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## Bending the Clock: New Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Ageing: A Roundtable Conversation

Andrea Charise, Devoney Looser, David McAllister, Ruth M. McAdams, Jacob Jewusiak, and Travis Chi Wing Lau

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Over the past decade, several academic studies have taken nineteenth-century ageing as their topic, including Devoney Looser's *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain* (2008), Karen Chase's *The Victorians and Old Age* (2009), Kay Heath's *Aging by the Book* (2009), and Alice Crossley's special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* (2017). Following the publication of two significant new monographs – Andrea Charise's *The Aesthetics of Senescence* (2020) and Jacob Jewusiak's *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel* (2019) – the time is ripe for a synthesis of this dynamic cluster of scholarship, with special attention to where nineteenth-century perspectives on ageing is going, and ought to go, from here. Recorded in January 2020, this roundtable is a curated compilation of conversations with key scholars in the field: Devoney Looser (Arizona State University), David McAllister (Birkbeck, University of London), Ruth M. McAdams (Skidmore College), Jake Jewusiak (Newcastle University), and Travis Chi Wing Lau (Kenyon College). Edited by Andrea Charise, this roundtable assembles new perspectives on the present and future of nineteenth-century studies of age(ing), including: What's next for age studies' approaches to reading and teaching nineteenth-century texts? How might a better understanding of 'old' models inform our current day concerns with ageing populations and intergenerational discord? Can age studies research help make a case for the enduring role of the arts and humanities in a STEM-dominated culture? And how might attending to the old, ageing, and obsolete help address newly emergent global crises, including the rise of populism and climate change? Accessible in both audio format and textual transcription, this roundtable interview offers a timely resource for researchers, students, and a broader public interested in the literary present and futures of ageing and older age.

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<https://soundcloud.com/openlibhums/19-podcast-bending-the-clock>

### Introduction (0.00–4.10)

Hello, my name is Andrea Charise and I am delighted to be your host for a multimedia contribution to the journal *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*.

This special issue of *19* features a range of age studies approaches to nineteenth-century literature: a timely topic for literary and historical research in this period. Over the past decade, several academic studies have taken nineteenth-century ageing as their focus, including Devoney Looser’s *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain* (2008), Karen Chase’s *The Victorians and Old Age* (2009), Kay Heath’s *Aging by the Book* (2009), and Alice Crossley’s special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* (2017). More recently, the publication of Jake Jewusiak’s book *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel: Growing Old from Dickens to Woolf* (2019), and my own book, *The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (2020), means the time is ripe for a synthesis of this emerging, dynamic scholarship, with special attention to where nineteenth-century perspectives on ageing is going — and where it ought to go, from here.

In the wake of major upheavals in literary, economic, social, and medicalized ways of understanding the human condition, nineteenth-century British literature contributed important strategies for representing what Karen Chase has called ‘the invention of the elderly subject’.<sup>1</sup> But is this investigation of the past just a static description of history — interesting only to stuffy collectors of historical information about a long bygone time? In this roundtable, entitled ‘Bending the Clock: New Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Ageing’, a group of established and emerging scholars offer their insights into the role and relevance of nineteenth-century age studies: Devoney

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 13.

Looser (Arizona State University), David McAllister (Birkbeck, University of London), Ruth M. McAdams (Skidmore College), Jake Jewusiak (Newcastle University), and Travis Chi Wing Lau (of Kenyon College). In these conversations we will hear how these scholars have come to recognize the significance of age and ageing in their scholarly and creative work; their personal investments in thinking with age and ageing; the role of age studies, and nineteenth-century literature, in exploring the value of the arts and humanities today; and how theorizations of oldness, ageing, progress, and the obsolete are at the heart of emergent global crises including the rise of populism and climate change.

The interviews you are about to hear were recorded in January 2020 at the annual convention of the Modern Languages Association in Seattle, Washington, USA. I mention that here because context matters, of course. But given the transformative world events of 2020, including the coronavirus pandemic — which, at the time of this recording, has claimed the lives of almost two million people around the world, many of them older persons living in long-term care — but also the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, which catalysed the global resurgence of protests for police reform and justice for Black lives, the time elapsed between recording and publishing these interviews highlights not only what is missing, but also what endures. As you listen to these conversations, whenever that might be, take note of how time’s passage leaves its mark on these discussions of ageing. But also, as well, pay attention to where the issues discussed here remain, persist, and evolve well beyond the constraints of 2020’s temporal frame.

As A. T. Q. Stewart writes in *The Shape of Irish History* (2001), ‘we measure time by the customary lifespan. A century seems a very long time to us precisely because it is just beyond the normal.’<sup>2</sup> In 2021 it’s clear that exactly ‘who’, and what, that sense of ‘normal’ temporality serves — and the modern ideologies of ageing, progress, and historical time itself — are issues with deep entanglement in nineteenth-century British literature and culture. To find out how and why this might be the case, let’s turn things over to our guests, beginning with Devoney Looser, for their perspectives on the old, and new, of nineteenth-century age and ageing.

### **Devoney Looser (4.10–13.51)**

I’m Devoney Looser. I teach at Arizona State University and I write books and other fun things.

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<sup>2</sup> A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Shape of Irish History* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2001), p. 16.

### ***On multigenerational living and coming to age studies***

I see the field of age studies as central to how I think, and live, and breathe in the world now. I mean, that's sort of what any field of study does to us, doesn't it? It reorients what we see and what we look at in hopefully positive, productive intellectual ways. So even in the pivot to the work that I did on Jane Austen, who of course only lived to forty-one — and maybe didn't make age as central a category, or at least old age as central a category, to her work as some of us might have wished — I still see age studies as part of that work.

When I was ten, my grandfather passed away and my paternal grandmother moved into the home with us. So I grew up with my parents, my brother, and my grandmother in the household. It definitely showed me things and made me think differently about late life. Not always positively. She and I had a very fraught relationship. She had been a really important person to me up until age ten; and after ten, it was utterly fraught! [laughs]

Having a woman in our home who was telling me things that were even, at the time I thought, crazier than what my mother was telling me, you know: 'When are you going to get married?' 'I'm 14, Grandma!' These kinds of things. But it really shaped me in ways that I didn't understand towards thinking about the life course and thinking about generational issues.

When I was an undergraduate, I had an opportunity to take a class called 'Grow Old Along with Me, The Best Is Yet to Be' — right, that famous nineteenth-century quote — with a professor named Barbara Andersen, who was herself at that point nearing retirement age. But she had a group of traditional-age undergraduates reading literary texts that specifically took old age as a subject. So my first course in age studies and in humanities was as an undergrad — no one was calling it age studies. I didn't know that I was doing something that would later produce research questions for me, but it was a really formative experience.

### ***On opportunities and barriers in age studies research***

My book, *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain* — so that book came out a decade ago. I think even over the past decade, the responses have changed. Partly that's thanks to work like yours and other brilliant people in age studies, making it clear that when we say age, we don't just mean old age. And when we say old age, we don't just mean this thing that's not for people except if they're old. But I think when I first published in that field, there were lots of people who said, 'you're a (quote, unquote) young person or a middle-aged person: Why would you want to do this work?'. Increasingly, as age gets added into more people's automatic thinking about what it means to study something intersectionally, it will be less weird. I think it's already less weird.

I don't know if I have gems of wisdom for someone to offer an adviser who's giving pushback. First of all, I am shocked that such people exist. So that shows my own corner of the world — that I'm not maybe experiencing enough beyond that corner! But I am really interested to think this through, because what you're describing is an academic system where in all likelihood, somebody (quote, unquote), older is telling somebody younger, more junior, not to do work on a demographic that is more like the adviser — in all likelihood — than it is like the person writing. So that's bizarre, first of all, and makes no sense. But I think showing the work that's being done is crucial. So many people are out there working now to make [age studies] more visible. The journal *Age, Culture, Humanities* is one that I'm really excited to see have such great visibility, it's open access. There are just wonderful things that you could point an adviser to very quickly if there's a sense that this is not work where there is already a building audience.

#### ***On ageing, activism, and the politics of literary studies***

I would like to think we could define activism more capaciously. Just as we've defined age in narrow ways that have been damaging, we — and here I mean, academics — have identified activism in ways that are perhaps too narrow and damaging. I see some similarities in how those [terms] function; I don't know that I have used the word *activism* to describe what I do when I write or publish or speak. And I don't know how you feel about using that label for what you do, but it certainly belongs. I think it makes sense to put it there. That is, if you are working to persuade and bring about social and political change through any means, that you're doing that. It is a form of activism, in a sense. I think perhaps when we put that label on it narrowly, we're trying to say, 'I am knowledge making' — which has some fewer kinds of political valances, and that *knowledge making* is doing politics in a way that's easier to defend intellectually. Whereas *activism* is this thing you do if you are in the streets, pushing people, rather than trying to argue with them with ideas. And I think that's a really dangerous divide. And just to be clear: I consider my work deeply political and all the ways that are, to me, empowering and meaningful to repeat that word. But I understand that not everyone, even in the humanities, who affiliates with that term as a scholar, thinks that literary studies are political — or political enough.

Age is unusual in that it's the kind of life course experience all of us get to experience — if we're lucky enough, right? All of us get to make it to old age, if we're fortunate: at least that's how I imagine old age. That's unlike a lot of other identity categories. But I don't think its differences ought to mean that it doesn't belong in the wheelhouse with them; I think it absolutely belongs there, and our sense of past, present, and future are

enriched by putting [age] there. I don't think we're in a position globally where we're going to get to ignore it. And especially in industrialized countries, I know, you know, all these numbers incredibly well, the 'grey revolution' (or whatever it's being called this week! [laughs]) is obviously going to force people to see old age in ways that are new, or different, or newly visible.

***On nineteenth-century ageing, resilience, and research methods***

There wasn't one way to be an older person, an older woman, even an older author, or a celebrated author in the nineteenth century. There were many ways, many problems — but there were some pretty damaging and clear patterns for how to respond to individuals in that category as a group. For that reason, I think studying [nineteenth-century literature and ageing] together is meaningful, looking at the strategies that they had to respond to those stereotypes, the ways that they were limited by sexism and ageism (as we'd now call it): that those kinds of things really come to the fore, when you study older women writers as a group.

**Andrea Charise:** Can you give an example of one of those strategies?

One of my favourite stories from the [*Women Writers and Old Age*] book is the writer Hester Lynch Piozzi, who in old age was still very sociable and very excited, I think, to receive visitors. At the same time, the way that she received them was maybe not always to her liking. She was living in Bath, England, which is known for its Roman ruins, the hot springs, and all sorts of things there. She started to refer to herself as one of the 'antiquities of Bath'. I think that shows a great sense of humour; also an understanding that people were coming to gawk at her. But, at the same time, she liked that she wasn't being isolated. That's the kind of rhetoric that I would point to, as someone being 'resilient' in the face of circumstances that weren't entirely positive, honestly. By the way, her last work remained unpublished, and she gave it the subtitle 'A Granddame's Garrulity'. I think that is also a really powerful statement of talking back to the powers that be, that were ignoring her and not giving her the opportunity to put her words before a public — but also making fun of the stereotypes that were being thrust at her.

I wrote about this a little bit in an essay called 'Why I'm Still Writing Women's Literary History'.<sup>3</sup> I am troubled, and I think we are still ('we' meaning academics), we are still doing this where we say that old methods are somehow lesser methods. If, every time we called something 'old', we thought about what we were saying, that would be

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<sup>3</sup> Devoney Looser, 'Why I'm Still Writing Women's Literary History', *Minnesota Review*, 71–72 (2009), 220–27.



really valuable. I get very frustrated with the idea that the new is automatically good and the old is automatically bad; I think we've done this in our methods, I think we've done this in our findings. We've really, as academics, overvalued whatever the thing of the moment is — and I don't mean new questions. I mean, the idea that something that was done twenty or thirty years ago is automatically not as good. This is something we are doing to ourselves that we can change. This is not our going out and trying to advocate for something in the wider world that's being done to us or to populations of people. This is something we could change in our own field, and I'd like to see us do that more.

### **David McAllister (13.57–25.02)**

My name's David McAllister. I'm a senior lecturer in Victorian literature at Birkbeck, University of London, where I'm the director of the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies.

#### ***On ageing and contemporary politics (Scottish independence, Brexit)***

My interest in this field is relatively new. I had reached the end of a book project and my monograph [*Imagining the Dead in British Literature and Culture, 1790–1848*, Palgrave] came out at the end of 2018. That was a book that looked at the idea of the dead as a social group in the early nineteenth century, and the politics of either including or excluding the dead as an idea within society. I've come to ageing, partly, working backwards from death to ageing. Presumably, there's a teleology there which is going to see me move towards adolescence and conception! But, fundamentally, I've come to see resonances between my first body of research on death and dying, and then on age and ageing studies — which is the direction that I'm going in now.

The origin for me is actually contemporary and political. I'm Scottish but I live in London. I've lived in London for my whole career, essentially, and most of my adult life. And in 2014 there was a very divisive Scottish independence referendum, which I followed closely, of course. And I was struck in the aftermath — it was a very close vote — by the blame, which focused on 'the old', who were identified as being the group who had sold us down the river, or who had voted 'no' in such numbers that independence didn't happen.

When you looked at the actual breakdown of voting patterns and so on, it turned out that this was a convenient myth: the ageing and elderly were shouldering the blame for lots of other kinds of demographic breakdowns, and more interesting, more significant political fractures within Scottish society — so I'd had the germ of an idea, which was based on the contemporary political scene. That was then redoubled in the aftermath of

the Brexit vote, which followed two years later in which a similar kind of narrative played out. On both occasions, it was actually my side of the argument that was identifying the elderly as a ‘problem’ that had to be policed, or dealt with, or endured, even: until enough of them had died to run another vote.

And that’s where the parallels of my earlier work struck me. Partly because this identification of an out-group within society — who can shoulder the blame for the failure of progressive or revolutionary or radical politics — was something which emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution (except in the latter case, it was focused on the dead and on excluding the dead, and blaming the dead, for the sorts of cultural inheritances which made reform as a process so slow in the early nineteenth century). So I saw the similarities between the two eras. And that piqued my interest to show how, and whether, this generational sense of tension and imbalance and injustice was present in the nineteenth century, which is where my research interests lie.

#### ***On Charles Dickens and Victorian ageing discourse***

I work on the novel mostly. I suppose it comes down to a question of whether or not one considers population in the aggregate, on the whole, in the way that these large-scale political events did: where you have a referendum in which the results are broken down, firstly, into two big categories (who voted ‘Yes’; who voted ‘No’), and then into a series of demographic categories where you have, say, 15 million old people voting ‘Yes’ and 14.5 million old people voting ‘No’. Literature — certainly nineteenth-century literature — famously, attempts to put us into a sympathetic engagement with individual lives as they’re lived, in ways which hopefully should complicate, and widen, our sense of individual lives versus aggregate populations.

Thus far in my studies on this area, I’ve mostly been focusing on [Charles] Dickens. Both *Dombey and Son* and *Nicholas Nickleby* strike me as being novels which are fundamentally about a sense of generational fracture and tension. It was an odd period in Dickens’s life. There are letters from about 1846, I think it is, where he begins to grow a moustache for the first time. He’s on the verge of going to Italy at this point — actually, it’s slightly earlier, 1844 maybe — and he grows a moustache. He secludes himself so that nobody can see the moustache in the process of formation. When he grows it, he’s just on the verge of going to Italy, and he writes this desperate letter to his brother to say, ‘can you go to a barber’s and get me a bottle of hair dye, please?’. Evidently, his moustache had come through grey. Now, he’s only thirty-two or thirty-three, but the signs of ageing provoke this reckoning, I think, for Dickens of where he stands in relation to his youth and to a kind of demographic bubble where in the 1840s there was a baby boom, which was coming to an end. There was a kind of bulge of



population in their thirties and forties, who were finding that they weren't being given opportunities for advancement politically or culturally. Also in relation to impending old age: where he [Dickens] could look forward and see himself occupying a particular position within the life course [but] perhaps much earlier than he had imagined. And his body begins to betray him at this moment. So he looks for ways in which to disguise the process of ageing. And that, as we know, was a fundamentally Victorian cultural situation where particularly male bodies — obviously female bodies as well — but male bodies at this time were increasingly valorized as the means of wealth generation. The sense of people reaching their apex at fifty was in retreat, and products began to come onto the market to disguise the signs of male ageing for the first time, I think, really. So Dickens participates in this culture. He also writes about it in these novels.

*Dombey and Son* has a kind of evacuation of youth: it has children, and it has old men and women. In this vastly populated novel, there are only one or two characters who are in their twenties or thirties. One of them is Edith, who marries Dombey senior: she's conveniently, or specifically, poised at twenty-nine, the end of her reproductive peak, I suppose, in Victorian ageing discourse. Another one is Toodles [Mr Toodle], who is a working-class, very fecund engine driver who has five kids. When Dombey meets him, Dombey is constantly looking in the mirror and looking at signs of his own wrinkles developing, his hair receding. He looks at Toodles, this broad shouldered, working-class man, and he says his hair looks 'suspiciously dark. Maybe it's all the coal dust.' But of course it's not the coal dust; it's that he's young. And Dombey is obsessed with being old and with not having replicated himself through producing a male heir. *Nicholas Nickleby* again is about an antagonism between Ralph Nickleby, as an elderly man [and his nephew Nicholas], who won't move aside for his younger nephew. And they are antagonistic towards each other. So I think that reading age, reading generational tension, into Dickens's mid-career novels will give me some new perspectives on what are some very familiar texts.

### ***On Birkbeck, late life learning, and the humanities***

Your first question about whether I had a personal investment in this. There are usually raised eyebrows: 'what could this middle-aged man be doing interested in ageing?' [laughing] So I think there's a comedic impulse to suggest that this is personal rather than intellectual. But I'm not sure that those categories, in our line of work, that those categories can be ever entirely separated — or should be entirely separated.

Birkbeck as an institution is interesting. It began life as the London Mechanics' Institute in 1823 and, throughout its history, it has been a university for working people. We teach in the evenings. We teach at night. We don't teach any daytime classes.

Historically, we've had a majority of mature students: people who are returning to university or people who never made it to university in the first place. We have people coming onto our MA in Victorian Studies who are in their seventies and undertaking PhD work at the same time. We have a very mixed age range of students at the moment who cover the whole of the adult life course.

I'm planning an MA module on the topic [of nineteenth-century ageing] and I imagine it'll get a good response. I haven't yet flown it with any students, so I can't say what the response will be. Colleagues are keen because we have a strong medical humanities cohort in the research cluster within the university. And there are obvious ways in which this is a topic which speaks to some of the major issues, I think, facing English literature as a discipline, but also the humanities more broadly.

Since I've joined Birkbeck, there's been a series of periodic financial crises, which is common across the humanities in most of the West, at least. One of the issues that has come up has been the government in the UK clearly doesn't value these adult learners or late life learners and, in fact, sees the prospect of somebody coming back in middle age or in later life to do particularly a humanities degree as something which is an indulgence — a frippery. I think that it's important that people challenge that. And I think that the kinds of — oh, how to describe it — the kinds of arithmetic calculations that are involved in saying, 'so-and-so is such an age, they therefore realistically only have two or three decades, statistically, left to go. How much should we invest in their education?'. Or, 'how much on an individual level should I invest in my education at a later stage in life?'. Those kinds of accountancy questions — where you're asked to weigh up the value of a humanities education versus cold hard cash, whether governmental or personal — I think those are tricky and complex and they're coming increasingly under pressure. Birkbeck's model has been to push back against that and to insist on the social benefits as well as economic benefits of late life learning. The issues are very much in the balance in the UK at the moment.

The impossibility of imagining one's own later life is something which only becomes apparent as one ages. So this is necessarily a retrospective mode of thinking in the same way that I think is impossible to imagine the dead without having gone through the death of another. Fiction potentially offers people, if not a kind of authentic experience of how to think with age, then a convincingly ersatz one which might nevertheless perform some of the same functions as something which did, authentically, give you an account of ageing and the elderly. Or of different generations, not as entirely other from yourself but as yourself merely projected forward by twenty or thirty years: a projection that I now realize happens really quickly, but which in my twenties, I found fundamentally impossible.

### Ruth McAdams (25.10–35.26)

I am Ruth McAdams. I am a visiting assistant professor in the English department at Skidmore College, where I teach courses on literature and writing. My research field is Victorian literature and I'm currently revising my dissertation into a book. The tentative working title is *Trivial Histories: Unfashionable Persistence and the Present in Victorian Literature*. The project is on 'trivial' or trivialized forms of historical consciousness in Victorian literature, the way that these theorize non-progressive temporalities, and the difficulties of narrating progress. So, I have chapters on Disraeli, Thackeray, Martineau, and Hardy. I work mainly on novels, but also on life writing as well.

#### *On ageing and 'trivial histories'*

I feel a little bit like an interloper in age studies. I don't really study ageing; I study the literary — or maybe just discursive — representation of old people for particular political and aesthetic ends. And it's a highly questionable representation that I'm looking at! For me thinking about ageing rhetorically has proven really fascinating, but I'm not smart on the topic of the actual lived historical experience of ageing. That is somebody else's project.

One of the 'trivial histories' that I'm interested in is the treatment of the figure of the old person: as a kind of walking, talking, untouched time capsule from the past, the recent past. This is a really fascinating vision of history that that kind of model suggests. It's one in which individuals are locked into the mores or the norms of a particular time, let's say, their early adulthood: and time passes, but individuals don't change. Using this vision of old age allows us to suggest a vision of progress over time, whereby freezing the individual in time allows us to narrate a model in which the next generation comes and improves upon what the past generation has done.

It's a kind of strange treatment of the young as the future and the old as the past, with no one existing in the present moment — that category [the present] kind of getting emptied out. As you can imagine, this is a wholly messy model, so my book project contains readings of texts that are often focused on moments where an older person either talks about getting older, talks about ageing, or seems to speak from the past and to carry knowledge forward, that's either being passed on or maybe failing to be passed on.

The way that the discipline of history and the serious writings on historiography (by people like John Stuart Mill, Thomas Babington Macaulay), the way that those get theorized in the nineteenth century is about structural change, big structural change. By contrast, the 'trivial' kinds of history that I'm looking at are things that *seem* to reflect history, that seem to change over time, but that get construed as irrelevant or

not that important. So, what your grandfather says about the 1950s is not actually as 'important' as the serious, empirical, often very numbers-oriented work about change over time: [the latter] is where 'real' history happens.

Old people are just one of my touchstones. I also look at fashion, which is also something that changes over time, but the changes seem random and not that important, or at least that's the way that they are construed. I'm interested in recovering a more meaningful form of historical engagement in these seemingly trivial moments. And it's a word [i.e. 'trivial'] that I'm not entirely comfortable with, because sometimes if you use the word 'trivial' in your book title, people think that you and your project are trivial. I'm really theorizing the concept of the trivial: I think it's a very robust and serious engagement with the concept of the trivial, but it's something I'm still wrestling with.

### *On life writing and memoir*

I got into this extremely accidentally. I was studying nineteenth-century British literature. I had made that decision long before I was really thinking seriously about these questions. I would say, looking back over my intellectual development, there were a few moments where ageing struck out to me as something really interesting. The first was when I was doing my master's degree on Walter Scott; I was so fascinated in those strange moments in the Waverley novels where Scott claims that the origin of the story is in some encounter that he had with some old woman, in some cottage, somewhere in the Highlands, through some kind of oral communication moment. It's such an interesting vision of how transmission happens across time: this is, of course, extremely characteristic of Scott, but it's also all over a variety of nineteenth-century literature, and well through the Victorian period. That was a really important moment for me. Another was, early in my graduate school career, I took a class on the autobiography with my dissertation supervisor, Adela Pinch. You write your life writing after you experienced the things that you wrote about — so there's a fundamentally belated stance. That distinction between the 'I' who is experiencing and the 'I' who is writing has always struck me as an endlessly fascinating feature of life writing.

For me, thinking about life writing as a genre, as a kind of old person's writing, is fascinating. I tend to enjoy reading contemporary journalistic coverage of memoir, particularly when the memoirist is a relatively young person, because there's always this incredible disdain meted out by the press to a young person who has written an autobiographical work. Whether that person has lived a life that already seems worthy of documentation or not seems to be somewhat irrelevant. There is this, this, resentment at what was perceived as an act of appropriation.

***On (post)-liberalism, the ideology of progress, and appreciating King Lear***

One of my really big interests is the fate of liberalism in the twenty-first century. After a long period of dominance, liberalism seems to be on the outs — then again it totally persists. I think that we need to really understand its rhetoric and its logic, in order to understand our ostensibly post-liberal moment. And that's perhaps one of the overarching ways that I'm really interested in the way those kinds of thinking about history seem to animate the postmodern condition, or maybe just, like, the contemporary twenty-first century condition.

John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic* (1843) is often cited as a wholly progressive vision of history. Yet if you read the text carefully, Mill seems deeply hemmed in by limits on all sides. He argues that progress probably originated at a particular point, it didn't go back earlier than that point; he also seems to see it happening in only certain branches of knowledge. So, in the arts and literature, there really isn't progress; there's only progress in certain things. And Thomas Babington Macaulay's essays on history [i.e. *Critical and Historical Essays*, 1843] is often invoked as the patron saint of this ideology. And again, when you read those essays carefully, they are much more conflicted and ambiguous than I think we tend to acknowledge.

The idea of historical progress — that there's a kind of naturalness or an inexorableness to historical progress — has been violently undermined. Then again, it absolutely persists: for example, in the bestselling work of Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker, whose book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2012) spends several hundred pages establishing its premise that violence has declined in the *longue durée* over every human culture, and on every scale of reference. This book was a bestseller! So, I think that, despite the copious evidence to the contrary, there is a really firm belief that there is progress, and that there will be. Even the same people who are highly agitated about deeply urgent issues of climate change, or of deregulated capitalism — some of those same people, when you get them on a topic that isn't directly related, they still speak in a way that implies that there has been progress over the past decades and that there will be progress in the future. We urgently need to understand this idea of progress: it may appear old-fashioned; then again, it seems to undergird all of our thinking.

When I taught *King Lear* in graduate school, I was told by a friend that her teacher had once said that 'unless you were old enough to have children who had betrayed you, you were not old enough to appreciate *King Lear*'. Maybe that guy was right, was the conclusion I came to! [laughs] *Lear* has always been my least favourite of the Shakespeare plays (don't quote me). But I actually like the idea that maybe there's literature that I'm still too young for. I like the idea that there's literature that will appeal to me more as I get older than it does to me right now — or that it would have to me when I was eighteen years old.

Then again, also when I was teaching *King Lear* in graduate school, I was observed by a female faculty member in my department who was sort of a mentor. I told this anecdote in class, and she told me afterwards that she didn't think that I should have said that, because 'you just shouldn't make assumptions about what life experiences the students have or have not had'. She said that it was, of course, entirely possible that there were students in the class who had cared for an ageing parent with dementia, for example, and that really stuck with me. So, I think that when I approach my teaching now, I tend to really try to avoid any kind of assumptions about what it means to be eighteen to twenty-two years old — that they are even eighteen to twenty-two years old! Or that my experience of being that age necessarily has anything in common with theirs. I think in practice it often does, but I try to remove that kind of bias from my speaking on as many subjects as I possibly can.

### **Jacob Jewusiak (35.38–44.13)**

My name is Jake Jewusiak. I'm working at Newcastle University. The title of my new book is *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel: Growing Old from Dickens to Woolf* [Cambridge University Press, 2019].

#### ***On ageing, duration, and impact of literary form***

My interest, at the beginning, was in *ageing* is a process, which is what my book was about. So I was really fascinated with the way that the novel was able, or at times unable, to represent characters growing old in a kind of real time. In some of the chapters, I was focusing on issues of gender, social class, and questions of utopia, topics like that. Now I've become increasingly interested in a postcolonial approach, paying attention to race in a comparative account between Indian and English literatures.

My book is interested in ageing as a process and, in particular, the kind of formal limitations in the novel to representing that. Many of those conventions where a character will grow old very quickly after a trauma — they might develop a grey hair after they lose their fortune; then they, like Grandfather Trent in [Dickens's] *The Old Curiosity Shop*, become demented after that. I was interested in the way in which the novel was compressing those, the duration of ageing into really more descriptive moments or sketches. And I was reading that formal convention as connected to larger cultural movements that were repressing ageing, attempting to push it to the background of experience — for some, attempting to appear younger, to be more competitive for work, for example, or trying to secure a successful marriage. These are the sorts of things where the process of ageing is being hidden or obscured to some degree. In what way does the novel — I don't think that it necessarily *creates* that [effect], but it does, and it



also reflects it. So there's some way in which the novel is training our attitudes towards ageing, and the very limitations with which it can represent a character growing older.

One of the turns to form in the book — one of the things that kind of pushed that forward — was a sense that a lot of the [age studies] work had been about recuperation. Which was great, but how do we move past or perhaps develop an alternative line of analysis that might go parallel to a lot of the work that's already been done in the past? What does form offer that's different or new?

One of the things that I'm attempting to do is to think about how literature is implicated in the way that we see, the way that we construct — I don't want to say phenomenology, but you know — a kind of phenomenological sense of how form can shape our perception of ageing. That's how I imagine form not as a purely aesthetic thing, but one that's deeply connected and entangled with issues of culture and history. I'm using 'duration' out of the sort of Bergsonian tradition, partially because of the time in which he was publishing, and it's connected to my work in that sense that the kind of tail end of [the period my book discusses]. But I'm interested in duration, not as a kind of diachronic process of X after Y after Z, but thinking about it more synchronically, as something that elongates or contracts.

***On representing durational experience: H. G. Wells and George Eliot***

Some of the other thinkers that have been important for my thinking of duration in the book have been [Gilles] Deleuze and Brian Massumi, in thinking about affect and whatnot. I guess the attempt has been to think about duration as a kind of continuity, rather than contiguity, and the ways in which the novel works to take duration and say, here is time passing — everyday time — and to convince us that sort of durational experience is something that actually is more like a series of points, just like one word follows another. But I don't think that duration is quite like that. There's no space between times, it's kind of all connected. And the novel works to punctuate that experience that, in our lives, is not punctuated at all.

On the one hand I look at negative examples because I think it's impossible to represent duration. I guess Proust tried to do something along those lines, but it's still written, which is one of the points I'm trying to make. But there's a lot of examples where it's very absent, right? So, in one of H. G. Wells's short stories, the — oh God. Now I'm forgetting the title of it. The ... something of Mr Elvisham ...

**Andrea Charise:** The Story of the Late Mr Elvisham.

Yeah. It's just a bunch of generic words at the beginning, so it's completely left my mind. [laughs]

**Andrea Charise:** No duration. Immediate satisfaction.

Thank you! But yeah, in this short story, it's basically a 'freaky Friday' story, but without the comedy: a scientist creates a potion that is able to transfer his own older body with a younger person without consent. When the young man, who's now been converted into an older one, wakes up, he is looking in the mirror and thinking, 'what has happened to me? I feel like all of my life is disappeared.' He comes to this shocking realization that he's old. It's a science-fiction story, but at the same time it's touching on something very real, an intimate experience of ageing: that moment of critical age awareness where you suddenly realize something, right? There's this shocking moment: something's changed or you feel changed or whatnot. That moment is one in which you've realized that a lot of duration has slipped away from you — that you've skipped over it unreflectively or uncritically.

I started off in graduate school wanting to work on British modernism. And whenever I was taking a course with Danny Hack, then we started reading some of the nineteenth-century stuff. It was actually [Elizabeth Gaskell's 1852 novel] *Cranford* that sort of turned me. At the time I wasn't thinking about issues of age at all. It was just thinking, like, this is such a bizarre, such an interesting novel from a formal standpoint. Episodic and loosely knit together. Almost plotless.

Thinking about intergenerational relationships was something that always interested me. I was reading George Eliot's novel *Romola* and there's this scene near the end of it when Baldassarre is sitting next to the river and just watching the currents flow, trying to find some food. He's been abandoned until his son floats by and he picks him up and actually kills him. This image resonated in my mind because I was thinking, you know, how many people have actually thought deeply about this character who's been forgotten by the novel — and have we, as critics, also forgotten about him too? I didn't end up going to write about that, but that was the beginning of it from a professional context. From a personal standpoint, I was raised by my grandparents and I think that to some degree there was maybe a sense of, little sensitiz[ation] to reading for age, based on that experience.

#### ***On teaching – and learning from – age studies***

In the past, I've given job interviews and job talks and I've talked with people after the fact and with jobs I didn't get. They expressed to me a kind of concern that, 'Oh, the research is great. The scholarship is great. You've published great stuff, but we're a bit concerned that the students won't be interested in your topic.' This was, I think, coming very much from the declining enrolment crisis in English, and in humanities

more generally; that there's some concern that old age might not appeal to students as a sexy topic that they might want to take.

However, now that I've been working at Newcastle, I've had my course directly on this topic in the nineteenth century. In the student evaluations, they've been actually extremely positive about the topic. Typically, the comment would go something like, 'At the beginning, I didn't think that this is going to be interesting', or 'I hadn't studied this at all before.' And that's precisely the reason why they found it to be compelling — because it was something new. And I think that they felt like they had a bit more room to stretch their legs, given the amount of scholarship that's currently in the field. Perhaps that they felt like they could take ownership over some of the things that they're saying; they're not just repeating what someone else has already done before. So I think that the students, at least what they were writing in the eval[uations], have been pretty good. For the most part. [laughs]

Age studies has always been a highly intersectional field, but there's still opportunities for pushing it even deeper, especially when it comes to issues of race and perhaps thinking globally — at least in the humanities version of what we do. I don't know why I keep reflecting on these traumatic job memories, but yeah. I was giving a presentation and someone asked me: 'what do you think about ageing and climate change?'. And this had, what I thought, absolutely nothing to do with what I was working on whatsoever. It took a couple of months, after the initial surprise wore off, that I was thinking: actually, there's quite a bit that you could do on that topic — both in the nineteenth century, but especially right now, in moving the fields together.

### **Travis Chi Wing Lau (44.19–56.30)**

My name is Travis Chi Wing Lau. I work in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature, but I'm very interested in the medical humanities, literature and science, and disability studies. My current book project is on the history of the anti-vax movement as a literary and cultural phenomenon. I've called it *Insecure Immunity*.

#### ***On age studies, disability studies, and the chronicity of living***

I came to this field not historically committed first; I was interested in the questions, thinking about bodies, the history of bodies. And I was interested in monstrosity and why certain bodies get marked out as one thing or another. I realized those were the questions I was asking, but I didn't understand that they were historical questions. I had really formative influences when I was at UCLA where I was prompted to think about the Gothic as a very particularly historically specific genre that is becoming popular at a certain time. And it is unsurprising that at the same time, science and medicine are changing.

I'm very interested in the way that age studies and the way disability studies has been putting pressure on the issue of age — they make us think about temporality in really interesting ways. Ageing suggests a movement towards senility or oldness (if we want to put it that way), and that is a certain linear concept of time. Disability studies, and even queer studies, has prompted us to think differently about what does it mean to age or to mature? That's something that I've been thinking a lot about with my work on vaccination, which is a pre-emptive, future-oriented task or procedure. What does it mean to secure health in the future by doing something now? In some ways that is an ageing question, especially because vaccines are not always going to be lifelong; they require boosters. They do age, so to speak.

I believe it's Arthur Frank who was talking about the ways in which illness and disability interrupts a life course. And it creates something that he describes as 'narrative wreckage', in which a life is, to use a sort of nautical metaphor, shipwrecked, or has fallen into disarray and needs to be repaired. Even in that model, there is a sort of curative timeline in which that eventually must be repaired or that person will remain in this state perpetually — and that seems to be an undesirable thing. I've been trying to think about, even in my own work as a poet, the ways in which poetry offers us a way of sitting in that contingency before the moment of cure: the possibility of chronicity, which is another interesting time term, right? What happens with chronic illness that eludes a sense of finality, or eludes that curative moment that we're told we should desire (and we may sometimes desire).

My poetry has been trying to think about my experience of chronic pain. In chronic pain there isn't the resolution — there isn't one. For me, that's very much the case, as it will involve incredibly invasive spinal surgery; for me it was, it was not the best choice because of its consequences and the possibility of paralysis, which was incredibly terrifying to me. So I've had to learn in some ways what it means to live with something that doesn't necessarily have an end. That might worsen in fact, and may attach itself to other forms of disability and illness. And that to me is a sort of bentness to my development, where I feel like there were certain things I could have done physically before that are now entirely foreclosed. Instead of tragedy, I'm thinking, is there actually a new set of branching life paths that I have in my ableism, which I will admit is true — my internalized ableism — I did not think were possible.

### ***On crip time, reproductive futurity, and queering life's 'milestones'***

The concept of crip time, I'm indebted to a number of disability thinkers for this. Alison Kafer being one of them, and Margaret Price, both of whom are responding to the ways in which linear time tends to put certain pressures on us to do certain things

like milestones. Normative development means you should be able to do these physical things, or you must have achieved this social milestone, like getting married, right? This is also a queer time question, but crip time often gets played out in institutions as ‘let’s give our students more time for an assignment’. And that’s the surface level of what crip time tends to be, and that all bodies are not necessarily designed in the same way, therefore, their relationship to time is different. Expecting everyone to adhere to the same timeline — from a crip time perspective — is an ableist thing.

I will always refer back to Alison Kafer’s definition, which is: instead of bending bodies to the clock, you bend the clock to the bodies. That’s a great way of thinking about it, both practically, but also about it, theoretically. It is time exploded, and I think these are Alison’s words. What happens when we let go of the expectations of a timeline that must proceed in a certain way. In health terms, [this takes the form of] the linear narrative of: you have a problem; it is diagnosed; you are given possible treatment options, and then you’re cured. What happens when that timeline fails? That is also crip time.

The way I think about temporality has been entirely conditioned by my understanding of queer theory and thinking about reproductive futurity as the main mode by which heteronormativity gets perpetuated (what Adrienne Rich calls ‘compulsory heterosexuality’) but, related to disability studies, compulsory able-bodiedness: [the ideology inherent in the idea that] if you are young, you should be able bodied. A great example of this in my personal life: just recently, I’ve been going through physical therapy for my chronic pain and any number of people walk up to me and go, ‘you’re too young to be here. I’m surprised you’re here.’ It’s a set of assumptions about my youth as being somehow spared from, or not yet encountering, forms of debility and disability.

And to me, it is also related to queerness and being askew from normative time (to use ‘queer’ as a sort of verb or method). Reproductive futurity — which says you are not a successful person unless you have been in a heteronormative coupling that then produces another generation — still, in many ways, impacts the ways in which people feel like they’ve developed, they’ve matured, they have become adults, functioning adults. I think about that cultural pressure all the time, especially with the rise of fertility. Why is it that IVF [in vitro fertilization] has become such a marketable thing? It’s in many ways playing upon the expectation of reproductive futurity.

As somebody who was raised Chinese, there is an immense expectation for children to be caretakers for their parents. One might critique that as an unfair expectation. But for me, there’s a certain, not just reverence, but responsibility — an ethics of care that is built into the way my culture works, where it is not just duty and obligation, but a fulfilment of a life’s path. That part of becoming an adult, too, is learning to care for

others. And I think that is not a way that Western people perceive Chinese expectations of ancestor veneration, or caretaking later on.

The other way I've been thinking about this, too, is the ways feminist and queer and disabled scholars have been forcing us to think more complexly about ethics of care. Even with IVF technologies, the global South is the place by which these technologies get perpetuated — the sort of birth tourism that happens in the global South. What does it mean that the caretaking responsibilities of this future generation of Western white families is being done through the reproductive labour of the global South? This is an intersectional issue. And we cannot think of [IVF] purely in terms of just reproductive function, but the labour of care; how it gets — to use a word that is perhaps disturbingly appropriate — globalized and outsourced.

***On generational difference, interdependence, and the future(s) of literary age studies***

I'm really interested in thinking about the way age — which typically in a colloquial way gets reduced to a number, but it's also a set of individualized experiences, contradictions, paradoxes, that are deeply idiosyncratic — allows for certain things like #okboomer, which is a calcification of a certain age group that seems to have promised interdependence and success and all the other attending ideals, and has failed to do so. It's easy to do that. But to chart moments of solidarity or connections across age groups would be really interesting to think about. What does that actually mean when the instinct now is to find every moment of difference? I think disability studies, if it's taught me anything, it's that society and culture has a really powerful way of investing certain universals with the promise of certain ideals, right? One of the things that youth sometimes does for us is to say that we will be — this is a cliché now — when people are in their twenties, 'I feel invincible. I feel like I'm immortal. I can do whatever I want.' And in some ways that too is a fiction, right? It's in our films, it's in our literature that when you're a certain age, you should be able to do certain things.

But if you ask people, 'really: has your life path actually gone in that way?', many people would say no. And it's these moments of contradiction where, say, a person's development didn't go as they expected, or it took a detour; even this spatial language of 'meandering' or 'going off path', 'the straight and narrow', I'm following these heteronormative terms — and what they imply about a life course. If we're thinking across age divides, whether or not the generations experience it differently: there are resonances in that feeling of displacement, feeling like what was promised to you is not how you expected. And rather than invest in that myth or double down on it — which I feel like sometimes it's easy to do because it's familiar and known — what would it mean to undo those narratives by creating new cultural myths or new cultural identities that are not so ageist in their understanding?



I've been trying to think about where else disability is grappling with the issue of age, maybe not explicitly in terms of age studies. The new direction that historical studies of disability are starting to move in is: what happens when we move away from physical disability to invisible disabilities or cognitive disabilities? And to be frank, I feel like we don't talk about it very sophisticatedly. That's unsurprising because when we're going to the archive, it's way easier to locate the physical disability than the invisible one. That's where the challenge is now. How do we think about cognitive difference, and neurodivergence or neuro-atypicality, as a way of thinking about age in history?

In many ways, literature is the space where the very terms of cognitive difference get worked out. I'm thinking about all those strange moments of temporality that appear all through literary forms in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that often involve illness or disability. It is a moment for us to think about how our imagination of what time is, and what normative time is, is actually very limited. There are things that escape our ability to translate immediately into language. For neurodiversity, there's a way in which I think novels, especially novels that have recursive structures, or are sectioned in ways that fold or intertwine with one another: these forms ask us to think about, what are actually our neurotypical ways of approaching one narrative, another life? How do these forms challenge us to think about those assumptions of neurotypicality, right? The moment that you decentre the able-minded or the able-bodied, suddenly these narratives seem very different.

## **Conclusion (56.35–1.10.50)**

### ***On the past, present, and futures of ageing in nineteenth-century literature***

**Devoney Looser:** I think I bring a bit of a 'past is prologue' vision to this. That is, as someone who came up through an academic sphere where it went from women's studies to gender studies, and lots of questions about whether you should study women separately — or, what does it mean to move into some new labels? — I see age studies, ageing studies, going through some similar kinds of institutional discoveries, moments, and growing pains. I think those have been, on the whole, positive for women's and gender studies: they have compelled thinking of the field, its subjects, and objects in new ways. And that's probably something that age studies also needs to do next: to think through the people it's excluding, including, and why. To think about why it is that when we say 'age', we still think 'gerontology': that really is not ultimately going to get us thinking in new ways about the life course.

But thinking about creativity across the life course is a crucial part of what age studies is doing, and can do — and what people beyond the field could grasp. I do

worry a little bit about what you [Andrea Charise] in your own book [*The Aesthetics of Senescence*] called imagining age studies as ‘spot the old person’: I do worry in the arts about age studies being *help the old person make things*. And that is not what age studies in the humanities ought to be limited to, ‘spotting’ them or helping them make things. These are both noble things, not to denigrate them at all! But I would hate for the entire field to be understood as limited to those things. That is scratching the surface of what this field ought to be having us reorient ourselves to think about.

**Ruth McAdams:** One of the things that I’ve been pondering, and I’m sure you have thoughts on this, is about the relationship between age studies and childhood studies. Childhood studies is a perhaps slightly better established — I don’t know, maybe that’s not fair — set of concerns and approaches, and it’s one that I don’t know a lot about. But it’s one that I think is highly relevant to what we’re doing, because it has to do with the way that normative subjectivity is construed within a pretty limited band of young adulthood: between when you become marriageable and when you get married (which, as you know for women, is often vanishingly short; and even for men is more limited in nineteenth-century texts). I look forward to reading and writing more about that.

**David McAllister:** In the same way that I said in my twenties, I found it impossible to imagine age and ageing as a process that I would be subject to, I can’t foresee where my research is going to lead me. And I’m excited by the development of this field and its timeliness as these kinds of political issues emerge. The repetition of patterns — the cyclicity of issues of generational tension and injustice — should give us pause for reflection to see how it played out in an earlier era. The nineteenth century was essentially the first moment where, in the sociology of generations, there were the sorts of shared experiences by which generations formed themselves as imagined communities (in the Benedict Anderson sense). It’s only with industrial modernity that these shared experiences are possible through networked rail travel, through developing media, and networks. Until that point generations themselves had been rather mundane facets of aristocratic reproduction, succession, and inheritance. Suddenly to be able to define yourselves as a generation — which is not purely defined by cohort but defined by your relation to cultural or historical circumstance — emerges from the nineteenth century, and is something which recurs throughout the twentieth and now into the twenty-first century. To look back and see how the Victorians handled and mishandled this should, hopefully, allow us at least a sort of archive of experience that we can refer back to and compare the outcomes of our current status quo, and our direction of travel with how things have been in previous centuries.

***On contemporary generational conflict: #okboomer, academia, and the possibilities of the classroom***

**Ruth McAdams:** I think we need to take age seriously when we think about intersectionality. But we also desperately need an intersectional age studies. Full disclosure: I am a millennial living in the ravages of deregulated capitalism and with a deeply undermined future due to not only that, but also climate change. And I live under fascism in the United States. Then again [the hashtag] #okboomer is not an intersectional formulation of the way that people in positions of power have oppressed or silenced people with less power. So, I think often in that hashtag, ‘boomer’ is standing in for other things: like whiteness, like maleness, like upper middle-class identity. It suggests that something is a generational conflict that is, to some extent, a generational conflict: but there are other major fault lines too. It’s very possible that simply blaming boomers as a group is not entirely helpful at combating urgent problems like climate change, like the deregulation of capitalism, like fascism, et cetera. So, I have really deeply mixed feelings about this, because on the one hand, I’m on the beat of intergenerational conflict, collaboration, et cetera. On the other hand, I think it’s not necessarily a step forward to be blaming boomers for things that not all boomers are responsible for — and, also, people who are not boomers are entirely responsible for.

**David McAllister:** We’ve become siloed, I think, by and through technology, into age-specific categories who only speak to each other. The means of communication that have become so prevalent on social media, I think actually are serving to reinforce generational division and to retrench those sorts of tensions, which I can see parallels for in the early nineteenth century as well.

**Travis Chi Wing Lau:** I recently wrote a piece about this movement that has received some rightful criticism: the ‘slow scholarship’ movement. I thought about it as very much a disability project about what does it mean in academia’s ableist, hyperproductive culture: what kinds of bodies are not allowed to be in that space because you cannot keep up? I’ve also been very influenced by the work of Mel Chen who wrote this [2014] essay on brain fog.<sup>4</sup> One of the things they mentioned is cognitive disability is the ‘unthinkable’ in academia: minds that do not react, respond, act. I’m even thinking about my own experience now being on the job market, that kind of performative expectation for not just knowledge but efficiency, speed, demonstration that you can comply with normative timelines.

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<sup>4</sup> Mel Chen, ‘Brain Fog: The Race for Cripistemology’, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 8 (2014), 171–84.

In the disability community, ‘temporarily able-bodied’ was a term that was popular and is now very much criticized for its implications. But the idea that we are all in some ways temporarily abled — we will all face disability in some form — as much as we don’t want to universalize (in the same way we do with, say, queerness, where everything is queer and everything is disabled), the fact that we can find common ground with one another in our shared temporary able-bodiedness ... I think that’s really fascinating. Not just solidarity, but interdependence. In the classroom, when I am in immense amounts of pain, telling my students that — it’s amazing how much my students have reached out to help me, to assume some of the responsibilities, the leadership, and have stepped up to do that work together with me. Just in the same way that I would do that for them.

***On strategic presentism, age studies, and the enduring long nineteenth century***

**David McAllister:** Given the focus in Victorian studies in recent years about our relevance, our ongoing relevance, I think that it’s important that we engage with these issues. It offers a means of being public-facing, of speaking to concerns of today, in the sort of **V21 Collective** appeal for things which can be strategically presentist. I think that age studies is a way of thinking about the world around us, in which we can posit the Victorian and posit the nineteenth century, as a useful resource.

**Travis Chi Wing Lau:** I think of myself as a bit of an interloper between periods. The questions I want to ask have not been so easily defined by century, but by shifts: not only in literature, but in theory and practice of medicine. I have been really influenced by the V21 Collective and their move towards what they’ve termed ‘strategic presentism’: not just the past for the past’s sake, but really thinking about the past’s continuities in our present moment. I think for students, understanding why it is the past matters is actually a presentist project, right? And whether or not we think presentism or anachronism are sometimes obstacles to (quote, unquote) good research: in my view, those are things we shouldn’t disavow, right? If we ask our students to answer ‘the stakes question’ in their writing and in their work, why are we not beholden to those same questions? And if that is presentism, I don’t see that as a problem. Especially as we think of the British nation as, in many ways, dissolving in a different way because of Brexit, right? The endurance of these seemingly Victorian phenomena is fascinating, and a way of thinking about why it’s necessary to look at this period in our current moment.

**Jake Jewusiak:** In comparing the way in which age was functioning as a figure for the relationship between the colonizer and colonized, between the British Empire and

India, tracing that legacy from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century as a way of understanding now: I think that some of the anti-immigration sentiment that's arisen lately, this populist rhetoric, a lot of it is coming from societies in which an influx of younger people would probably provide a nice balance to ageing populations. The resistance is coming, I think, from a colonial legacy that has shaped the understanding between the metropole and the colony through the lens of age, and through a kind of colonial paternalism between the two.

**Ruth McAdams:** I think that's a really wonderful way of formulating it. Many of what I think are often construed as newly emergent global crises are, in fact, entirely rooted in the nineteenth century: clearly and unambiguously so. For example, resource extraction and environmental despoliation, which we are currently bearing the consequences of, is an entirely nineteenth-century topic. Free-market capitalism is a nineteenth-century topic. The nineteenth century is alive and wreaking havoc today. So, I think we need to distinguish between the relevance or obsolescence of a topic and the age of the topic. If there are certain aspects of the nineteenth century that are truly obsolete, then it's probably not worth talking about them. It is probably not worth studying them. In a way I have a firm commitment to a fundamentally presentist pedagogy and scholarship. I think that if we're going to study the nineteenth century, we're going to study it for its relevance, and not just for its surface difference.

**Travis Chi Wing Lau:** We've been thinking about the relationship between things like medical humanities, disability studies, and all of these adjacent fields. One of my concerns about the way we think about things as so specialized, or sort of field clearing, like — I need to say I do this — what do we lose when we put people together who don't do the same things, but they actually might be. They're just using different terms.

**Jake Jewusiak:** Yeah — I do think that age studies and perhaps medical humanities more generally is a kind of jumping-off point perhaps for making these kinds of connections. Once we start pushing these fields further and further, we'll have more concrete examples of where the successes lie. But I do think that we add an important emphasis on the interface between these scientific problems and adding in the cultural aspect to these disciplines that might not be thinking about those histories and cultural legacies that have led up to them.

There's a proliferation of interest, at least that I'm feeling from scholars in Europe and in the UK, in putting together networks and developing more special issues and pushing this conversation forward. I think also pushing age studies in new directions, such as ecocriticism, perhaps a deeper engagement with post-humanism, there, I think

there's so much, so many interesting possible things that could be done. Right now it seems like the future is bright, that there's a lot of new scholars that are interested in this topic as well, and I'm very excited to see the direction that it takes. Do I know what that is yet though? I don't know. [laughs]

**Andrea Charise:** You have been listening to a special multimedia contribution to the journal *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to advancing interdisciplinary study in the long nineteenth century. 'Bending the Clock: New Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Ageing' is an edited compilation of interviews conducted at the MLA Annual Convention in January 2020 with Devoney Looser, David McAllister, Ruth McAdams, Jake Jewusiak, and Travis Chi Wing Lau. Big thanks and appreciation to our interviewees for agreeing to share their insights in this forum. All materials were recorded and edited by Andrea Charise. The audio recordings and transcripts included here were reviewed and received final approval by interviewees prior to publication. Finally, thanks to the editorial team of *19* for the opportunity to share this work in an online, open access forum — and thanks to you, as well, for listening.

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