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Helen Maria Williams's Arts of the Future[❖]

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ABSTRACT

This article examines several cross-cultural texts by the late-eighteenth century British writer Helen Maria Williams, to identify Williams's strategies for political rhetoric in international contexts. Williams tends to use aesthetic metaphors, such as sketching or harp-playing, as a way of seizing the contingency of the moment and making possible a way of thinking about current events from the "future." The example texts are the 1790 first volume of her *Letters Written in France*, where Williams engages with the arguments of Edmund Burke; her 1815 verbal "sketch" of Napoleon Bonaparte, which she says only the future can reveal; and the conclusion of her 1784 poem *Peru*, which celebrates "the future triumphs" of Peruvian culture in the wake of centuries of violent Spanish colonization.

KEYWORDS: Helen Maria Williams, French Revolution, colonialism, futurity, verbal sketch, metaphor and simile

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The British Romantic writer Helen Maria Williams provides a stimulating test case for the topics of "Literary Women" and "Global Encounters," given the complex ways her work interweaves those concepts. Williams often uses metaphors drawn from the arts, and specifically musicianship and sketching, to create political interactions that aspire to futurity. The temporal play of her work creates international alliances. Because aesthetic phenomena work in multiple timescales at once, through objects and practices that can be both socially immediate and presumably enduring, they offer Williams an opportunity to situate the future alongside the present or make current events coextensive with historical events. In activating multiple timeframes concurrently, usually through the complex play of a musical or visual metaphor, Williams creates female-centred literary encounters that span the globe.

Williams is known for being a relentlessly international thinker, engaged not only as a British eyewitness to the French Revolution but also as a travel writer, translator of an important French colonial novel and epochal scientific treatises of exploration, cross-cultural novelist, and author of abolitionist and anti-colonialist poetry. Her work is generally characterized by a commitment to thinking about politics globally, and from specifically a woman's perspective. Her writings from Revolutionary France, for instance, have been said to show her "commitments to develop a deliberate and powerful reimagining of world citizenship" and to promote "a universalist model" (Weng 352). Nevertheless, as Yi-Cheng Weng proceeds to show, Williams's vision of "universalism" was a mode of internationalism specific to women's literary productions: although "Williams's reportage of events in France was seen as an uncomfortable foray running counter to socially prescribed feminine roles and spheres," it was still emphatically received as writing of a woman specifically (346). The implication is that "universalist" writing could offer no escape from the delimitations of female authorship, even for a writer committed to challenging gender codes through complex considerations of international politics.

Building on these premises, this essay will investigate Williams's literary experiments with time, to identify how Williams as a woman writer could advance sensitive political commentary in an international context, when her political opinions ran counter to British popular opinion. I find that Williams, in responding to the Revolution in France or an ever-expanding imperial Britain, tends to use artistic metaphors, such as sketching or musicianship, as a way of seizing the contingency of the political moment and making possible a

way of thinking about current events from the "future." Meanwhile, as is well known, she maintains a constant interaction with the 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* of Edmund Burke, such that her Revolutionary writing can be considered a "thorough critique of Burke's ideas" (LeBlanc 26). In her metaphors of art and aesthetic judgments of events, Williams presents the future as something immediately accessible and knowable to her, developing a kind of world citizenship that exceeds cosmopolitanism through its reliance on impossible time. The universalism Williams espoused was, paradoxically, highly delineated by gender and temporality, to the extent that it would seem that speaking "globally" as a world citizen while being unavoidably a British woman demands a special access to futurity. Williams claimed such access for herself largely through metaphors of sketching, drawing, and musicianship, which could render the universal into a temporal rather than geospatial category and have it be specifically feminine and literary in nature. From such a perspective, she could claim the future as an alternative form of the present, a perspective supposedly unavailable to more powerful male political commentators.

Previous research has shown how Williams's political travel writings tended to embed the future in her present moment, enabling her to write historiographically about very recent events (Rohrbach 48); and how Williams, in her work as a translator, could activate futurity in a specifically deconstructive and cross-cultural way, to mount a complex and ambivalent response to the horrors of colonialism and chattel slavery (Sigler 67-93). This essay builds on those arguments to consider how Williams develops a form of present-oriented history writing that valorizes contingency for its own sake. I begin by considering an early text, Williams's anticolonial epic *Peru* from 1784, to think about how futurity, once it has been aestheticized as "some living Harp" (1512), inserts the future of the Peruvian colonial experience into the British present as a way of mounting an ambivalent critique of imperialism. At the end of the poem, Williams manages to present current events in Britain as "the future Triumphs" (1514) of South American history, once the future of that history has been adapted into a complex musical metaphor. Specifically, Williams develops the figure of a living harp, which, through its paradoxes, can pour the liquid of futurity over the entire world. I next consider the status of prediction in Williams's nonfiction writings from Revolutionary France, beginning in 1790, to consider how Williams aestheticizes contingency in the

face of Burke's own pessimism. I then turn to Williams's 1815 writings, in which she grapples with the question of how best to represent Napoleon Bonaparte. Williams, even while demanding that "we must leave him to posterity," finds that she can begin to "sketch" him here and now, despite her request that we "leave to future times to seize the pencil and draw the bold lines and shades of this tremendous picture" (*Narrative* 188). The invocation of "future times" as an aspect of the present is possible, I argue, because of the way that her sketching metaphors open the future as a component of the here and now, much as her earlier musical metaphors had done.

In the Revolutionary 1790s, it was not unusual for a writer, even a woman writer, to engage in historical terms with current events (Rohrbach 48). What sets Williams apart, explains Emily Rohrbach, is how "the intensity of immediate experience is heightened . . . by mediations of futurity," which "elevate her fervor" (49). Thus "the speculative future gains a speculative immediacy" in Williams's reportage (50). Consider, for instance, Williams's concern, during the Revolution, for the masterpieces of art housed in the Louvre: she warns that "the destruction of those treasures, the legacy of genius to future ages, would be . . . a crime to be arraigned by posterity!" (*Narrative* 166). In this sentence, the violence of the Revolution activates two futurities in defense of the artwork. Williams first appeals to "posterity" to prosecute the destruction of masterpieces, as if the present had no framework yet through which to condemn their destruction. But the artworks themselves, which are feared to have no future beyond the Revolutionary present, were always already themselves relics of the future, "the legacy of genius to future ages" (166). That is, they are an archive of a past futurity and need to be protected on those grounds. The aesthetic register is not expected to curtail brutality, but merely to create new opportunities for responding to it. Art history is meaningful because its objects of study were once oriented toward the future, but the future of art history will be oriented toward the past. In a pincer movement, the two futurities vindicate each other, to discredit the brutality of the present in the name of aesthetics. The immediate present, for Williams, becomes a battleground where a conditional future event (i.e., the possible destruction of the artworks) makes vulnerable a historical record of the future (i.e., the paintings themselves), which also speak to the future. As a result, the present is effectively deferred, as Williams moves the reader between the here and now of her writing, a past future belonging to the artists, and a conditional future to come of the artists'

presumed audience. The crisis of the present becomes, through the unique temporalities of the artwork, a crisis of multiple futurities at varying levels of stability.

I am not inclined or prepared to say that aesthetic discourses invariably open experimental temporalities. The point is merely that they can, if engaged in specific ways such as Williams is doing. Carlos Vera Sánchez has argued that "aesthetic experiences are able to affect temporality," precisely because of their capacity to foster "the potential emergence of a process of entrainment between artwork and subject as a means to come in contact with the radical presentness that the artwork carries within itself" (582, 585). In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz extols "the realm of the aesthetic" as a form of political engagement with the present in the name of the future. Such a gesture "is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations" (1). Implicitly building on Muñoz's arguments, and especially his interest in Ernst Bloch's meditations on "the anticipatory illumination of art" (3), I aim to show how Williams finds in Burkean aesthetic theory a way of thinking about recent history in a global and future-oriented way, that is, in a way basically anathema to Burke's own ways of thinking about politics. Within Romantic scholarship, critics such as Emily Rohrbach and Marc Redfield have shown how aesthetic discourses tend to summon timelines and thus readily open into futurity, a discovery that will also guide my analysis (86-88; 12).

I. "The living harp" at the End of *Peru*

Peru shows the complicated political investments of Williams's aestheticized cross-cultural analysis. It develops a specifically feminist perspective on world history and proves that Williams's lifelong engagements with the aesthetic thought of Edmund Burke were not purely attempts to counter his view of the French Revolution, which would not begin for another five years. Williams would often engage with the printed words of powerful male interlocutors, perhaps Burke most of all (Knott 11). During the Revolution, Williams's subversive appropriations of Burke's ideas took on new political urgency, given Burke's stature as an eminent conservative Whig politician and author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Scholarship often pits Williams against Burke in a sort of implicit culture war about gender, aesthetics,

and the revolution, but the relationship between them is more complex than simply opposition or counterargument. It is not enough to say that Burke represents a conservative viewpoint to which Williams offers her progressive, feminist counterarguments. Rather, by placing her encounter with Burke on the aesthetic level, where Burke had initially made his name as a theorist of the sublime, Williams can access asynchronous dimensions of the political on a global scale. Burke's way of thinking about the sublime involves a complex play of temporalities, moving between auditory and visual phenomena and between atemporal images to repeated, and thus time-bound, musical experiences (Buch 44-59). Williams seems to be attuned to this aspect of Burke's thought, moving between the visual and auditory registers as a way of separating time from chronology to orient the reader toward the future as an aspect of the present and past. Such a strategy, basically the exploitation of deferment, repetition, and figuration gone haywire through the intimate, subversive replication of a dominant discourse, is one that today we would call deconstruction.

This essay does not assert that Williams's deconstructive proclivities indicate that her work is less beholden to the racializing logics of the late eighteenth century, nor that the aesthetic and atemporal register is any more of a panacea. It merely asserts that Williams was using deconstructive logics, and appealing to aesthetic phenomena, as part of her reckoning with the always-already global experience of writing as a white British woman in the Romantic period. I take to heart Taylor Schey's recent observation that figural language in the Romantic period, precisely because of its tendency to produce ambiguity and undecidability, often secured the era's racializing logics, given how eighteenth-century racialization often depended upon the presumed fungibility of Blackness. In a text such as *Peru*, Williams does not at any point exempt herself from the racializing logics of her era, and nor does the poem untie racism's ideological, cultural, and discursive knots. What the poem does do, however, is produce an experiment with time in the context of an aestheticized meditation on colonialism and globality.

Peru proves that Williams was not engaging with Burke merely because of the Revolution or the supposed sublimity of revolutionary-era Paris. As early as 1784 in *Peru*, Williams was already engrossed with Burkean aesthetics. The poem's rhetoric of sublimity is closely modeled on Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* (Thomas 75-79; Duquette, "Horrific Suffering" 116), and the poem

responds to Burke's thinking even when it is not mentioning him, given that the poem's hero, a mythologized version of Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas, pointedly embodies "a form of power excluded from Burke's system" (Duquette, "Horrific Suffering" 121). Burke's implicit presence in *Peru* allows Williams to impugn violent forms of masculinity as part of the overall violence of imperialism, and to connect British imperialism to centuries of Spanish colonialism in South America. After all, Burke's aesthetic thought can be considered a form of gender analysis, given its constant association of sublimity with masculinity and beauty with femininity, a fact which made the *Philosophical Enquiry* a text through which women writers would seek to contest the delimitations of gender in a late-eighteenth-century world (Price 32, 58). Though the *Philosophical Enquiry* is strongly gender-coded, its aesthetics, especially in the hands of other writers, need not be necessarily considered antifeminist. It is a discourse with myriad potentialities. *Peru*, engaging with Burke's ideas, begins to articulate a feminist discourse on time and history. Sublimity becomes a way of women reaching toward the future: "And still her Tablet points to distant Time / Stamp'd on its deathless base, his worth sublime" (Williams 1451-52). As a nonthreatening "feminine sublime" arrives to save the poem's Peruvians from centuries of Spanish imperialism, Williams "defines prophecy as a painful witness to impending political injustice, and to its future reparations, which is enabled through . . . merciful feminine friendship" (Duquette, "Horrific Suffering" 121). That is, Williams uses a feminized version of the Burkean sublime to open the future to the possibility of justice.

Rayna Rosenova has done the most to show how "Williams as poet prophesies the fall of the Peruvian empire and the state of innocence from the perspective of her stance in the future, thus picturing the events as anticipated rather than already realized" (par. 9)—a claim with which I wholeheartedly agree. To extend Rosenova's insight, I would like to examine *Peru*'s concluding musical metaphor, which achieves two contradictory things at once: first, it announces the sublime musical skill of the muse as a figure for political poetry generally (dare we call her a muse-ician?); yet it also taps into the depersonalized power of the Aeolian harp, a standard Romantic metaphor for engaging poetically and in a depersonalized way with the present moment. It is striking that Williams, at the poem's end, uses the Aeolian harp image as a way of opening geopolitics into the future, through the figure of the literary woman:

> The Muse, whose pensive soul with anguish wrung,
> Throb'd as her early Lyre she trembling strung,
> Shed the weak tear, and breath'd the powerless sigh,
> Which soon in cold Oblivion's Shade must die;
> Pants with the wish thy Deeds may rise to Fame,
> Bright on some living Harp's immortal frame;
> While on the string of Extasy, it pours
> Thy future Triumphs o'er unnumber'd Shores.
> (*Peru* 1507-14)

At the beginning of the quoted passage, the poet is telling a story about what the muse had been doing—that is, sensitively playing the harp. The action is narrated in the past perfect tense, as if to suggest that the performance has been completed and can now be evaluated as a historical fact. We are told that the muse's soul "throb'd," a term that seemingly connects her soul to her heart or displaces the soul into the heart. The nearness in sound between "harp" and "heart" makes the connection all the more apparent.

The intimacy is deep, because, in a strange role reversal, it is the musician who "trembles" once the string is plucked, as if the harp were playing the muse. The muse is rendered the passive instrument of the "living Harp." Thus, somewhat perversely, the poem resolves what had been the contradiction between the environmental passivity of an Aeolian harp and the emotional power of the musician's techne. These good vibrations are enhanced by Williams's use of the verb "strung" rather than the noun "string" or the verb "strum." "Strung" is a strange verb, as it seems to suggest the installation of the instrument's strings, rather than the playing of the harp as a musical instrument. The strangeness is enough that the word "strum" arises implicitly to the ear given its nearness to "strung" in the context of someone playing a stringed instrument. Yet it would be unusual for a human harpist to "strum" their instrument; that is, rather, how the wind plays an Aeolian harp. This further connects the strings of the instrument to the muse's actions intrinsically—much like we have already seen with the muse's heart-soul and the harp's status as a "living" thing, in contrast to the muse's role as a stock allegorical figure. Williams allows no space between the metaphorical lyre and the allegorical musician, nor the preparation of the instrument and the playing of it. The word "as" is intended to convey a simultaneity of time, according to which two

things—the soul's throbbing and the stringing of the lyre—are narrated at once, as if they were two facets of the same event. We can recognize this as a deconstructive provocation, building two times into one and the same time and marking the intimacies implicit in the disjuncture. The word "as" also seems to hint at the possibility of a latent simile, which would compare the muse's soul to the muse's lyre, specifically its strings. I mean merely that one can read the line against the grain, as if it were a simile. Such a (mis-)reading attempts to undo the simultaneity denoted by the "as," as it locates a bit of distance, and thus deferral, into a line meant to announce the simultaneity of the throbbing and singing. Reading the line in this way, it becomes syntactically uncertain whether the muse herself throb'd, shed, and breath'd, or whether the muse throb'd like a shedding and breathing lyre. These several ambiguities all point to the same effect: the symbolic instrument and allegorical musician are intimately connected. The muse effectively *is* her living harp, or is living as a harp.

There is next a shift in temporality in the passage, as we move from a narration in the past perfect tense to a statement about the future: "which soon . . . must die." The passage does not really register a shift from past actions of the muse to the future "death" of her sigh—rather, the muse's sigh belongs to the past, but will "die" soon, inevitably. This too is a deconstructive gesture, as it reveals death to be an aspect of life and part of a pastness to come. One must begin to consider how a sigh—that is, an exhalation of breath—could be alive enough to die in its own right, or what the death of a nonliving thing—a sound, an exhalation—might mean. The sigh of the muse, rather than the muse herself, is literally "sentenced" to death, when an errant but fateful subordinate clause beginning "which soon" seals the sigh's own fate against all common sense and schedules it metaphorical and allegorical demise. The harp is living, but the sigh shall soon be dead. From there the passage moves into the present tense ("it pours")—yet what it "pours" into the present is the future ("thy future triumphs"). The reader begins to realize, after some ninety pages of poetry tracing several centuries of history, that what had been narrated as something past is after all an ongoing event. It is simply that the poet, connected as she is to the future, sees the present as something completely past. It is as if Peruvian history were part of world history, and as if world history were, in turn, part of the allegorical framing of the history of Peru. It becomes clear and unavoidable that *Peru* "may be echoing England's own history as a colonial power"

(Thomas 76). Williams here—as we will soon see her doing in later texts as she discusses Burke and Napoleon Bonaparte—treats the future as an aspect of the present, and contrasts the future to the violence of the past.

There is additionally a tension in the passage between the contingent, as expressed with "the wish" that something "may" happen, and the necessary (i.e., "must die"). It allows the death of the sigh to be described as something animalistic, and its panting can signify both the muse's desperate desire and the sigh's own terminal illness. It is vexing to think about a sigh panting—as if one form of exhalation could perform another, without giving up its claim to being a sigh rather than a pant. The muse desires only that "thy Deeds," meaning the Indigenous peoples' centuries-long struggle against their Spanish colonizers, be better publicized, for instance in an epic poem. In this sense, *Peru* is finally revealed to be the object of its own desire, to the extent that it will be willing to mark for death the very expression of that desire. It is only at this point that the poem *Peru* is quickly metaphorized as a "living Harp" that metaphorically "pours" a liquid of the future over the rest of the world. Or, rather, we learn that the frame of the living Harp is not subject to time, being "immortal"; yet its strings are made of emotion, specifically "Extasy," the feeling of being lifted outside of oneself. Once more, it is like the breath has taken on an independent life, and death, of its own. The harp was "strung" in the past, but the strings continue to do things in the present (hence: "while," which suggests an ongoing action). And so, the immortal living Harp is said to interact with its own objectified string across a temporal divide. It is as if the string were no longer considered part of the harp, or the non-musical part of the harp, its frame rather than its strings, were the essence of its being. Yet the string is specifically what "pours"—that is, sings; that is, writes—"thy future Triumphs" into the wider world. In this way, the anti-colonial violence of the 1781 Cuzco Rebellion is captured in the metaphorical musical instrument that is Williams's poem *Peru*, while the musical instrument, in the name of the anti-colonial project of Peru's Indigenous people, begins to conquer the rest of the world ("o'er unnumber'd Shores"). That is, the poem's homage to anti-colonial resistance gives way to new modes of futural historiography which themselves are sent forth to dominate globally, spreading outwardly from the poetic metropole of *Peru*. The poem ends by creating a future empire of counter-imperial historiography, to valorize "Thy future triumphs." It is an image of the impossible, of a harp-frame taking agency of its own, of activating the future in the present as an act of anti-

colonial colonial poetic historiography. To be clear, I am not trying to assert that Indigenous knowledges and European knowledges are or were always inseparable. Rather, I am making the more limited claim that, in Williams's European imagination, the best way to valorize traditional Indigenous knowledges would be to show them operating as colonial agents of the future, working at an aesthetic level rather than a directly political one. For the British Williams, any notion of global encounter necessarily presumes a colonizing episteme, but what she sees as the enduring and revolutionary qualities of Indigenous knowledge can be displaced, through deferment and repetition, into the future, if they can be aestheticized.

There is one more echo to trace in this complex image, one that connects the living harp to *Peru* as a textual production, and to women's writing communities more broadly. By ending with this image of the "living Harp," the poem alludes to its own framing matter, meaning its opening dedication "To Mrs. Montagu," namely Elizabeth Montagu, leader of the Bluestocking Circle. The dedication was essential to helping Williams establish her reputation as a poet (Kennedy 29). The dedication of the poem had used the same language of muse and harp: there, the muse is supposed to pour her notes into Mrs. Montagu, and "then should thy Virtues live upon her [i.e., the muse's] Lyre" (Williams, *Peru*, sec. "To Mrs. Montagu," line 7). Hence, the muse, in sounding the lyre at the end of the poem, effectively animates Mrs. Montagu's virtues. The final harp-frame image effectively symbolizes the poem's narrative frame: symbolically, the poem ends with its own opening dedication.

This ouroboros of a framing structure is crucial because it suggests a place for women's agency within the deconstructive play of historical and musical reference points. The question of agency is of course never straightforward in the domains of deconstruction or history; it is not so simple as Williams claiming a space for feminist artistic expression through her imagery. Rather, the structure highlights the ways that history, in its vast and collective movement, opens the possibility for retroactive, collective reinterpretation, which is asserted as a form of agency, broadly construed. David Gary Shaw argues that deconstructive argumentation might accommodate broader, possibly collective and narrative forms of agency for today's historians. For Muñoz as well, finding modes of writing histories of collectivity can be a turn toward futurity and potentiality, because collectivity is a matter of "belonging in difference" (20). Williams's implicit re-invocation of Montagu attempts just

such a thing, as it credits the Bluestockings with centuries-old and far-away acts of resistance and reserves a future for female genius within the arc of history. The genius claimed goes under the name Montagu but would seem to be a collective project, given the Bluestockings as a social organization. This is significant because, as Derrida has noted, the term "genius" is so thoroughly gender-coded and individualized as to render the very concept of female genius, especially in the plural, strange and futural: "the future of this word becomes therefore stranger than the singular fate of its past. If this future is bequeathed to us, we shall have to answer for it" (*Geneses* 5). Williams appears to be claiming such a responsibility, of "answering for" the geniuses of a woman through her future-oriented poetic history of *Peru* and its musical framing structures. Deborah Kennedy observes that the poet Anna Seward responded to *Peru* as if it were a bequest to women's writing per se, a musical gift to the world from a "lovely female bard" who had played the "golden strings" of "the epic lyre" (30-31). The complex image of the harp frame at the end of *Peru* is thus a way for the poem to comment on its own structure and intellectual community. Leah M. Thomas has observed of *Peru* that, "though these historical players are male, [Williams] retells this history through female kinship ties," that is, through narrative means and female collectivity (75). The dedication to Montagu, and its reactivation at the poem's conclusion, is another way that the poem credits anti-colonial resistance, even when undertaken largely by men, to networks of women. This metatextual structure implies that the female-oriented values, such as sensibility and "extasy," that the poem had been attributing to the Incas, have all along been derived from Montagu. Thus, the poem acknowledges that its vision of history has been a retroactively constructed fantasy. After all, Montagu, a figure from the poem's own moment, initiates the affects and virtues that the poem's historiography locates in historical Peru.

The result of the textual play is a double bind where, in Williams's estimation, European knowledge and Indigenous knowledge would seem to be inseparable through their shared orientation toward the future. It makes the poem complicit in the colonizing project even as it champions an Indigenous uprising. This sort of complexity is a facet of the poem that Juan Sánchez has noticed, too:

> While the poem works to direct the British imperial project away from an ideology of conquest, as critics rightly argue, it does so only in an effort to reinforce an older colonialist paradigm that would not only come to serve as the basis of Britain's so-called 'Second Empire' but was also derived, ironically, from Spain's own justifications of empire. (173)

I agree with Sánchez's assessment but would like to suggest one more step, regarding the poem's final lines: with the image of the muse's living harp, not only does *Peru* yet again reinforce a colonizing paradigm for decolonization, but it credits a contemporary white Englishwoman with the first stirrings of a global anti-colonial impulse. It is as if a contemporary European had inspired several centuries of South American history—as if Peru, in enduring colonization since the sixteenth century, were already drawing Williams's present as a way to situate its own future acts of decolonization as a peaceful future for the rest of the world. And yet the future ideal of peace, in this poem, has itself been metaphorized as the spoils of colonization: peace is here described as a foreign luxury from the future specifically, "massive Treasure, yet unknown to Kings" (*Peru* 1444). It is luxurious because rare, and rare because it is yet to come, and yet to come because it is impossible now.

II. "Its last page": On the outcome of the Revolution in France

Williams's nonfiction prose writings on the French Revolution engage the present as history in similarly Burkean terms, and similarly expose the past to the present and present to the future. Williams's engagement with Burkean aesthetics had become, by 1790, more politically fraught than it had been during the era of *Peru*, given Burke's new status as the leading Anglophone voice condemning the Revolution. Williams again adopts what today we would call a deconstructive strategy. She turns Burke's texts against each other or points out the internal inconsistencies in Burke's arguments while embracing the consequent ambiguities as political possibilities in themselves. In her initial 1790 instalment of *Letters Written in France*, Williams contrasts her two home cities in Burkean terms, arguing that "London has . . . most of the beautiful, and Paris of the sublime, according to Mr. Burke's definition of these qualities" (94). Famously she describes the Fête de la Fédération as "the most sublime

spectacle which, perhaps, was ever represented on the theatre of this earth" (63). Williams here appropriates the voice of traditionalism and turns it against itself, pitting the young Burke of the *Philosophical Enquiry* against the more ubiquitous Burke of the *Reflections*, to try to preserve what was revolutionary in his aesthetic thought. The texts helped Williams to become the most significant contemporary interpreter of the French Revolution for the British left (Bray; Craciun).

Part of Williams's strategy is to put herself in the centre of a horrific or confusing political scene and offer firsthand accounts in what Ernst Bloch would call "a utopian light" (28). Yet her work goes beyond the reporting upon Paris as "a significant environment" (28), because Williams embeds herself in Paris the place but not in any stable time: Paris, given its sublimity, possibility, and horror, can give the constancy of a *here* to a riven *now*. Williams locates the value of urban experience in and through aesthetic production: "spare, oh, spare this devoted city!" (*Narrative* 166). Williams urges her readers, on the basis that "Paris belongs not to the French alone; all Europe is interested in its preservation, in its science, in its literature, its arts" (166). That is, the trauma and death associated with Paris produce a demand not for narration but for an archive. The present Paris belongs to the French, but Paris as site for the "preservation" of cultural achievement, is pan-European. The internationalism of Paris emerges as an aspect of its contemporary futurity. This experience is not fully cosmopolitan (and hence, not cosmopolitan at all), as it produces a European Paris specifically; yet it is also post-national in orientation. As Derrida holds, the demand for an archive arises from the future and announces a willingness to anticipate the future in the face of trauma and death (*Archive Fever* 80).

Through the Reign of Terror, the violence of day-to-day events became increasingly horrific to Williams and, in practical political terms, indefensible to her British readership. Stephen Blakemore suggests that Williams may have adopted a future-oriented perspective as a defense mechanism: "She talks about the troublesome violence by establishing a future perspective, a temporal distance, that will mysteriously justify the violence by making it disappear 'in the minds of posterity'—displaced in time and space" (186). Yet perhaps it is not a case of bad faith after all. My sense is that Williams is not seeking to occlude the events in question, but rather to confront them from a new, feminized vantage point. To navigate the politics of a more and more wary

moment, Williams relied upon a contradictory historical perspective of a type similar to that pioneered in *Peru*. "Anarchy cannot be lasting," Williams argues in 1793, explaining that:

> the evils it may produce will be but the evils of this day and of to-morrow . . . if the evils of anarchy will be temporary, they will also be terrible. . . . Upon the whole, the French revolution is still in its progress, and who can decide how its last page will finish? (*Letters Written in France* 162)

The problem with this argument is that it opens completely the wrong question for Williams's rhetorical purposes. Any skeptical reader would simply reply: well, since you asked, it seems as if Mr. Burke has been able to decide, more cannily than you, how its last page will finish. Williams attempts to stave off this response by arguing that reporting from the future is different from making an accurate prediction: "He that makes a number of bold guesses," she posits,

> will always succeed in some of them. . . . [T]he judicious friends of the French Revolution foresaw as well as [Burke] did, and feared, the evils he predicted; but as they believed there was a possibility that they might not happen, they were glad to see a trial made for the instruction of the human race.
> (166)

Here, Williams affirms that things could have been otherwise, and that this contingency is valuable in and of itself. It is as if, for Williams, every present moment brings along with it the dead futures of the past—the futures that never arrived, "of fears and expectations" of the past's worlds to come (Jameson 297). Williams orients her text toward these dead futures even in the face of their nonexistence. She makes a point to trace counterfactual details alongside the events she has witnessed. For instance, she says in 1795: "Had the convention, when Henriot [sic] sent them his mandate, ordered him to be instantly put to death, their orders, if they could have been promulgated out of the precincts of the hall, would undoubtedly have been observed" (*Letters of Politics* 79-80). In this doubly counterfactual example, Williams not only relates a conditional counterfactual supposition but also adds an additional hypothetical practical

consideration about the dissemination of information, to nest layers of conditionality into her eyewitness report. Williams thus activates what Lisa Lowe would call the "past conditional temporalities" of texts that explore "what could have been" (40-41). As Lowe suggests, such a technique can generate cross-cultural intimacies, as Williams's texts certainly do.

Emily Rohrbach interprets Williams's predictions differently than I do. For Rohrbach, Williams's "narrative both performs the failure to predict the events that will transpire after 1790 and suggests that no one, not even Edmund Burke in his gloomy outlook, predicted—or could have predicted—the violence of the Reign of Terror by drawing on a historical pattern of cause-and-effect relations" (49). What I see in the quotation from Williams above is something a little bit different. It is not that Williams and Burke have both been proven wrong, or that guessing right would never have been possible—it is rather that Burke got lucky with his guesses. Williams's argument thus depends upon reconstituting the element of chance in the historical register, so as to emphasize that the world as it currently exists for her was not inevitably that way. What interests me is that Williams is avoiding the more obvious counterarguments: she does not claim, for instance, that the violence in France has been overstated, nor does she claim that such violence has been a wise investment in future liberty. She emphasizes, rather, the very uselessness of the violence. She does not assure us that all will be better tomorrow, but rather affirms that today and tomorrow will be similarly violent, as if to say that it will be a permanent revolution. Most importantly, she deems it best not to make up one's mind while the interminable event remains in progress. In response to those, such as Burke, who would argue that process *x* must yield result *y*, Williams, without denying that his warnings have been borne out, nevertheless insists that there was always a possibility that the evils might not have transpired. Such a possibility is, for Williams, the thing to be valued in itself—even once the evils have emerged. Rather than hoping that things will work out for the better, she mounts a defense of contingency, affirming the perhaps, even and especially when the perhaps proves impossible to sustain in the face of the evidence.

Williams is basing her response to Burke upon questions of narrative and genre: not having reached "its last page," she notes, it is simply not clear to what extent this Revolution partakes of comedy or melodrama, tragedy or farce, sentimental fiction or gothic romance. That is, much as she had likened her epic poem *Peru* to a harp's song, she here likens her political reportage to a novel.

She presents her writing as a form uniquely capable of traversing these generic gaps, to enable the reader to observe the Revolution from the future. Despite Williams's constant emphasis on futurity, these passages also reflect the historical novel as a genre, narrating the event through the rise of collective consciousness and an array of historically significant personages. They are what Jameson would call "science fiction," presenting a historical narrative of the future. Read in this way, Williams's engagements with Burke can be seen as a salvo in the decades-long battle between utopian radical writing, both fictional and nonfictional, and the conservative historical novel, in which a utopian "resistance to historical explanation" characterizes the more progressive works (London 555). Yet Williams refuses to relinquish historical explanation as a mode of writing—she merely relinquishes the need for it to correspond to historical facts. As Orianne Smith notes, "Williams's career was shaped by her confidence in the utopian potential of the written word as an agent for social change," even as she remained a writer in search of an "appropriate genre for her progressive millenarianism" (99). Williams's writings from France can be seen as experiments in genre in which aesthetics and politics are mutually constitutive and therefore inseparable, and in which multiple and competing temporalities undermine the realization of any universalist, cosmopolitan utopia. Muñoz makes a distinction between "possibility" (meaning, "a thing that simply might happen") and "potentiality" (meaning "a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense"), preferring the latter (9). The distinction is not so clear-cut in Williams, who seeks to activate the potentiality of that which *might have happened* but did not. She consistently finds metaphors and genres in which past possibility can assert itself today as potentiality.

It is here, in the space between genres, impossible histories, worldwide literatures, and democracy to come, that Williams seems the most deconstructive. One will note how Williams's responses to Burke closely anticipate a twentieth-century debate between Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida over Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Purloined Letter." Basically, we have Burke assuring the reader that political violence will always "reach its destination," so to speak, in a "proper and circular itinerary" (Lacan 53), while Williams, taking Derrida's part in the discussion, insists upon the counterfactual "possibility [that] belongs to structure"—meaning, that even "when it [i.e., here, the Terror] does arrive its capacity to not arrive torments it with an internal

drifting" ("Purveyor" 201). The outcome is not assured even when it has happened, as it still always might not have happened. Williams's term for such an "internal drifting" is "history." It is an act of speculative thought; it presents such thought as its own kind of revolution. Much as for Derrida, Williams takes it upon herself "to link the 'as if' [i.e., the historical existence of contingency] to the thinking of an event," such as the Revolution or Cuzco Rebellion, "to meditate this quasi-automatic alliance between chance and necessity, between accident and essence" (*Without* 213; "Time" ix). Counterfactually vindicated by the continuing historicity of chance, Williams claims what Alain Badiou would call "the subjective dimension of a delayed temporality" (3), such that the present is for her, but not for Burke, always still yet to come. History, for Williams, is a formal property of a text and a species of anti-philosophy, rather than an account of what has happened or is happening.

The difference between Burke and Williams reveals the incommensurability of their historicisms. Like Burke, Williams comments upon current events as they occur—her writing certainly makes her an important figure in the history of journalism and foreign correspondence. But she understands current events not to be the result of past decisions, but as one of many possible outcomes, each of which are preserved as a monad. She reports on these events from the future, it would seem, and with a broad, even cosmic perspective that can ascertain the randomness inherent in the present being what it has been. She offers retrospective commentary on the events occurring all around her at that moment. Burke, on the other hand, has been making predictions. That is basically the opposite approach to Williams's. A prediction requires that we extrapolate from currently available data to project a likely outcome later. When we predict, we exist in the here and now and outline events yet to come. Williams's perspective presents the obverse of such a discourse: she seeks to describe contemporary experience from a perspective that has not yet become possible or emerged, or that has even been foreclosed given the vagaries of the present. As stated before, she links the contingent, the "as if," to the thinking of the event, and speaks confidently of how the present will one day look.

By 1796, Williams was dedicating the American edition of her writings to "the Right Hon. Edmund Burke," offering it "with extreme diffidence" to "your own prophetic reflections," acknowledging to Burke that "your puny opponents, if opponents they may be called, are either sunk into oblivion, or

remembered only as associated with the degrading cause they attempted to support." She goes so far as to assert that: "every true friend of mankind, anticipating the judgment of posterity, views, with esteem and veneration, the unvarying Moralist" Burke (*Residence* xiv). This act of tribute represents not merely Williams's reassessment of Burke's ideas, nor even primarily an attempt to disentangle the young, aesthetically oriented Burke from the later Burke of the *Reflections*, as she had been attempting in 1790. Rather, Williams is hollowing out a hegemonic discourse and opening it toward its own internal aporias. Note the strange temporality of the praise in the passage. She praises Burke as a prophet, for his ability to predict the future. His predictions have been validated, Williams acknowledges. Yet even if history has borne out his view, futurity can always still change our view of Burke's predictions. Burke is himself called "unvarying," as if he were a static textual object held up against the dynamic situation in France, and yet the "true friend of mankind" would be she who can "anticipat[e] the judgment of posterity" upon Burke (*Residence* xiv). Williams remains committed to separating two forms of futurity here: there is the futurity that predicts, and the one that can see the past predictions from the future, rather than from the present, where they have been borne out. In separating these forms of futurity, Williams again splits the difference between "possibility" and "potentiality," by insisting upon the possibilities that could have been latent in the present, but were not. Burke's imagined future from 1790 is now Williams's 1796 present, and yet a view from the yet more distant future, if enacted today as a praxis of "anticipation," will reveal new possibilities in the present.

Williams is effectively changing the underlying suppositions of what history is, pointing to a constitutive openness and antagonism at its basis, and thus refusing to allow it to become "a continuous space" (Koselleck 23). And this can be understood as an interruption to her universalism, because the "all" that she champions is internally riven, and the field of power continually broken by small acts of resistance from within. Williams seems to explore an insight into politics that is today associated with the deconstructive thinkers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: that is, that there can be no clear demarcation between inside and outside of power, and no way to separate the contingent from the necessary (142). As Laclau and Mouffe explain, "hegemony is basically metonymical: its effects always emerge from a surplus of meaning which results from an operation of displacement" (141). Williams is modeling

this same sort of thought in her textual interactions with Burke, creating global encounters based on deferral and difference. She exploits an openness internal to Burke's thought and apprehends it from the future in the name of the encounter between necessity and contingency. In the face of arguments largely about the value of tradition, Williams activates within Burke the "judgment of posterity" that always might have augured new political possibilities, displacing national concerns into a global frame. It is a way for Williams, now on the defense, to upend the male-dominated historiographic discourse from within.

III. Future Times

Williams resolved in 1798 to "no longer hang my harp upon the willows, and despair of the future. I shall begin with the second volume of Napoleon's history, . . . leaving the first volume to a future period" (*Narrative* 4). The allusion is in the first place to *Othello*, specifically Desdemona's willow song, which would traditionally have been accompanied by a lute (Brennecke 37); by the eighteenth century the notion of hanging one's harp upon the willows had become the refrain of a folk song, e.g., "I'll hang my harp upon the willow tree," which (in some versions) posits musical performance as an alternative to war and violence: "I thought no more of my master's sword, / When I played on my master's lute" ("Three Chords"; "I'll"). With this traditional song in mind, Williams vows a new and different course of action, committing to rethinking Bonaparte in a way detached from linear time. She will write histories in which what is second precedes what is first.

By 1815, Williams was still adamant about the present impossibility of describing Bonaparte, but had switched into a visual register for her historiographical metaphors:

> You desire me to give you a sketch of the character of this extraordinary personage; but who at present can well acquit themselves of such a task? We must leave him to posterity. Time will place his figure in the point of view and at the proper distance to become a study for mankind. At present, and above all in his country, we have seen him too near; we have felt his influence too powerfully. . . . But if we leave to future times to seize the pencil and draw the bold lines and shades of this tremendous picture, we

> may now sketch some of the minuter, scattered traits of character . . . before they fade from the remembrance. (*Narrative* 188)

Williams here makes a distinction without a difference, contrasting her current verbal "sketch" with the pencil-drawn lines-and-shades (meaning: a sketch, rather than a painting) that will be possible only in the future. That is, the difference appears temporally, as a deferment, rather than between media. Because these media are indistinguishable, she suggests, a coherent description of Napoleon will only be possible in times to come yet is also something that she can achieve immediately. To clarify: I am not suggesting that sketches in general cannot accommodate difference; rather, merely that Williams insists upon creating difference through deferral even in a case where scant difference can be found, if only then to remark upon the proximity between the differentiated modes. To "sketch" the "scattered traits" becomes, in a sense, to prepare the study of what will eventually be developed into only a study. A conditional clause ("if we leave") ensures that the act will not be inevitable; within that clause, though, Williams uses the present tense ("to seize . . . and draw"), to illustrate that, although these events are occurring presently, they remain contingent. The metaphorical conversion of writing to drawing presents the work of nonfictional narrative as a slowly developing image. It also allows Williams to begin differentiating between "drawings" and "sketches" in the same way that studies made in preparation for larger artworks can be exhibited in their own right, as studies. Thus, Williams exploits two modes of representing the present, treating them as reliant upon one another; meanwhile, metaphorizing history-writing as the production of a still image eliminates the appearance of any disjuncture between temporalities and effaces the rhetorical task performed by her conditional present tense.

With this argument, I seek to connect Williams to a tradition of feminist praxis that looks both to art and figuration as pathways for cultural critique and experiments with temporality. I particularly have in mind the work of the art historian Marsha Meskimmon, who argues that art is not "mute matter awaiting form, but a locus for" thought experiments which may "[posit] the *possibility* of feminist futures" (366). Not everyone, of course, has such high hopes for aesthetic discourses—there is certainly a tradition of scholarship more skeptical of the political efficacy of aesthetics. For instance, classic Marxist scholarship

has sometimes seen the presumed autonomy of art as a signal of its limitations as a site of possible social transformation. For Tony Bennett, for instance, "the structure of aesthetic discourse is inherently suspect in its political leanings, no matter how radical the political protocols displayed on its surface" (47). Others, such as Herbert Marcuse, find a middle ground between optimism and pessimism, offering limited hope that aesthetic discourses might create "another reason, another sensibility," that can make thinkable emergent forms of social organization (7). My purpose in this essay is not to settle this matter, nor really to take sides in it. My aim is simply to indicate that Williams makes repeated recourse to art objects and aesthetic theory, often through figural language, as a way to generate asynchronous possibilities, which, I would suggest, was a feminist act in an era when clock and calendar were coming to dominate culture, and were arising from male-dominated fields such as the military, empire, and business (Sigler 2-8).

Sketches, including verbal "sketches," were ideologically fraught and highly gendered in the nineteenth century. "As essentially private objects," often associated with women's artistic production, and with a necessarily unfinished air, they exerted a generic force meant to keep women writers and artists out of openly political conversations, as Richard C. Sha explains (145). And yet the rhetoric of sketching also opened "the possibility of agency" for women writers such as Jane Austen and Charlotte and Anne Brontë, who could rely upon the ideological connotations of the sketch "to exploit the instability of public and private spheres to the benefit of women" (2, 146). As Sha goes on to explain:

> the sketch placed yet another double bind on women: on the one hand, those who want to be thought of as ladies are encouraged to sketch or to call their finished works "sketches," and on the other, the unfinished-ness of the sketch, albeit intrinsic, virtually guarantees that women will be criticized for their want of self-command to finish what they start. Whereas women's lack of finish is read as a lack, men of the Romantic period are able to transform this lack into a sign of genius. (151)

It is in this context that we should read Williams's "sketch" of Napoleon Bonaparte. It becomes a way for her to interrogate the field of current events

from an occluded perspective, that of the future. It reframes her zeal for irresolution as a genre requirement. As Sha stresses, the feminine propriety associated with the sketch could give cover to women writers as they pursued transgressive ideas (2). Williams's many rhetorical acts of humility and deference should be read in this way. Natasha Duquette proposes something similar in her book *Veiled Intent: Dissenting Women's Aesthetic Approach to Biblical Interpretation*, which shows how aesthetic discourses could give women writers, including Williams, cover for their dangerous political ideas.

Within Williams's sketch, the invocation of "future times" is filled with its own ambiguities. On the one hand, Williams seems to be describing herself as someone engaged in a long-term project, one that she will be beginning now and completing later. But the sentence also allows for the possibility of a strange personification: it is possible to read the sentence as a statement that her preliminary sketches are to be distinguished from the artwork of a more ambitious visual artist named "future times." In this way, the entire future becomes a potentially present and unified human being, and that being is, at one and the same time, Helen Maria Williams and not. Williams's whole project, in a circular way, receives its authorization: in order for the bold lines of this anthropomorphic "future times" to be properly insightful, Williams must *now* sketch the details. Yet, the details, if they are to contribute to a larger image in any coherent way, must follow the terrain initially mapped out by the bold lines. The two forms of representation require each other and, it seems, necessarily precede one another. Hence, the difference between the contemporary sketch artist and "future times" is not simply a matter of waiting until later: it is a gap that separates Williams from herself, setting both selves in motion together. She offers her present work as source material for a grander sketch to come, and even justifies it on those grounds; yet ironically, that grander sketch, drawn by a person called Helen Maria Williams or perhaps "future times," exists conditionally in the here and now, as a figure of potentiality. Williams is producing a gap not between present and future, as it might at first have seemed, but between now-as-it-is and now-perhaps. She is inserting a possible future into the here and now as a supplementary and alternative form of journalism, "a future in the present," as Muñoz, following C. L. R. James, would call it (49-64). And yet in no sense is that conditional mode of memorial superadded. It is structurally necessary, given how, from the very beginning, the sketches of today have been always already *preliminary*: they receive their meaning and

impetus only in relation to the future histories that will be, perhaps, drawn in times to come.

IV. The "faithful pencil": The history of the present

A fissure opens between Williams-the-foreign-correspondent and Williams the future historian as they mutually cohabit the present day. About the War in the Vendée in 1796, Williams claims that it would be impossible for readers today to believe that the slaughter of priests had actually occurred, given the extent of its horror. Blakemore says: "she was, as far as I know, the first British contemporary to insist that the Jacobins were engaged in systematic genocide," and she dwells upon the extraordinary challenge of representing atrocity (234). But then, immediately next, Williams outlines what the historians of the future shall be able to accomplish: "the historian, whose faithful pencil must trace the hideous features of this Vendean war, in all their deformity, shall describe scenes which I shall not name," and will face an incredulous public given how "the events of the last five years, which have sometimes led us into regions of hitherto undiscovered beauty and sublimity, have also dragged our reluctant steps into dens of undescribed and unknown monsters, whose existence we had never till now believed" (*Letters of Scenes* 37). Note that in this passage, "till now" refers to the future, not the time of Williams's writing. Only in the "last five years" have aesthetic discoveries begun to portend danger. Yet, now that we have discovered the "dens" of these "monsters," we can retroactively understand them to have existed all along. Nevertheless, the "monsters" remain to this day "undescribed," as if to suggest that our recent discoveries pertain to something yet to be accounted for, or as if we had discovered a futurity embedded, as a new aesthetic regime, in the present. It is a retroactive movement in the sense that it is "our steps," not those of the people of the future, who will be affected by this pictorial reinterpretation to come. Even while Williams seems, in this passage, to renounce her duty as an eyewitness and reporter ("scenes which I shall not name"), she then begins recounting this history in its full horror, herself in the here and now. It is as if she is no longer coextensive with the "I" who is writing the text. "My pen," she says, "wearied of tracing successive pictures of human crimes and human calamities, pursues its task with reluctance," as if her pen had an affect of its own (1). It is a similar form of personification to the "living Harp" of *Peru*.

Recounting, in a stream of consciousness, her days in prison, she says:

> one of those daring bridges that are thrown across the gulph, and that tradition calls the work of supernatural agency, after the first transport of admiration, in which the mind loses all traces of the past, or thought of the future, has subsided, the torrent-rill which rushed down the Luxembourg tapestry presented itself in my memory, . . . You will forgive this digression: my mind is full of those scenes of beauty and grandeur which have calmed my troubled spirit[.]
> (*Letters of Politics* 38-39)

Williams here alludes to the tapestry hanging in her former prison cell, "which described a landscape of romantic beauty" (36). She uses the Burkean discourse of the sublime and beautiful as a "bridge" that can help us cross the aporias of memory. She then burns down that bridge upon crossing it into the future. The Luxembourg tapestry is a double-edged image, symbolizing her own mental capacity to maintain hope and optimism in the face of confinement, but also recurring to her mind as a marker of her traumatic confinement. Even when later she is walking through nature, the scenes of "nature" are traumatically aestheticized, such that the world's torrent-rill are allusions to the tapestry. The artwork has become "real life," while the landscape has become, in effect, a representation of that tapestry. The tapestry represents freedom in confinement but also the permanent confinement of the free. Because it is specifically a Luxembourg tapestry, it carries connotations of modernity and democracy—that is, an aesthetic commitment to engaging with the world through "everyday events" rather than "grand scenes of history or faith" (Brosens 53). History, through the symbolic tapestry, becomes a psychodrama in which the historian's capacity for memory, even with regard to current events, confronts a tendency to "[lose] all traces of the past, or thought of the future" (*Letters of Politics* 38-39). Beauty as an aesthetic category provides a possible way to relate a psychological and testimonial crisis, yet it also renders the crisis permanent. And so writing traumatic current events as history will demand new narrative techniques. Now, instead of the image of a tapestry, she moves to that of a "sketch":

> An historical sketch of this period is no common picture of human nature, . . . [rather,] it is like the savage scenery of Salvator, where all is wildly horrible, and every figure on the canvas is a murderer. We are forced to wander through successive evils.
> (*Letters of Scenes* 78-79)

The word "successive" implies a series, the production of a narrative dependent upon linear time. Yet "sketch" implies a static image capturing a moment. In the space between these two temporalities, Williams's narratives of the Revolution reckon with the trauma of war and the open-endedness of Revolution.

Williams's texts conduct experiments in figuration in which aesthetics and politics are mutually constitutive and therefore inseparable, and the historical record only becomes possible in posterity as the future is constructed as a present possibility through international frames. Thus Williams, to borrow a phrase from Duquette, "created vibrant and generative spaces of cross-cultural exchange" ("Dissenting Cosmopolitanism" 94). Yet the temporal component of this work complicates the current consensus that Williams's work was primarily "cosmopolitan" (Craciun 6), even if it was relentlessly internationalizing. As Williams figuratively aestheticizes time to create a theory of historical contingency, she produces a specifically British perspective on current events that has been constructed out of the past and future vantages of international others. Such cross-temporal and cross-cultural thought is not quite a blanket commitment to cosmopolitanism as such, as it constructs world citizenship across a gender-coded temporal gap that would render such any global perspective merely figurative and, to most, inaccessible. It is a specifically literary and specifically feminist mode of staging global encounters as history.

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