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POLITICS, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

Ronjaunee Chatterjee & Amy R. Wong

In the wake of the American election, Elaine Hadley's "[Closing Remarks](#)" from v21's b2o issue—that we are writing, living, and teaching in a “critical moment, some might even say a survivalist moment” in which “the power of positive psychology does not seem adequate to the times”—appear chilling in their urgency. Hadley cautions against a pleasure and optimism largely disengaged from feminist and class critiques, as well as from what she calls “Politics with a big P.”

Hadley's remarks offer a helpful point of departure in answering the v21 collective's recent call, after November 8th, for commentary on presentist pedagogy. We believe it is important not to separate discussions about “presentism” in the classroom and “presentism” in scholarly production. In what follows, we offer some thoughts on how to bridge these “presentisms,” with our hopes that Victorian studies can become more inclusive in this era of exclusion: both of different kinds of scholar-teachers and the diverse populations of students that we all teach. We extend Hadley's important exhortation for better engagement of feminist and class critiques to point out another concerning trend, especially since Donald Trump's victory and his appointments of Stephen Bannon and Jeff Sessions to critical positions of political power: the normalization of whiteness in every facet of American life across the spectrum of political views. Humanities scholarship is more complicit with this phenomenon than we might like to admit. In the rising neo-Nazi figure, Richard Spencer (who received a BA in English at the University of Virginia, an MA in Humanities from the University of Chicago, and completed doctoral coursework on modern European intellectual history at Duke), we have an example of how academic engagement of theory at elite institutions can be complicit in this normalization of whiteness. As Katherine Franke in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* has [recently noted](#), “nuanced ideological work” can allow such whiteness to masquerade as respectable.

We are concerned that our current political situation—as evidenced by Columbia professor Mark Lilla's [recent defense](#) in *The New York Times* of liberalism's seemingly neutral premise of unity—has resolutely buried the hard work of generations of academics working on intersectional theory and politics. This development is one that we should actively resist, as scholars and as teachers of Victorian literature. In the classroom, even a cursory glance at John Stuart Mill's “On Liberty” could reveal the cracks in Lilla's foundations, the violence of his liberalism's exclusions. Pointing out these tensions to students should be primary rather than secondary, and should not be cast aside in favor of recent scholarly trends toward theory that eschews “politics with a big P,” whether surface reading or the turn to generality in formalist scholarship. Now is precisely the moment for an ethical reconsideration of what it means for the humanities to proclaim the end of “paranoid reading” or the exhaustion of particularity. While fresh theoretical engagements are welcome and necessary, we should prioritize survivalist questions. Today, who exactly has the luxury not to be paranoid, suspicious, fearful, except the privileged few? And, in the era of “fake news” and “post-truth,” can we afford *not* to teach the hermeneutics of suspicion?

How we form research communities in an increasingly imperiled intellectual culture also has a bearing on the normalization of whiteness—which inevitably extends into our classrooms. Restricting rigorous discussions of difference to conference panels on Empire, for instance, reproduces itself in classrooms where students consider these conversations closed off to more “universal” topics. Intersectionality should be the fabric of scholarly and pedagogical practice, not its adjunct.

We also feel that it is important to resist the image of a purified Victorian studies classroom, untethered, for instance, to discussions of feminist, queer, and critical race studies; or the basics of writing and composition. As women and professors of color teaching Victorian literature, our area of specialty, at the margins of our current professional positions (whether in women’s and gender studies; or as an all-purpose instructor in British literature, composition, and other areas of non-expertise), our experiences directly counter this “ideal” of a course on Victorian literature and culture. Our hunch is that *most* instances of teaching Victorian literature in our universities occur in similarly unsettling, unstable academic environments that do not allow for the traditional form of labor separation that the purified Victorian studies classroom requires. The adjunctification of higher ed mandates, after all, that many scholars teach outside their primary fields and do it well, for little compensation. Moreover, when we teach the 19th-century as women of color, we teach knowing that our very embodiments can decenter a monolithic (and often uncritically Anglophilic) idea of the “Victorian Era” that continues to have a hold on our students as well as on our institutional practices. As such, our pedagogical practices are necessarily different from those of our white colleagues; we have unique challenges and opportunities that should be differentially considered. When we take stock of the Victorian studies classroom, we must assess its future within a present that is defined by this reality: a reality of precarity and difference that is not abstract but—especially to more marginalized instructors—clearly embodied.

As with the humanities more broadly, Victorian studies seems in danger of divorcing itself from the present of students’ lives when it does not stare the increasingly elite site of its own production squarely in the face. We need to build forms of collective resistance across our teaching and our research that combat the kind of economic elitism that fed the incoming administration’s consolidation of power around white privilege and superiority. This might simply mean reminding ourselves that the latest forms of theory need not overturn “old” ones, and therefore resisting the deliberate forgetfulness or “oubli” that often structures violent consolidations of power in the name of change. We must also think laterally about how to be in solidarity with more marginalized colleagues and student activists, make conferences more inclusive through digital modes of participation, and build more interdisciplinary syllabi that speak to the unstable and shifting classrooms in which most of us teach.

Our present—though frightening for many of us—offers glimpses of possibility, too. As teachers of the humanities, we are in a position to contribute to new forms of collectivity and resistance by nurturing visionary thoughts and actions in our research practices and in our classrooms. Victorian studies can contribute to the urgent imaginative thinking required by the humanities in order to survive, but only if it models a *living politic*: empathetic to readers, students, and multiple kinds of teacher-scholars, aware of its own contradictions (what Foucault might call the paradox of subjugated knowledge), and committed to intellectual labor as a social practice involving more than simply the privileged few.