

International Visiting Research Fellowship 2016

Vivasvan Soni

'Aesthetics and the Crisis of Judgment in the Eighteenth Century'



As part of its international research collaboration, the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions funds outstanding international scholars in the field to visit one or more of the Australian nodes for a period of between four weeks and two months, to work with members of the Centre on a research program of their choice. Visitors are invited to present their work in lectures or symposia, where they will receive feedback from and engage in discussion with members of the Centre, promoting collaborative research.

Vivasvan Soni held an International Visiting Research Fellowship in 2016 and travelled to Australia to work with the Centre's nodes at The University of Queensland (UQ) and The University of Melbourne (UMelb). Vivasvan is Associate Professor of English at Northwestern University where he teaches eighteenth-century British literature, as well as critical and literary theory. His book, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (Cornell University Press, 2010), won the Modern Language Association Prize for a First Book. He also edited 'The Crisis of Judgment in the Eighteenth Century', a special issue of *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 51.3 (Fall 2010), and has published a number of essays and articles on eighteenth-century British literature. He is working on a project that probes the long history of our discomfort with judgement, tracing its genesis in eighteenth-century discourses of empiricism and aesthetics.

Vivasvan comments on his experience as a Visiting Fellow with CHE below.

I was awarded an International Visiting Research Fellowship to visit two nodes of the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, at The University of Queensland and The University of Melbourne. My visit spanned two weeks, from 24 October 2016 to 8 November 2016, with the time split about equally between Brisbane and Melbourne. The major formal events of my visit included:

1. A masterclass (UQ, 27 October 2016), in which I presented research from my book project in progress, on judgment and aesthetics in the eighteenth century, and we had a wide-ranging conversation about this research and its implications for methods of reading in the humanities;

2. A seminar (UQ, 28 October 2016), in which I presented another paper from the judgement project, 'Playing at Judgment: Aporias of Liberal Freedom in Kant's Third Critique', followed by another probing conversation about this paper;

3. A seminar (UMelb, 3 November 2016), in which I presented new work from another project of mine on utopian writing, a paper called "'Gigantic Shadows of Futurity": Some Modern Anxieties about Representing the Future', on a panel with Adam Potkay. Of course, such visits are not exhausted by these formal events, and I had many rich conversations outside the formal confines of the visit, with Spencer Jackson, Peter Holbrook, Xanthe Ashburner, Sushma Griffin, Kenneth Chong and Grace Moore, among others. Such conversations were not only valuable for my own research, but also gave me a sense of the wealth of talent in the Australian academy at present. I was also able to attend talks at UQ. Finally, this fellowship also offered me the opportunity to visit Australia for the first time, and the visit dramatically transformed my perception of the country. It is a rather remarkable place, in ways that I had never fully appreciated.

The main purpose of the visit was for me to share my research with colleagues at the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, and to learn from their expertise so that I could hone the work I've already done and find new lines of inquiry. In this sense, the visit was an absolute success. Indeed, for me, it was one of the high points of my academic career to date. It was a privilege to be able to share my research with so many curious and able minds, and to learn from their various fields of expertise. Further, I believe my new research on judgment has much to contribute to the way we think about research in the humanities and, to gauge from the responses to my masterclass and seminars, the participants were really able to appreciate the novelty of what I was doing and how it might impact their own work and change their habits of interpretation.

The masterclass was an opportunity for me to speak to a broad audience, ranging from undergraduates and graduate students to postdoctoral fellows and senior faculty, about the importance of judgment as a practice, about why we as a culture are so uncomfortable with judgment, about the long history of this discomfort, and about how we might need to rethink judgment in order to make it more approachable as a concept. Participants in the

masterclass read two of my essays: one on Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* and how it teaches us to judge, the other on the British philosopher Shaftesbury and how his idea of 'soliloquy' provides a foundation for reflective practices of judgment. I also presented a broad overview of the project and its implications. The discussion then ranged widely over many topics, from the history of aesthetics to the relation between the sciences and the humanities, to the role of literature in cultivating judgment, and the nature of interpretive methods in the humanities. It is very difficult to speak to an audience of such differing intellectual backgrounds, but by all accounts the masterclass was a real success. Most importantly, I think I was able to persuade participants at all levels of the importance of this project, and to show them that recuperating judgment will require us to question some of the most basic assumptions we make about interpretation in the humanities. In the masterclass, I feel like my role was more that of an explicator, whereas in the seminars (described below), I was questioned about my papers in ways that opened up new avenues for thinking about the problem of judgment.

The seminar on my paper, 'Playing at Judgment: Aporias of Liberal Freedom in Kant's Third Critique' (now [podcast](#) in the 'Emotions Make History' series), was the most helpful for me in terms of raising questions that I hadn't thought of and helping me to understand aspects of my project in a new light. There were a number of enormously rich and suggestive questions during question time, which I still find myself mulling over as I work on the judgment project. For example, one of the postdoctoral fellows asked me about the place of rhetoric in the eighteenth century, how it was being displaced by aesthetics, and what effect this might have on the concept of judgment. I had never approached the problem of judgment from this angle before and it strikes me as a productive line of inquiry, which I hope to pursue as the project advances. I don't know what concrete results it will produce just yet, but it is rare that I get a question that opens up such significant new avenues of inquiry. In similar fashion, a faculty member noticed that I was talking about games as providing a model to think about innovation within constraint, and she pointed out that Renaissance poetry (especially the sonnet) worked in a very similar way. She provided me with a new way for thinking about how to connect my study of judgment in games to literary theory and problems of genre. A philosopher posed a question about predication in Kant, and particularly a different way to think about what is at stake in predication in an aesthetic judgment. This is a question that I hope to investigate further. And finally, Peter Holbrook pointed out that aspects of my theory of judgment had much in common with the work of Michael Oakeshott, a suggestion that I hope to follow up on in due course. These detailed suggestions went far beyond the usual level of engagement I expect from an academic talk, and I am deeply grateful for them. They have the potential to transform the ways in which I think about the project, though only time will tell what fruits they will bear. The seminar I presented in Melbourne was also a valuable experience. It spurred me to write a new piece related to my project on utopian writing. The experience of being on a panel with Adam Potkay was invaluable, and his own work on hope also helped me think in

new ways about the utopias project. Questions from Grace Moore and others in the audience were equally illuminating. The project on utopian writing is not as far along as the judgment book, and it will be a while before I can turn my attention fully to it, but when I do, I know that the conversations I had in Melbourne will help to shape the project.

Finally, in addition to these formal events, I should single out the many conversations I had with Spencer Jackson about the practice of cultural critique in the present, and the way in which my work on judgment could speak to contemporary developments in critical theory. Spencer is enormously knowledgeable about this, and shared many insights with me about how to build connections between my own project and other strains of critical theory. These conversations were some of the real highlights of the trip for me, and I imagine Spencer and I will continue to be in conversation for a long time to come.

In closing, I want to acknowledge gratefully the extraordinary hospitality of my hosts at both institutions. Spencer Jackson was instrumental in making the trip happen and in organising many of its details. And while I was in Brisbane, he gave very generously of his time to show me around the city and its surroundings. Xanthe Ashburner and Sushma Griffin helped enormously with the many administrative and bureaucratic details of the trip. And in Melbourne, Grace Moore coordinated the panel with Adam Potkay, as well as the details of the trip, and was a gracious host. I really couldn't have asked for more, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity provided by the fellowship to engage in this kind of international exchange of ideas. It was a privilege and a pleasure to be able to visit the UQ and UMelb nodes of CHE.

Research Output:

1. The paper on Kant that I presented at the Brisbane seminar was in the process of revision after a few conference iterations. It will be published in its final form as: Soni, V. 'Playing at Judgment: Aporias of Liberal Freedom in Kant's Third Critique'. In *Literary/Liberal Entanglements: Towards a Literary History for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Corrinne Harol and Mark Simpson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming.
2. The paper on Shaftesbury I presented at the masterclass was also in the process of revision after a few conference iterations. It will be published as: Soni, V. 'How to Hit Pause: Language, Transcendence and the Capacity for Judgment in Shaftesbury's "Soliloquy; or, Advice to an Author"'. In *Judgment and Action*, edited by Thomas Pfau and Vivasvan Soni. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming.