**BACLS-WHN Conference 2023: Abstracts**

**6 September: Old Gym, University of Birmingham**

**A1 Contemporary Narratives of Work**

**Betsy Porritt (University of Birmingham): “‘I’d give up all my breaks for genuine leisure with you’: Registering a Poetics of Work”**

This paper is an exploratory essay into the ways poetry, and a more broadly considered poetics, registers, frames and complicates the cultural object of ‘work’. In it I consider work as a porous, toxic, hopeful, demanding, and absent figure via three lenses; Karen Brodine’s *Woman Sitting at the Machine Thinking* (1978-87), Bernadette Mayer’s *Utopia* (1984), and Holly Pester’s *Eclogues for Idle Workers* (2019). While the landscape of work is figured variously within each text, distinct approaches emerge which can help us formulate questions about the role of poetics as we consider: what are we working towards?

Contextualising Brodine and Mayer alongside the 1970s ‘Wages for housework’ movement and Silvia Federici’s critical call to arms, I explore how their poems are in part responses to the idea that life and work are one. What happens when work and the work*place* are collapsed? How does each poet’s writing practice maintain a wider politics as they formulate specific demands? Brodine’s articulation of cyborgian restrictions of the working and, and Mayer’s written ecosystem of working and living, are both framed as passionate pedagogical projects.

Leaping forty years, and Pester’s poem-play creates a space that encompasses these foundational fights, while drawing in anti-work figure-heads from antiquity. If Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City* fundamentally collapsed the fiction of a binary urban and rural, Pester, via a polyphonic office drama breaks down the false landscape that is a self-contained ‘world’ of work.

**Dr Betsy Porritt** (b.porritt@bham.ac.uk) is Teaching Fellow and poet at the University of Birmingham on the Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences programme. Her PhD focused on the material practice of multidisciplinary poet Susan Howe. She recently published a chapter in [The Affects of Pedagogy](https://www.routledge.com/The-Affects-of-Pedagogy-in-Literary-Studies/Lloyd-Emmett/p/book/9780367553210) handbook, a [review in Jacket2](https://jacket2.org/reviews/intimacy-index), and her debut [pamphlet of poems](https://www.guillemotpress.co.uk/poetry/betsy-porritt-a-mediated-and-partial-zone).

**Huw Marsh (Queen Mary University of London): “‘Bullshit’ Jobs and Ticklish Comedy: Humour and Sadness in the Contemporary Workplace Novel”**

Novels set in the contemporary workplace often paint a bleak picture of working life, its underpinning precarity and anxiety combined with stretches of boredom and frustration. It is also true that many of these novels are, at least in part, funny. This paper argues that the discomforting tension between humour, bleakness and sadness found in contemporary workplace fiction is representative of a broader dissatisfaction with cultural narratives surrounding work and labour practices.

The protagonists of novels by Halle Butler, Ottessa Moshfegh and others are employed in what David Graeber terms ‘bullshit’ jobs, referring to unengaging, seemingly pointless work. Graeber concludes that the proliferation of these jobs represents a ‘collective acquiescence to our own enslavement’.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, working—and often working *badly*—in such roles can also be a method of resistance against those who subscribe to the notion that advancement via a conventional career is a necessary good. Their resistance to these narratives gives these books a peculiar affective quality that alternates between ironic withdrawal and feelings of sadness or anger; it is an affect I describe as ‘ticklish’ for the way it combines irritation and discomfort with a peculiar kind of pleasure and amusement.

**Dr Huw Marsh** ((h.d.j.marsh@qmul.ac.uk) is Senior Lecturer in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature at Queen Mary University of London. He works mainly on contemporary Anglophone fiction and is the author of *The Comic Turn in Contemporary English Fiction* (2020) and *Beryl Bainbridge* (2014). He is currently researching a project about comedy and work.

**A2 Contemporary Irish Fiction: Narratives of Recovery**

In this panel we will discuss, broadly speaking, what is ‘happening now’ in contemporary Irish fiction. Approaching contemporary Irish fiction from a variety of perspectives, this panel will engage with and challenge various narratives of recovery – spanning the crash of the economic Celtic Tiger, the subsequent rise of the Celtic Phoenix, the return to realism and probing of its formal, generic and political capacities, as well as recoveries in terms of social, affective and interpersonal relations. At the heart of these papers are questions about the novel form – examinations of its artistic and ethical capabilities and limitations. These papers investigate, as Sally Rooney does in *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, whether ‘the novel works by suppressing the truth of the world – packing it tightly down beneath the glittering surface of the text’ (96).

**Orlaith Darling (Trinity College, Dublin): “Literary Realism or, the Artistic Logic of Neoliberalism in Irish Women’s Fiction”**

This paper analyses the literary realism of four women novelists in the context of the Celtic Phoenix. Whereas realism has always been closely associated with capitalism as a genre and form, a neo-modernist turn emerged in Irish fiction writing in the years following 2012. This has been analysed in terms of a formal reaction to or against the capitalist realism of austerity policies. The realist novel, however, has remained popular with contemporary women writers, and this paper examines novels by Naoise Dolan, Niamh Campbell, Sara Baume, and Sally Rooney, asking how their work subverts or critiques capitalism not just in content, but in form. Across these novels artmaking emerges as a self-reflexive motif through which these writers gain critical distance from the totalising capitalist systems they inhabit and consider the ethics of creative production within this system.

**Orlaith Darling** (darlingo@tcd.ie) is currently completing her PhD on the representation of neoliberalism in contemporary short fiction at the School of English, Trinity College Dublin. Her research interests include neoliberalism’s influence on contemporary cultural forms and narratives, and she has published on this question in *Popular Music and Society, Feminist Media Studies, Critique* and other journals. With Dearbhaile Houston and Liam Harrison, she co-founded the Contemporary Irish Literature research network and edited a recent special issue of the *Irish Studies Review* on women’s writing and work. Her research is funded by the Irish Research Council, and she is based in the Trinity Long Room Hub.

**Dearbhaile Houston (Trinity College, Dublin): “‘almost painfully happy’: Recovering the Marriage Plot in Sally Rooney’s *Beautiful World, Where Are You*”**

This paper considers the recuperation of the marriage plot in Rooney’s 2021 novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, in connection with concepts of material sustainment and narrative closure. The seemingly happy, domesticated ending for the two heterosexual couples at the centre of *Beautiful World* can be read as an attempt to assuage coalescing anxieties regarding material security and sustainment – the cost of living, precarious dwelling spaces, and ambiguous domestic relationships – in contemporary Ireland. Rooney’s novel arguably subverts the traditional marriage plot in that no nuptials take place in the narrative. However, its conventional ‘happy ending’ (which features the co-habitation of Alice and Felix and the pregnancy announcement of Eileen and Simon) assures the reader of the characters’ continued survival and sustainment – achieved within the safe confines of the heteronormative couple – after the novel’s final pages and in spite of allusions to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper will examine how Rooney’s novel aligns with Caroline Levine’s articulation of the nineteenth century marriage plot as a narratological device which simultaneously presents ‘ideological cover’ for women’s economic dependence on men and provides closure to the question of a heroine’s ontological precarity1 but renegotiates the manifestations of such closure in light of its setting in twenty-first century Ireland, taking place against a backdrop of numerous crises.

**Dearbhaile Houston** (dhouston@tcd.ie) received her PhD in English Literature from Trinity College Dublin in 2022, where she focused on representations of domestic space in the work of Anne Enright, Lorrie Moore, and Alice Munro. Her research is broadly concerned with contemporary Anglophone women’s writing and spatial studies. She is a co-founder of the Contemporary Irish Literature research network.

**Liam Harrison (University of West of England): “Stylish Magazines: Literary Journals and Contemporary Irish Literature”**

This paper will explore how literary journals in twenty-first century Ireland have played a vital role in terms of the artistic development of contemporary Irish writing. Ruth Gilligan has considered the 2008 economic crash in Ireland as its own kind of 1922 modernist moment. Gilligan proposes that, ‘in the years directly following the crash, a huge range of literary magazines and journals were established […] focusing on more avant-garde or innovative work, these journals now serve as invaluable launchpads for emerging, risk-taking writers.’ Journals such as *gorse*, *The Dublin Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, *The Tangerine*, *The Moth*, *Banshee*, *Paper Visual Art*, and more recently, *Holy Show*, *The Pig’s Back* and *Tolka*, have facilitated new writers and innovative writing in Ireland – offering editorial development, publication opportunities, and public visibility. These journals and magazines have often provided the space for experimental writing which allows writers to take risks, risks that the slow pace of commercial publishing often does not allow for. This paper examines several of these journals alongside the authors they have published, probing the significance of literary journals when it comes to writers’ creative practice and publishing journeys. More broadly, a focus on twenty-first century literary journals can provide an alternative narrative for how we consider and conceptualise contemporary Irish literature. Rather than indulge constant claims about the death of the novel, or attempt to find or coin the latest literary trend we might be better off attending to how literary journals and independent publishers facilitate rich and strange kinds of writing in practice.

**Liam Harrison** (Liam.Harrison@uwe.ac.uk) is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of the West of England. He recently completed a PhD researching late style and modernist legacies in twenty-first century British and Irish fiction at the University of Birmingham. He is a founding editor of the non-fiction literary journal *Tolka*, and a founding member of the Contemporary Irish Literature Research Network. Liam sits on the executive board of the British Association for Contemporary Literary Studies as an elected ordinary member.

**A3 National Identity and Landscape**

**Owain Burrell (University of Warwick): “The Forest and the Future of Englishness”**

From lukewarm responses to the Coronation to Westminster’s invocation of Clause 35 against the Scottish Parliament, the future of the British Union seems uncertain. Yet most commentators are interested in the futures of an independent Wales or Scotland, leaving England as a rump state: what is left of Britain after the Union’s dissolution. Though serious consideration of what an independent England could look like is mostly absent from political discourse, within contemporary British literature a number of authors have considered the cultural implications of an independent England (Westall and Gardiner 2013).

The difficulty of writing Englishness is in part a problem of space: the evaluative/accumulative logic of the British state dominates the landscape. The forest has become a key space for imagining an England independent of this logic. Fiona Mozley’s *Elmet* (2017) considers the forest as the site of an alternative approach to Englishness, embracing the medieval ideal of ‘liberty of the greenwood’ as embodied by the legend of Robin Hood (Pogue Harrison 1992, Schama 2004). In doing so, Mozley follows Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* (2009) and Sarah Hall’s *The Wolf Border* (2013), rejecting the conservatism of this medieval position by embracing recent developments in environmental thinking (e.g. MacFarlane 2019). Mozley moves beyond Butterworth’s and Hall’s mourning for a lost life-world and instead posits the forest as a place in which to imagine the future of Englishness, not only its past. This forested imaginary allows for the cultivation of an alternative Englishness: radical, communal, and environmentally entangled.

**Owain Burrell** (o.burrell@warwick.ac.uk) is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of Warwick. His thesis is titled *The Grammar School Ideal in British Literature 1945-1990*, which investigates the cultural history of the grammar school as an institutional tool of the British state to transform regional schoolchildren into British citizens. He is interested in regional literatures, post-British imaginaries, and meritocracy and productive logics in British cultural contexts.

**Misbah Ahmed (Queen Mary University of London): “Anti-Capitalist Resistance in the British South Asian Pastoral Novel: Mona Arshi’s *Somebody Loves You*”**

Using Mona Arshi’s *Somebody Loves You* as a starting point, this paper will consider how new trends in British South Asian (BSA) writing are adapting the BSA novelistic canon. *Somebody Loves You*’s continued engagement with a pastoral and anti-capitalist mode make it a key and pivotal work to discuss new and rarely seen themes in the BSA text (Saha and Lente, 2020) such as the pastoral/postcolonial pastoral writing, displaced temporalities, and the poetic prose form. A maintained dialogue with *Somebody Loves You* will facilitate a discussion into the critical theory these themes engage with such as BAME exclusion from English nature and landscape spaces (Bakar, 2020, Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs, 2019, Grewal, 2004), writing minorities and the minoritised genre, and the future of BSA creative practice. The novel’s reclamation of quintessentially English spaces, such as pastoral writing which has enduring ties to Englishness, is suggestive of the shifting cultural identification of BSA writers, who have more enduring ties to Britishness than generations prior (Su, 2011, Garrard, 2012).

Key questions this paper will address include:

* What do these new themes signify about upcoming BSA texts?
* How can the pastoral mode be a method of reclamation of communities and spaces BSA individuals have historically been isolated from?
* How do displaced temporalities and the anti-capitalist mode destabilise the relationship between the reader and the novel, and how does this resist marginalisation and alienation of the BSA subject within the novelistic space?

**References**

ARSHI, M. 2021. *Somebody Loves You,* Sheffield, And Other Stories.

BAKAR, F. 2020. ‘The English countryside was shaped by colonialism’: Why rural Britain is unwelcoming for people of colour. *Metro* [Online].

**Misbah Ahmed** (misbahahmed@gmail.com) is a PhD candidate studying at Queen Mary University of London and a recipient of the Principal’s Studentship. Her work focusses on the British South Asian contemporary novel, which embraces new emergent identities to become a site of resistance. She previously completed her MA at the University of York, titled ‘Contemporary Young British South Asian Women’s Novels: Trauma, Gender, and The Everyday.’

**Jacob Miller (University College, Dublin): “‘The breath of past ideas’: Utopia, Unionism and Ambivalence in Andrew O’Hagan’s *Our Fathers*”**

In 1997 the Scottish parliament was established, heralding a new era of devolution. Over 20 years later, amid SNP dominance, Brexit, and calls for a second independence referendum, the devolution project appears to have been short-lived. Published in 1999, Andrew O’Hagan’s *Our Fathers* condemns Scottish nationalism but also expresses ambivalence towards devolution. Building on Tom Nairn’s characterisation of devolution as “the preservation of the world’s oldest multinational state through cautious, negotiated reform controlled from the centre”, this paper understands devolution as a strategy to prolong the British union. I will argue that Andrew O’Hagan’s *Our Fathers* mediates a centrist unionism through the novel’s pessimism towards the post-war welfare state and Scottish independence. By examining the novel’s imagery of haunting and addiction, I aim to show how *Our Fathers* characterises Scotland as dependent upon the British union. O’Hagan’s novel ostensibly presents a devolutionary “third way” politics as the only option by framing independence as economically unviable and casting the utopian dreams of the welfare state as a failure. However, the eulogising tone of the novel’s depictions of Scottish nationalism and post-war state welfare also indicates equivocation towards centrist devolution. The novel’s characteristic ambivalence hints at the insecurity of Scottish devolution, suggesting that the union will continue to be haunted by Scottish nationalism. By re-examining *Our Fathers*, I aim to shed light on how contemporary calls for independence re-emerged from the failures of 1990s centrism.

**Jacob Miller** (jacob.miller@ucdconnect.ie) is a PhD student in the School of English, Drama and Film at University College Dublin. His research interests include hauntology, Marxism, and world-ecology. His thesis examines the literary aesthetic of hauntology in post-1980 Anglo-American fiction. His research is funded by the Irish Research Council.

**Tom Fielder (Birkbeck College, London): “A Dramatization of Brexit and Psychoanalysis”**

In this presentation, I propose to explore the potential of creative praxis to illuminate the question of ‘What Happens Now’, specifically through a dramatization of my own doctoral research. As a psychosocial researcher, I am concerned with the ways in which the ‘psychic’ and the ‘social’ are intertwined: with the ways in which the voices embedded in contemporary social and political formations ‘outside’ are also registered ‘inside’. The subject of my research is Brexit and psychoanalysis, and, in this presentation, I propose to experimentally reconfigure my own research as an object of theatrical performativity or ‘play’. I take creative inspiration from Ali Smith, particularly her *Seasonal Quartet*, with an extended quotation from *Autumn* (2017[2016])*,* and critical inspiration from the psychosocial scholar Candida Yates’s (2015) work on play and political culture. For Yates, the notion of play connotes both the negative sense of being ‘played with’ by manipulative political actors, but also the possibility of a more authentically interactive mode of political engagement, in which voters may ‘play with’ their political subjectivities. ‘Play’, in this latter sense, inhabits what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971) referred to as a ‘transitional’ space, within which political identifications can be continually reworked and recreated. I have performed variations of this piece for the Birkbeck Psychosocial Studies PhD Conference in 2022, for a PhD research seminar in the English, Theatre and Creative Writing Department at Birkbeck in 2023, and most recently for my local Labour Party members.

**References**

Smith, A. (2017[2016]) *Autumn*. London: Penguin.

Winnicott, D. W. (1971) *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock.

Yates, C. (2015) *The Play of Political Culture, Emotion and Identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Tom Fielder** (tomfielder555@gmail.com) is a PhD researcher in Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. His research engages Brexit and psychoanalysis, together with literature, history and critical theory. He has published scholarly articles in *History of the Human Sciences* and the *Journal of Psychosocial Studies.*

**B1 Diary Writing and Feminized Work**

This panel will explore contemporary manifestations of the literary diary and examine the relationship between contemporary diaristic writing and feminized work. It has been widely argued that labour in the Global North has become increasingly ‘feminized’ over recent decades, a term which describes not only the increasing inclusion of women in the paid labour force but also the late-capitalist increase in service work and affective labour. In this context, we argue that turning to the diary can illuminate the role of literature in a landscape of increasing precarity. The diary has historically been a marginalized form, its literary qualities once questioned by scholars, and often—because of it seeming immediacy, association with private life and intimate feelings, and alleged lack of craft—perceived as feminine. As Kate Zambreno puts it, ‘The diary is seen as raw, emotional, not fully formed, just like the girl’.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this panel, we ask what the formal qualities of diaries and diaristic cultural productions (as work-products, as representations of daily work, as expressions of the private experience so often co-opted by contemporary labour) can reveal about work today, especially in its temporal dimensions.

Developing out of the 3-year research project Feminized: A New Literary History of Women’s Work, the panel will bring together readings of a variety of literary diaries: popular ‘hen lit’ diaristic novels such as *Bridget Jones*, contemporary experimental prose texts by writers including Renee Gladman, Sheila Heti, and Heidi Julavits, and digital, autobiographical diary comics. Taking a comparative, genre-inclusive approach, we will show how engagements with the diary across diverse genres and media reflect on the temporal conditions of contemporary labour.

**Ida Aaskov Dolmer (University of Southern Denmark): “The Impossible Work-Life Balance: Diaristic Narration of Time Famine in Postfeminist Mum’s Lit”**

Ida Aaskov Dolmer will discuss narrated simultaneity in two popular so-called ‘hen lit’ novels, *Bridget Jones: Mad about the Boy* and *I Don’t Know How She Does It*, both of which are written in minutely detailed diary form and depict working mothers’ time famine as a result of the double shift, i.e. the doubling of paid work and reproductive work. This presentation argues that this diary form in particular can faithfully represent the ordinary impossibility of time famine as well as the clash experienced in the encounter between the linear and organized time of waged work and the repetitive and transgressive maternal time.

**Ida Aaskov Dolmer** (iad@sdu.dk) is a PhD researcher with the project *Feminized: A New Literary History of Women’s Work* at the University of Southern Denmark. She researches the representations of mothering as work in contemporary British fiction.

**Emily J. Hogg (University of Southern Denmark): “The Order of the Days: Using Diaristic Form in Contemporary Experimental Prose”**

Emily J. Hogg will discuss recent experimental prose texts which make innovative formal use of diaries and the diaristic mode. Anna Jackson[[3]](#footnote-3) has argued that the autonomy of individual diary entries and their appearance in a sequence comprise the central formal tension of the diary as it is traditionally conceived. Recent texts by Heti, Julavits, and Gladman experiment precisely with autonomy and sequence, through collections of diary-like entries organized by principles other than the chronological passing of the days. The paper will examine the exigencies of contemporary labour which contribute to these formal innovations with the diary.

**Emily J. Hogg** (ejh@sdu.dk) is associate professor of contemporary anglophone literature and PI of the project *Feminized: A New Literary History of Women’s Work* at the University of Southern Denmark (funded by the Carlsberg Foundation). She has published on contemporary literature’s relations with precarity, human rights, and feminist theory.

**Charlotte Johanne Fabricius (University of Southern Denmark): “By the Hour: Concurrence and Care Work in Instagram Comics”**

Charlotte Johanne Fabricius will discuss digital forms of life writing shared during the 2023 *Hourly Comic Day*: an online event during which comics artists share autobiographical comics on Instagram detailing the minutiae of a day in their life. Discussing hourly comics produced by woman cartoonists who are also caregivers and homeworkers, the presentation asks how other forms of feminized labour shape and are shaped by the work of capturing one’s life by the hour. The case studies will be scaffolded by methodological reflections on the study of digital comics in the context of life writing and feminized literary forms.

**Charlotte Johanne Fabricius** (cjf@sdu.dk) is a postdoc with the project *Feminized: A New Literary History of Women’s Work* at the University of Southern Denmark. She holds a PhD in cultural studies and works in the intersection of global and digital anglophone literature, comics studies, and feminist critique.

**B2 Extensions of the Text: Intertextuality and Transmediality**

**David Wylot (University of Leeds): “Metabibliographic Fiction: The Theory and Practice of the Self-Conscious Book”**

The book has shown great resilience in the face of fearful predictions of its demise. Indeed, as Jessica Pressman (2020) and others have suggested, ‘bookishness’ has become an aesthetic in itself in response to digital transformations in reading and writing. Situated within this context, this paper develops an account of what it terms ‘metabibliographic fiction’, a form that employs a range of devices to reflexively signal the book as narrative medium. Examining this with reference to Steven Hall’s *Maxwell’s Demon* (2021), I argue that metabibliographic fiction invites a different kind of critical orientation to that provided by metafiction’s literary, theoretical, and narrative frameworks. First, the paper explores the ramifications of the ‘metabibliographic’ for foundational accounts of meta*fiction*. Second, the paper works towards an account of the methods through which metabibliographic fiction may foreground the material, and not just linguistic, conditions that support and sustain it, which I develop through a synthesis of Gerald Prince’s ‘metanarrative sign’ (1982) and Jerome McGann’s ‘bibliographical code’ (1991). The bigger pictures driving this paper, then, have to do with period and method: if the paper book has again taken hold of authors and readers, can we re-tune inherited frameworks of metafiction to adapt accordingly, and what might the meeting between narrative theory and the study of the book provide as a critical resource for unpacking that turn?

**David Wylot** (d.wylot@leeds.ac.uk) is a Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Leeds, UK. He is the author of *Reading Contingency: The Accident in Contemporary Fiction* (Routledge, 2020), and has published work in *ASAP/Journal*, *Textual Practice*, *and Modernist Cultures*.

**Caroline Wintersgill (University of Stirling): “The Anatomy of an Ending: Metatext, Intertext and Paratext in Kate Atkinson’s *A God in Ruins*”**

*A God in Ruins* is a novel which lures the reader into the immersive security of a Forsterian family saga, only revealing its starkly metafictional intent in the final pages. Published as a sequel to the formally experimental bestseller *Life after Life*, the narrative appears to be on a more conventional trajectory to completeness and closure until the final revelation that the closure offered by Atkinson is a radically destablising instance of denarration.[[4]](#footnote-4) The shock at the novel’s end draws violently contradictory reactions from readers, yet very few readers express anything other than surprise at the ending, despite numerous hints in imagery, intertextuality, narrative technique and the material form of the printed book.

This paper presents a close reading of the novel’s complex ending. Pursuing a strategy inspired by Felski’s notion of ‘post-critical reading’[[5]](#footnote-5), it compares insights on endings informed by narratology with perspectives from readers and the literary industry. It shows how the metatext is revealed through subtle use of intertextuality and how paratextual elements including the cover design and blurb reveal signs of the novel’s intent—its material form echoing its narrative construction.

The novel has as many as six different modes of ending, some tending towards narrative completion and others disrupting it to reveal a nest of shadow narratives. It is both fascinated by closure and resistant to it: Atkinson balancing a storyteller’s engagement with the lives of the protagonists with her ethical commitment to fiction as a mode of sense-making in the face of calamity.

*Warning: paper contains spoilers!*

**Caroline Wintersgill** (caroline.wintersgill@stir.ac.uk) is Senior Lecturer in Publishing Studies in the Division of Literature and Languages, University of Stirling. Her research on the contemporary novel aims to combine literary and publishing perspectives and she has a long-term obsession with fictional endings.

**B3 “Stories into Song”**

**Presenters:** **Nick Bentley (Keele University)**

**Melanie Ebdon (Staffordshire University)**

**James Peacock (Keele University)**

This presentation, which includes musical interludes, forms part of a British Academy-funded project called “Stories into Song.” If it is possible, we would like this proposal to be considered as a workshop rather than a standard academic presentation: a 45-50-minute presentation / performance with time for group discussion afterwards. As well as the two project leaders, Bentley and Peacock, we are aiming to include participants from the Keele workshops, mentioned below. If this is not possible, we are happy to present a standard 20-minute paper.

Up to now, there has been no academic study into the theory and the creative processes involved in the adaptation of longer-form literary texts such as novels and short stories into pop and rock songs. Our paper for BACLS-WHN reflects the different aspects of our pilot project. With brief reference to other examples, we take a couple of well-known songs adapted from, or at least inspired by literary texts—Kate Bush’s “Wuthering Heights” and Rush’s “Tom Sawyer”—and analyse the decisions made by each artist with regard to genre, instrumentation, selected aspects of the source text and harmonic structure. Secondly, we discuss the processes involved in our own adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro’s “Never Let Me Go” and play extracts from the draft recording. Thirdly, we discuss the workshops we ran at Keele University with volunteers from the Potteries area, in which we co-created a song adapted from Daphne Du Maurier’s short story, “Don’t Look Now.” (This will eventually be recorded in a professional studio.) Finally, we offer some initial thoughts, based on our work so far, on the development of a theory and methodology for fiction-to-song adaptation, and the possibilities of such co-creative adaptation as an innovative method for literary analysis.

**Nick Bentley** (n.bentley@keele.ac.uk) is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Keele University in the UK. He specialises in postwar and contemporary British fiction, with a particular interest in working-class fiction, subcultural fictions (the subject of his latest monograph project), and marginalized and intersectional voices. He is a keen amateur musician whose work can be found at <https://soundcloud.com/quantumofwantum>.

**James Peacock** (j.h.peacock@keele.ac.uk) is Reader in English and American Literatures at Keele University in the UK. He specialises in contemporary fiction of urban spaces, and his current research concerns literary representations of gentrification. He is the author of *Brooklyn Fictions: The Contemporary Urban Community in a Global Age* (Bloomsbury 2015). He is also a keen amateur musician and songwriter, whose original music can be heard at [James Peacock | ReverbNation](https://www.reverbnation.com/jamespeacock)*.*

**Melanie Ebdon** (M.D.Ebdon@staffs.ac.uk) is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature & Creative Writing at Staffordshire University where she leads modules in ecocriticism, Gothic literature, magical realism and postcolonial literature. She specialises in ecocriticism and the contemporary novel, and has published work on writers such as Sarah Hall and Jon McGregor. She is a keen amateur songwriter, singer and guitarist who has performed on various UK folk circuits and small festivals.

**Keynote Roundtable. Getting published in *C21*: Meet the Editorial Team**

The editorial board of *C21: Journal of 21st-Century Writings* (the affiliated peer-reviewed journal for BACLS) would like to propose a panel discussion about publishing open access. How can we tackle pervasive attitudes that publishing in a “diamond” open access journal like *C21* (in which articles are free to read and do not charge authors to pay to publish) is as prestigious as a traditional journal published by a so-called legacy publisher? Why are the politics of open access publishing so contentious and what pressures do literature journals face as the “big 5” publishers ramp up the commercialisation of their open access content? What are the consequences of our decisions as scholars about where we publish?

We will also consider how ECRs can prepare for publishing their first articles and gain crucial insights into professional publishing workflows, the peer review process, and the editorial stewardship of articles. The panel will draw on recently drafted best practice documentation at *C21* and its publisher, the Open Library of Humanities, an award-winning scholar-led publisher of humanities journals.

Professor Siân Adiseshiah (Loughborough University) – S.Adiseshiah@lboro.ac.uk

Dr Zoe Bulaitis (University of Birmingham) – z.h.bulaitis@bham.ac.uk

Dr Alice Bennett (Liverpool Hope University) – benneta1@hope.ac.uk

Dr Arin Keeble (Edinburgh Napier University) – A.Keeble@napier.ac.uk

Dr Oliver Haslam (University of Evansville) – O.Haslam@lboro.ac.uk

Dr Melissa Schuh (Christian-Albrechts Universität zu Kiel) – schuh@anglistic.uni-kiel.de

**C1 Words Lost, Broken and Recycled**

**Victor Rees (University College London): “Broken Mouth: Alternative Disfluency in the Novels of B. Catling”**

In 2018, the sculptor, performance artist and novelist Brian Catling, best known for his monumental *Vorrh* trilogy (2012-18), was asked whether he thought his experience of speaking with a stutter had resulted in an increased form of “linguistic creativity.” Catling, in response, distanced himself from the hypothesis by suggesting that the stutter “just produces an alternative.”

My paper will take this distinction between “creativity” and “alternative” as its starting point, exploring the multifarious influence of speech disfluency on Catling’s speculative fiction. By foregrounding the idea of continual transformation, whereby the image of disfluency emerges in differing, often contradictory, aspects, my study will first look at instances in the novels where the stutter is depicted as a form of semantic blockage. I will then explore instances where disfluency provokes epiphanic revelation for Catling’s characters, especially those who are able to navigate a speech pattern that foregrounds synonymous or “alternative” words. I will show where this pattern of verbal substitution, a tactic frequently employed by stutterers, elicits both meaninglessness as well as new meaning.

The aim of this paper is to question what new possibilities arise when the study of contemporary literature is framed around “alternatives” as opposed to teleologically motivated creativity. I will position the “alternative” as a different kind of transformative urge, one which is not overloaded with qualitative terminology and does not treat topics such as disability as monolithic, but which focuses instead on the opportunities afforded by diverse experimentation.

**Victor Rees** (victorrees7@gmail.com) is a first-year PhD student at UCL, researching the novels and performance art of Brian Catling. His other interests include fin de siècle Decadence, transdisciplinarity, the process of cinematic adaptation and the treatment of environment on film. Some of his work can be found at victorrees.com.

**Adrienne Mortimer (University of Leeds): “The Lost Shape of Words: Reading the Post-literate Condition in Ali Smith’s *Like* (1997)”**

This paper explores the condition of ‘post-literacy’ and its representation in Ali Smith’s debut novel *Like* (1997). The protagonist Amy Shone—once a fellow in English an unnamed Cambridge college who wielded books and knowledge as ‘power tools’ over others—mysteriously loses the ability to read and to write. I argue that Smith stages Amy’s postliteracy as a critique of the professionalisation of literary studies. As the narrative charts the protagonist’s loss and eventual recovery of literacy, Smith uses puns and word play to disrupt the protocols of professionalised reading, in the process re-enchanting modes of aesthetic appreciation and interpretive enquiry through the inquisitive eyes of Amy’s seven-year-old daughter. In turn, I will use *Like*, and its framing of post-literacy, to intervene in, and find a way out of, perennial critical reading debates which remain preoccupied with taxonomizing reading practices into what Matthew Rubery and Leah Price (2020: 1) call ‘adjectival pigeonholes’. This paper asks, then: what are the epistemological possibilities of post-literacy (as a state of being, mode of reading, way of knowing, etc.), as they emerge in *Like* through Amy’s journey? How might they challenge, serve, or ultimately *disrupt* ‘professional’ styles of reading—that is, the kinds of reading taught in the university classroom or valorised in contemporary literary studies?

**Dr Adrienne Mortimer** (a.mortimer@leeds.ac.uk) is a Leeds Arts and Humanities Institute (LAHRI) postdoctoral fellow. Her doctoral research investigated the representation of non-literacy in contemporary British and US novels. She is currently working on a new project on post-literacy and ‘Futures of Reading’, exploring representations of literacy loss in dystopian fictions and video games.

**Ed Garland (Aberystwyth University): “Literary Captions and Captionary Fiction”**

Some of the characters in Marlon James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings* occasionally notice a temporary ability to hear sounds that ought to be inaudible. In Sayaka Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman*, the narrator describes how her ‘body picks up information from the multitude of sounds’ in her workplace. In Lisa Rovner’s film *Sisters with Transistors*, closed captions are more evocative than the captions in most other films—they might have emerged from novels. These three examples all demonstrate what Sean Zdnek has argued is one of the principles of closed captions—they ‘don’t describe sounds so much as convey the purpose and meaning of sounds in specific contexts’. Like the viewer of the film, the characters in the novels are given imaginative access to the sounds the writer thinks they need to know about. In this paper, I argue that contemporary literature has started to incorporate the priorities of captioning, while some contemporary captions have become more literary.

An increase of viewer engagement with closed captions has received much attention in the past few years. But the emergence of what I call ‘captionary fiction’ is a development that needs analysis. By comparing some captions with a selection of brief moments in recent novels, I suggest that the increasing presence of captions in our lives coincides with a shift in the way novelists attend to sonic experience. This shift offers us the opportunity to consider how written words contribute to aural diversity—the fact that everybody hears differently.

**Dr Ed Garland** (ed.garland@mailbox.org) is the author of the essay collection *Earwitness*, which won the New Welsh Writing Award in 2018. He completed a PhD thesis entitled ‘Sonic Experience in Contemporary Fiction’ at Aberystwyth University in 2022. His short story ‘YEAH NOT BAD’ was published by The Stinging Fly online in May 2023.

**C2 Queer, Feminist Narratives**

**Nozipho Wabatagore (University of York): “Where the Heart Desires”**

This paper presents novel extracts that explore lesbian love between two girls, Vimbai, a twelve-year-old girl from a rural village and Paidamoyo, a girl of fourteen from Harare. Vimbai initially believes Paidamoyo is her half-sister when her father, Baba, brings Paidamoyo to the homestead because her mother, Amai, has stopped bearing children.

The story depicts the arrival of Paidamoyo and Vimbai’s reaction to this sibling rival for Baba’s affection. Still, in the most unlikely scenarios, Vimbai is drawn to Paidamoyo: their growing fondness and mutual respect for their difficult position as competing siblings. The novel excerpts deploy the lesbian genre in a rural Zimbabwean village to examine what happens now for the current depiction of queer identities in Zimbabwean fiction. Through exploring lesbian love that transcends the family and legal boundaries placed on these girls, this story challenges the lack of Zimbabwean storytelling exploring queer love. The story interrupts the current literary tradition of silencing marginalised identities and becomes part of creating a fluid and diverse “moment” in Zimbabwean fiction.

Paidamoyo struggles with the knowledge that she is a fraud half-sister. This theme of pretence also implicitly goes into a dialogue with the political and social formations of the present Zimbabwean discourse of homosexuality, and the girls’ perspectives seek to revise the current understanding of homosexuality held in Zimbabwe. Yet, at the story’s centre is this desire to explore lesbian love to reveal new potentials for the representation of same-sex relationships in fiction.

**Nozipho Wabatagore** (nozipho.wabatagore@york.ac.uk) is a writer, Graduate Teaching Assistant, and doctoral researcher at the University of York. Nozipho works on a practice-based literary thesis that applies a queer lens to Zimbabwean and South African novels. As part of the creative thesis, Nozipho is writing a novel that explores lesbian characters in Zimbabwe.

**Fiona Tolan (Liverpool John Moores University): “A Life Can Be a Manifesto: Connecting Bernadine Evaristo to a History of Feminist Manifestos”**

This paper contextualises Bernadine Evaristo’s 2019 Booker Prize-winning novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, and her 2021 autobiography, *Manifesto*, within a lineage of feminist manifesto writing. Although works of literary fiction and life-writing, these notably feminist-engaged companion texts overlap in their exploration of protest, trouble making, heritage, and community. They foreground Evaristo’s concern—longstanding, but increasingly urgent—with a history of women’s lives, women’s writing and women’s protest, and together, they function to frame a literary manifesto for feminism today. Taking from Sara Ahmed the principle that the purpose of a feminist manifesto is to ‘cause a disturbance’ (2017: 251), this paper centres Evaristo’s work in a discussion that seeks to trouble the definition of a feminist manifesto in a manner that is entirely congruent with the troublesome nature of both feminism and manifestos. When we read Evaristo’s recent work as a cumulative manifesto, we discern her central tenets for living a feminist life. Drawing on the same utopian impulse and instinct to make visible the marginalised experience, Evaristo’s contemporary writing, I suggest, is best and most instructively read alongside the longstanding feminist manifesto tradition, each body of work illuminating the praxis, purpose and potential of the other.

**Dr Fiona Tolan** (f.tolan@ljmu.ac.uk) is Reader in Contemporary Women’s Writing at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. She is the author of *The Fiction of Margaret Atwood* (Bloomsbury, 2022) and *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (Rodopi, 2007). She is currently writing *The Politics of Cleaning in Post-War Women’s Writing* and co-editing *Jackie Kay: Critical Essays*.

**Amy Bouwer (University of Nottingham): “Backlash to the Future: Anti-Utopianism in Contemporary Feminist SF”**

In the wake of #MeToo, feminist visions of a united, transnational front against sexual harassment and rape culture are growing increasingly hazy. High-profile domestic abuse cases such as those against Johnny Depp and Marilyn Manson have reinvigorated backlash narratives and deepened the rifts not only between gendered activist groups but also within the feminist movement itself. Doubts about due process, overreach, and false accusations fuel anti-feminist sentiment that women have ‘gone too far’—that feminists are ‘dangerous extremists’ with a ‘zeal to destroy men’ (Hillstrom 2018: 5).

This narrative has, significantly, found new expression in feminist speculative fiction. Where gynocracies and single-sex societies once operated to cognitively estrange readers from their patriarchal realities, recent works eschew utopianism altogether. In this paper, I investigate a distinctly anti-utopian trend in contemporary speculative feminism, drawing on Talulah Riley’s *The Quickening* (2022) and Christina Dalcher’s *Femlandia* (2021) as core examples of ‘backlash’ texts. My analysis hinges on Lucy Sargisson’s definition of utopia as engendering a desire for ‘radically different “nows”’ (1996: 52); rather than prompting ‘paradigm shifts’ (Whitford 1991: 20) or educating desire (Levitas 1990: 8), Dalcher and Riley misrepresent feminist utopia as a misandrist blueprint. Despite invoking the literary traditions of feminist eutopias (*Herland*) and dystopias (*The Handmaid’s Tale*), *Femlandia* and *The Quickening* advocate for a retreat from radicalism. After tracing the paradoxical use of feminist utopian allusions to promote an anti-utopian stance, I will discuss how these novels—and feminist dystopias more generally—provide critical insight into an increasingly fractured political movement.

**Amy Bouwer** (aexab13@nottingham.ac.uk) is a PhD researcher in the School of English at the University of Nottingham. Her thesis, funded by Midlands4Cities, examines the feminist imaginary in women’s dystopias from 2016 to 2020, with particular emphasis on their expansions (and sometimes explosions) of the legacy of *The Handmaid’s Tale.*

**C3 “Ishiguro and the Critics:**

**The Author’s Role in Shaping Contemporary Critical Practice”**

**Presenters:** **Dominic Dean (University of Sussex)**

**Peter Sloane (University of Buckingham)**

**Emily Horton (University of Brunel)**

**Respondent:** **David James (University of Birmingham)**

This panel explores how the career of one of the world’s most celebrated living authors, Sir Kazuo Ishiguro, has been marked by conscious interactions between the writer, his works, and the critical practices applied to them and, increasingly, informed by them. As Ishiguro remarked in an interview with Alan Vorda and Kim Herzinger, in his early career ‘I got a very easy ride from the critics’ - although soon ‘this became very restricting and the very things that helped me in the first place started to frustrate me as an artist’. Such interactions have shaped not only Ishiguro’s novels and criticism responding to them, but often also broader debates over the ethics and proper focus of literary critical practice, and even over defining literary studies as a discipline. Both Ishiguro’s works and his critics share an important role in these debates - a role to which this panel will bring context, analysis, and suggestions for future development.

Ishiguro’s novels have long offered a site for essentialist readings and challenges to them, in relation first to the author’s Japanese heritage and subsequently to his distinctively British and English themes. Indeed, he commented to Linda Richards that he set his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1984), in Japan because ‘literary critics and journalists in London suddenly wanted to discover a new generation of writers who would be quite different from your typical older generation of English writer’. Alongside and responding to this, recognition of the transnational nature of Ishiguro’s concerns and their relationship with postcolonialism, migration, globalization - and conversely with resurgent nationalisms - has made Ishiguro central to accounts of how contemporary fiction registers the conflicts and shifts of twentieth- and twenty-first century history, and of the relationships between ‘British’ fiction, world literature, and issues of translation and transnational reception. Meanwhile, Ishiguro’s style—encompassing his famously unreliable narrators, apparently sparse prose, and ethically-weighted but often opaque turns of plot—has informed and contested claims over ‘surface’ and depth reading, and over critical humility and responsibility.

This panel will consider Ishiguro as case study for how living authors shape their critical receptions, critical practices, and debates over literary studies as a discipline in perpetual dialogue with creative work. Questions of audience, readership, and the material conditions for success are also implicated.

**Dominic Dean (University of Sussex): “Ishiguro, Celebrity and Humanity”**

From Ryder in *The Unconsoled*, to Christopher Banks in *When We Were Orphans*, to Tony Gardner in *Nocturnes*, many of Kazuo Ishiguro’s protagonists are celebrities of various degrees and fields. Their experiences often incorporate Ishiguro’s reflections on his own literary celebrity, its frustrations, ironies and perversities; and they offer a parodic writing back to the criticism that underpins and interprets such status.

Ishiguro’s celebrity characters attract a relentless attention that seeks to uncover significance in all their choices, actions and behaviours, however irrelevant, mundane or bathetic they may be. This paper argues that Ishiguro counters such perverse attention with figures and forms of abstraction that constitute the necessary ethical conditions for better action in the world than his celebrity protagonists manage. *Klara and the Sun*, where the narrator's baseline engagement with the world involves abstraction, but where she is compelled to attempt to overcome this, offers another unexpected route to perceiving the ethical and human potential of abstract forms. In exploring Ishiguro’s tragicomical portrayals of celebrity as a form of writing back to his critics, this paper thus ultimately finds value in their opposite.

**Dominic Dean** (d.dean@sussex.ac.uk) is a researcher and tutor in contemporary literary studies, and a research policy manager at the University of Sussex. His research focusses on violence towards children in contemporary British fiction, in contexts of migration, queerness, and intergenerational conflict. He has published widely on Ishiguro in *Textual Practice* and in *Commonwealth Literature*, and is co-Editor of a recent special issue of *English Studies* on Ishiguro and International Crisis. He is currently finalizing a monograph on children who kill in British fiction from Thatcherism to Brexit.

**Peter Sloane (University of Buckingham):** “Peculiar Life Forms: Ishiguro *as* the Critics”

Each of Ishiguro’s most famous works involve vital critical judgement, most centrally to the narratives of Masuji Ono’s works of propaganda in *An Artist of the Floating World* as he tries to determine the extent of his complicity in the war; the students’ naive but deeply significant artwork in *Never Let Me Go* upon which so much, even deferrals of execution, rests; the failed Piano recitals in *The Unconsoled* which, were they to be successful, would heal ruptures in town and family; or Klara’s capacity to emulate and perhaps replicate her dying owner Josie in *Klara and the Sun*. Much is at stake in each of these aesthetic assessments, in which acts of criticism seep into the art object, and in which we see manifest Ishiguro’s own interrogation of the function of art and his engagement with literary criticism. These instances of aesthetic appraisal raise questions to do with the function of art and its responsibilities to politics; of art’s capacity to convey the depths or even existence of souls; art’s redemptive and consolatory dimensions, in tension as they are with the more individualistic aspects of performance; the nature of being human, and its amenability to behavioral replication. But they also enable us consider the form of fiction itself, and Ishiguro’s own anxieties about readings and frequent misreadings of his works.

**Peter Sloane** (peter.sloane@buckingham.ac.uk) is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Buckingham, and a scholar of 20th and 21st century anglophone literatures. He has published widely, including the monographs *David Foster Wallace and the Body* (2019) and *Kazuo Ishiguro’s Gestural Poetics* (2021). His current book is an exploration of *Narrative Displacement: Tracing the Refugee in 21st Century Literature and Life Writing* (LUP 2025). He also writes often on film, especially on Wes Anderson, Claire Denis, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Alejandro Jodorowsky.

**Emily Horton** (emily.horton@brunel.ac.uk) is a lecturer in World Literatures at Brunel University. Her research interests include contemporary fiction in English and Spanish, specializing in trauma and affect theory; genre and popular fiction; and fictional explorations of globalization and transnationalism. Her first monograph, *Contemporary Crisis Fictions*, was published with Palgrave Macmillan in 2014, and her second, on *21st-Century British Gothic* is forthcoming with Bloomsbury in 2023. She has also co-edited three volumes: *Ali Smith*, with Monica Germanà (Continuum, 2013); *The 1980s: A Decade in Contemporary British Fiction*, with Philip Tew and Leigh Wilson (Bloomsbury, 2014); and *The 2010s: A Decade in Contemporary British Fiction*, with Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble, and Philip Tew.

**David James** (d.james.1@bham.ac.uk) is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Literature at the University of Birmingham. His books include *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and *Modernist Futures* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Among his edited volumes are *The Legacies of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); ‘Postmillennial Commitments: Fiction since 2000’, a special issue of *Contemporary Literature* (2012); *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); and, most recently, *Modernism and Close Reading* (Oxford University Press, 2020). For Columbia University Press he co-edits the field-shaping book series ‘Literature Now’, and he serves as Editor for World Anglophone Fiction at *Contemporary Literature*.He is currently completing *Sentimental Activism* (forthcoming with Columbia University Press), a book about the politics of compassion and solicitation in medical memoir, poverty fiction, and refugee writing.

**D1 The Human and the Post-human**

**Klara Machata (University of Freiburg): “‘Each tiny human a cell of the beast’: Human and Non-human Perspectives in Pitchaya Sudbanthad’s *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*”**

Many narratives that imagine the future of the planet are set in cities yet in most cases it is the human city-dwellers whose fates and insights are considered to be of interest. Pitchaya Sudbanthad’s 2019 novel *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* presents a vision of a vibrant city that is inhabited by humans and nonhumans alike. The novel explores the city of Bangkok, its historical past, and its imagined, flooded future through a series of overlapping episodes that focus on a multitude of characters at differing points in time: from a 19th-century American missionary to a young migrant construction worker, from Bangkok’s wealthy cosmopolitan elite to students killed in the 6 October 1976 massacre. Political and ecological concerns come together in this text: animals are not only passively affected by the changes humans evoke, but the birds, snakes, and dogs who roam the streets contribute insights into the transformation and the injustices of the city. In my presentation, I explore how Sudbanthad’s complex narrative weaves together manifold human and non-human interiors and perspectives to create a multilayered vision of a city haunted by the past and heading towards an uncertain future. While the human inhabitants of the city remain central to the narrative, animals also haunt the city and the city itself haunts humans and animals alike.

**Klara Machata** (klara.machata@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de) is a Ph.D. candidate and research associate at the University of Freiburg. She holds an advanced degree in geography and English language and literature. Her research explores the intersection of ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, and political and cultural geography.

**David Tierney (University of Liverpool): “The Necessity of Uncertainty when Voicing Nonhuman Animals”**

Generally, in traditional fiction, the non-human animal (NHA) mind is not intruded upon, something which Marco Caracciolo makes a point of when talking about Richard Powers’s *The Echo Maker* where a herd of cranes are described in detail, but ‘their minds are kept at a respectful distance’.[[6]](#footnote-6) In comparison, science fiction (SF) frequently broaches this distance, modifying and voicing its NHAs using human language. This paper will use David Herman’s theory on umwelt modelling and non-human narration to explore uncertainty and embodiment in the novel I am writing for my PhD, *Ark*, in the process drawing comparisons to other SF works and their narrative styles.

*Ark* is a novel set on a farm animal sanctuary in a near-future Ireland and is told from the perspective of the sanctuary’s humans, NHAs, and android NHAs. In the process, it explores a variety of consciousnesses through various styles with human chapters being told in traditional prose and NHAs and robot NHAs having their chapters’ writing styles fragmented to varying degrees, attempting to capture their umwelts while also acknowledging the uncertainty in this process. The paper will show how my research draws on SF such as Ian Watson’s *The Jonah Kit* and Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in that Country* in its themes and methodology and how uncertainty is an essential aspect of voicing NHAs and in capturing and understanding even a part of their umwelts.

**David Tierney** (d.tierney@liverpool.ac.uk) is a Creative Writing PHD student at the University of Liverpool researching representations of non-human animal communication. His thesis novel *Ark* depicts the perspectives of non-human animals and android animals, drawing on posthumanism and ecocriticism. He has been published in *The Stinging Fly* and *Green Letters*.

**James Baxter (Trinity College Dublin): “Brian Evenson, Immobility, and ‘the world-**

**without-us’”**

Throughout Brian Evenson’s multi-faceted career, the award-winning horror novelist, short story writer, translator, and literary critic engages in a broad philosophical inquiry into the limits of human understanding before a chaotic and indifferent world. As Scott Bradfield writes, ‘Evenson’s stories are post-*everything*. They are post-human, post-reason, post-apocalyptic. But more than anything, they are post-psychological…’ (2019)—drawing influence equally from popular horror authors such as Peter Straub and Thomas Ligotti, as well as the frosty narrative modernism of Samuel Beckett and Thomas Bernhard. This paper will focus primarily on the 2012 novel *Immobility* which exemplifies Evenson’s characteristic depiction of apocalyptic landscapes, devoid of futurity, wherein humanity is subject to a steady affective evacuation. The novel opens as Joseph Horkai is defrosted from a cryonically preserved chamber in order to recapture a stolen vial of ‘seed’ which may or may not be the key to rejuvenating all life on earth. Paralyzed from the waist down, Horkai must traverse an irradiated landscape before the mysterious condition that has rendered him immobile takes over his entire body. Evenson’s novel resonates with the bleak philosophical terrain of Eugene Thacker’s *In the Dust of this Planet* (2011), evoking Thacker’s abyssal insights into ‘the world-without-us’; for Thacker, the notion of ‘the world-without-us’ instils a ‘negative awareness’ of the preconceptual split between subject and world, engendering an ethical orientation towards the earthly that recedes from human awareness. This critical nexus will allow for a nuanced understanding of Evenson’s harsh minimalist narrative and its ethical, political, and epistemological components.

**Dr. James Baxter** (baxterja@tcd.ie) holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Reading, studying the legacies of Samuel Beckett in postmodern American fiction. He is the author of the Palgrave monograph *Samuel Beckett’s Legacies in American Fiction: Problems in Postmodernism*, and has been published in journals such as *Textual Practice* and *Samuel Beckett Today*. He is an Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow based at Trinity College Dublin, where he is undertaking a 2-year project on ‘mass-market modernism’ and the ‘big little’ magazine in America. More broadly, he is interested in the intersection between late modernist stylistics and popular cultures.

**D2 Novel Feelings**

**Alex J. Calder (University of Cambridge): “Rethinking Empathy: Essays and Criticism by Namwali Serpell and Zadie Smith”**

This paper attends to essays and critical non-fiction by acclaimed English novelist Zadie Smith and Zambian writer and critic Namwali Serpell. Through the confluence of these writers’ aesthetic preoccupations, I will argue that these contemporary writers offer sustained critiques which explore the possibilities, limits, and vagaries of empathy within neoliberal late capitalism.

As Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl contend, ‘the prominence and complex circulation of “empathy” as a cultural and political signifier, and as a capacity or asset” is significant to the sociohistorical conditions of the early twenty-first century (*Rereading Empathy* 2-3). Serpell and Smith (respectively) make cases for the critical-affective capabilities of fiction to reflect upon ethical issues and socio-political structures. As Serpell surmises: ‘Literature doesn’t create our capacity for empathy’, instead ‘our capacity for empathy allows us to create and read literature’ (“Unethical Reading and the Limits of Empathy” 196). Serpell repeatedly stresses the banality and problems underlying empathic imperatives for art: emphasising instead the complex—often indeterminate and ambivalent—affordances of fiction. By comparison, Smith maintains an alterity-inflected humanism which posits an alternative form of critical empathy, striving for a fluid process of ‘*Feeling into knowledge, knowledge into feeling*’ (*Changing My Mind* 40). Both writers reflect upon the dynamic capacities of fiction to focalise the perspectives of others and to provoke and question status quo realities, particularly socio-economic inequality and racial injustice. I propose a conceptual dialogue between Smith and Serpell that provides a creative-critical locus for aesthetics, affect, ethics, and the representational politics of marginalisation.

Originally from Caithness (Highland), **Alex** **Calder** (ajc338@cam.ac.uk) is an AHRC-funded PhD candidate working on a single-author study of Ali Smith. In April 2023, he co-organised the first conference on Ali Smith for *Contemporary Writers: Critical Essays*. His research has been published in *Alluvium* and *Critique*, with forthcoming work in *The Cambridge Quarterly* and a chapter on Max Porter.

**Marta Zanucco (University of Liverpool): “‘If I say, “This really happened,” then it’s true’: Performativity, Sincerity, and Collaboration in Barbara Browning’s *The Gift*”**

At the beginning of Barbara Browning’s autofictional novel *The Gift* (2017), the narrator announces her plan to ‘help jump-start a creative gift economy that would spill over into the larger world of exchange’. Her interest in gift-giving, which she sees as a potential alternative to the neoliberal market logic, influences not only her actions throughout the narrative, but also her approach to writing and her relationship with the reader.

In line with her insistence on ‘inappropriate intimacy’, Browning’s alter ego addresses the reader in the second person, constantly inviting us to believe in the truth of her account while, at the same time, metareferentially disclosing that some details of her narrative have been fictionalised. This dialogic relationship with the reader, who is called to participate in the narrative performance by negotiating this contradiction, will be explored by combining Anna Poletti’s concept of periperformative life narrative with Adam Kelly’s notion of New Sincerity.

Moreover, as she acknowledges her inclusion of real people in her novel, the narrator repeatedly expresses a preoccupation with the ethics of collaboration. Drawing on Lauren Fournier’s description of autotheory ‘[a]s a mode of writing through the self as relational’ as well as on her concept of lateral citation, it will be shown how *The Gift* formally enacts a tension between its narrator’s desire to commune with others through her writing and her resistance to let go of control over her narrative, reflecting the difficulty of overcoming individualism that underlies her acts of gift-giving.

**Marta Zanucco** (Marta.Zanucco@liverpool.ac.uk) is a PhD student in the Department of English at the University of Liverpool. Her doctoral project explores a group of recent contemporary novels dramatising a writer’s life and creative process, with a special focus on ideas of community and collaboration. Her research interests include contemporary fiction after postmodernism, autofiction, narratology, and affect theory.

**Natalie Wall (University of Liverpool): “ʽI wanted everything turned up a little too high’: Realism, Neoliberalism and the (Im)possibilty of Recovery in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*”**

*A Little Life* (2015) and the discourse surrounding it exemplifies contemporary interest in trauma fiction, however it does not strictly follow the traditional methods of representing trauma and recovery. Yanagihara’s representation of trauma and its effects blends first and second wave trauma theory methods to create a “heightened emotionality” (Kellerman 2019), melding conventions of realist fiction and fragmented literary representations of trauma to create the greatest emotional impact. Yanagihara also uses the tension between protagonist Jude’s outer and inner life to form her own counter-cultural thesis on the possibility of trauma recovery. Jude outwardly appears to have conquered his traumatic past as his wealth, career success, loving family and friends all suggest he has created a happy life despite his horrific past. However, Yanagihara’s extensive narration of Jude’s traumatic memories, depression, suicidal ideation, and self-injury reveal a man resigned to never heal. Critics have read the novel as a potential protest against “neoliberalism’s placatory myths of the individual and the attainment of personal ‘success’” (Rushton 2020) as markers of recovery and/or mastery over a traumatic past. A ‘happy ending’ seems impossible in *A Little Life* due to the “current societal and institutional conditions” (Rushton 2020) of contemporary neoliberal society inside and outside the novel which only equates healing as capitalist productivity. This paper will explore how Yanagihara augments the realist method to create an ‘emotional realism’ and, in doing so, strikingly conveys her ideology on the possibility of recovery.

**Natalie Wall** (natalie.wall@liverpool.ac.uk) is an English Literature PhD candidate at University of Liverpool. Her research looks at contemporary trauma literature and theory, particularly the representation of the traumatised body in fiction and popular engagement with trauma fiction in online spaces, alongside post-critical theory. She is also a freelance writer and has had previous work published in *The Independent*, *Refinery29*, *iPaper* and *VICE UK*.

**D3 Technology, Climate, Crisis**

**Julia Ditter (University of Konstanz): “Explosive Pollen, Steam-Powered Vixen and Unseemly Science: Neo-Victorian Energy Regimes”**

Neo-Victorian fiction presents us with self-conscious revisions of history and alternate visions that are informed by contemporary concerns. This is particularly striking in novels that disrupt historical realism through an infusion with fantastical and magic realist elements. The disruptive estrangement of history serves to highlight particular aspects of the past as central to urgent contemporary concerns.

In this paper, I want to focus on the alternate energy histories created by Neo-Victorian fictions and how they might inform our engagement with our current energy and climate crisis. As a number of critics in the energy humanities have noted, our current energy systems and imaginaries are rooted in nineteenth-century industrialist and imperialist infrastructures, not just in a technical but also a material, economic, social, cultural and literary sense.

The legacy of these energy regimes is reflected on in Neo-Victorian fiction that draws attention to ethical questions, in particular environmental and social questions, that are acutely relevant for the twenty-first century. In particular, I will consider the way these Neo-Victorian fictions interrogate the imperialist and industrialist underpinnings of energy epistemologies by looking at the magic realist novels of Natasha Pulley, Rod Duncan’s Gas-Lit Empire trilogy and Ken Liu’s short fiction.

**Julia Ditter**(julia.ditter@uni-konstanz.de) is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Konstanz, Germany. She is currently preparing a monograph on Scottish literature, borders and the environmental imagination and working on a post-doc project on energy infrastructures in the nineteenth-century Anglophone periodical press.

**Dong Xia (University of St Andrews): “Damage Control: The Poetics of Insecurity in Ben Lerner’s *10:04*”**

My paper will argue for a poetics of insecurity in Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* (2014) against the backdrop of the climate crisis. I read the novel, bookended by two storms (based on Hurricanes Irene and Sandy), as a literary response to the politics of security in U.S. political and media discourses surrounding climate disasters. These discourses, often mobilised by counterterrorist strategies, vigilantly project the future as the worst-case scenario, full of threats to be eliminated pre-emptively and territorialise the future as an enclosed object-sphere. The future thus configured is to be managed, controlled, 'pre-mediated' (Richard Grusin), and perpetually actualised. Such a future is deprived of its futurity since it is but a continuation of the present without new possibilities. Against the politicised will to security, which is predicated on defying the openness of time, *10:04* enacts a literary engagement that seeks to proliferate time by attending to different orders of temporality. *10:04* offers an 'insecure' model of the future which posits radical uncertainty to be not only fruitful but also ethically necessary to cultivate alternative futures. My paper will first outline how the U.S. perceptions of climate disasters tap into the War on Terror and the pitfalls of the security imperative focusing on minimizing the risk. It will be followed by a discussion of Lerner's idea of the virtual, which is a literary temporality that affords futurity without a particular future, and then I will demonstrate how Lerner implements this literary virtuality to give futurity back to the future. With the contrast between the politics of security and Lerner’s poetics of insecurity, I hope to showcase (in)security as a twenty-first-century ethos and that Lerner participates in a more general sentiment among contemporary writers which considers literature as a placeholder for futurity and surprise.

**Dong Xia** (dx2@st-andrews.ac.uk) is a PhD candidate at the School of English, University of St Andrews. Xia has published articles on the feminist reading of email novels and on acoustic ecocriticism. Xia’s current project concerns the intersection between contemporary literature and technology via the idea of chance.

**Mathieu Bokestael (University College Dublin): “Insular Iconicity and Utopian Immunity: Inoculating the Self in Tamsin Calidas’ *I am an island* (2020)”**

This paper contends that Tamsin Calidas’ memoir *I am an Island* (2020) invests in a fantasy of the absolute immunity of Self. The narrative is dependent on an allegory of inoculation through wild swimming, in which both the biomedical and political semantics of immunity are activated in order to symbolically construct absolute immunisation. Such biopolitical layering, however, has been criticised in a body of critical-theoretical work that deploys a genealogy of immunity in order to critique how the concept has shaped contemporary community relations. In this presentation, I argue that *I am an island*’s deployment of immune discourse invites an investigation of the text’s immunitary unconscious through such critical-theoretical work. In performing this analysis, this paper shows how an immunitary lens allows us to reconceptualise a blue humanities approach to island imaginaries and the immunising power of water.

**Mathieu Bokestael** (mathieu.bokestael@ucdconnect.ie) is a PhD candidate at University College Dublin’s School of English, Drama, and Film, and a Resident Scholar at UCD’s Humanities Institute. His dissertation, funded by the Irish Research Council, explores the manner in which theories of immunity and care can help us understand how communities are imagined in contemporary writing about Scotland.

**8 September: Online [Zoom]**

**A1 De-colonising, De-marginalising, Sampling, Coinings:**

**Critical Pedagogies for Contemporary Literary Studies**

**Jade Munslow Ong (University of Salford), John Roache (University of Manchester),**

**Veronica Barnsley (University of Sheffield) and Jade Cuttle (University of Cambridge)**

This panel addresses the intersection of three urgent problems in contemporary literary studies:

1. The precipitous and ongoing drop in the number of students taking English Literature at A-Level and university.
2. The sector-wide priority assigned to research over and above questions of pedagogy, in both financial and ideological terms.
3. The risk of the simultaneous stagnation and neoliberal co-optation of questions of decolonisation and inclusion in the contemporary university (and elsewhere).

We start from the contention that these problems are mutually reinforcing, rather than separate, and thus that a collaborative, cross-institutional, and interdisciplinary approach is required if the subject of literary studies is to survive (let alone flourish) over the next several decades. In this, we wish both to acknowledge and to build upon the crucial work already being done by colleagues in this area, including Robert Eaglestone’s powerful critique of the ideological scientism that has come to inform (and limit) the English National Curriculum (in *IMPACT*, 2020), Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan’s call for a newly rigorous focus on the role of the pedagogy in shaping research (in *The Teaching Archive*, 2020), and the important recent collection on decolonising the discipline edited by Charlotte Beyer (*Decolonising the Literature Curriculum*, 2022).

Following the lead of such work, we highlight the need to develop effective, critically-informed, and innovative modes of pedagogy as a means of confronting the challenges facing contemporary literary studies; and we accordingly frame the lecture theatre, the seminar room, and the assembly hall as spaces that have just as much (if not more) potential to intervene in our present challenges as the 4\* REF output. In this light, each panellist will introduce and consider a particular mode of critical pedagogy, outlining its potential to rise to such a task:

1. **Decolonising (Jade Munslow Ong)**: Efforts to decolonise university teaching and learning have been ongoing for a long time, and are indebted to, and have been led by, campaigns from outside of the ‘centre’ (perhaps most famously with the 2015 student-led movement #RhodesMustFall). Yet ‘decolonisation’ is increasingly being used in UK HE as synonym for depoliticised and dehistoricised forms of ‘recognition’, ‘internationalisation’ and/or ‘diversity’. This paper will consider how EDI initiatives both help and hinder efforts to decolonise literary studies. It draws on specific examples and models of practice within Higher and Further Education in order to argue that both the drop in the number of students pursuing qualifications in English Literature and the financial and ideological deprioritisation of pedagogy in HE might both be meaningfully addressed by sustained efforts to decolonise the discipline.
2. **De-marginalising (John Roache)**: While a notion of ‘marginality’ underpins current United Nations’ approaches to questions of uneven educational development, the term itself is both overused and under-theorised in sociological and pedagogical literatures. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to trace the ways in which the question of ‘de-marginalisation’ has historically been co-opted by a range of Black and postcolonial feminist thinkers including the Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, and Gayatri Spivak. It shows that this term has been especially useful in the attempts of such radical thinkers to develop more collaborative and politically-informed modes of pedagogy, and ends with a consideration of how such frameworks might inform our teaching of a range of feminist and postcolonial texts today.
3. **Sampling (Veronica Barnsley)**: This contribution traces the development of a module on Contemporary Black British Writing over the last five years. It considers the questions and challenges raised by the ‘ghettoisation’ of black literature in majority white English departments and the approaches (decolonial theory and practice, inclusive curriculum planning, collaborative teaching) that may be used to address them. The paper foregrounds student perspectives on and responses to learning via non-standard assessments and module evaluations and explains how using art, music and digital media in the classroom (including the poet Otis Mensah’s practice of ‘sampling’) enables an ethos of curiosity rather than control.
4. **Coinings (Jade Cuttle)**: This paper uses the concept of ‘silthood’ to think about how contemporary British BAME nature poets reframe the challenges of writing into an ‘almost universally white’ (Barkham 2021) canon by ‘coining’ new words and ways of writing. Not only is present scholarship behind in assessing the wealth of British BAME poetry, but more nuanced theory, pedagogical practice and new terminology is required to address this overlooked genre. We must pluralise the angles of analysis to accommodate race, nature and Britishness in BAME-authored poetry. Teaching these texts will deepen the dialogue between race studies and ecocriticism, widen the British nature poetry canon hitherto “colonised” by “white middle-class men” (Jamie 2021), while challenging unconscious biases behind canonisation and criticism itself.

Having outlined the different approaches, we will consider the possible connections and tensions between them and address the need for diverse and collegial forms of cross-institutional collaboration in the face of today’s increasingly neoliberal HE ‘marketplace’. And we will also invite attendees to share their own thoughts, ideas, and practices on the pedagogical and disciplinary questions at hand: indeed, the hope is for this panel to act as a prompt for an interactive and open discussion about the possible contributions scholars of contemporary literature can make to ensuring the intellectual and political development of literary studies as a whole.

**Veronica Barnsley** (v.barnsley@sheffield.ac.uk) teaches global literatures at the University of Sheffield. Her forthcoming monograph, *Childhood in Global Literatures: 21st Century Perspectives* (Routledge), looks at childhood at the intersection between literature and international development and she’s recently published on childbirth and midwifery in African literatures in *Moving Worlds* and the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. Veronica has coordinated engaged teaching projects with refugee and asylum seeker organisations in Sheffield and is involved in initiatives to create a more inclusive curriculum.

**Jade Cuttle** (jadecuttle@hotmail.co.uk) is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge. Her research is titled ‘British BAME Nature Poets: A Study in Silthood’ and focuses on the work of Grace Nichols, Kei Miller, Elizabeth Jane Burnett and Khairani Barokka. Jade completed an MA in poetry at UEA and her poetry has been broadcast and commissioned by BBC Radio 3 ‘The Miracle of Mould’, BBC Proms (‘The Art of Splinter’) and the BBC Strong Language Festival. Her album of poem-songs, *Algal Bloom* was released in 2021 through Warren Records. Jade is currently working on *A Mossary of Poetic Terms*.

**Jade Munslow Ong** (J.MunslowOng@salford.ac.uk) is Reader in English Literature at the University of Salford and Principal Investigator on AHRC-funded research project, *South African Modernism 1880-2020.* She is author of *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism: Allegory, Empire and Postcolonial Writing* (Routledge, 2018), and has two books forthcoming: a co-authored book with Matthew Whittle entitled *Global Literatures and the Environment: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Routledge), and a co-edited collection with Andrew van der Vlies entitled *Olive Schreiner: Writing Networks and Global Contexts* (Edinburgh University Press). Jade is also a BBC/AHRC New Generation Thinker and appears regularly on BBC Radio 3.

**John Roache** (john.roache@manchester.ac.uk) is Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Literatures in English at the University of Manchester. He is currently working on a monograph, *Towards a Critical Theory of Marginality*, which traces the links between the sociological, economic, and literary notions of margins and marginality that have emerged since the turn of the twentieth century. John has previously published articles on subjects including the modern literary archive (*Textual Practice*, 2022) and Walter Benjamin’s theory of historicity (*symplokē*, 2017). A 2022/23 Fellow of the Institute for Teaching and Learning, he is also currently writing about the question of educational marginality in relation to issues of diversity and inclusion in English literary studies.

**A2 Diasporic, Political and Creative Solidarities**

**in Contemporary British and Irish Narratives**

**Laura Aldeguer (University of Oviedo): “Political Solidarity at Work in Ali Smith’s *Winter* (2017)”**

Laura Aldeguer’s paper examines, from a gender and affect theory perspective, the solidary bonds that form among the main characters of Smith’s *Winter* (2017). Infused with a sense of common understanding and inclusivity, Smith’s works take the lead of one of BrexLit’s branches, becoming a stage that welcomes (trans)national dialogues (Everitt 2022). *Winter* features a European character, Lux, who is presented before an English family barely united by their last name. In the presence of a *stranger* (Ahmed 2000), a series of domestic and national issues cleaving the family come to the fore. Following the sense of Brexit conveyed in *Winter*, this paper will analyse the representation of Lux and the family’s affective responses to her presence. Contemporary theorisations of solidarities, especially political solidarity (Scholtz 2008), will prove useful to underline the ways in which characters from distinct cultural milieus appeal to a unity based on moral duties and shared commitment to fostering an appreciation for difference within the UK.

**Laura Aldeguer** (lauraldeguer@uniovi.es) is a 1st year PhD candidate in Gender and Diversity Programme at the University of Oviedo. In 2021, she obtained a BA in English Literature and Linguistics from the University of Oviedo. A year later, she completed an MA in Gender and Diversity from the University of Oviedo. She is a member of the research group Intersections: Literatures, Cultures and Contemporary Theories.

**Carla Martínez del Barrio (University of Oviedo): “East European Migration to the UK and Diasporic Solidarity in Marina Lewycka’s *Two Caravans* (2007) and Kate Clanchy’s *Antigona and Me* (2008)”\***

Carla Martínez del Barrio’s presentation argues that diasporic solidarity arises from contrasting articulations of joint struggle, allyship, and kinship in migrant communities (Bhardwaj 2022). For this reason, the discussion will suggest that considering “solidarity with refugees” as a single entity can lead to reductive and presumptuous results. By comparing two novels that depict contemporary East European Migration to the United Kingdom, *Two Caravans* and *Antigona and Me*, this paper offers a frame for understanding the complexities and the tensions that arise within literary representations of diasporic solidarity in the UK. The literary theme of migration not only fuels the conversation around alterity within diasporic as well as postcolonial studies but also creates a space for disadvantaged and voiceless migrant others and, most importantly, it calls for responsible action and hospitable attitudes from the other (Sulkin 2018).

**Carla Martínez del Barrio** (martinezbcarla@uniovi.es) is a PhD candidate in Gender and Cultural Diversity at the University of Oviedo. She completed her BA in English and MA in Gender and Diversity at the University of Oviedo and she is a member of Intersections: Literatures, Cultures and Contemporary Theories research group of the University of Oviedo.

**Cristina Riaño Alonso (University of Oviedo): “Cosmopolitan Mediation and Creative Solidarity in Hannah Lavery’s *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* (2021)”\***

Cristina Riaño Alonso’s paper explores Lavery’s theatrical response to the death in police custody of Sheku Bayoh. Originally from Sierra Leone, Sheku was a thirtyone-year-old Black man residing in the coastal town of Kirkcaldy, Scotland. Although he died in this locality on May 3, 2015, his death came to the national forefront in the wake of George Floyd’s death and the Black Lives Matter protests. Drawing from theories of affect and strange(r)ness, she will first examine Lavery’s use of verbatim technique to underscore the construction of Shekuh Bayoh as a fearsome stranger. Then, she will explore the use of grief and anger to both subvert the construction of Sheku’s strange(r)ness in official discourses and interrogate Scottish national self-conception as a safe and welcoming space. Her analysis will contribute to substantiate her understanding of Hannah Lavery as a cosmopolitan mediator (Gunew 2017) and the play as a call for solidarity.

**Cristina Riaño Alonso** (rianocristina@uniovi.es) holds a PhD from the University of Oviedo. A member of the research group “Intersections” (U. Oviedo), her field of expertise is contemporary Scottish literature, analysed from the framework of cultural, postcolonial, decolonial and gender studies. She has attended international academic conferences to disseminate her research.

**Matthew Lear (University of Edinburgh): “‘Constructing Collapse’: Fluid Systems and Infrastructural Crises in Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones*”**

This paper will examine how fluid representations of the house in Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones* (2016) give form to an emerging political and social moment shaped by construction, crises, and collapse. Whilst the popular ghost estate setting within contemporary Irish fiction is typified by its stasis and symbolism, *Solar Bones* (2016), I will argue, alternatively presents the Post-Celtic Tiger house as an interconnected ‘living thing’ sustained by fluid systems and network infrastructures.[[7]](#footnote-7)

McCormack’s ghostly protagonist Marcus Conway—a recently deceased engineer returned for All Souls’ Day, 2008—is confined to his home where he attempts to comprehend a myriad of collapse: of life and the human body, of faith, of local and global economies and infrastructures. Yet, criticism has failed to recognise the house, in its multitudinous technologies, as uniquely both a component and product of ‘policy, budgets, and government commitments’ capable of intersectional socio-political critique.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Engaging with current environmental humanities scholarship, in *Solar Bones*, I argue that the pulsing networked representation of the house connects Irish infrastructural and institutional crises that range in scale and specificity (the church, the economic crash, the cryptosporidiosis outbreak, the Corrib gas controversy and climate change) to reveal and depict a coherent, post-crash landscape wrought by collapse and corruption.

More broadly, this paper will identify aspects of how the fiction of Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland may collectively contribute to how property is narrated and historicised, and thus how housing is culturally imagined and thus managed in, and for, the future.

**Matthew Lear** (m.j.lear@sms.ed.ac.uk) is a PhD candidate in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. His research on ‘Repurposed Poetics and Anthropocene Time’ is funded by the SGSAH AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership. A recent Scotland-based scholar selected for the British Council’s ‘EARTH’ programme, he is also a member of the Edinburgh Environmental Humanities Network and assistant editor of *FORUM*.

\*Note: The first three papers of this panel draw on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to brings together feminist, postcolonial and affective insights into the principles of solidarity, cosmopolitanism and strangeness. They examine representations of diasporic, political and creative solidarity in four contemporary British narratives intended to foster cross-cultural dialogue, collective resilience and inclusive solidary behaviour in the readership.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**A3 Familiar Strangeness:**

**Identity Boundaries, History and Narrative Forms**

**Carla Rodríguez González (Universidad de Oviedo): “Revisiting Historical Solidarity in Denise Mina’s *Rizzio*”**

The aim of this paper is to study the representation of historical forms of gender, religious and ethnic discrimination in Denise Mina’s novella *Rizzio* (2021), as well as the solidary responses envisioned by the author to counteract them. In order to do so, I will apply Sara Ahmed’s conceptualisation of *familiar strangers* (2000) and Judith Butler’s notion of the *differential distribution of grievability* (2004) to analyse both the frictions and the redefinition of identity boundaries caused by encounters with strange(r)ness in this text, which narrates the assassination of Mary Queen of Scots’ Italian secretary, David Rizzio, in 1566. I will next examine how difference is inscribed on the body of these two characters—Mary’s advanced pregnancy and Rizzio’s Mediterranean phenotypes—to articulate a gendered hate discourse that substantiates the legitimacy of the plot that led to Rizzio’s murder. My analysis will cover the historical and cultural representation of the Scottish queen from a gender perspective that interrogates the romantic, religious and political symbol constructed upon her figure as a national myth. I will conclude that Mina’s fictionalised rendering of this historical incident contributes to challenging more general discourses and relations of power and antagonism which are crucial to understand the complexities of twenty-first century Scotland.

**Carla Rodríguez González** (rodriguezcarla@uniovi.es) is Senior lecturer in English at the University of Oviedo, Spain. She is co-PI of the research project “World-travelling: Narratives of Solidarity and Coalition in Contemporary Literature and Performance,” funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science. Her recent publications include *Performing Cultures of Equality* (Routledge, 2022), *Debating the Afropolitan* (Routledge, 2019) and the special issue *Strangers and Trespassers in Contemporary Women’s Crime Fiction (Papers on Language and Literature*, 2022).

**Camellia Choudhuri (Independent Researcher): “Haunting History: Examining Jay Bernard’s Hauntological Poetics in *Surge* (2019)”**

This study examines how Jay Bernard’s hybrid poetics reformulates modes of historicizing Black British cultural identity. It contextualizes Bernard’s multimodal work, *Surge* (2019), as a “hauntological” text to illustrate the efficacy of performance arts in creating embodied mnemonic archives. Rooted in Bernard’s extensive archival research conducted at the George Padmore Institute London in 2017, *Surge* displays a fertile interpenetration of text, image and performance to create an archive that is “alive.” Bernard’s interest in the “radical excavation” of black British history in order to “haunt” it back, centers around two notorious London-based fires: the New Cross Massacre (1981) and Grenfell (2017). Though separated by decades, both fires primarily affected working-class black individuals. Bernard identifies similarities between the lacunae that riddle the legal documentation surrounding each event. Their historiographic project views these archival absences as resultant of deliberate ideological erasure and attempts to recuperate the narratives lost to systemically enforced invisibility.

Against this backdrop, I argue that Bernard’s performing texts, in their printed and embodied forms, negotiate between the tenuous transversals that cut across past and present, acts of remembering and cultural amnesia, and articulation and silence. The *Surge* poems integrate fragmented lyric and narrative forms and a vocative British-Caribbean musical aesthetic to foreground marginalized voices. Through an analysis of Bernard’s intertextual counter-discourse against dominant centres of knowledge and power, this study highlights how their poetic experiments foray into the interstices between public narration and private truths, to alter the conventional theoretical bases underlying archival and memory.

**Camellia Choudhuri** (camelliac123@gmail.com) has recently completed her MA in English Literature from St. Xavier’s College, Kolkata, India. Her research interests include archival queer poetics and performance studies.

**Iris Pearson (University of Oxford): “Disrupted Decorum, Focalisation, and Readerly Hesitance in Angela Carter’s Experimental Novels”**

In her early drafts of *Wise Children*, Angela Carter can be seen labouring over the tone and grammar of the narrating voice. Should the prose be in the first or third person, or a mixture of both? Should the text advertise its focalisation through the consciousness of Dora Chance, or should it conceal that subjectivity under the guise of omniscience? This paper examines Carter’s experiments with narrative perspective in two novels—*Love* (1971) and *Wise Children* (1991)—within the context of Genette’s theory of the impossibility of omniscient narration. If, in the latter novel, a cynical, idiosyncratic voice immediately advertises its narrative control, the third-person grammar of the former necessitates a reliance on other devices to focalise the story.

Applying an affective formalist method, borrowed from Doug Battersby, which attends to the ways in which formal devices cultivate readerly affect, I argue that Carter’s experiments with focalisation invite a reader to feel hesitant, as they parade that novelist’s combative and provocative themes as products of particular narrative perspectives. When Carter offers comedy instead of tragedy, or flatness instead of pathos, the experimental focalisation leaves a reader feeling unable to take that wrongness at face value, instead wavering between two possibilities in a prolonged state of hesitance. In this way, my paper wades through reams of criticism celebrating the general subversiveness of Carter’s work, and reframes her experimentation in affective terms, aligning her with other late twentieth-century novelists such as Anthony Burgess and B.S. Johnson who affectively repel their readers.

**Iris Pearson** (iris.pearson@new.ox.ac.uk) is a PhD student at the University of Oxford, working on form and repulsive readerly affect in late twentieth-century experimental novels. She has articles published or forthcoming in the *Latin American Literary Review* and *The Journal of Avant-Garde Studies*.

**B1 Pandemic Perspectives**

**María Jesús Sánchez García (University of Oviedo): “Solidarity during Plague Times: Louise Welsh’s *A Lovely Way to Burn”***

This paper aims to provide an analysis of Scottish author Louise Welsh’s first installment of her *Plague Times* trilogy: *A Lovely Way to Burn* (2014). The novel can be classified as an intersection between thriller and science-fiction dystopia, as we follow Stevie Flint’s desperate search for answers regarding her boyfriend’s passing in the midst of a pandemic. This apocalyptic context in which the events take place provides an insight into the main focus of this study: the juxtaposition of individualism and the need for social bond. The paper will be divided into two main parts, the first section consisting of an analysis of the main character in terms of ambiguity and alterity. The catastrophe background will then be explored in connection to the etymological origin of the word *apocalypse*, seen as what precedes the uncovering of a fundamental truth. It will pay special attention to our belief systems regarding community, or “what is *obligated* together" to see how solidarity—or lack thereof—plays a key role in the development of the character’s quest and the articulation of her own self and her relations to others. Her interactions provide the grounds for reflection on human response in the face of disaster, as well as on the darkest side of human nature and its potential for profitable atrocity.

**Ms María Jesús Sánchez García** (sanchezgmaria@uniovi.es) from the University of Oviedo (Spain) is Lecturer in the Department of English Philology with an interest in contemporary Scottish literature written by women and the evolution of dystopian fiction from an interdisciplinary perspective. She is a member of the Research Group “Intersecciones”.

**Firuze** **Güzel (Ege University): “Imagining Life after Covid: Ethics of Tolerance in *The Madness of Crowds*”**

*The Madness of Crowds* (2021) by the Canadian author Louis Penny can be categorized as a pandemic novel, which imagines life after the official end of the Covid-19 pandemic. The novel’s core subject and dilemma revolve around a statistician, Abigail Robinson, who has a radical claim to refrain from experiencing similar horrors if any other pandemic or catastrophe ever occurs in the future. As a consequence of her statistical research, she claims the world can use its resources fairly and effectively only by letting go of its vulnerable members; a process which she defines as “mercy killing.” As a type of euthanasia, her proposal also bears an insinuation of eugenics and is thus rejected by several people and government officials, however, also attracts some defenders despite its morally ambiguous nature, which the author considers to be a” madness of crowds.” This ethical position and dilemma presented by the novel are followed by another, the right of free speech and the limits of tolerance to such atrocities. The idea of protecting Robinson’s right to address her ideas and research freely constitutes the ethics of tolerance that the novel presents. This idea is reinforced by further instances, but not just by Robinson’s case, which demonstrates a postmodern relativistic ethical outlook of tolerance and understanding “the other.” In this regard, this presentation aims to examine and discuss how Penny pursues to employ an ethics of tolerance in a fictional post-Covid period in *The Madness of Crowds* and advocates how such an ethical attitude may help people to live in a safer world.

**Keywords:** The Madness of Crowds, Covid-19 pandemic, ethics of tolerance, freedom of speech, understanding “the other”

**Firuze Güzel** (firuze.guzel@ege.edu.tr) works as Res. Assist. Dr. at the Department of American Culture and Literature, Ege University, Izmir. She received her PhD degree in 2021 with a dissertation titled “Postmodern Perception of Values, Morals and Ethics in Contemporary American Science-Fiction Novel.” She earned a Fulbright SUSI grant and stayed in New York as a visiting scholar at NYU in the summer of 2022. Her studies mainly focus on contemporary American novel and drama, postmodern fiction, science fiction, literary theory, and philosophy in literature.

**B2 Contemporary Representations of**

**People at the Margins, People in Jeopardy**

**Sophie Jones (University of Strathclyde): Genetic Futures of Pregnancy Sickness:**

**Sarah Hall’s ‘Mrs Fox’ at the Intersection of Disability and Animality”**

In Sarah Hall’s short story ‘Mrs Fox’, a man wakes to find his wife, Sophia, vomiting. When Sophia’s nausea continues he imagines her wasting from a rare cancer; instead, she mutates into a fox and, after a brief captivity at their home, leaves him for the woods. She reappears months later with a litter of kits: his progeny. Sophia’s sickness is belatedly implied to be nausea and vomiting of pregnancy (NVP), and her metamorphosis from human to fox seems to have been triggered by conception.

NVP or ‘morning sickness’ tends to appear in culture as a form of narrative prosthesis: it functions as plot reveal or punchline but rarely as experience. This narrative marginalisation parallels the condition’s medical status: NVP often goes untreated, partly due to fears of congenital disability in the wake of thalidomide. In recent years, NVP has become the subject of new genetic research that suggests the potential for more effective therapies. Yet this research may also reinforce the theory that NVP is an evolutionary mechanism that protects the foetus—a necessary burden that should go untreated.

 In this article, I draw on this context to read ‘Mrs Fox’ as a double allegory. On the one hand, Sophia’s metamorphosis from human to animal invokes the evolutionary safety-net explanation for NVP. On the other, ‘Mrs Fox’ allegorises the cultural marginalisation of NVP. Drawing on work in crip theory and animal studies, I argue that new scientific research into NVP spotlights the need for new narratives of gestational sickness.

**Dr Sophie A. Jones** (sophie.jones@strath.ac.uk) is Lecturer in Contemporary Literature and Gender Studies at the University of Strathclyde. Sophie works at the intersection of contemporary literary studies, gender studies, and the medical humanities. Sophie’s first monograph, *The Reproductive Politics of American Literature and Film, 1959-1973* will be published by Edinburgh UP in 2024.

**Joseph Anderton (Birmingham City University): “Frames of Homelessness: Response Ethics and Writing Other Lives in Alexander Masters’s *Stuart: A Life Backwards*”**

In *Frames of War* (2009), Judith Butler writes ‘If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense’ (1). The context of the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’ made apparent to Butler the force of perspectives that can decide who is recognised as human with a life that should be grieved. Butler is particularly attuned to how media discourses construct perceptual and narrative frames that stipulate what is seen, known, and protected as life. ‘It is only by challenging the dominant media,’ Butler writes, ‘that certain kinds of lives may become visible or knowable in their precariousness’ (51). This is a matter of apprehending precarious lives through the stories we are told and tell ourselves.

The frames that underlie the perception and treatment of marginalized groups are addressed in contemporary homelessness literature. In this paper, I argue that part of Alexander Masters’s task in *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (2005) is to break the epistemological frame that he used previously to conceive of people who are homeless. His biography is characterised by a tension between alterity’s challenge to comprehension and representation on one hand, and the imperative to respond on the other. I discuss how Masters’s standard forms of recognition are inadequate to account for Stuart’s experiences but in realising the need to respond to a life that addresses him, Masters demonstrates a form of response ethics in literature.

**Dr Joseph Anderton** (joseph.anderton@bcu.ac.uk) is Reader in Modern and Contemporary Literature at Birmingham City University. He is the author of *Beckett’s Creatures: Art of Failure after the Holocaust* and has published widely on dehumanization, animals and the nonhuman, and late modernism. His recent research focuses on literary representations of homelessness, particularly rough sleeping, and he is currently working on a new monograph project entitled *Writing Homelessness in Contemporary British Literature*.

**Sarah Dara (University of York): “Sexual Violence and ‘the Victim’ in South Asian Sex Trafficking Literature”**

This paper examines the depiction of the power of sex trafficking survivors in contemporary South Asian literature. Current sex trafficking texts focus on a victimised narrative, presenting protagonists with little or no agency. I argue that the violence that comes with being trafficked affects these characters in various psychological and physical ways, however this does not mean that they are without agency and interiority.

The books analysed in this paper include Mahasweta Devi’s *Douloti the Bountiful*, Tariq Mehmood’s *Song of Gulzarina* and *Girls Burn Brighter* by Shobha Rao. These texts have been selected for their representation of the experiences of survivors from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Through trauma theorisation, and feminist and postcolonial perspectives, this paper will look at sexual violence and its effects on the voice of characters. The relationship voice has with identity, religion and geographical relocation will be explored to showcase the agency and interiority of sex trafficking survivors in fiction and drama.

Many of these texts depict South Asian survivors with greater control or ability to escape, while some show them as passive and acted upon. I discuss the reasons behind this phenomenon, including exclusion of survivors’ voices and the absence of detail and comprehension in trafficking literature. Using a variety of criticism including that of Whitehead and Luckhurst, this paper argues that stereotypes of the ‘helpless victim’ who has no voice and cannot save herself are false, and the characters in these texts do challenge trauma and violence through their agency or interiority. The conclusion of this research is that characters in South Asian sex trafficking literature have agency, though it can be influenced by factors including the length of trauma and violence, the writer’s depiction of the character’s voice and how the traumatic event affects the character.

**Sarah Dara** (sarah.dara@york.ac.uk) is a writer, and PhD researcher in English and Creative Writing at the University of York, UK. Her creative-critical research focuses on issues of representation including the voice, agency and identity of South Asian sex trafficking survivors in contemporary literature. Sarah’s multidisciplinary research has been influenced by her career as a journalist and creative writing instructor in Karachi, Pakistan. She is published in the *Herald*, *Soch Videos*, *Newsline Magazine*, *Himal Southasian*, *Literally Stories* and *The Bard Review*.

**Gemma Marr (University of New Brunswick): “Love, Lust, and the Local: Representations of Queerness in Newfoundland Fiction”**

In a moment when LGBTQIA+ communities are under attack on a global level, depictions of queer joy in local spaces have transgressive potential. Such texts show the diversity of queer life by moving through pain and abjection into community building, local recognition, and vibrant existence outside urban centres. There is, this writing asserts, love, fun, and growth for queer people in spaces assumed intolerant.

The proposed paper focuses on the vibrancy of queer joy in small community by discussing two contemporary depictions of St. John’s, Newfoundland. Jessica Grant’s *Come, Thou Tortoise* uses a unique style to track the protagonist’s movements, which are marked by expositions of joy as Audrey shares memories of her queer parents. In Eva Crocker’s *All I Ask*, protagonist Stacey likewise navigates St. John’s via her developing sense of self, moments of pleasure, and complex relations. Both Audrey and Stacey are complicated characters who move through social formations in ways surprising and poignant. Despite similarities, Grant’s novel, written in 2009, involves a slow unfurling of queer relation as Audrey relates one memory at a time until readers understand the reality of Walter and Thoby’s love. Written a decade later, Crocker’s text is more overt; there is no need to ease the reader into Stacey’s queerness, which is understood as part of the local fabric. Reading the texts together offers an affirmative queering of St. John’s that complicates metronormative stereotypes governing central and marginal spaces (Halberstam, 2005) and positions queer joy as a powerful aspect of the local milieu.

**Gemma Marr** (gemma.marr@unb.ca) holds a Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in the Department of History at the University of New Brunswick. She completed her PhD, which focused on representations of gender and sexuality in Atlantic Canadian literature and culture, from Carleton University in August of 2022.

**B3 Mixed Media:**

**Contemporary Literature’s Engagements with Other Forms**

**Maisie Ridgway (University of Sussex): “Meaning and Materiality in Allison Parrish’s Asemic AI Poetry”**

The industrial logic of machine learning models like Chat GPT have caused widespread speculation about the future of writing in all its forms. Such tools aim towards verisimilitude or the capacity to perform against the benchmark of human competence, a goal that perpetually returns us to our own human image. Using theories drawn from the emerging field of Critical AI studies, I consider Allison Parrish’s Wendit Tnce Inf in opposition to such models. Wendit Tnce Inf is a book of asemic prose poems generated by machine learning models called Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs). Instead of semiotic datasets of poems or prose, Parrish feeds the GANs with a visual dataset of different typefaces in different word and sentence configurations. The result is a poetics of approximate and unreadable alphabetic forms that look like letters and words but aren’t. As opposed to verisimilitude, then, Wendit Tnce Inf cultivates an aesthetics of “offness” specific to AI generated poetry, which reilluminates the graphology of letters typically coded into abstraction as sign. Alongside Parrish’s Wendit Tnce Inf, I consider the 2012 ScanOps project by Andrew Norman Wilson as an early example of this aesthetic “offness”. ScanOps is a collection of accidental images created when the human hands of the workers who scanned and digitised texts for Google Books accidentally appear in the scans. These fluoroscopic records of human-machine interactions embody computationally informed poetry as a collaborative event between different human and machine agencies that act on each other to create new aesthetic objects.

**Maisie Ridgway** (she/her) (mr478@sussex.ac.uk) is a doctoral researcher at The University of Sussex, who recently submitted her PhD thesis ‘The Agencies of the Letter: Poetics, Meaning, and the Materiality of Language from James Joyce to the Digital’ for examination. Her recent publications include ‘Joyce the Technician’ in Joyce Without Borders (University Press of Florida) and ‘Joyce and Posthumanism’ in the James Joyce Broadsheet.

**Pankhuri Singh (University of Exeter): “The Adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays in Indian Cinema”**

My paper focuses on the critical evaluation of how the Shakespearean plays are translocated and adapted into the Indian setting along with aiming, rethinking, and repositioning Shakespeare in the 21st century Indian cinematic setting. My talk will be offering a nuanced understanding of the various approaches undertaken by Vishal Bhardwaj, the director of the Shakespeare trilogy, that translocates the Shakespearean plays of *Macbeth,* *Othello*, and *Hamlet*, in *Maqbool* (2004), *Omkara* (2006) and *Haider* (2014) respectively.

In the conference, I will be discussing the various elements employed by the filmmaker to indigenise the Shakespearean play in the Indian setting. The few ways in which this is achieved is by transculturally adapting the play to a specific part in India and giving it a modern take on the play, like in *Omkara*, Othello becomes a hoodlum working for a local politician. Then there are elements of Hindu mythology added, the Emilia figure becomes the vengeful deity of Goddess Kali and redresses the wrongs done to Dolly/Desdemona.

The filmmaker also adds in social and cultural norms, along with rethinking the props and making them more Indian audience specific, like the ‘handkerchief’ of *Othello* becomes the ‘waistband’ in *Omkara*. Finally, the auteur resorts to staying close to Bollywood trope of songs and dance sequence. The ‘Mousetrap scene’ of *Hamlet* becomes a lavishly choreographed song ‘Bismil’ in *Haider*. I will thus throw light on all these aspects and analyse how Shakespeare is adapted in Hindi cinema.

**Pankhuri Singh** (ps540@exeter.ac.uk) is a third-year PhD student in the Department of English, University of Exeter. Her research title is ‘Adapting Shakespeare’s plays in Indian Cinema’, and her supervisors are Professor Pascale Aebischer and Dr Ranita Chatterjee. She originally comes from India and has a passion for writing blogs in her free time. She is currently a Post Graduate Teaching Associate. She completed her Master of Arts programme from The University of Lucknow where she was a valedictorian and received a gold medal. She is the Assistant editor to the University of Exeter, magazine Exclamation. She has presented her research in ESRA (European Shakespeare Research Association) 2023 and BSA (British Shakespeare Association) 2023, along with attending conferences in University of Southampton, University of Liverpool, University of Birmingham and The Shakespeare Institute. She is currently working as the Research Culture Assistant for the College of Humanities, University of Exeter and is a committee member of the BSA Media and Performance Team.

**Devin Tupper (University College London): “Lives Between”**

*Lives Between*, a critical-creative novel, explores how in an increasingly digital, fluid, and diverse world, authorship is unstable, blurred, and transmissible. It draws on my original critical-creative practice, critical Gothic authorship, to examine anxieties of self-censorship and identity authors grapple with as they navigate increased exposure and vulnerability that comes with working in globally policed and disorderly digital spaces. My paper, ‘The Campbell Media: A Critical-Creative Reading’, is both a presentation of my method and a reading from a section of Lives Between. There will be a brief presentation on the theory which informs critical Gothic authorship (creative criticism, Nomadology, Derridean hauntology, authorship studies, and the Gothic) before a reading from one of the book’s fictional sections entitled, ‘The Campbell Media’, is given.

This section, informed by scholars like Friedrich Kittler, Erika Kvistad, Maria Beville, Donna J. Haraway, and Jack Halberstam, follows Reed Campbell, a social-media influencer, who documents a haunting while flipping a house. It demonstrates how the critical and creative components illustrate the gothicisation, digitisation, and de-centralisation of the author-figure. This expression of critical and creative components blurs the lines between authorship, readership, and text, engaging the parallels between the Gothic and critical-creative practice. As a critical-creative endeavour, *Lives Between* balances the artistic and theoretical, leverages the Gothic novel form to allow the critical and creative to be in constant dialogue with one another, and recontextualises the relationship to reflect the fluidity between the creative and critical in a developing interdisciplinary relationship.

**Devin Tupper** (uclzdtt@ucl.ac.uk) is an award-winning playwright and PhD candidate on UCL’s creative critical writing programme. His research focuses on the intersection between the creative and critical, and the parallels between the Gothic and creative-criticism to explore digital technology creates a haunted authorial voice in contemporary authorship.

**C1 De-colonising, De-marginalising, Sampling, Coinings:**

**Critical Pedagogies for Contemporary Literary Studies Part 2**

**Rebecca Bevington (University of York): “Taking Down Walls’: Border Crossings, Brutality and the Education of Human Rights in *Enrique’s Journey* by Sonia Nazario”**

On lists of set texts for secondary school literature courses across the US, Sonia Nazario’s 2006 non-fiction book *Enrique’s Journey* is routinely featured. Nazario, an investigative journalist, documents the route taken by Enrique, a seventeen-year-old Honduran boy, from his home of Tegucigalpa through Mexico by ‘freight-hopping’—riding the tops of cargo trains. Enrique eventually reaches his mother Lourdes, a forcibly displaced domestic worker who departed for the US twelve years earlier to lift her family out of poverty; Nazario aims to reveal the ‘crisis’ of Central American children who migrate north to be reunited with their mothers.

The book’s pedagogical appeal is articulated by Ashley Boyd and Jeanne Dyches in their article, ‘Taking Down Walls: Countering Dominant Narratives of the Immigrant Experience’, arguing for the book’s positive impact on American students’ imaginative and empathetic capacities, and its ability to ‘humanise migrants’, prompting discussions about human rights and social justice in the classroom. Nevertheless, the book often reproduces dehumanising stereotypes of migrants, depictions of extreme violence that frame Central American migration as a crisis for US citizens, and political convictions which reinforce dichotomies of ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ border-crossings, refuting the fundamental rights of the book’s subjects. In this paper, I interrogate why *Enrique’s* *Journey*, as a ‘counter-narrative’ to racist anti-migrant discourses, is considered an effective political intervention in the classroom, arguing that the book’s tendency to excavate moments of trauma experienced by marginalised people curtails its ability to offer resources for human rights education.

**Rebecca Bevington** (rebecca.bevington@york.ac.uk) is a PhD student at the University of York’s Department of English and Related Literature, funded by the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities (WRoCAH). Her research focuses on fictional and non-fictional representations of refugee women, building a feminist literary approach to theories of displacement and human rights.

**Charlotte Beyer (University of Gloucestershire): “Writing Back to History: Using Andrea Levy’s “Uriah’s War” as a Case Study for Decolonisation on a Level 4 Skills Module for English and Creative Writing Students”**

Level 4 Skills modules are conventionally employed to teach basic undergraduate competences such as literacy and study skills. My paper examines how I have reevaluated the aims and objectives of a Level 4 skills module by centring debates around decolonisation and equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). I argue that such modules offer a crucial opportunity to further vital conversations around decolonisation and hidden narratives in the contemporary diverse classroom.

Using Black British author Andrea Levy’s 2014 short story “Uriah’s War” as the case study literary text on the module, my Level 4 skills module affords a space for decolonisation. Exploring hitherto silenced histories of Caribbean soldiers’ participation for Britain in the First World War, “Uriah’s War” connects powerfully with recent reassessments of the British Empire’s war effort and issues of race, identity, and citizenship. My module examines these challenges to historical and literary master narratives alongside more recent debates around Black Lives Matter, thus offering students opportunities to consider decolonisation through practical examples investigated in class.

Classroom debates focus on themes such as decolonisation and writing back to history through a creative/literary lens. The module furthermore provides opportunity for student responses to and reflections on decolonisation and their learning journey in the Portfolio assessment I set. My inclusive approach thereby extends the conventional remit of the conventional skills module to centre on decolonisation, reflection, and cultural literacy, thus reimagining the module to foster the emotional, intellectual, critical, and creative awareness and competences required in the contemporary diverse classroom.

**Dr Charlotte Beyer** (cbeyer@glos.ac.uk) is Senior Lecturer in English Studies at the University of Gloucestershire, UK. She is the author of three single-author scholarly monographs to date, *Murder in a Few Words: Gender, Genre and Location in the Crime Short Story* (McFarland, 2020), *Contemporary Children's and Young Adult Literature: Writing Back to History and Oppression* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), and *Intersectionality and Decolonisation in Contemporary British Crime Fiction* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023). She has published widely on crime fiction and contemporary literature. Dr Beyer has edited six books to date. These include *Teaching Crime Fiction* (Palgrave, 2018) which was shortlisted for the 2019 Teaching Literature Book Award. Her book *Mothers Who Kill*, co-edited with Josephine Savarese, was published by Demeter Press in February 2022. *Decolonising the Literature Curriculum*, her edited book on pedagogical scholarship, was published by Palgrave in March 2022. Dr Beyer has also edited two journal special issues, for *American, British and Canadian Studies* on contemporary crime fiction (2017), and *Feminist Encounters* on feminism and motherhood in the 21st Century (2019). Dr Beyer is the Editor-in-Chief of Teaching the New English, the Palgrave book series on Higher Education pedagogy. She also serves on the Editorial Boards for the journals The New Americanist, American, British and Canadian Studies, and Feminist Encounters. Dr Beyer is a Crime Writers’ Association Dagger Award judge in the category of historical crime fiction.

**Rebecca Roach (University of Birmingham): “Contemporary Literature from the Classroom”**

As many of us have learned when teaching the literature of our moment, the professor is never the only expert in the classroom. Students bring their own specialist knowledge—whether on up and coming authors, Goodreads trends, second-hand bookstore stock, fanfic or audiobook aesthetics—of literature and literary culture at the 'bleeding edge'. What might we learn from this knowledge? What does contemporary literature and literary culture look like through the eyes of our students?

Acknowledging this vision takes on urgency in a moment of broad political, social and climate crises and the particular crises of expertise and institutional legitimacy facing the university today. What is the purpose of the contemporary classroom? What counts as knowledge in the eyes of our students and what kinds of expertise do we lack?

Following Laura Heffernan and Rachel Sanger Buurma's provocation in *The Teaching Archive* that the 'work of classrooms' has been crucial to the development of literary methods and canons, this cluster proposes that we look to the classroom in our analysis of contemporary literature. Moreover, it suggests that contemporary literature is a particularly rich object of focus, given its conceptually tense relationship to history. While Heffernan and Buurma focus on creating a 'new history for literary study', as Theodore Martin has noted, the category of the contemporary 'compels us to think, above all, about the politics of how we think about the present'. Studying contemporary literature requires us to think about the (political) position of the classroom and the voices of its participants. What might this awareness tell us both about our object of study and the work that classrooms can do?

Potential panel contributions might explore topics such as:

* what constitutes a classroom in our contemporary moment
* what the contemporary looks like to our students
* the role of college text choice on publishers' marketing and list decisions
* how political and market policies determine who is in the classroom
* the preservation of contemporary course syllabi and student notes
* the politics of mediating student voices in scholarship on contemporary literature
* the challenges and rewards of teaching a moving target (and reusing resources)
* conceptions of global and local literature, as refracted in the particular classroom
* digital classrooms and digital texts

**Rebecca Roach** (r.roach@bham.ac.uk) is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Literature at the University of Birmingham. (Full bio TBC)

**C2 Visualities**

**Helen Penet (Université de Lille): “Fiction in the Age of Digital Photography: A Case Study of some Contemporary Irish Women’s Writing”**

Almost a century and a half after François Arago presented Daguerre’s invention to the Académie des sciences, Nancy Armstrong devoted *Fiction in the Age of Photography* to the impact this invention had on literary realism in the 19th century. A little more than half a century after the first digital photograph, Julia Breitach’s *Analog Fictions for the Digital Age: Literary Realism and Photographic Discourses in Novels after 2000* questioned whether literature written in the digital age has genuinely come to terms with the revolution digital technologies have wrought on the medium of photography, suggesting that the digitalisation of photography has altered photograph’s relationship to the real “rather less than might be expected”.

This paper aims to reflect on a corpus of literary texts which have been published since Julia Breitbach’s 2012 monograph and which make explicit reference to digital photography, from selfies to revenge porn and Instagram, to see if this finding still holds. Referring to some of the fundamental differences between chemical and digital photography explored by WJT Mitchell in *The Reconfigured Eye*, including the loss of authenticity/ease of manipulation, the potential for infinite sharing and indefinite storage, and the evaporation of the distinction been producer and consumer of images, this paper will study a number of recent novels by Irish authors, including Sally Rooney, Louise O’Neill, Megan Nolan, Naoise Dolan and Louise Nealon, to discover if and how digital photography is changing contemporary fiction.

**Helen Penet** (helen.penet@univ-lille.fr) completed her PhD at Université Paris 7 in 2002, and since 2003 she has been a lecturer in English and Irish Studies and Université de Lille. Her research focuses on 20th and 21st century Irish prose writing, and the representation of photography in literature.

**Audrey Chan (University of Cambridge): “The Everyday Museum in Matisse’s Paintings: A. S. Byatt’s *Matisse Stories*”**

As Brain O’Doherty notes, postmodernists have been challenging the “modernism’s avatar,” which is the juxtaposition of the white wall and paintings. This paper extends from such an ‘anti-white-wall’ sensibility and reads A.S. Byatt’s set of everyday narratives inspired by Matisse’s sketches as a form of ekphrastic aesthetics as she explicitly deploys “features of Matisse’s artistic vision […] to flesh out a fictional location or landscape” (Fishwick 55), which historicises “value and critique museum culture” through manifesting “the aesthetics of detail, ornament, fragility, and ugliness” (Hepburn 15) of Matisse’s paintings. Through analysing Byatt’s idea of the transcending merging process of the everyday and the visual art through ekphrastic enchantment, I look at how Byatt engages with the painted subjects’ life in relation to our “own lives as beholders” (Mitchell 49). My examination of the collection as an ekphrastic work that reaches the Desmonian metaxological sense is read through three layers: 1) How Byatt makes the readers ‘re-enchant’ art through imagination by ‘displaying’ Fauvist artist Henri Matisse’s sketches on white pages; 2) How Byatt moulds Matisse’s primitive into a ‘real person’ to collide the unruly everyday with art theories, which questions the “exhibition value” of artworks in museum culture, and to show us the potential of turning “an everyday object” (Benjamin 224-5) into art; and 3) How Byatt seeks for real and transparent connections with artworks through the images of smashed glasses. Eventually, I illustrate how these ekphrastic moments overcome the questions of representation in artworks and transcend the materiality of capitalist life by displaying paintings in the form of life instead of art objects in museums.

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**Audrey Chan** (tyc33@cam.ac.uk) is a PhD student reading English at St. John’s College of the University of Cambridge. Her research project focuses on Hemingway’s oeuvre in relation to both particular paintings and artistic movements, and the historical networks that facilitated his engagement with modernist art. She has two upcoming peer-reviewed articles about the aesthetics of mythical Cityscapes from Cubism to Ultraísmo in Joyce and Borges as well as Alberto Breccia’s parody of Futurist paintings in modern *bande dessinée* to be published by *eSharp* and *FORUM* this year.

**C3 Compromised Affects**

**Holly Parker (University of Lincoln): “‘Leave it at Home’: Grieving and the Neoliberal Workplace in Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed*”**

Margaret Atwood’s (2016) novel, *Hag-seed*, stands as Atwood’s contribution to a series retelling Shakespeare’s narratives in the twenty-first century. Academic attention to date has focused primarily on this adaptation aspect but the novel is also important in its own right; Hag-Seed is a novel that presents a commentary on grief and interrogates the expectations of managing one’s emotions within neoliberal workplace culture. This paper, then, will focus on how Hag-seed presents the central character’s—Felix’s—experience of grief within the neoliberal workplace. Felix begins the novel as a director of the Makeshiweg Theatre but becomes the victim of a workplace coup from the theatrical board. He is shunned, outcast and sacked for expressing his grief within the workplace, but, the reader is positioned sympathetically to Felix’s experience. As such, the discussion of the novel will consider the way Atwood challenges the concept of emotionality as the irrational antithesis of ‘bureaucratic authority’ (Donal Gibson and Scott Schroeder, 2002). The analysis will utilise affect theory and Jon McKenzie’s work on performance management to inform the reading of the text. In short, this paper will argue that the novel grapples with the complexity of neoliberalism by critiquing the commodification of the arts and examine how Atwood acutely explores the ways grief is performed and received within neoliberal culture.

**Holly Parker** (hParker@lincoln.ac.uk) is an Associate Lecturer and PhD researcher at the University of Lincoln. Her current research focuses on affect and performance in twenty-first century fiction, forming an interdisciplinary study across affect theory and performance studies that rests on the cultural backdrop of neoliberalism and postmillennial digital culture. She recently published a journal article on Keith Stuart’s *A Boy Made of Blocks* in *Alluvium* and developed her research on affect, *Minecraft* and neoliberalism in this novel as a book chapter that will feature in *Ready Reader One: The Stories We Tell About, With, And Around Video Games*, under publication with Louisiana State University Press, expected Summer 2023.

**Tommaso Villa (University of Lincoln): “‘Expressionless, Expresses God’: The Idealisation of the Athlete as a Tool for Neoliberal Personal Development in Chad Harbach’s *The Art of Fielding*”**

This paper will analyse the way that the idealisation of the athlete is used in Chad Harbach’s *The Art of Fielding* (2011) to cultivate personal emotions that serve neoliberal logics of self-monitoring and systemic preservation. The novel will be read through Rachel Greenwald Smith’s notion of “personal feelings” and through her analysis of the role that affect plays in the neoliberal novel as a tool to foster individual development with the aim of enhancing productivity. Firstly, the paper will show how the novel’s athlete, Henry Skrimshander, is objectified by other characters to champion ideals of beauty as a currency that dispels personal gain while effacing all problematic aspects of contemporary sports, privilege, and campus life. Furthermore, it will be explained how the emotional connection with the athlete’s grace and superior skill is turned into an opportunity for individual self-improvement through athletics and the arts that serves neoliberal notions of citizenship which deny the possibility of systemic change. Specifically, it will be demonstrated that Harbach enacts this process by replacing free play with the more controllable experience of flow as theorized by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Finally, *The Art of Fielding*’s form and style will be juxtaposed with that of Tracy O’Neill’s *The Hopeful* (2015) to highlight the way other contemporary sports fiction problematizes the struggles of the athlete.

**Tommaso Villa** (hParker@lincoln.ac.uk) is an Associate Lecturer and Italian 3rd-year PhD candidate at the University of Lincoln, where he is also PGR Rep for the 21st century research group. This is his first BACLS Conference. His thesis is titled “*An Athlete for All Epochs: The Hyper-Professional Sports Hero*” and it deals with the representation of athletes in contemporary American sports fiction by looking at novels by authors such as David Foster Wallace, Tracy O’Neill, Gabe Habash, Chad Harbach, Katherine Hill, and Emily Nemens. One of the chapters of the thesis was the runner-up in the Lyle Olsen Essay Contest organised by the Sport Literature Association (SLA). While he is currently working specifically on contemporary American sports fiction, he is also interested in American fiction at-large as well as in post-modernism, phenomenology, masculinity studies, and neoliberalism studies.

**Ágota Márton (University of Oxford): “Detachment and Millennial Closeness: Impersonal Perspective in Zadie Smith, Amit Chaudhuri, and Rachel Cusk”**

Sitting on an airplane headed to Greece, Rachel Cusk’s narrator in *Outline* (2014) remarks the stillness and bound formlessness of the people and things around her: “The electric light, with the absolute darkness outside, made people look fleshy and real, their detail so unmediated, so impersonal, so infinite.”1 Cusk’s novel practices, through what she calls an “invisible narrator,” an almost impersonal, evasive attention to the world that renders it simultaneously strange and familiar. My paper explores the ways in which such forms of literary detachment negotiate a world of unprecedented affective closeness. This attention that defamiliarizes yet acknowledges the starkly real immediacy of shapes is characteristic of, alongside *Outline*, a range of novels published in the past decade. Cusk’s sketch emblematizes this phenomenon of removed attentiveness which unites a range of otherwise deliberately idiosyncratic writers, including Zadie Smith, J. M. Coetzee, and Amit Chaudhuri, each of whom seem to be exploring forms of disengagement that are, nevertheless, affectively engaging. This remodelled impersonality is rooted in modernist and avant-garde representation of hard, depthless surfaces and extra-human modes of perception, echoing Virginia Woolf’s “unowned” perspectives and the Imagists’ quest for an impersonal and objective poetics. Yet, it departs from aesthetic modernism by moulding a different kind of proximity between writer and text, creating forms of closeness through detachment, and intimacy through bleached affect. Departing from notions of the novel as an intimacy-cultivating medium, such impersonal perspectives generate a new poetics of attention that rethinks notions of millennial “nearness.”

**Ágota Márton** (agota.marton@ell.ox.ac.uk) is a lecturer at the University of Oxford where she teaches literary theory and Anglophone literature from the 1830s to the present. Her doctoral thesis, which she is currently preparing for publication, argued for a revivification of modernist forms of aesthetic attention in twenty-first-century novels preoccupied with the problem of empathy. Her new project theorizes the notion of the ‘new impersonal’ in the work of writers such as Rachel Cusk, Anna Burns, J. M. Coetzee, and others.

**Wiktoria Tunska (University of York): “‘Desperate and deranged dream’: Anger, Violence, and Carnival in J. G. Ballard’s *Kingdom Come* (2006)”**

Asked about his writing technique, J. G. Ballard described his method as conducting thought experiments on contemporary societies. Read in this context, Ballard’s last novel *Kingdom Come* (2006) can be described as an examination of the political potential of fascist ideology and latent aggression in conditions of hyperconsumerism. Consumerist boredom galvanizes a state of collective madness in residents of the drowsy town of Brooklands, which, throughout the novel, transforms into a carnivalesque stage. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalization, this paper investigates the carnivalesque aspects of *Kingdom Come*, arguing that the carnival is not only foundational to the novel’s plot but becomes the major organising principle of the text. The carnival, I suggest, becomes the style of the novel, where style is understood in line with Michael Dango’s definition, as ‘a coordination of form and content’ (2021). Scrutinising *Kingdom Come*’s embodiment of carnivalesque, this paper also seeks to establish a palpable relationship between notions of carnival and anger, which are linked by their potentially transformative character. Finally, drawing on scholarship in affect studies, I aim to investigate the affective potential of carnival, suggesting that, while the form of the carnival acts as a means to regulate social anger within the text, on the metatextual level, the carnival operates as a form of affective communication: its form becomes a language that allows the expression of negative feelings. As such, I argue that carnivalesque functions not only as the main aesthetic but also as the main affective form of the novel.

**Wiktoria Tuńska** (wiktoria.tunska@york.ac.uk) is a PhD researcher in English Literature at the University of York. Her research project explores an affective dimension of contemporary British literature with a particular focus on Brexit fiction. Wiktoria acts as a Managing Editor of *Alluvium Journal* and an Editorial Assistant of *ASAP/J*. She is also a Graduate Student Representative of the BACLS.

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