

From the Editor

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It proves oddly appropriate and even instructive that this particular issue has been a bit delayed in publication. At the “Eighteenth-Century Futures” workshop (May 2016), many of our conversations turned on whether the future was (and/or was understood to be) “open” or “closed.” In other words, was the future something both unknown and unknowable (because it had yet to happen, and experience provides us with the only evidence we have) or was it unknown yet nonetheless already largely set? Depending on context, the future might be envisioned as a political ambition or speculated on in probabilistic terms; it could be wished for or dreaded; it might be planned by men [*sic*] or promised by God. If many in the eighteenth century conceived of the future as “out of their hands” or divinely ordained (as do many today), others derived hope from the thought that the future might be theirs to make.

Publication closes one future for authors and their characters, even as it opens other possible futures to readers, reviewers, and writers of fanfiction alike. Since its founding nearly twenty years ago, the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Indiana University has built its major, annual workshop around the discussion of pre-circulated, unpublished texts—texts, we might say, with a future. Part of the pleasure of looking back at the workshop in retrospect is to see colleagues’ ideas, arguments, and analysis develop through interaction with each other (such that a text’s possible futures at the start of the workshop and those it has at the end may not always coincide). When we met in May 2016, for instance, David Alff’s *The Wreckage of Intentions: Projects in British Culture, 1660-1730* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) and Christina Lupton’s *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018) were still works in progress—the transcribed discussions published here show us these authors (and many others) still in the process of honing their arguments, crafting their prose.

The conceptual entanglements and meta-media contortions of a volume that records past conversations about the future as if they were happening in an eternal present are easily seen here: in any of the transcriptions, for instance, there comes a point at which the session chair lists the commentators and questioners who are still yet to come (most of whose eventual words then do appear several pages later). But with two years’ hindsight, it is the political thread running through these discussions that stands out most sharply. At the very beginning of the workshop, for instance, a graduate student was reminded (following Center norms) that her status allowed her to jump the queue and “trump” faculty members wanting to speak; she chuckled and replied, “I feel so powerful being trump.” In the context of late spring 2016, when Donald Trump had just, somewhat improbably (and thanks in no small part to the recent Indiana primary results), emerged as the almost certain Republican Party candidate for president, his name could still be used to ever-so-slightly-nervous comic effect. Later in the workshop, intervening to suggest that the primary purpose of counterfactual writing is to produce something “interesting,” something that results in “affects of attentiveness and excitement,” a colleague said, “You could come up with a lot of different [counterfactual] scenarios [that are] boring, and so we would not even think about them. . . . I mean Hitler has to win the damn war or

something.” The counterfactual, he proposed, “makes the past interesting again” and potentially has the same effect on the future as well. He continued, “There’s something happening that’s exciting: maybe Trump gets elected, something crazy will happen”—an astute insight into the thrill of the counterfactual and a statement met with general laughter. Nobody in the room really expected anything *that* exciting to happen.

But now “something crazy” has been happening for more than eighteen months. Long since anything to laugh about (except in the bleakest of ways), events of the past two years cast claims and conversations from the workshop in a new light. One paper, for instance, called our attention to Coleridge distinguishing the Roman Empire from Napoleon’s by means of the latter’s “rapidity... The reigns of the first three Caesars have been crowded into the three first years of the reign of Bonaparte.” Read today, those lines call to mind the many recent editorials, articles, and books in which authors assert or question the appropriateness of the 1930s as comparator for our present political moment. Hartmut Rosa’s argument—that political change once happened at a speed that corresponded to human lives but late financial capitalism has sped change up so much that politics [as we have known it for the past two centuries] is left behind—also rings more eerily true in summer 2018 than it did in May 2016. In retrospect, perhaps most eerie of all is the description by one participant of a certain strain in Marxist historiography—with its emphasis on the agency of ordinary working people and optimism about the possibility of meaningful revolution—as “an appealing counterfactual, counter-narrative” but not anything “we” might ever accept as true.

In the current moment, we take our future hopes where we can find them. I derive some small joy from the thought of readers around the world accessing these conversations and building their own futures from them. (It has been suggested that the transcripts may some day be acted out by participants’ children, friends, or colleagues.) Joy comes, too, from thinking of the Center’s past achievements and on-going work. As always, it is a pleasure to thank individuals and institutions, including: Executive Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University-Bloomington, Larry Singell; the Center’s first two Directors, Professors Dror Wahrman and Mary Favret; the Center’s Administrator and Financial Officer, Dr. Barbara Truesdell and Melinda Bristow-Meadows; and above all, our talented and dedicated transcribers, Tracey Hutchings-Goetz, H. Grace Schmitt, and Robert Wells.