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## Critically Understanding Specific Periodizations: The Question of Nation Time

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# Critically Understanding Specific Periodizations

## *The Question of Nation Time*

JENNIFER DEVERE BRODY

*In some ways it is the historical certainty and settled nature of that term against which I am attempting to write of the western nation as an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the locality of culture. This locality is more around temporality than about historicity: a form of living that is more complex than “community”; more symbolic than “society”; more connotative than “country” . . . more mythological than ideology; less homogeneous than hegemony; less centred than the citizen; more collective than “the subject”; more psychic than civility; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications—gender, race or class—than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism.<sup>1</sup>*

In a well-known essay from his edited collection, *Nation and Narration*, the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha lauds the performative disruptions offered by “marginal” subjects of modernity. I begin by invoking Bhabha’s work because it questions how we understand the limits and possibilities of thinking about the time of the nation that the title of this new journal, “cusp” offers. How do we perceive this term? It is at once a place and a potential. The cusp portends, suspends, and suggests temporality. It is a complex word that the editors chose for its suggestive ambiguity. Bhabha too argues that ambiguity is a watchword of modernity. “In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern

society becomes the site of writing the nation.”<sup>2</sup> In re-reading Bhabha’s “disseminal” work, it made me think about the innovations of Tye-himba Jess’s recently published book of poems entitled, *Olio* (2016). Jess’s work exemplifies the creative ways that we can revise our understanding of cultures on the cusp of the turn of twentieth century. In this Pulitzer Prize-winning book, Jess perpetually plays with form as he explores key figures in (African-)American/global culture from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s. The book is a black-and-white, off-size compendium championing difference and dissonance. The text hails its readers to engage with its multivalent material in many ways. For example, it uses non-standard fonts, line drawings, musical scores, epistles, historical prose, dual timelines, and covers multiple subjects. Most pointedly, its graphic elements require readers to deconstruct the text by ripping out pages and reconstructing them, making three dimensional what have been two-dimensional (racist) stereotypes. It is full of ambiguous splittings, literal conjoined twins, psychological insights, material metaphors, and multiple modes of address. Indeed, in opening the flat renderings of actual historical figures such as the famous conjoined Mckoy twins, the savant enslaved pianist “Blind Tom,” and the neo-classical sculptor Edmonia Lewis (it was the latter that belatedly led to Jess’s performative poems), Jess’s work seems to be a manifestation of many of Bhabha’s ideas about forms of life, cohesion, and the open spaces between binaries.

To wit, the title of the collection, defined on an opening page, asserts that an olio is, “a: a miscellaneous mixture of heterogeneous elements; hodgepodge b: a miscellaneous collection (as of literary or musical selections) also: the second part of a minstrel show which featured a variety of performance acts and later evolved into vaudeville.” Page 1 introduces a “Cast of . . . owners of The Olio” and proceeds to suture scraps of scripts, different fonts, bifurcated timelines, interviews, lyrics, drawings, proclamations, photographs, epistles, sonnets, musical elements, dimensional excesses (such as the pages that exceed the literal binding of the book itself), horizontal text, numerous poetic genres, and more to create an olio worthy of the term itself.<sup>3</sup> On every level, this book challenges us to be aware of our conventions of reading and to be critical of our understanding of specific periodizations. Its penul-

timate timeline juxtaposes an ongoing enumeration of “red record” lynchings with creative accomplishments such as the operatic premiere of Sissieretta Jones and the recording of the blues. One might say that this book resurrects and records Reconstruction, the period following the Civil War in the United States (as well as its global dimensions), as part of a disparate simultaneity where the timeline, like the syncopated song, breaks to reveal jagged forms. One page of the timeline highlights the year 1901 (the year of my grandmother’s birth). The noted historical event for that year is: “105 Blacks reported lynched.” Indeed, this moment has been called the nadir of race relations in the United States and coincides with Ida B. Wells’s international crusades against lynching. On the other side of this year, we learn that international blackface performers “Bert Williams and George Walker record for Victor Records and become world’s first Black recording artists.”<sup>24</sup> As Jacqueline Goldsby among others has argued, modernity and lynching go hand-in-hand (witness the photographs of lynchings and bodies hanging from metropolitan lamp poles in the North, for example). Jess’s work joins these “innovations” and provides new ways to think critically about cultures on the cusp of change. While a full account of Jess’s truly brilliant and challenging work is well beyond the scope of this essay, I hope to highlight aspects of this text that can serve as a model for potential submissions to the new venture that is organized to elicit work oriented to a temporal axis rather than one that somehow strictly adheres to national literatures. Two insights from the text of *Olio*: it remembers that primitivism is an invention of modernity and that time can be recursive rather than purely teleological. Indeed, *Olio*’s spatial aesthetics suggest that we pay attention to how time proceeds—perhaps especially in African-American and queer sexuality studies which have troubled straightforward singularity and accumulative ideas of time through tropes such as Du Bois’s “double consciousness,” and here I am thinking of work such as Daphne Brooks’s *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1950* (2006) that connects African-American and Victorian or nineteenth-century studies transforming both in the process.

\* \* \*

Let us turn to the editors' stated parameters of *Cusp* as spelled out on the publisher's website:

*Cusp: Late 19th-/Early 20thC Cultures* is a new home for field-defining scholarship on the works, authors, artists, problems, and phenomena that defined the dynamic period from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. *Cusp* encourages interdisciplinary scholarship, including (but not limited to) work on literature, the visual arts and cinema, theatre studies, intellectual history, publishing, periodical studies, and music. All movements and genres will feature in the articles and reviews on its pages, from detective fiction to journalism, aestheticism to anarchism, realism to Vorticism. Our journal welcomes new perspectives on canonical authors, artists, and events of the period, as well as hitherto marginalized voices. We also intend to center a more global or transnational approach to the period. Contributions that explore literature and culture from across the globe, from Great Britain, Ireland and North America to Europe, the Middle East, South America, Africa, and Australasia, will be an essential element in the journal's contents.

Pointedly, the editors do not actually delineate specific dates but suggest a generalized period of time. Thus, unlike the recently discontinued journal *English Literature in Transition: 1880–1920*, the editors of *Cusp* envision a “dynamic period” that might feature “movements and genres.” As such, they appeal to modes of relationality that contravene fixity in favor of producing dynamic, changing cultures as new “constellations.” In this, they may follow work by “neo-Victorianists” who have asserted that, “We don’t have to turn away from the mainstays of Victorian literature to study empire and racialization, although it may be useful to set these works in new constellations.”<sup>5</sup>

The conceptualizations undergirded by the editors' selection of a hyphen and solidus or slash in the journal's subtitle fascinate me because I wrote a book on punctuation. The slash may be synonymous with cleavage: it cuts both ways—at once separating and suturing certain entities. The slash is an “unpronounced” (in both sense of the term) visual remark that we recognize as spatial even as it marks temporality.

Indeed, how we understand this “break” reveals much about our spatio-temporal and geopolitical thinking.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the very term *cusp* incorporates futurity: it portends. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines cusp as “a point of transition between two different states” and “a pointed end where two curves meet.” It has bodily and astrological meanings as well. It can also refer to the two ends of a crescent moon that strain to meet one another even as they enlighten the “whole” of the moon. Again, we are asked to think critically about time in such reflections.

What time is, is a question that requires us to ask “where” and “when”? These understandings of time productively derange the ways we might speak strictly in terms of dates as demarcations of and for periodization. Moreover, seeing periods and periodization in these fundamentally interrogative and relational terms, the editors of this new journal/journey encourage authors to expand the way we conceptualize the boundaries of empire—its global reach beyond the British Isles and its colonies, but also a temporal beyond—to current times, such as the recent work being done on neo-Victorianism that actively intervenes in the representational strategies of current discourse.

In a recent conference paper for the C19 Association, Janet Neary remarked that Autumn Womack’s work “insists on the aesthetics of racial data [such as Ida B. Wells’s *The Red Record*, 1895] to elaborate “black lifeworlds” and avoid “the statistical trap that equates black life with social death.”<sup>7</sup> Central to this work is an investment in the ongoing, the unfinished, and the speculative. “How [might we] visualize a story about slavery that has not yet come to an end?” asks Womack.<sup>8</sup> I take this as akin to the project of *Cusp*, which through its charge and reframing will champion work that employs an “analytic practice which focuses on the durational, the aesthetic, the material, and the speculative” thereby having, “the capacity to shift our understanding of surfaces, technologies of realism, and the commodity fetish, producing a more sophisticated understanding of black visual culture.”<sup>9</sup> Like many colleagues on the editorial collective of *Cusp*, I have been engaged in such poststructuralist, postcolonial, African Americanist and new historicist projects since I finished my dissertation in 1992.

My work that combined my interests in African American studies and Victorian studies bordered on being unintelligible in the segregated world of the US academy that thought, against a massive amount of historical and as *Cusp* shows us “temporal” evidence, that Blackness belonged within the purview of American studies and that Victorian studies, impossibly, was the province of an all-white “little England.” Fortunately, *Cusp* ushers us towards new work that takes account of the now too numerous to name postcolonial, circum-Atlantic studies, and we can speak about “new constellations” that transform our understanding of Blackness, Indigenous, and Victorian studies as conjoined, in dialogue, concurrent rather than segregated by other means.

I was keen then, as now, to unmask the white heteropatriarchal and racial capitalism that propelled that earlier narrow understanding of Victorian studies. As such, I am indebted to so many scholars of Black Britain for providing examples of how to critique such discursive formations and am thrilled that the editors here are calling for work on racial difference, globality, and technology. In *Impossible Purities* I argued that I wanted to intervene in the segregated practices of the academy that saw the “putative ‘objects and subjects’” of Victorian Studies as distinct.<sup>10</sup> I relied on my theoretical orientation as a Black feminist to deconstruct the whiteness and maleness of Victorian studies. The book explicitly named whiteness and white supremacy as part and parcel, if not in fact, products of Victorian culture. The book concluded with a reading of Bram Stoker’s novella, *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911). I wrote of that text, and racial phenomena more generally, that: “The whiteness of purified Englishness momentarily masks the putrefaction of impurity. Only from a distance, both temporal and spatial, can the sickening remnants of violent death, like the purified history of England itself, appear as a ‘shining mass of white.’”<sup>11</sup> To contrast this vision, I selected the work of the contemporary Afro-Scottish queer artist Maud Sulter (1960–2008) to grace the cover of the book. Richard Powell had introduced me to Sulter’s work when he and I were on a trip to Brazil. The self-portrait of Sulter that I selected, *Calliope* (1989), from the Zabat series, shows her posing as a muse and recreating yet another photographic image—this one of the nineteenth-century actor Sarah Bernhardt by French photographer Nadar. Looking

back on this cover, I realize that my selection of this postmodern image, like my decision to highlight *Olio*, was an expression of an already palimpsestic reimagining of a neo-Victorian past as well as a Black intervention into normative constructions thereof.

I see now that perhaps my position was oppositional to the field as such and was invested in exposing differential racial theories (including white supremacy) at work in Victorian Studies. The critics who taught me to read the ‘canon’ and cultural artifacts of Victorian Studies were black feminist scholars such as Hortense Spillers (especially in her essay, “Neither/Nor”), Val Smith, Hazel Carby, critical race legal scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia J. Williams, postcolonialist critics such as Bhabha, as well as Toni Morrison, whose book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) was enormously helpful for thinking through an unmarked “Africanist” presence not only for American but also British literature and culture.

The subject of my own most recent work is on the nineteenth-century “transatlantic commuter” (to borrow a phrase from James Baldwin), Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907), mentioned above. Born in America, this Afro-Native/Black and Ojibwe queer sculptor became an expat in Rome, the only “dark” member of the group of white female artists who decamped there in the mid-1800s. Lewis died in 1907 in London, where I first encountered her image pasted on a random page in one of the Victorian writer Charles Reade’s scrapbooks. This image—a black and white etching based on a photograph—was cut out from the *London Illustrated News* and pasted next to a drawing of one of her neoclassical sculptures. As I was researching my first book at the St. James Reading Room in the 1990s, I took a photo of the page without knowing anything about Lewis or her work. Since that time, she has been revived in numerous ways: she even received a posthumous obituary in *The New York Times*; her digital likeness (almost always sutured to her sculpture) is being recirculated online, and aspects of her life have been imagined in poems, scholarly monographs, plays, and children’s books (even a photographic series and drama by Maud Sulter that I only recently learned about). Like Tyehimba Jess, Edmonia Lewis allows us to think about the boundaries not only of blackness but also of the nation-state and even linguistic parameters in new ways. Her compli-



cated subjectivity demands it and opens the possibilities for rethinking where, how, and who resides in/beside/beyond “Victorian studies” or “Edwardian” or even “Empire” studies. She is poised to take her place and join the plethora of figures on the cusp who point the way beyond and toward another epochal shift in redrawing the boundaries—spatiotemporal, geopolitical, generic, and recursive. Let me conclude by saying that as a member of the inaugural editorial collective, on the cusp of this initiative, I am eager to review new contributions. There is still so much work to look forward to in this newly configured, global time . . . on the cusp of *Cusp*.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of The Modern” in Homi K. Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 2 Ibid., 297.
- 3 Tyehimba Jess, *Olio* (Seattle: Wave Press, 2016), 1.
- 4 Ibid., 226.
- 5 Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, “Undisciplining Victorian Studies,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 10, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/undisciplining-victorian-studies/> (access July 29, 2020).
- 6 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- 7 Janet Neary, Untitled remarks, “Reconstructing 19thC Black Visual Studies,” *C19 Seventh Biannual Conference: Reconstructions*, Coral Gables, Miami, FL, March 31–April 2, 2022; Autumn Womack, *The Matter of Black Living: The Aesthetic Experiment of Racial Data, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 86.
- 8 Womack, *The Matter of Black Living*, 202.
- 9 Neary, Untitled remarks.
- 10 Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 6.
- 11 Ibid., 176.