

Comments from the Past and from the Future

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Good morning, and welcome to the first of the workshop's last two panels: this first is decidedly concerned with understanding the eighteenth-century's own temporalities and futures, while our final panel addresses present and future in eighteenth-century's light.

My name is Sarah Knott and I'm a historian here at Indiana University. I'm here this morning partly as an interloper from the past—that is, the past of the workshop's opening session. Usually I am able to immerse in the workshop conversations, to stay with the workshop as one long present, but not this year. So my remarks are less in the spirit of bringing forward the ongoing conversation, than a voice from two days' past, before discussions got really underway. I leave it to others to bring the conversation fully into an immersive present, to forward an ongoing discussion into an unfolding future. I am also here as a scholar of early America, a historian interested in that place many intellectuals in the late eighteenth century (if not today) deemed a place of future hopes. Think Richard Price. Or think Turgot, describing the United States as the hope of the human race, and perhaps its model.

This panel brings together two paper-givers who were surely fated to be present. Jesse Molesworth, my colleague in our English Department, is one of the Steering Committee master minds behind this year's workshop. Many of you know his first book, *Chance and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Realism, Probability, Magic*. All of you can intuit that his second book concerns the historical construction of time within eighteenth-century literature and culture, its title is projected as *Years, Days, Hours: Temporality and Form in Eighteenth-Century British Art and Fiction*. Those of us in the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies know that the enquiry takes Jesse to compelling subjects that he makes yet more interesting, including that century's British calendar reform.

Christine Zabel, currently a visiting fellow at the Center for European Studies at Harvard University, is equally fated to be present. Her first book, *Polis and Politeness: The Discourse of Ancient Athens in England and France, 1630-1760* (published in German) came out this January. That she is fated to be here is signaled perhaps, by two of her many articles and reviews. The pair of forthcoming reviews concern books by two of our three directors: one by Rebecca Spang and the other by Dror Wahrman (co-written with another former Center member, Jonathan Sheehan). Clearly Christine is already in conversation with the people of this place.

So what is happening in these papers? Each assembles an archive of eighteenth-century intellectual discussion. Each proposes a very clear account of ideational change across the eighteenth century—a before and an after of temporal notions, or perhaps a series of nested changes, or of new meanings of time and future forged and old meanings faded or forgotten.

Jesse's archive is British natural history or, more particularly, discussions about the dating and origin of the Earth. He offers a reading of prominent theorists—Halley, Burnet, Whiston, Woodward, Goldsmith's Buffon, Whitehurst—founded on one underlying contrast. On the one hand (the early hand, the inherited hand), there is cyclicity, symbolized by the spinning top. Time is a set of events that may be repeatedly set in motion. The musical model is the fugue.

On the other hand (the later hand, the becoming-hand), there is linearity, articulated as time's arrow. Time is a set of events understood consecutively and with direction. History moves forward along a line. The musical model is the symphony. Jesse's own question follows the direction of time's arrow: How, he asks, did linearity ascend? The answers reside in the twists and

turns of natural historical argument about the Earth's past as well as about its future. Will there, or will there not be a second deluge?

Christine's archive is British, Dutch and French (especially French) intellectual understandings of "speculation." She is impatient with impoverished accounts which either restrict that long eighteenth-century notion to economic vocabularies, or that deploy it lazily and ahistorically, to describe all manner of contemporary practices: speculating on the political news or on life expectancy or on grain or on the sex of an unborn child. What, she asks, is speculation's ideational history? Her answer is primarily metaphysical, or at least, initially metaphysical. In the early part of her account, including in the years of the South Sea Bubble, speculation largely meant abstract reasoning, a mode of understanding that emerged in tandem with its contrast: sensory empiricism. Speculation then was applied to practical questions about the future in 1760s France: the *Physiocrats* applied the idea of "speculation" to commerce, mindful of changing market conditions that exceeded past experience, and it appeared in discussions of life annuities in the following decades as well. And finally arrives Revolution, where buying and selling *rentes* overwhelmed speculation's previous meanings, and earlier stockjobbing disasters like the South Sea Bubble got renamed speculation. Burke complained that the Revolution made speculation as extensive as life. We arrive perhaps at the exploded usage in whose wake scholars have unwittingly followed.

So we have here, then, two subtle accounts of conceptual change, themselves firmly rooted in the regime of time's arrow. "Befores" are superceded by "afters," without any shadow of Hogarth's or Burke's declension narrative. There are plenty of wonderful analytic moments: Jesse's use of E.M. Forster on story and plot, for example, to illuminate Woodward's hatchet job on Arbuthnot's theory of fossils. Or Christine's formulation of how metaphysical speculation transformed future presents into present futures. But given this is a closing eighteenth-century session, let's go broad, wide, even "speculative." One way to do so is to ask Jesse to return to the "most importantly" of his page five, to his suggestion that what matters about the ascent of time's arrow in eighteenth-century discussions of history is the impact such ascendance may have had on a *variety* of artistic forms. "Impact" is an interesting term here—all collision and velocity in its eighteenth-century terminology, an admixture of space and time, and not much less forceful in our own usage. Jesse names musical form and he looks back to his earlier work on the novel. I want to ask about impact resistance: about forms that dulled or refused time's arrow, as well as about how to conceptualize impact between different forms and genres, or in relation to other disciplines, spheres of activity, or practices. As a historian of early America (where a credible secularization thesis has never taken root), I also want to ask about what other *longue durée* phenomenon are preconditions or accompaniments to time's arrow.

My invitation to Christine to go broad, wide, and speculative takes a more geographic turn. Set these French debates in a more Atlantic context and it's hard not to notice the importance of two other kinds of late eighteenth-century speculation. One is insurance not for life but for people as line-items: the insurance for the enslaved men and women of the transatlantic slave trade. Some 433,000 people were traded in the French slave trade of the last quarter of the eighteenth century; Nantes, Bordeaux, and Marseilles—like London or Liverpool—were centers of slave-trade insurance. The other is New World land speculation. Think of figures like Rochefoucault-Liancourt, or Talleyrand, speculating on a substantial scale for European investors in American backcountry lands. How do these histories from beyond the hexagon bear on a late eighteenth-century history of the idea of speculation in which 'Revolution' is not the only massive phenomenon?

There are, I'm sure, other speculations to be raised in, between and around these two papers. Echoes of narrative book-ends of open futures (Daniel's paper) or slowness and acceleration (Jonathan's) from the first session. The poetics and politics of time and the future, to borrow Rebecca's coinage. But first I'll give our paper-writers a chance to respond before opening the floor for discussion.