

# Prospects for the Present

Jeffrey Insko\*

*Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century.*  
Lloyd Pratt. U of Pennsylvania P, 2010.

*Cruel Optimism.*  
Lauren Berlant. Duke UP, 2011.

*Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century American Literature.*  
Peter Coviello. NYU P, 2013.

More than a decade into the twenty-first century, the temporal turn in American studies—which finds scholars across period specialties and critical perspectives exploring various social, historical, corporeal, mechanical, and phenomenological “time binds,” to borrow a phrase from Elizabeth Freeman’s indispensable contribution—is by now flourishing in such fertile soil that it has developed a number of distinct, if intertwined, branches: queer studies, body/affect, print and material culture, aesthetics, transnationalism. Indeed, this turn has produced some of the most compelling Americanist scholarship of the twenty-first century, much of it emanating from queer studies.<sup>1</sup> The works reviewed here indicate the emergence of yet another offshoot. Each of these works addresses the formations, reformations, and promises of the present, the *now* and the *not yet*—not just in the simple or superficial sense of the moment in history we currently inhabit, but the ideation and theorizing of the present and its relations to what did not, has not, might not, or has yet to come to be. By beginning to take *now* seriously, these scholars herald a long overdue arrival of the present as a locus of theoretical inquiry and critical practice. Yet they also remain respectful of and attuned to history and historicity, which is one reason for examining this strain in three otherwise distinct works: together, they point beyond historicist paradigms that many Americanists find severely limited in helping to contend with the rich literary-cultural past and our precarious present.<sup>2</sup>

Two related historicist assumptions have foreclosed the present as an object of interest in its own right. First is historicism’s un-reflexive understanding of a temporal chronology allowing for both periodization and contextualization. The second assumption follows from the first: once one walls off the *then* of texts’ production from the *now* of their study, maintaining the distance between them becomes a methodological injunction. Indeed, it seems axiomatic

\*Jeffrey Insko is an associate professor of English at Oakland University. He is currently completing a manuscript titled *The Ever-Present Now: Romantic Presentism and Antebellum American Literature*.

that present-mindedness is a- or unhistorical. Yet such a rigid distinction is all but impossible to maintain in practice, which is why charges of creeping presentism have long perturbed literary historicism. As Valerie Rohy puts it, historicism “interpellates everyone as a guilty subject of temporal self-governance and measures all against a standard none can meet” (129). One might describe the presentism of historicism as a tacit, even supercilious, present-knowingness in relation to the past. What Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call “symptomatic reading” (21) is predicated on this kind of knowingness: viewing (past) texts from a safe historical distance, the “self-satisfied” (703) present-critic, to borrow Jennifer Fleissner’s term, understands them better than their contemporaneous readers and producers ever could themselves.

Seeking alternatives to historicist methods, some recent critics have begun to develop presentist reading practices that revel in the play of anachronism, trace historical “feedback loops” (Dimock 898), cultivate a self-consciously “critical” (Barrish 19) or “perverse” (Halberstam 41) or “rigorous” (Dawes 360) presentism.<sup>3</sup> Such practices coincide and sometimes overlap with the temporal turn insofar as they take seriously various nonlinear, nonsequential temporalities. Unlike the new temporal studies, however, these approaches do not set out to frustrate normative assumptions about time, history, and the relations between the past and the present; they simply find responsible, cautious, productive tactics to transgress those norms.

In what follows, I situate three recent books at the intersection between these two veins of twenty-first-century scholarship—the temporal turn and the development of deliberately antihistoricist reading practices—the junction where a critical practice recognizing an overdetermined separation between *then* and *now* meets a body of scholarship demonstrating how nonlinear temporalities are the stuff of which both ordinary experience and history are made. Despite vast differences in subject and method—a study of literary genre in the antebellum US, a study of sexuality in nineteenth-century American literature, and a study of affective responses to the failed promises of the late twentieth century—these works share an avoidance of conventional historicizing and prefer reading practices that realign the ordinary relations between the past and the present. For Pratt and Coviello, this means relinquishing the view, reinforced by chronology, that any given present is the inevitable result of past forces tending inevitably toward some discernible future. For Berlant, whose eclectic archive is not historical, but contemporary, and who is skeptical about dreams of better days to come, it means a resistance to narratives of emergence (the past as explanation) in favor of rigorously attending to ordinary activity in the living present. At the same time, these works scarcely agree about what the present is or what it can do

*Despite vast differences in subject and method . . . these works share an avoidance of conventional historicizing and prefer reading practices that realign the ordinary relations between the past and the present.*

for us. These differences disclose the stubborn entrenchment of historicist procedures and assumptions and some of the difficulties involved in extricating ourselves from them.

The conventional view of the present understands it to be punctual and empty, identical to the present that comes before and the one that follows it successively. In this conception of time as homogeneous and empty, to recall Walter Benjamin, one present moment follows another with metronomic regularity and precise uniformity. Nineteenth-century departures from this standard view of time mark the starting point of Pratt's *Archives of American Time* (2010). Pratt notes that the familiar narrative of US nationhood hinges, in part, upon the temporal unification brought into being by print, mechanical timekeeping, railroad schedules, political elections, time-discipline, and other cultural and technological forces seeking to impose a uniform standard of time over an increasingly vast populace spread out over a large space. Pratt is interested in what might be described as the inverse of this familiar process. Rather than emphasizing a push toward continuity and cohesion across the American literary tradition, Pratt emphasizes the discontinuity and disruption at the center of the period when, as the old story goes, an American literary tradition, and a coherent national and racial identity, began to coalesce. "By focusing on the often ignored disaggregating potential of the period's literature and its peculiar account of time," Pratt challenges this consolidation thesis of nineteenth-century American literature (2–3). Although literature certainly played a role in the historical process of temporal homogenization, Pratt shows how nineteenth-century US literature also "deepens the period's temporal repertoire" and "superadds to the temporal landscape it inhabits" (5). For Pratt, much of this literature's "disaggregating force" is to be found in literary form: "combin[ing] the temporalities of everyday life with the untimely chronotypes that its conventions of genre demanded. . . . This literature pluralized time. It did not purify it" (5).

*Archives of American Time* examines this pluralization of temporalities in a series of chapters each of which contributes to the study of a distinct literary genre: the historical romance, Southwestern humor, and African-American life writing. Pratt's careful readings unfold the "archive of temporalities drawn from other moments than [their] own" that these texts inscribe and proffer their readers (15). Pratt sees the failure to achieve that which has ordinarily been attributed to them as marking these genres: historical romance fails to provide access to a shared past; Southwestern humor, to displace the local with the national; African-American life writing, to consolidate racial identity or coherent subjectivity. Reading the American historical romance against the grain, for instance, Pratt demonstrates that however much it may have contributed to "the emergence of a

national time called progress" (64), the genre was also forced to reckon with the period's other, competing temporalities. Then, scrupulously examining Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827), and Joseph C. Hart's *Miriam Coffin* (1835), he teases out how the eruption of premodern temporalities, especially the "persistence of the past in the present" (109), disturbs those texts narratives of linear progress and encourages forms of affiliation that cut across those favored by the centripetal forces of nationalism.

Thus, far from being uniform and empty, the present moment that the historical romance conjures for its readers is multivalent and conflicted, "allow[ing] its readers to imagine and inhabit impossible relationships that cross naturalized chronological boundaries separating past, present, and future" (70). A more crowded present that cannot be reduced to a point along a chronological sequence similarly characterizes Pratt's investigations of literary regionalism and African-American life writing, two more genres disarticulating national and racial consolidation. In his treatment of Southwestern humor, Pratt moves beyond linear-historical accounts of literary regionalism, in which time's translocal standardization gradually supersedes a local time linked to specific places and their diurnal rhythms. Regionalism thus appears as either nostalgic longing or resistance. By contrast, Pratt shows how Southwestern humor indexes multiple local temporalities. As in his reading of the American historical romance, localism amounts to much more than a "prehistory of the present—a present whose own character is obscured in the process of comparing the local to the national." Rather, "we encounter a radically different past absent the telos of the present, and the present itself looks different unburdened of the responsibility to figure the past as its prehistory" (152). Similarly, in the African-American life narrative, Pratt finds a multiplicity of conflicting temporalities preventing both black and white racial identities to coalesce. The former, of course, is the more surprising claim: Pratt argues against claims that African-American life narrative as a genre helped to forge black solidarity. The genre instead "engenders an African American reading subject who is never securely raced—never quite complete" (158–59). In place of a coherent (and singular) sense of racial community founded on a "simultaneity of experience" (185), the African-American life narrative depicts African-American experience as a conflict of times, "in which the past and present were both the same and different" (185).

Pratt's depiction of the present as fulsome and conflicted suggests how fully *Archives of American Time* "depart[s] from some of the historicist protocols that currently dominate American literary study" (23). Consider Pratt's point that the past neither determines

nor leads inevitably to any particular present, an idea bespeaking the thwarted desire of those writers and critics who have sought to “populate the horizon with Americans” (2). *Archives of American Time* portrays such efforts as inevitably doomed to failure. The book’s operative vocabulary—“forbids,” “inhibited,” “foreclosed,” “impossible,” “disaggregating potential”—emphasizes what this literature did not achieve rather than what it did. Those failures, however, are necessary to open up spaces of possibility for both the present critical and cultural moment as well as the present in general. By depicting the nineteenth-century US present as a site of clashing temporal modalities, a network of possible trajectories, Pratt reveals a “reading subject faced with a relationship to the future in which that future is a disconcertingly undefined vector made so by virtue of the fact that any given present *is felt* to incline toward several different futures (and pasts) at once” (7; emphasis mine). Eschewing a version of history where social identity serves as a “structuring entelechy,” Pratt aims to “reanimate our own present tense” as a “site of possibility” resistant to past claims on it or any other present as its “direct lineal descendant” (7).

Striking here are Pratt’s metaphors of procreation—“populate,” “lineal descendant”—which suggest affinities between his project and Jordan Alexander Stein’s “queering” of literary history (864). In particular, both Pratt’s language and his decoupling of the present from the past as its progenitor recall work on queer temporality that challenges understandings of the movement of history tied to the “temporality of heterosexual reproduction” as well as to important ensuing debates about investments in futurity (Stein 864).<sup>4</sup> This refusal to think of the past solely as succession, of extraction or descent—that is, history as a kind of parentage—also hints at the ways that conventional historicizing tacitly relies on or explicitly promotes orders of time committed as much to heteronormative ideas of reproductive futurity as they are to historical progress. More precisely, it reveals just how difficult it is to disentangle the two.

Given Pratt’s resistance to structuring entelechies in the movement of history, however, somewhat surprising is the book’s deployment of modernity as both term and periodizing concept. Despite Pratt’s invigorating refusal to accept the present as the inevitable outcome of equally disunited former presents, the book takes modernity for granted as a historical destination: modernity, it appears, arrived and it’s where we still dwell now. One wonders how useful a term like *modernity* really is after we’ve relinquished conventional ideas about the linear, chronological, forward movement of history and the period divisions it enables. If the past persists into the present, if the past and the present are “both the same and different,” why cling to a term that designates a historical break whereby we

distinguish one period, ours, from earlier ones? Or, is it that modernity simply means *now*—one stretched even further into the past?

Such questions—about queer temporality and about splitting the past into discrete befores-and-afters—also enliven Peter Coviello's *Tomorrow's Parties* (2013), which shares a great deal in approach and aim with *Archives of American Time*. Just as Pratt's antihistoricist approach looks to "reanimate the present," Coviello's procedure is "counter-historical and . . . restorative" (11). *Archives of American Time* attends to the "untimely chronotypes" (5) of nineteenth-century literary genres to resist reading that literature as "the prehistory of the present" (68). *Tomorrow's Parties* examines writers' "untimeliness" in order to refuse reading the presexological past strictly in terms of how things turned out, as a former present the tendency of which was always leaning toward the one we now inhabit (12).

*Tomorrow's Parties* investigates "literary imaginings of sexuality" and intimate attachment from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, a period marked by the fact that the parameters and norms that would later come to define and circumscribe human sexuality had yet to be codified (4). As Coviello puts it, this moment came "before it was assumed that every person and every intimacy could be assigned a hetero- or homosexuality, but in which the first stirrings of that great taxonomical division, the initial movements of coordination and solidification, could already be felt" (4). In luminous readings of Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, Joseph Smith, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Henry James, among others, *Tomorrow's Parties* provides a glimpse of some of the unrealized possibilities of "sex in the long, last moments before it might have known itself as 'sexuality' in its modern senses" (11).

Yet Coviello takes pains not to reproduce a simple dichotomy between modern and premodern understandings of sexuality, as if such differences are even meaningful. Like Pratt, Coviello distinguishes his own approach from conventional "prevailing historicist models" by "leaning against, and perhaps thickening" them (12). Here, Coviello avoids the "presumption" that "as worldly post-Victorians, we see more clearly, can describe more acutely, and simply *know* so much more" than the authors we study (13). These presumptions lead critics to view the past as either "anticipatory" or "agnostic." The agnostic approach emphasizes the "intractable illegibility of the past," the past as radically other (13). The anticipatory views the past primarily in terms of "what would eventually come to be" (14). Coviello disavows the agnostic because it might well "miss the degree to which the emergence of modern sexuality was a movement, a slowly unfolding *process*, rather than an event" (14).

Nor does he describe this movement as unidirectional or inevitable. Thus, Coviello departs also from the anticipatory approach that sees nineteenth-century sexuality “as laying the groundwork for . . . a language of sexuality and affiliation” still to come, as if to “presume . . . that all roads lead to Rome” (15). To use Pratt’s term, the anticipatory approach risks treating modern sexual taxonomies as a kind of “structuring entelechy.”

This resistance to treating the past as preparing for the present is coiled in Coviello’s fondness for the term “beguiling” (2, 5, 43, 118, 158), which functions as both a presiding spirit of and a methodology in *Tomorrow’s Parties*. Often enchanted with the authors and texts he reads, Coviello contends that the historicist’s procedure of “discursive contextualization” inadequately reveals the contours of sexual imaginings never quite coming into full historical being (17). Instead, “to trace, in as much detail as we can, the outlines of any number of broken-off, uncreated futures” (20) requires a mode of apprehension best achieved through “close textual reading” (18), through sensitive attention to “the specific atmospheres of a given work’s language, which come clearest in long exposure” (19). This approach aptly describes *Archives of American Time* as well; both books proceed by way of careful, sustained literary analysis—close reading—of particularly literary texts.

In *Tomorrow’s Parties*, such detailed explications include readings of Whitman’s *Memoranda During the War* (1875–1876), Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance* (1852). The book is divided into three parts, each of which is devoted to some nonmodern, “extravagant” vision of sexual possibility that has since faded from view. Venturing carefully into what Dana Luciano incisively calls “chronobiopolitics”—the arrangement of life in terms of sexual reproduction—the book’s first part explores the “Lost Futures” that Thoreau and Whitman once descried (*Arranging Grief* 9). Coviello reveals Whitman’s investments in futurity, a problematic gesture from the perspective of queer studies insofar as such an investment might seem to capitulate to heteronormative time. Yet, he also describes Whitman not as a writer interested in (using Pratt’s language) populating the horizon with his own progeny in any conventionally procreative sense, but in imagining “the prospect of a mode of generation that is sexual though not quite normatively hetero-, nor for that matter normatively reproductive” (60). Similarly, Coviello locates in Thoreau’s writings a yearning after a future of sexual possibility that would never be realized. In his journals, especially in the chapter on “Sounds” in *Walden* (1854), Thoreau expresses a desire to unmoor sex from bodily possession, viewing it as something other than “a set of practices, an aspect of identity, or a property of the self” (43).

The book orients its other writers in relation to various conceptions of, possibilities for, and apprehensions about futurity. In a fascinating reading of Joseph Smith, for instance, Coviello cautiously considers Smith's embrace of polygamy as a "possibly capacious" counter-imagining of a "social and sexual imaginary. . . that would not come to be" (126). By contrast, monogamous marriage for Frederick Douglass signaled the entrance into intimacies and affiliations both sexual and contractual unavailable to him in slavery. Less hopefully, Coviello reads *The Blithedale Romance* as a novel "about homophobia" insofar as it registers a certain anxiety about the emergence—the "first premonitory impressions" (148)—of fully recognized same-sex desires and exchanges. Similarly, though less anxiously, is James's *The Bostonians* invested in "rhetorics of 'the emergent'" (171).

But how are all of these futures—imagined, felt, dimly glimpsed, feared, but never fully manifest—related to the present? Typically, these authors' yearnings toward or concerns for futures beyond their reach respond to an unsettled, elliptical present. Coviello describes these gropings toward the future as responses to what lies "beyond the horizon of present-tense articulability" (39), to what is only "marginally legible" in the present" (65), to "vaporous present-tense existence" (99), or to what is "inaccessible in the present tense" (105). This evanescent present differs from the abundant one that Pratt's proof texts make accessible. Yet Coviello's uncertain present also functions, as Pratt's does, as the site of possibilities. Emergence, change, surprise, anticipation, expectancy—these things are functions of, are experienced in, the present. Relations between past and present are "unstable and incomplete, fissured by points of connection and continuity" (203), so that the past is not "locked in a kind of intractable illegibility to present-tense apprehension" (203).

A great deal turns on his phrase "present-tense apprehension," which nicely captures the dangers and the promises of any nonhistorical, present-oriented inquiry into the past inasmuch as "apprehension" suggests seizure or taking possession, not just understanding or knowledge. In another sense, apprehension means anticipation of an unknown future. To try to know the past but to risk abusing it, and to do so with the hope (even the dread) of what might come of that understanding: such an effort strikes me as a fair representation of the course that Coviello navigates. Locating his own project at the point where a desire to bring past and present together in some new configuration meets nonnormative modes of temporality, Coviello aspires to cut a path between the understanding of the past's alterity as "radical othering"—sometimes posited by historicism—and the "cultivated anachronism" (204) of those who hope to undermine

historicism's assumptions and authority (204). To describe a different sort of relation of the past to the present, Coviello reaches for terms signifying in an affective register—and here we might recall that yet another meaning of “apprehension” involves feeling and sensibility—such as “touch” (203), “rubbing” (14), and “friction” (204).

For all of their searching attempts to work outside of historicist protocols and procedures, neither Coviello nor Pratt wholly embraces the present as an explicit, sustained object of interest. They untether it from linear chronology and its determination by the past and of the future. They give a helpful nudge to the study of the literary past in the direction of the present, but they hesitate, a function both of lingering wariness toward traditional notions of presentism and anachronism as well as a sense of the present as too “vaporous” for sustained attention. They certainly don't adopt the enthusiastic stance toward the present, for instance, of Carolyn Dinshaw in *How Soon Is Now?* (2012), her rich study of “Rip Van Winkle”-like medieval “aynchrony” tales. A kind of medievalist cousin to the works reviewed here, Dinshaw's book is worth mentioning for its bold and generative attempt “to claim the possibility of a fuller, denser, more crowded *now* that all sorts of theorists tell us is extant but that often eludes our temporal grasp” (4). Dinshaw shares with Pratt a hope that attending to richer, more varied temporal experiences in the present—whether derived from literature or from everyday living—can reinvigorate the historical now we currently inhabit, can “rouse us to look for other ways of world making, for other ways of knowing, doing, being” (170).

While they don't quite commit to the present as completely as Dinshaw, there's nevertheless a great deal in Pratt and Coviello likewise suggesting that a new engagement with *now*—especially its attendant talk of renovation and reanimation and new forms of world-making—is either born of or leads to a certain degree of optimism. If so, then Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* is here to crash tomorrow's parties. After all, in the face of “the retraction of the social democratic promise of the post-Second World War period” and “the state's withdrawal from the uneven expansion of economic opportunity, social norms, and legal rights” (3) what could possibly warrant such optimism? What cause is there for hope, given the “fraying” of “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” (3)? What room for aspiration following “decades of class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness that have increased progressively since the Reagan era” (11), the slow, inescapable deterioration of the promise of “the good life” (11)? Isn't there something perverse, even *cruel* about maintaining that optimism given

these world-historical conditions? And why is it that people persist in their optimism (especially when it's cruel) in the first place?

These tough questions lead Berlant to posit that a relation of cruel optimism obtains when “something you desire is actually an impediment to your flourishing” (1). The object of that desire could involve romantic love, economic gain, the belief in meritocratic rewards, or even political change. It's not simply that the realization of these desires is impossible; it's that “the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). By looking carefully at an eclectic set of texts—European and American poetry, film, television, and fiction since the 1990s—and social conditions involving, for instance, labor, citizenship, class, and health (obesity, in particular), *Cruel Optimism* traces the ways that subjects cope with the disintegration of these fantasies of the good life. This dense, challenging, and often abstract study is in many ways very different in tone and sensibility from Pratt and Coviello—and not just in its skepticism about optimism and hope. Berlant still practices the kind of symptomatic reading that Marxist and psychoanalytic theory helped to make possible. Her diagnoses of both the “precarious present” at the turn of the millennium and the structuring of good-life fantasies are predicated on a kind of *seeing through* related to what I've been describing as historicist knowingness (191). That is, it's not altogether clear just *who*, other than the critic, determines when a desire impedes your flourishing.

What aligns *Cruel Optimism* with these other three works, and the central element I would most like to address, is Berlant's sustained interest in the present as a site of both lived (historical) experience and theoretical possibility. Berlant elucidates the present by getting inside the kind of premonitory experience that Coviello describes, the feltness of historical becoming: “The present,” she explains, “is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else” (4). As an affect, rather than an object, the present is also “under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters (when did the ‘present’ begin?) are also always there for debate” (4). Because the present is a process of unfolding, genres—a term she uses to denote all sorts of ways of organizing experiences—help people manage that unfolding. According to Berlant, the traditional genres having served this role are no longer up to the task.

*Cruel Optimism's* chapters therefore track the “dramas of adjustment” of people moving through the prolonged present during the course of their ordinary lives (59). In the second chapter, for example, two texts about AIDS, Gregg Bordowitz's film *Habit* and

Susan Sontag's story "The Way We Live Now," illustrate "the ongoingness of adjudication, adaptation, and improvisation" that typifies living in a time of "crisis-ordinariness,"—crisis seen as a lingering feature of everyday life (54). In the film and the story, ritual and conversation take the place of action and plot as individuals work toward "figuring out the terms and genres for valuing living" (59). While none "imagine . . . having expertise enough to have mastered the situation," they all remain committed to "cultivating better intuitive skills for moving around this extended, extensive time and space where the crisis of the present meets multiple crises of presence" (59). In the sixth chapter, Berlant examines people living in economic precarity through readings of two French films by Laurent Cantet, *Human Resources* and *Time Out*. Like the individuals in Bordowitz' film, members of the precariat are "catching up to what is already happening in ordinary worlds shaped in a crisis-defined and continuing now" (52). Their historical present is a "situation," "a genre of living that one knows one's in but that one has to find out about, a circumstance embedded in life but not in one's control" (195). Faced with this emerging situation, "people try to maintain themselves in it until they figure out how to adjust" (195).

This felt experience of maintaining oneself within an "ongoing present" (17), Berlant terms "animated suspension" (5, 195), which represents an alternative mode of temporality to that of crisis or the traumatic event. For instance, Berlant argues that Mary Gaitskill's novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* "produces a counter-temporality that provides not narrative continuity but something more like the deep red areas on an infrared image" (137). Saturated in this way, the present as Berlant portrays it is more than a mere "rest stop between the enduring past and the momentous future" (158). The "stretched-out present" (5) of ordinary life is instead the site where renegotiations of one's attachments get worked out. Berlant's accounts of individuals "wandering" (257), "watching something unfold" (6), or "lean[ing] numbly or wonderingly toward the next potentiality" (63) represent a far more banal, even hopeless present that seems a far cry from the rich, crowded life of teeming possibilities such as Pratt locates in literary texts. While Berlant's sense of individuals muddling through everyday life might not be optimism, it may not be despair either, but the place where her own kind of knowingness dissolves. She parts ways with those Marxian theorists, not to mention historicist Americanists (67), who view the present skeptically, as ahistorical, because its contours and historical effects cannot be known by those living in it (67). Instead, *Cruel Optimism* (albeit mainly implicitly) restores respect for "what's apprehensible in the ordinary" (68) of the present moment, for the extended now as "a relay through which the historical can be sensed before it is redacted"

or congeals into a knowable event (66). So while we may not be able to rid ourselves of our attachments, we might well feel their attrition and therefore seek and try out newer, more productive ones. Maybe that's hope enough.

Although the portrait of the present emerging from these three excellent studies isn't entirely coherent, together they suggest ways of contending with the present free from fears of presentism or anachronism. It also appears, if these works do signal increasing interest in the *now*, much of the work that will follow is likely to take place under the auspices of affect theory, or at the very least, via renewed engagements with subjective experience in some form or another: the importance of yearning in Coviello, attachment in Berlant, and readerly experience in Pratt all indicate as much. Of course, both affect and experience have themselves typically been treated as inimical to history—though those tensions have also been productively addressed recently.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, perhaps, the works I've discussed here offer appealing new ways for Americanist literary scholars to think about their relations with the past—that giving up on historicism does not mean giving up on history.

## Notes

1. See Thomas Allen, *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007); Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (2008); Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007); Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009); Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), and Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* (2010).

2. See, for instance, the essays collected in the recent volume *The Limits of Literary Historicism*, Ed. Allen Dunn and Thomas Haddock (2012).

3. Also see the chapter titled "Historical Correctness" in Marjorie Garber, *Quotation Marks* (2003). Varieties of presentism have also been of interest to Shakespeare scholars for some time. For recent iterations, see Evelyn Gajowski, ed., *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare* (2009).

4. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) and Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*. Also of interest is Michael Snediker's *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (2008). Snediker makes a compelling case for situating queer optimism not in relation to future promises, but "firmly in the present tense" (18).

5. For an illuminating attempt to bring affect and history into relation, see Justine S. Murison, "Feeling Out of Place: Affective History, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Civil War" (2013). For a massive attempt to think of history in terms of subjective experience, see F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005).

### Works Cited

- Barrish, Phil. *White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic American Realism*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2005.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.
- Best, Stephen and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21.
- Coviello, Peter. *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. New York: NYU P, 2013.
- Dawes, James. "Abolition and Activism: The Present Uses of Literary Criticism." *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Ed. Russ Castronovo. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. "Crowdsourcing History: Ishmael Reed, Tony Kushner, and Steven Spielberg Update the Civil War." *American Literary History* 25.4 (Winter 2013): 896–914.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.
- Fleissner, Jennifer. "Historicism Blues." *American Literary History* 25.4 (Winter 2013): 699–717.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998.
- Pratt, Lloyd. *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2010.
- Rohy, Valerie. *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality*. New York: SUNY P, 2010.
- Stein, Jordan Alexander. "American Literary History and Queer Temporalities." *American Literary History* 25.4 (Winter 2013): 855–69.