touched and parted ways, and about where they might be pointing.

But I had to let go of all that because the literary present kept encroaching on my attempts to think about futurity. Now, the "literary present" in question was not something like literature today or the literary spirit of our moment. The literary present was a tense. Primed to notice how literary critics wrote about futurity, I had begun paying more attention to the verb tenses in which they did so. What arrested my attention was a practice I had been inside for too long to find strange until then: namely, the practice of writing predominantly in

the present tense when writing about literary works. While describing, characterizing, or analyzing a text's formal properties, what did I—what did we—overwhelmingly use but the present tense? Recapping a work's or a writer's argument? Present tense. Annotating a work's politics? Present tense. And perhaps the strangest and most invisible of all, paraphrasing or summarizing the events narrated in a literary work, even one originally written in the past tense? Present tense. I was to learn that these usages, together, were known as the literary present.

I was first waylaid while pursuing my interest in futurity back to Peter Brooks's classic *Reading for the Plot*. I wanted to remind myself of Brooks's speculation that the master-trope of narrative was "the *anticipation of retrospection*," a reading in expectation of a narrative terminus that would, as he put it, "restructure the provisional reading of the already read."[5] In the pages that led up to this formulation, Brooks discussed a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm called "Allerleirauh," or "All-Kinds-of-Fur," which he first reactivated through a standard plot summary:

> A dying queen makes her husband promise that he will remarry only with a woman as beautiful as she, with the same golden hair. He promises, and she dies. Time passes, and he is urged by his councilors to remarry. He looks for the dead queen's equal, but finds no one; until, years later, his eyes light on his daughter, who looks just like her mother, with the same golden hair. He will marry her, though his councilors say he must not[.][6]

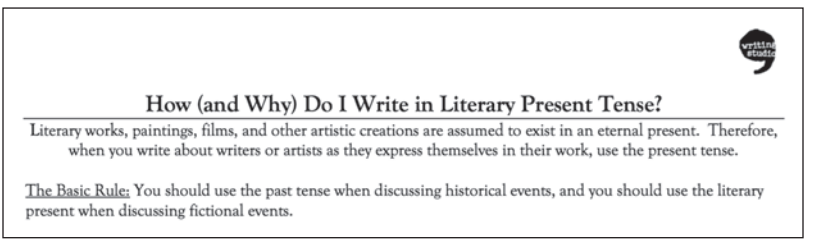
Brooks's use of the literary present tense jarred me. The words *Grimm* and *fairy tale* had raised in me the wrong expectations. They had sat me, mentally, cross-legged on the floor of the children's section of the library or by the eternal campfire of oral retelling. I had been ready for Brooks to begin with some version of "Once upon a time" and to go on in the preterite, as the Grimms did in their telling of "All-Kinds-of-Fur":

> There was once upon a time a King who had a wife with golden hair, and she was so beautiful that her equal was not to be found on this earth. It came to pass that she lay ill, and as she felt that she must soon die, she called the King and said, "If thou wishest to marry again after my death, take no one who is not quite as beautiful as I am, and who has not just such golden hair as I have: this thou must promise me." And after the King had promised her this she closed her eyes and died[.][7]

The use of the past and pluperfect tenses and of temporal markers such as "once," "it came to pass," and "after" in the Grimms' version—these would have produced a sense of succession, of moving through different depth planes of the narrative past. Reserving the present tense for direct speech—the dying queen's "[i]f thou wishest to marry again after my death, take no one who is not quite as beautiful as I am, and who has not just such golden hair as I have"—would have endowed her speech with the presence I associated with oral discourse, differentiating it from the narratorial preterite. In contrast, Brooks's summary flattened those depth planes by cutting back on temporal markers and by adhering almost exclusively to the present tense. The simple present, moreover—not the present progressive, "he is promising," in which actually unfolding events would be narrated, but the more emphatic and frozen simple present, "he promises." It was as if chronologically distinct events had been represented on the surface of a single Grecian urn that Brooks beheld, and the presence of the artifact before him had overpowered the discrete pasts of the events the urn depicted. Virtually all of the sequentiality—and consequentiality—in the summary's *fabula* came from the raw successiveness of its *sjužet*: "he promises," "she dies," "time passes," "he is urged." Strangest of all, this flattened, utilitarian summary of the tale occurred in the tense I associated with quoted speech and informal anecdote, the present tense. Contrastingly, the formal oral retelling I was expecting would have unfolded in a past tense that foregrounded the narrator's distance from the tale and the absence of its characters from the time of the retelling. The literary present of Brooks's summary seemed to steal presence from speech and confer it on the synopsis. Yet in the process it also foregrounded the thingliness of the Grimms' tale, noisily constituting it as an object of summary, description, and analysis. It alchemized one kind of putative immediacy into another: the transient immediacy of speech into the eternally present immediacy of the textual artifact.

Even as Brooks's plot summary jarred me, I was jarred to find myself jarred. I had not only practiced such uses of the literary present for years but also enforced them hundreds of times as a teacher—every time I had, with tight-lipped irritation, written in the margin of a student's paper, "It is conventional to use the present tense when summing up the events or characteristics of a work of literature." Yet I couldn't remember ever having been taught to use the literary present, much less having had the convention explained or historicized for me. So I consulted a few recent guides to academic writing—Helen

Sword's *Stylish Academic Writing* and Eric Hayot's *The Elements of Academic Style*.[8] Although addressed to graduate students and faculty in the humanities, these titles seemed to regard the use of the literary present as too basic a convention to address head-on. It wasn't until I started reading websites and handbooks created by university writing programs that I learned even the name of the literary present. Yet these sources tended to treat the literary present as a given, offering only tautological reasons for its use. Vanderbilt University's Writing Studio posted this representative one in 2008 (Figure 1):



How (and Why) Do I Write in Literary Present Tense?

Literary works, paintings, films, and other artistic creations are assumed to exist in an eternal present. Therefore, when you write about writers or artists as they express themselves in their work, use the present tense.

The Basic Rule: You should use the past tense when discussing historical events, and you should use the literary present when discussing fictional events.

Figure 1. Online handout posted by Vanderbilt University Writing Studio, 17 July 2008, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/writing/wp-content/uploads/sites/164/2016/10/Literary-present-tense.pdf.

Moving beyond exclusively academic writing-cultures yielded less circular, if no more historicized, claims about the literary present tense. Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd, in their book *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*, had this to say about the quotation (rather than the summary or characterization) of literary writers:

> When quoting great writers we tend to use the present tense, even if they died centuries ago: "Milton reminds us . . ." "As Shakespeare says . . ." The literary convention recalls the truth that must have inspired it. Writers we revere feel like colleagues and confidants, as if they were speaking to us directly. This communion of strangers, living and dead, derives from the rather mystical quality called "voice."[9]

There again was the meeting of voice or orality and literature under the sign of the perpetual present, only this time with the addition of reverence, communion, and mysticism. I wasn't convinced that these

time-transcending attitudes were the sole guarantors of all present-tense engagements with literary works, such as Brooks's summary of "All-Kinds-of-Fur." Yet even in colder places than Kidder and Todd's book I encountered rationales for the literary present rooted in the ostensible timelessness of writing. The authors of the *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* took such a view in a section called "[t]he 'timeless' use of the present tense."[10] You could use the preterite (or simple past tense), they said, to report on a performance you had just seen. ("It was amazing—Puck and the other faeries were punks on roller skates!") But the perspective for a synopsis, they added,

> is not that of a past performance (so that the preterite would be inappropriate) but of a work that can be performed (or read) at any time, and is in that sense timeless. . . . Writing has a permanence lacking in speech, and where past writings have been preserved they can be read now, and we can talk about them from the perspective of their present and potentially permanent existence rather than that of their past creation.[11]

When the same *Cambridge Grammar* authors provided examples of the "timeless" present tense used to describe artworks created in the past, those examples were, after all, redolent of communion, reverence, and mysticism:

> (b) Focus on present existence of works created in the past
> A similar use of the 'timeless' present tense is seen in:
> i. *Describing individuals coping with ordinary life and social pressures, she [Jane Austen] uses a sharp satiric wit to expose follies, hypocrisies and false truths.*
> ii. *That's not exactly what the Bible says.*
> iii. *Rubens is a master of those parts of his art which act immediately on the senses, especially in the portrayal of the tumult and energy of human action in full power and emotion.*[12]

The impression of the voice's immediacy and presence, I had thought, was indissociable from the time-bound, mortal body that produced it, and from the instantaneous vanishing of spoken utterance into the ether. But here in the literary present, the immediacy and presence of the voice had been given a home outside the ephemerality of the body. Out of reverence for the author or for writing's capacity to outlive the moment of its creation and survive in fresh readerly presents, we had decoupled utterance from death.

While I was on the trail of the literary present, I learned of a number of neighboring uses of the present tense to describe actions not simultaneous or coextensive with the statement in question.

Historical present
With William IV's death, the 17-year-old Victoria becomes Queen.

Annalistic present
"It is not till the close of the Old English period that Scandinavian words appear."[13]

Anecdotal present
So a chicken, a tree surgeon, and a literary critic walk into a bar.

Habitual present
Every time he comes in he orders a mint tea and a maple walnut scone.

Gnomic present
Scarcity is value. Taking naps helps the brain form memories.

Deirdre McCloskey took up the last of these, the gnomic present, in *The Rhetoric of Economics*, where she noted its power to confer "the authority of General Truth" on a statement.[14] That advantage came with a disadvantage, however. The gnomic present, she added, "sidesteps whether it is asserting an historical fact . . . or a general truth . . . or perhaps merely a tautology. The one meaning borrows prestige and persuasiveness from the other."[15] I couldn't help noticing how McCloskey's warnings about the gnomic present drifted into the gnomic present. Her claim that "[t]he one meaning borrows prestige and persuasiveness from the other" could describe a particular historically bounded instance, but it could also be understood as a more general and transhistorical rule-of-thumb. That drift from the particular to the general was familiar to me in literary scholarship, including my own. It seemed born of the wish to end a section of detailed summary and analysis with a more authoritative and exportable claim—something approaching the axiom or the apothegm.

All of these exceptional usages of the present tense—the historical, annalistic, and anecdotal presents, the gnomic and habitual presents—turned up in literary scholarship. In addition, our discipline shared with many others the practice of using the present to sum up past claims within the discipline. (*Vandana Shiva argues*; *Watson and Crick contend*; and so forth.) But the use of the present to describe and analyze a cultural artifact created in the past seemed largely the

province of humanistic disciplines. And because paintings, statues, buildings, and musical compositions lacked a grammatical tense, the use of the present to summarize explicitly fictional narratives written in the preterite seemed to be particular to literary studies. Adding up these shared and eccentric usages of the present, I hazarded that ours was the academic discipline that spent the largest proportion of its time teaching, speaking, and writing in the present tense. We were, in effect, a Society for the Promotion of the Timeless Present.

Given the apparent intensity of this disciplinary commitment, I expected to find the use of the timeless present tense a site of study, debate, and critique among literary critics. I had already come across arguments about other discourse-specific usages of the present. In 2010, Philip Hensher bewailed the fact that half the novels shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize he was then judging were written in the present tense, and Philip Pullman joined his lament in the pages of the *Guardian*.[16] A few years later, Ben Yagoda and John Humphrys complained that the historical present had become the default tense for historians speaking on radio, TV, podcasts, and even in lecture courses.[17] Where Yagoda and Humphrys found the historical present lazy, tacky, irritating, and pretentious, David Shariatmadari rose to defend it as a "neurologically truthful" way to bring the past to life.[18]

But when it came to the literary present I could find neither outcry nor passionate defense, either recently or in the cornerstone texts of U.S. literary studies where I thought I might find them. For example, the present tense was not, for Cleanth Brooks, what made paraphrase heretical. To the contrary: *The Well Wrought Urn* was a veritable paradise of the literary present, a book in which past and future tenses were as rare as hen's teeth—even rarer than in the ten poems Brooks discussed, most of which also took the present as their base tense. By Brooks's own admission these poems were "parable[s] about poetry," John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" most conspicuously so.[19]

> Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
> Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
> And, happy melodist, unwearièd,
> For ever piping songs for ever new;
> More happy love! more happy, happy love!
> For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
> For ever panting, and for ever young —
> All breathing human passion far above,
> That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
> A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.[20]

And what did that parable have to say but that poetry, like the Grecian urn itself, partook of a timeless present, piping ever-sweet melodies as old age wasted one generation of readers after another? Nor did the "Ode" stop at describing and praising the eternal presence of the urn. As an address to and description of an artifact, Keats's whole poem was in the aesthetic present that literary critics used when writing of texts, that Cleanth Brooks used when writing of his ten "parable[s] about poetry." The "Ode" was a veritable warrant for the literary present. True, it also acknowledged how that tense froze the artifact out of history and the "breathing human passion" of mortal desire. But when Keats's urn spoke in the poem's final lines, it did so not in the preterite one might expect of a "Sylvan historian" but in the gnomic present: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"—an utterance that seemed to me suddenly much less interested in *beauty* or in *truth* than in the copula *is*.[21] Reading the "Ode" as an ambivalent canonization of the aesthetic present tense helped me appreciate the instincts of my teachers who had paired it with a particular Wallace Stevens poem:

> **Anecdote of the Jar**
>
> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was, upon a hill.
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill.
>
> The wilderness rose up to it,
> And sprawled around, no longer wild.
> The jar was round upon the ground
> And tall and of a port in air.
>
> It took dominion everywhere.
> The jar was gray and bare.
> It did not give of bird or bush,
> Like nothing else in Tennessee.[22]

For in its bloody-minded commitment to the simple past, Stevens's poem now seemed nothing less than a refusal or negation of the "Ode" at the level of grammatical tense—a fact that generations of scholarly commentary on "Anecdote of the Jar" written in the literary present likely caused most of us to miss. And this was to say nothing of writing worksheets that asked students to rewrite lines from "Anecdote of the Jar" into the literary present (Figure 2).[23]

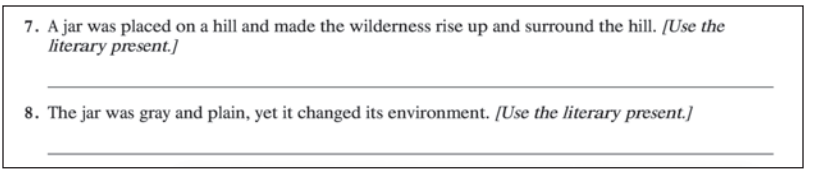


Figure 2. Kylene Beers and Lee Odell, *Elements of Literature Fifth Course: Essentials of American Literature* (Princeton: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2007), 60.

As for critiques of the literary present, I was able to locate only one rather brief example, in Phyllis Rackin's essay "Misogyny Is Everywhere," which appeared in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*. Rackin was responding to fellow Shakespearean Peter Erickson's claim, about *All's Well That Ends Well*, that "Helena's gender makes impossible any one-sided identification with Helena against Bertram."[24] Erickson's use of the verb *makes* in the present tense, said Rackin, "seems to universalize [his] reading and deny its historical specificity, implying that ambivalence and anxiety are the only possible responses to the character for any reader or viewer in any time or place."[25] (We could also say that Erickson's use of the literary present had slid, as so often and so easily happens, into the gnomic present.) Rackin continued:

> The conventions of scholarly writing have been to write about literary texts in the present tense, thus expressing their imaginative presence, and about historical events in the past tense to mark their temporal distance from the writer who recounts them. This distinction is breaking down, both in popularized history, where the present tense is increasingly used to describe past events, and in postmodern historical theory, which is shaped by the recognition that history, no less than fiction, is constantly updated to fit the shapes of present interests and assumptions.[26]

Up to that point, the moving part in Rackin's analysis was not the literary present but the preterite, whose grip on historical narrative she saw weakening owing to two factors: the same rising popular use of the historical present that Yagoda and Humphreys later complained of; and the growing recognition of historiography's ineliminable presentism. But the second of these implied, at least, that if the presentist drift of historiography made it harder to distinguish from literary analysis, it was because literary analysis was already presentist. The rest of Rackin's paragraph made this more explicit:

> The question of grammatical tense poses an especially pressing problem for new historicist literary criticism. The present tense effaces historical distance, the past denies literary presence, and the distinction between past tense for history and present tense for fiction implicitly denies the imbrication of the literary text in its historical context that animates the entire new-historicist project. If the text and its historical context are components of a seamless discursive web, it is difficult to sustain the grammatical distinction between present and past tenses that marks the separation of the literary text from its historical context. But if that distinction is elided, where does the new-historicist scholar situate herself in relation to the literary/historical objects of her analysis?[27]

Although framed as feminist-new historicist, Rackin's meditation on tense was deconstructive in its arc, landing on a version of the necessary-impossible. The use of tense to separate the literary text from its historical context was both indefensible and indispensable—indefensible because literature was historical and historiography incapable of purging itself of presentism; indispensable for reasons of disciplinary definition and critical standpoint. The new historicist should applaud the loss of literature's monopoly on the present tense because that loss reimbricated literature in history. But that reimbrication would also mean the loss of all procedural means for distinguishing between literature as figure and history as ground. Even more disquieting for the new historicist critic, the re-entanglement of literature and history was happening not by way of a shared historical distance, but by way of a shared presentism—the double drowning of historical distance as the waters of the historical present rose and mingled with those of the literary present.

Where Rackin expressed deep unease about the confluent presentism of text and context, scholars writing in the wake of new historicism have been less vexed by it, even calling for strategic presentism as a corrective to new historicism's small-bore archival projects. The Manifesto of the V21 Collective, published in 2015, criticized the field of Victorian studies for having "fallen prey to positivist historicism" marked by a "fetishization of the archival . . . show-and-tell epistemologies and bland antiquarianism."[28] The Collective called for a "critical rethinking of form and formalism" and for "a new openness to *presentism*" that could acknowledge the degree to which the world made by the Victorians endured in the present.[29] With its focus on presentisms of standpoint and motivation, however, the V21 Manifesto understandably overlooked the presentism baked into the functional grammar of literary studies. It left for others to consider whether the discipline's relentless and

unstrategic use of the literary present actually got in the way of more strategic presentisms.

To pursue this question would be to develop criteria for winnowing bad presentism from good. If one took seriously Ernst Bloch's claim that "[w]e do not all live in the same now," what defense could one mount of a critical grammar that herded all readers into the homogenized, transtemporal present of the text?[30] Assuming one allowed for the possibility of good presentisms, surely this was not one. It was reflexive rather than intentional, enforced but unhistoricized in our pedagogy, and so thoroughly naturalized a part of our discourse as to be essentially beneath notice. Its omnipresence wasn't a scandal, exactly, but it was ideological in the worst sense of that word. It needed to be surfaced as an object of scrutiny, then denaturalized, and quite possibly renounced.

Yet as I tried to imagine conducting our work without the literary present tense, I kept hearing that phrase from Kidder and Todd's *Good Prose*, in which they described how long-dead writers could feel like colleagues—in their words, like a "communion of strangers, living and dead." Yes, this communion was connected in their analysis to a "mystical quality called 'voice'" that raised my hackles, particularly in its uneven distribution. (People said "As Shakespeare reminds us" but not "As Colley Cibber reminds us," using the literary present to confer on canonical authors' words the status of general knowledge. Some of the dead were more undead in our grammar than others.) Still, the notion that other forms of the literary present might allow the living and the dead to meet as if contemporaries stayed with me, in part because such a "touch across time," in Carolyn Dinshaw's phrase, had been celebrated by queer temporalities scholarship I admired.[31] What if the literary present were not, or not only, homogenizing? Was there some light in which the literary present could be understood as not-one, as not self-identical? It had already become abundantly clear to me that the present tense was multiple, describing events or conditions with a range of durations, ontologies, and temporalities. In what ways, I wondered, might the literary present be, in Bloch's word, "non-synchronous"?[32]

I referred earlier to Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*, and its argument that past-tense narratives implicitly looked forward to the diegetically future terminus from which they were narrated, and from which their meaning would be stabilized in the end. The narrative preterite (from the Latin *praeterire*, to go by, go past, go beyond, or pass over) reminded readers in the most basic terms that the events

being related had already gone by. Brooks attributed, though, a dissenting view to two mid-century French theorists of narrative—the anthropologist Jean Pouillon and the semiotician Claude Bremond. They argued, said Brooks, "that the preterite tense used classically in the novel is decoded by the reader as a kind of present, that of an action and a significance being forged before his eyes, in his hands, so to speak."[33] Even if, as he went on to note, "it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place," Pouillon's and Bremond's observation rang true to my experience.[34] By now I could no longer number the times I had been spellbound by a past-tense narrative that seemed to unfold with the real-time self-disclosure of the present tense. That phenomenological immediacy of the narrative preterite made me wonder something else, something that took me back from tense to temporality. If the narrative past tense could be decoded by readers as a kind of present, might a similarly asynchronous decoding happen if we turned the dial of tense one click? Might the literary present, that is, be decoded, in some instances, as a kind of future?

Some pages ago I listed several usages—the historical and annalistic present—where simple-present constructions referred to past events. But there were also, I learned, situations where simple-present constructions referred to future or future-conditional events:

> **Futurate**
> I start work in a few days. The train leaves at 7:30 tonight.
>
> **Travel itinerary**
> To reach St. Oggs, we make our way along the River Floss to where it is joined by the Ripple.
>
> **Directions**
> You take your first left at the gas station and keep going till you reach the covered bridge.
>
> **Stage directions**
> (*David crosses upstage left, leans his elbow on the lid of the piano.*)

In such examples, a future event, trip, or performance was either certain or tangible enough to be described in the present tense while yet retaining its futurity. Could the literary present be temporally amphibious in a similar way? To pursue this question, I turned to the late José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There*

of Queer Futurity. I wanted to think with criticism that was deeply skeptical about the politics of the present as a temporality, and whose use of the literary present as a tense might be expected to amplify any noise or non-self-correspondence in that tense. For Muñoz, the present time was "straight time"—as he put it, "impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations" (27). Where Lee Edelman and other queer theorists critical of reproductive futurism called for a radical presentism, Muñoz rejected what he called "the devastating logic of the world of the here and now, a notion of nothing existing outside the sphere of the current moment, a version of reality that naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity" (12). In disrupting what it took to be the tyranny of the here and now, I thought, Muñoz's book might find the there and then of queer futurity salted away inside the tense of the here and now, perhaps especially in the literary present. I was also encouraged by the crucial role played in *Cruising Utopia* by Bloch, the theorist of untimeliness I mentioned earlier. Finally, there was the book's title, which asserted that a present participle might be in some intimate relation to a utopian condition negated or absent in the present, present only in the future—even as the book itself visited past moments variously tragic, violent, and utopian, from the late 1950s through the years of its writing, as harboring resources for a critique of straight time.

Muñoz opened *Cruising Utopia* with a long paragraph, written almost entirely in the present tense, that denounced the present time as a "prison house" whose "totalizing rendering of reality" prompted us "to strive . . . to think and feel a *then and there*"—both a past and a future not ready-to-hand (1). Queerness belonged to other times and places; it was not immediate, not present, not nearby. Yet the paragraph moved by way of an incantatory repetition of the formulation "Queerness is": "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality"; "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present"; "Queerness is a longing that propels us onward. . . . Queerness is a thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough"; "Queerness is also a performative . . . . Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). Muñoz's opening took an expression in the most authoritative key of the present tense—the gnomic present—and through repetition shook it loose from its holdfast in the present time. However,

none of the statement's gnomic authority had been relinquished in the process. "Queerness is" drew its authority not from the existent world but from the non-existent yet worlded world Muñoz called "the aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic" (1). By the time you came to the paragraph's end, you had been powerfully reminded that a not-yet present condition, a condition of not-yetness, could be said to be here; that the simple present could harbor a legible sign of, or a felt desire for, some negated but potential state. You were cruising a good place that was, as yet, no place.

Even if he saw the present as straight time, Muñoz thought the present tense susceptible to queering, as *Cruising Utopia*'s first paragraph intimated about the gnomic present. But what about the literary or aesthetic present? With its attraction to canonicity and authority, its presentism, and its compulsory timelessness, was the literary present the least queerable region of the present tense? Or could some of those same traits make it, as Muñoz wrote of queerness, "a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold [of] straight time is interrupted or stepped out of" (32)? *Cruising Utopia* contained no explicit meditations on the mechanics of the aesthetic present. But its first chapter was anchored in a reading of James Schuyler's poem, "A photograph," which itself used the aesthetic present and occasioned the further use of it in Muñoz's analysis, both uses under the sign of a longing in the present for queerness in futurity:

> *A photograph*
>
> Shows you in a London
> room; books, a painting,
> your smile, a silky
> tie, a suit. And more.
> It looks so like you
> and I see it every day
> (here, on my desk)
> which I don't you. Last
> Friday was grand.
> We went out, we came
> back, we went wild. You
> slept. Me too. The pup
> woke you and you dressed
> and walked him. When
> you left, I was sleeping.
> When I woke there was
> just time to make the
> train to a country dinner

and talk about ecstasy
which I think comes in
two sorts: that which you
Know "Now I am ecstatic"
Like my strange scream
last Friday night. And
another kind, that you
know only in retrospect:
"Why, that joy I felt
and didn't think about
when his feet were in
my lap, or when I looked
down and saw his slanty
eyes shut, that too was
ecstasy. Nor is there
necessarily a downer from
it." Do I believe in
the perfectibility of
man? Strangely enough,
(I've known unhappiness enough) I
do. I mean it.
I really do believe
future generations can
live without the in-
tervals of anxious
fear we know between our
bouts and strolls of
ecstasy. The struck ball
finds the pocket. You
smile some years back
in London, I have
known ecstasy and calm:
haven't you too? Let's
try to understand, my
handsome friend who
wears his nose awry.[35]

Schuyler opened by describing a photo on his desk, then recalled a recent weekend spent with the photo's subject, who was also the poem's addressee, in sexual transport, easy intimacy, travel to a country dinner, and talk about varieties of ecstasy. In its description of the photo, the poem was anchored, like Keats's "Ode," in the aesthetic present: "*A photograph* / shows you in a London room"; and toward the end,

You
smile some years back
in London, I have
known ecstasy and calm:
haven't you too? Let's
try to understand, my
handsome friend who
wears his nose awry.

But it also wandered into the past tense, and into other uses of the present. At the level of both tense and temporality, Schuyler seemed to ask, and Muñoz with him, in what kind of ecstasy did ekphrasis partake?

For Muñoz, the poem's futurity lay in its utopian evocation of a future when queer subjects would be free of the fear the poet and his addressee felt:

I really do believe
future generations can
live without the in-
tervals of anxious
fear we know between our
bouts and strolls of
ecstasy.

Schuyler's poem evoked that future through a series of present-tense verbs—the emphatic present "I do believe," the modal present "generations can live," the simple present "we know." It was as if, at the level of grammar, the passage were revealing what C. L. R. James called "the future in the present."[36] But "A photograph" bent the present toward futurity at other points as well. The very next sentence, "The struck ball / finds the pocket," was in the simple present tense typically used for synopses, proverbs, and statements of the habitual. Having been struck by Schuyler's evocation of future generations, however, the sentence also curved toward the pocket of the future in a manner suggestive of those constructions I discussed a few moments ago—the stage direction, the travel itinerary, and perhaps above all the futurate, as in: *The train leaves at 7:30 tonight*. Where that example reported the on-time future departure of the train as an immutable fact, Schuyler's futurate, "The struck ball / finds the pocket," was mutable as to date and time. Yet it still put the billiard ball, featured in so many philosophical thought experiments about randomness, uncertainty, and unknowable causality, assuredly in the pocket. The poem's final sentence was another instance of "the future in the present," this one

in the more open form of the imperative, a tenseless mood that feels like an exhortation in the present to a near-future act:

> Let's
> try to understand, my
> handsome friend who
> wears his nose awry.

My question, prompted by Peter Brooks, had been whether the aesthetic present could be decoded as a kind of future. Schuyler's poem was anchored in the aesthetic present, but it evoked "the future in the present" elsewhere than in its descriptions of the photograph, as if to say that the ekphrastic present could trigger but not harbor futurity. Muñoz's reading of "A photograph" seemed gently to contest that verdict in its way of using the literary present. It did so partly through its drift from paraphrasing the poem to gnomic-present statements vectored toward the future, as in: "Queerness's ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness in the world" (25). But even in passages that did not drift toward this gnomic futurate, Muñoz bent the literary present away from the marmoreal timelessness that often marked it and toward a perpetual present full of the ongoingness of unfinished business:

> When "future generations" are invoked, the poet is signaling a queerness to come, a way of being in the world that is glimpsed through reveries in a quotidian life that challenges the dominance of an affective world, a present, full of anxiousness and fear. These future generations are . . . not an identitarian formulation but, instead, the invocation of a future collectivity, a queerness that registers as the illumination of a horizon of existence. (25)

For all its explicit references to future generations and collectivities, much of the passage's futurity lay in a subtlety of tense, the difference between the simple and the progressive present. Had it read, in the simple present of synopsis, "the poet signals a queerness to come," that signaling would have been understood as completed within the discourse-world of the poem. But by choosing the present progressive—"the poet is signaling a queerness to come"—Muñoz gave that signaling a longer and more open-ended durativity, one that lapped over the rim of the poem as completed artifact into the present of the critic and, by extension, the reader. Such an extension enacted by way of tense what the passage also evoked in more descriptive terms: the oncoming of a collectivity partly constituted by its receptiveness to a signal sent in the past, encoded in the literary present, to be decoded as a future.

Here, then, was one place where the literary present could be decoded as a future—as what we might call the literary futurate. It was not to be confused with other futurates I had encountered. *The train leaves at 7:30 tonight*: a future event endowed by routine with the facticity of the present. "The struck ball / finds the pocket": an entreaty, if a confident one, camouflaged as an adage. "The poet is signaling a queerness to come": a message angled toward a condition, and a community, not yet fully extant but to be summoned in part by the message itself. The last of these, Muñoz's literary futurate, was in some sense the weakest. It lacked the punctuality of the simple present, and its future was authorized not by the fact of the timetable or by the rhetorical authority of the axiom but by a future-conditional politics of hope. Yet it was also compellingly set off from the others by having, in the form of "the queerness to come," a kind of addressee. In the way it hailed a future through the openness of its present-tense address, Muñoz's literary futurate seemed to share, and to illuminate, something important about literary criticism both within and beyond queer temporality. This was the critic's hope not just of reaching an existing readerly community but also of summoning a future one through readings conducted in the literary present, readings that might function as present-tense directions for enough future acts of reading or re-reading to become the basis for community. It seemed to echo Romantic-era invocations of future readerships produced in part by reading the Romantics. It brought to mind William Wordsworth's claim that poems insulted by his contemporaries would not only receive but also give rise to the more favorable "judgment of posterity."[37] It recalled Percy Bysshe Shelley's untimely sense, too, that the poet "beholds the future in the present," regarding "the grammatical forms which express the moods of time" as "convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry."[38] And it invited one to think about other ways of warping the grammatical form of the literary present toward the future, maybe through non-rhetorical questions or imperatives ("Consider . . ." or "Let's / try to understand"), tropes in need of unpacking, allusions awaiting recognition, moments of critical free indirect discourse.[39]

But wasn't this to wander too far from the queer chronopolitics that made Muñoz's work so powerful? His analysis of "A photograph" was not, I reminded myself, simply an extreme case of the general one. He had recognized the potential for untimely and futurate address inherent in the literary present, and he had activated it, in his readings, toward the particular horizon of queer futurity. That horizon, in

turn, drew much of its political magnetism from the gay male life-worlds discussed in other chapters of *Cruising Utopia*—life-worlds that had been devastated or severely curtailed by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and whose negated status in the present fused the project's utopianism with mourning in ways that were specific to queer people, particularly those of Muñoz's generation. To wrench generalizations about literary critical practice from *Cruising Utopia*'s carefully sited readings would, I worried, water down or instrumentalize Muñoz's work where I wished to honor it. At the same time, I understood the vexed relationship between the general and the specific to be a problem internal to *Cruising Utopia*, part of its particularity. At its heart was the question of whether mourning specific lost individuals, communities, and life-worlds might take the form of addressing and even summoning unspecified ones in a desired future. For where the dialectic of general versus particular typically played out as a spatial matter of scale or exemplarity, *Cruising Utopia* projected that dialectic onto the axis of time. It made specificity a function of pastness; it made generality a function of oncomingness, of "the illumination of a horizon of existence." Insofar as the present was the aperture through which utopias past and future touched, then, it was also the point of contact between past particulars and future generalities. From the crossroads of the present, the past was the general-that-was, the future the particular-to-be. Only at that crossroads could the no-longer and the not-yet, separated in time and ontology, be co-present through their negation.

Muñoz understood the present as the "straight time" from which it was necessary to recall and to imagine queer utopias. But while the present was straight in *Cruising Utopia*, it was never simple, never unitary. It was, after all, the only temporality that could harbor the utopian touch of past and future, of particular and general. It was also the host temporality of the ghostly, if we followed Muñoz to Derrida in reading as "hauntological" what beset any ontology based on the opposition of presence and absence.[40] The utopian and the hauntological, both of them modes in which the present bore traces of the past or the future, met powerfully in Muñoz's chapter, "Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories," which quoted a 1964 dialogue between Bloch and Theodor Adorno. Remembering that Bloch had earlier quoted Baruch Spinoza's dictum, "The true is the sign of itself and the false," Adorno—ever the negative dialectician—had responded by inverting Spinoza's line to read, "The false is the sign of itself and the correct" (37). As Adorno glossed the inversion,

> That means that the true thing determines itself via the false thing, or via that which makes itself falsely known. And insofar as we are not allowed to cast the picture of utopia, insofar as we do [not] know what the correct thing will be, we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is. (37–38)[41]

The uncast picture of utopia, Adorno went on to say, "is actually the only form in which utopia is given to us at all" (39). We didn't know what utopia was, as we beheld our actual world in the present, but we knew it was not *this*. What's more, we possessed that negative knowledge of utopia, that positive knowledge of its absence, now and only now. However much we deplored its falseness, the present was the only time that could host the negation of its own adequacy through utopian longing.

In readings of John Giorno's writings and Tony Just's artwork as traces of past and future-conditional queer utopias, Muñoz would go on to decline Adorno's interdiction against casting the picture of utopia. But what detained me was less the chapter's departure from Adorno than what I came to think of as its hauntological method, its rapid rotations through Frankfurt School utopian thought, deconstructive ontology, the archive of public sex in the years before the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and subsequent aesthetic responses to the pandemic. Those oscillations allowed Adorno, Bloch, Derrida, Giorno, Just, and others to walk through the walls of their discrete historical moments and cultural sites and be half-collocated in the space of Muñoz's discourse, neither fully absent nor fully present to one another. "[T]he manner in which ghosts exist inside and out and traverse categorical distinctions," Muñoz wrote, "seems especially useful for a queer criticism that attempts to understand communal mourning, group psychologies, and the need for a politics that 'carries' our dead with us into battles for the present and future" (46). One way he had of waging this battle was to stage flickering colloquies between non-contemporaries, both living and dead, in his writing. What's more, the aesthetic present, put to pronounced and often intimate use by Muñoz, was the tense in which these figures were met as untimely contemporaries: "In this story Giorno fucks and sucks a young man who is later revealed to be Keith Haring" (36); "Bloch turns to Adorno . . . Adorno follows up . . ." (37); "Derrida is discussing . . ."; "Just's work represents the idealism of utopia while also representing the importance of effectivity and actuality" (43). Given the pains *Cruising Utopia* had taken to activate and complicate the present—as at once straight and haunted with queer possibility, compulsory and utopia-positive, simple and fissured with

the futurate—it was difficult not to see criticism's hallmark procedural tense as entailed in that complex activation. The literary present was not always already queer. But in Muñoz's work the particular ghost-light of queer utopia had backlit the literary present, outlining its non-self-correspondence and its political affordances with a special clarity. In doing so, *Cruising Utopia* had also intimated that the literary present's bent for untimely address might be a way out of the very temporal stranglehold the same tense could embody and enforce. At the same time, it had left me wondering whether by these lights any uses of the literary present were not decoded as a kind of future—wondering, that is, to what extent one participated in a utopian temporal mechanics whenever one wrote of a textual artifact to readers in the future and said, "Let's / try to understand."

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Preparing this talk acquainted me with the crazy temporal flexibility of the present tense in general—with the fact that, as the authors of the *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* put it, the present tense could be "used without any specific reference to present time, or to any time at all, but simply because the conditions of the preterite do not obtain."[42] Small wonder that a tense untethered to a time, defined largely through its negative relationship to another tense, could accommodate, in its literary-critical uses alone, such a scattered array of relationships to history and chronology, the spectral and the marmoreal, the static and the ecstatic. Yet out of that array, two discrete mental pictures of the literary present had condensed. One was the featureless bright room, dust-free and climate-controlled, where the literary artifact dwelled in the timeless present of interpretation. The other was a rippling plural interface, a zone where temporalities mixed like fresh and salt waters, from moment to moment differing even from itself. Two portraits: the library, the estuary. The first presupposed the adequacy of the present as the eternal time and tense of reading, asking those who met there to divest themselves of their contingency and historicity. The second presupposed the inadequacy of the present, taking that inadequacy as a warrant for admitting other times and tenses even if in ghostly or negated form. Each held its terror and its appeal. Confronting the first, the historicist in me shuddered to think that at the center of our practice as literary scholars was a beautiful, forceful, unhistoricized grammatical default whose main upshot was the effacement of historical distance. Yet how often I had stolen away

from the cliff edge of present time into that featureless bright room, hoping to encounter in the writing of other critics what Miller called the "due drama" of reading—the sense, as he put it, that "something is happening now, here, as this prose passes before my eyes. Thinking is thickened, its pacing palpable: the experience of reading matters."[43] Faced with the second, I thrilled at how a critic such as Muñoz could bend the tides of the literary present so as to cross possibility with loss, immediacy with durativity. What more could one want from the scene of reading than to find it surging with unmet demands from the past—and with traces of possible futures that were more equitable, more habitable, more free? But I sometimes shrank, too, from the use of a literary procedural tense to flood with the turbulence of other times a present that could feel turbulent enough on its own.

These two, contradictory portraits seemed to demand either reconciliation or adjudication. Yet it was in their tense co-presence that one could most clearly hear the question being put to our practice, a question that returned me to my abandoned theme of critical futurities. Before starting to ruminate on the literary present, I had been used to thinking about critical futurity as lodged primarily in two places: those where we studied others' discourses about the future; and the moments in our own discourse where we predicted or called for a different way of doing what we do. But my subsequent reading had taught me to regard the literary present as a primary, maybe *the* primary, address to futurity in our work. For attached to just about every present-tense synopsis, characterization, or interpretation of a literary text, it seemed, was an implied petition or prayer that said: let there emerge a readerly community for which this reading is not only true but generative of further discourse, further community. Let this literary present be the time in which the critic, the reading, and the reader-to-come can be as if contemporaries. Let the dead too be our interlocutors. Joined by their bid to convene an untimely gathering around the text, the two models in question saw the colloquy and the reasons for assembling it in ways that were profoundly divergent. One pictured the scene of reading as a present refuge from history and catastrophe, the other as a refusal of the present demanded by history and catastrophe. Their mutual rebuke renewed, even crucially constituted, the question that anchored our most heated methodological debates: how should the study of literature project social relations across time? Two pictures, each saying of the other and possibly of itself: whatever the answer is, we know it is not *this*. And nearby, a third, utopian picture—impossible to cast but belonging, in its impossibility, uniquely to the present—of

a criticism for which refuge and refusal could be functions of one another. The library, the estuary: how was one to cross them without passing the limits of even figurative intelligibility? The currents would mix in the shape of a room; the room would be full of the sea.

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With that, I broke off my encounter with the literary present, having summed up without resolution some of the many ways in which the tense cut. My sense of impasse led me to an extreme and possibly foolhardy decision when I began to write the present talk. If our discipline was characterized by a largely unexamined addiction to the timeless literary present, I wondered, what good would it do to take a critical look at that addiction while still completely in its thrall? So I embargoed the use, in my own discourse, of the present tense—not just the literary or the timeless present, but all indicative present tenses across the board—letting them stay only in quotations from works by others. Otherwise, I said to myself in a mantra given to me by Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "No presents."[44] Trained first to embrace and later to enforce the timeless present modeled by Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," I would this time follow the example of Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" in refusing it. Quitting the present tense cold turkey would, I feared, trigger all sorts of withdrawal symptoms. It would leave me relying too much on anecdote, or at least on a memoirish first-person preterite. It would contort my staging and analysis of evidence. It would bar me from using present-tense signposting moves such as "I argue," "I show," and "I suggest" to reassure listeners that they were traveling diachronically through a discourse-world that was in fact synchronically complete and coherent, what Erving Goffman called "the unkinetic world that lecturing is supposed to sustain."[45] Renouncing the present would vitiate the energetics and authority of my writing by denying me access to the gnomic present and its aura of General Truth. My paragraphs would end not in decisive maxims but in conditionals and rhetorical questions; rather than slam shut, they would sigh to a close.

But I hoped my experiment might also, by making a clearing in the space of tense, coax new practices into view. It might, for instance, help us develop new errands for the remaining verb tenses, especially the passed-over preterite, which we tended to reserve for the more inert contextualizing passages in our scholarship. It might license a weaker, more situated interpretive practice by highlighting particular reading trails—including the haphazard, serendipitous, and obsessive

ones that so many of us routinely pursued—over the gnomic axiom or the requisite 30,000-foot reconnaissance of the so-called field. I didn't know what else it might encourage or reveal. (One thing it did reveal to me with stunning clarity was this: that writing without using the present tense, and especially the literary present, felt far more out-of-discipline than writing about economics, law, or military history and theory ever had. Present-tense mechanics, I found, were indispensable to my sense of disciplinary habitus, yet featured nowhere in our disciplinary self-understanding.) I guessed that subtracting the literary present from a talk while thematizing it might do nothing more, in the end, than sharpen our desire—my desire—to rush back into its arms. But that was okay. Having chosen it again, we might at least write and speak in the literary present more sparingly, dodging in and out of it, much as oral raconteurs ducked in and out of the historical present, to convey emphasis or immediacy—or a longing for transtemporal community—through that movement. We might use the literary present more deliberately, with a keener sense of its strangeness, its import, its political baggage and potential, its intimate ties to both utopia and cultural capital. It was hard not to wonder about two things, though: how our practice might be transfigured if we were to unearth the history of our discipline's most characteristic tense and openly avow our use of it; and what it would mean to drop, once and for all, the pretense that we all lived in the same literary present.

That was, anyway, some of my thinking when I set out to write the talk I shared with you today.

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NOTES

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[1] See Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)," trans. Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *diacritics* 14.2 (1984): 20–31; *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996); and *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005).

[2] See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985); and David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004).

[3] For key articulations of these two approaches see, respectively, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004); and José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2009), hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. Muñoz's book will feature prominently in the second half of this essay. For an important collection of queer theoretical essays on time, see the Queer Temporalities special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2–3 (2007), ed. Elizabeth Freeman.

[4] See my *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 23–33.

[5] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), 23.

[6] P. Brooks, 8.

[7] Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Allerleirauh," in *The Harvard Classics, Vol. 17: Folklore and Fable*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), 162.

[8] See Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012); and Eric Hayot, *The Elements of Academic Style* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2014).

[9] Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd, *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction* (New York: Random House, 2013), 124.

[10] Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 129.

[11] Huddleston and Pullum, 129–30.

[12] Huddleston and Pullum, 129.

[13] Henry Sweet, *A New English Grammar: Logical and Historical* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 216.

[14] Deirdre N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 11.

[15] McCloskey, 12.

[16] See Philip Hensher, "The Booker judges should take a stand against the modish present tense," *The Telegraph* (9 September 2010), http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7991553/Opinion-Philip-Hensher.html; and Philip Pullman, "Philip Pullman calls time on the present tense," *The Guardian* (17 September 2010), https://www.theguardian.com/global/2010/sep/18/philip-pullman-author-present-tense.

[17] See Ben Yagoda, "Ben Yagoda Gets Sick of the Historical Present," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (23 April 2013), http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2013/04/23/ben-yagoda-gets-sick-of-the-historical-present/; and John Humphrys, "John Humphrys throws down gauntlet to Melvyn Bragg over use of present tense," *The Guardian* (27 July 2014), https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jul/27/john-humphrys-melvyn-bragg-historic-present.

[18] David Shariatmadari, "John Humphrys is wrong—the historic present tense keeps the past alive," *The Guardian* (28 July 2014), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/28/historic-present-tense-past-john-humphrys.

[19] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (San Diego: Harvest, 1947), 214.

[20] John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *John Keats: Selected Poems*, ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin, 2007), 192.

[21] Keats, 192.

[22] Wallace Stevens, *Selected Poems*, ed. John N. Serio (New York: Knopf, 2011), 49.

[23] This worksheet, widely available online, was either in the textbook itself or in an accompanying workbook. Marked "Collection 16: Make It New!", it instructed students

to alter the verb tenses of various sentences by and about Stevens, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and other U.S. modernist writers for consistency's sake and to deploy the literary present.

[24] Peter Erickson, *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991), 73; quoted in Phyllis Rackin, "Misogyny is Everywhere," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dympna Callaghan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 45.

[25] Rackin, 45.

[26] Rackin, 45–46.

[27] Rackin, 46.

[28] V21 Collective, "Manifesto of the V21 Collective: Ten Theses," *V21: victorian studies for the 21st century*, http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/.

[29] V21 Collective.

[30] Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics," trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique* 11 (1977): 22.

[31] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), 21.

[32] Bloch, 22.

[33] P. Brooks, 22. Käte Hamburger made a claim similar to Jean Pouillon's and Claude Bremond's: "[W]ith . . . fictional narration which with full stringency identifies this as fictional . . . *the preterite loses its grammatical function of designating what is past*" (*The Logic of Literature*, trans. Marilynn J. Rose [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973], 66, original emphasis).

[34] P. Brooks, 23.

[35] James Schuyler, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993), 186–87.

[36] C. L. R. James, *The Future in the Present: Selected Writings* (Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1977). Muñoz's third chapter, "The Future Is in the Present: Sexual Avant-Gardes and the Performance of Utopia," referred in its title and elsewhere to the title of James's book (49).

[37] William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Poems*, in *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. Nowell C. Smith (London: Henry Frowde, 1905), 163.

[38] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defense of Poetry," in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy (London: Penguin, 2016), 654.

[39] Andrew H. Miller considered a number of these devices in "Implicative Criticism, or The Display of Thinking," *New Literary History* 44.3 (2013): 345–60. I came to Miller's article late in my thinking but found it both resonant and generative.

[40] Muñoz, 42, quoting Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 51.

[41] The "not" in brackets was in the original dialogue but dropped out in Muñoz's quotation of it; see Bloch, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 12.

[42] Huddleston and Pullum, 129.

[43] Miller, 347.

[44] Kyla Wazana Tompkins, personal communication.

[45] Erving Goffman, "The Lecture," in *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 164.