FAST FORWARD: WOMEN'S WRITING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

PROGRAMME & ABSTRACTS

Biannual Conference of the Postgraduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network
Sheffield Hallam University // 8-9 September, 2017
FAST FORWARD: WOMEN’S WRITING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

DAY 1 | Friday, 8 September

10:30—10:50 REGISTRATION
10:50—11:00 WELCOME
11:00—12:30 PANEL 1
12:30—14:00 KEYNOTE
14:00—14:45 LUNCH
14:45—16:15 PANEL 2
16:15—16:30 BREAK
16:30—18:00 PANEL 3

DAY 2 | Saturday, 9 September

09:15—10:45 PANEL 4
10:45—11:00 BREAK
11:00—12:30 PANEL 5
12:30—13:15 LUNCH
13:15—14:45 WORKSHOP & READING
14:45—16:15 PANEL 6
16:15—16:30 CLOSE
DAY 1 | Friday, 8 September

10:30—10:50 **REGISTRATION**

10:50—11:00 **WELCOME BY CONFERENCE ORGANISERS**
Fiona Martinez, Krystina Osborne & Veronika Schuchter

11:00—12:30 **PANEL 1** (Chair: Hannah Boast)

MALIN CHRISTINA WIKSTRÖM (University of Abderdeen): Fighting the Stigma One Word at the Time: the Representation of Mental Health in Janice Galloway’s *Jellyfish*

SHAREENA HAMZAH (Swansea University): Jeanette Winterson: Literary preacher converting conformist mentality

PAULA MCGRATH (University of Limerick): Mining the Critical for the Creative: Trauma in *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing*

12:30—14:00 **KEYNOTE** (Chair: Veronika Schuchter)

ANNA BALL (Nottingham Trent University): Wingwomen: Towards a Contemporary Feminist Politics of Flight in Twenty-First Century Women’s Writing

14:00—14:45 **LUNCH**

14:45—16:15 **PANEL 2** (Chair: Fiona Martinez)

CHLOE ASHBRIDGE (University of Nottingham): Zadie Smith’s Urbanisms of Injustice and Spatial Freedom in the Post-Crash Era Contemporary Writing from the North of England and Scotland.

SHANTEL EDWARDS (University of Birmingham): From *White Teeth* (2000) to *Swing Time* (2016): Zadie Smith, the changing face of mixed race in Britain

ELENI GELASI (University of Cyprus): The theme of escape in short stories by post-millennial women writers in relation to modernist writers.

16:15—16:30 **BREAK**

16:30—18:00 **PANEL 3** (Chair: Jessica Orr)

AMY RUSHTON (Nottingham Trent University): A bubble in the vein: suicide, narrative form and the rejection of neoliberalism in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* and Miriam Toews’s *All My Puny Sorrows*

HANNAH BOAST (University of Birmingham): Borrowed Waters: Rita Wong’s Hydropoetics

VERONIKA SCHUCHTER (University of Oxford): Aritha van Herk’s Feminist Prairie Poetics
DAY 2 | Saturday, 9 September

09:15—10:45 PANEL 4 (Chair: Amy Rushton)

BECKY CULLEN (Nottingham Trent University): What is it O’Clock?

JO DIXON (Nottingham Trent University): Not All Epiphanies Are the Same: the epiphanic mode in Alice Oswald and Liz Berry.

LUCY SHEERMAN (Independent Researcher): ‘Inviting and forbidding at the same time’: The hope that comes from love for a ‘damaged’ hero

10:45—11:00 BREAK

11:00—12:30 PANEL 5 (Chair: Lucy Sheerman)

JESS OLIVER (University of Sussex): Mazing the Minotaur back: Ali Smith and Surveillance

JESS ORR (University of St Andrews): Ali Smith and the Twenty-First Century Reader as an Agent of Change

CARLY ROBINSON (Birbeck, University of London): The Becoming of Contemporaneity through Experimental Fiction

12:30—13:15 LUNCH

13:15—14:45 WORKSHOP & READING (Chair: Krystina Osborne)

14:45—16:15 PANEL 6 (Chair: Fiona Martinez)

AMY MCCAULEY (Aberystwyth University): The Category of ‘Woman’ in Transition: Verity Spott’s ‘Trans* Manifestos’

LIAN PATSTON (University of Southampton): “What does it mean to be this other person?”: Affinity and Digitization in the works of Chris Kraus and Dana Spiotta

INDIANA SERESIN (University of Cambridge): Straight Talk: The Confession of Heterosexuality in Contemporary Women’s Autofiction

16:15—16:30 CLOSING
KEYNOTE

>> ANNA BALL (Nottingham Trent University)

Wingwomen: Towards a Contemporary Feminist Politics of Flight in Twenty-First Century Women’s Writing

In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter’s winged *Fin-de-Siècle* heroine Fevvers proclaims that in the twentieth century, ‘all the women will have wings... [They] will tear off [their] mind-forg’d manacles, will rise up and fly away’. Fast forward to the twenty-first century, and it is clear that women’s flight-paths have not assumed quite so straightforward a trajectory, forcing us to reexamine the need for a grounded feminist politics within a landscape of disjunctive and traumatic sociomobilities. Employing Cixous’ claim that ‘flying is a woman’s gesture...flying in language and making it fly’ as its leaping-off point, this paper asks what happened to the dreams of flight that surfaced in twentieth-century feminist expression, and explores how they might be given fresh wings within twenty-first century women’s writing. Turning to work by a range of variously positioned contemporary women writers – from Kenyan-born, Somali-raised, London-based Warsan Shire’s poetic explorations of refugee women’s traumatic flights, to Lebanese-born, UK-based Hanan al-Shaykh’s novelistic portrayals of Arab women’s lives ‘up in the air’, to South Korean Han Kang’s avian reveries of non-violence – this paper explores what a twenty-first century feminist politics of flight might look like, and asks how it might operate in the service of gendered and literary solidarities that can help us to navigate the difficult territory of the contemporary political landscape.

Dr Anna Ball is a Senior Lecturer in English at Nottingham Trent University and teaches widely across the fields of contemporary literary studies, postcolonial studies and gender studies. She completed a GTA-funded PhD (2008) at the University of Manchester, and has taught at NTU since 2007. She is currently co-Director of NTU’s Postcolonial Studies Centre Working at the cusp of postcolonial, feminist, world literary and comparative literary studies and across various textual and visual mediums, she has published widely on questions of space, border-crossing, embodiment and agency, particularly within a Middle Eastern context. She is an Associate Editor for the Journal of Contemporary Women’s Writing and a member of the Postcolonial Studies Association. She also works closely with a number of arts and cultural organisations in the Nottingham area, including the New Art Exchange and Nottingham Beyond Borders.

POETRY WORKSHOP & READING

>> EMILY BLEWITT

Emily Blewitt was born in Carmarthen in 1986, and grew up in a small town on the Carmarthenshire coast. She read English Language and Literature at St Hilda’s College, Oxford, and has an MA in Film and Literature from the University of York. In 2010 she returned to Wales to begin a PhD in English Literature at Cardiff University, where she specialised in poetic representations of pregnancy
in nineteenth-century and contemporary women’s writing, graduating in 2016. She has published poetry widely, her work appearing in The Rialto, Prole, The Interpreter’s House, Ambit, Poetry Wales, Furies, Cheval, Nu2: Memorable Firsts, and in Brittle Star. The title poem from her debut collection, This Is Not A Rescue, was Highly Commended for best individual poem in the 2016 Forward Prizes, and is published in The Forward Book of Poetry 2017. Emily lives in Bridgend with her husband, Greg, and their fat black-and-white cat, Ozymandias.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

>> CHLOE ASHBRIDGE (University of Nottingham)

Zadie Smith’s Urbanisms of Injustice and Spatial Freedom in the Post-Crash Era
Contemporary Writing from the North of England and Scotland.

This paper examines how Zadie Smith’s NW (2012) responds to what Marxist geographer Edward W. Soja describes as the ‘socio-spatial dialectic’ (Soja, 1980). I aim to explore how far the text, in resorting to innovative narrative strategies and local specificity, represents its cultural condition and depicts a fragile underclass of which the post-crash period came to be symptomatic. Written amidst the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition and shortly after Britain’s 2007-8 financial crash, NW offers a pertinent exploration of how the underclass lay claim to the cityscape of London. This paper questions how far the metropole can be regarded, as Ken Livingstone promised, ‘a city in which you can achieve your potential’ (Livingstone, 2005) when ‘there is not enough work to justify five men working five days a week’ (Smith, 2012). Drawing on literary geography and urban spatial theory, the paper takes as its departure point the peripheral spaces of Caldwell council estate, and argues that the novel demonstrates how the spatial organisation of class is a consequence of governmental policies of space. I will examine Smith’s textual mapping of Leah and Natalie’s marginal geographies, in what I argue, constitutes a pessimistic departure from her earlier celebration of multiculture in White Teeth. Finally, the paper will conclude with the contention that the lack of socio-spatial autonomy of the flaneuse in Smith’s novel points to the bleak future of neoliberalism and social housing in contemporary Britain, and consider how this might support readings of post-2008 contemporary British fiction more broadly as registering the cultural conditions that resulted in the Brexit vote.

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Chloe has recently gained an MA in Contemporary Literature from York St John University, where she also worked as a Postgraduate Researcher. From September onwards, Chloe will be a PhD student at the University of Nottingham as part of the Midlands3Cities AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership. Her project is entitled: ‘State of the Nation: The Literary North and the Devolving Politics of Multiculturalism’ and constitutes a spatial devolutionary approach to contemporary writing from the North of England and Scotland.
Borrowed Waters: Rita Wong’s Hydropoetics

In the year 2000, chemist Paul Crutzen coined the term ‘Anthropocene’. Crutzen intended the term to capture the way in which, he argued, human activities have become the determining geological force of the present era. The term ‘Anthropocene’ has proven highly generative within twenty-first century literary criticism, taken up by scholars seeking to theorise the ways in which cultural texts have been complicit in, or offered resistance to, dominant modes of instrumentalising, extracting and exhausting nonhuman nature. One of the major ways in which the pervasiveness of our present ecological crisis is articulated in political and journalistic contexts is through the impact of human actions on the world’s water supply. Pundits speak of ‘water wars’ as sources become dry or contaminated, although Flint and Standing Rock show that access to clean water is already wielded as a form of violence by white elites. Rarely, however, have literary critics turned their attention to world water crisis. In this paper I focus on Canadian poet Rita Wong’s 2015 collection Undercurrent, which takes water as its explicit subject. I examine the representational strategies used by Wong to make harm to water visible, delineating a series of key images (the permeability of human bodily membranes; the water cycle; hormonal disruption) which I analyse using queer and ecofeminist theory. I argue that Wong’s text highlights aspects of ecological harm neglected in the Anthropocene debates, but foregrounded in Jason Moore’s work on the ‘Capitalocene’: the uneven responsibility for the state of our water, and the extent to which ecological crisis derives from neoliberal economic policy.

Hannah Boast is a Teaching Fellow in Contemporary and Postcolonial Literature at the University of Birmingham, and holds a Humanities Research Centre Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of York. She is currently converting her doctoral thesis into a monograph, titled Hydrofictions: Water, Power and Politics in Israeli and Palestinian Literature, and developing new research on literature and world water crisis. Her work has been published in journals including Green Letters and Journal of Commonwealth Literature.

What is it O’Clock?

Using Glyn Maxwell’s statement ‘You master form you master time’ in On Poetry (2012) as a point of departure, my practice-based Creative Writing PhD considers the relationship between contemporary poetry and time. The critical work explores the shifting temporalities of the poetry of Sujata Bhatt, Michael Ondaatje and Susan Howe, exploring the ways in which their work might be said to unsettle time’s ‘mastery’. In my thesis, I look at stratigraphic models of time, before drawing on the ‘poetic’ writing of Helene Cixous to suggest more nuanced ways of thinking about time and a poem.

In Stigmata (2005) Cixous asks ‘What is it O’Clock?’, interrogating temporal location - the O’Clock - in addition to a desire to understand the composition of time - what is it? In this paper I would like
to ask the same question: As a practicing contemporary woman writer, 'What is it O’Clock?' In other words, when are my poems in time, and what nature of time is presented within them?

I have never overtly aimed to write poems about women. For instance, I vowed never to write about the maternal experience on the grounds that writing poetry was an opportunity to temporarily step out of my role as a mother. I realise now that a host of children have arrived and made themselves heard in my poems; a girl grew out of a 200 year old pair of shoes; a mother sewed in a chair. I do not know when these women are in time, but they are also part of the present of my poems. My paper will open these cross-temporal issues of creative practice through a performance of my poems, interwoven with thinking on time and poetic form derived from my critical writing.

Becky Cullen is an AHRC-M3C PhD candidate at Nottingham Trent University. Her poetry has been published in journals such as The North and PN Review, and in 2016 she was the second poet-in-residence at Newstead Abbey, ancestral home of George Gordon, Lord Byron. Her favourite salad will always feature avocado.

JO DIXON (Nottingham Trent University)

Not All Epiphanies Are the Same: the epiphanic mode in Alice Oswald and Liz Berry.

In the final paragraph of The Poetics of Epiphany (1987), Ashton Nichols claims that from Wordsworth to Heaney epiphany ‘serves as a fleeting buttress against forms of experience and uses of language that seem increasingly uncertain, indefinite and problematic.’ But what is happening now in British poetry? Stephen Knight (2015) suggests that we are being bombarded by ‘linguistically conservative vignette[s] trimmed with images’ that conclude ‘with a wee epiphany’. His dismissal of epiphany as an unadventurous and unimportant mode of writing is not uncommon. Sandeep Parmar (2016) adds how epiphany is incongruous with our times and an inadequate approach for ‘expressions of complex identity and difference’. However, this paper argues that epiphany is not always a defender against uncertainty. Paradoxically, a technique which has become synonymous with a fixed moment of revelation, also has the capacity to embrace uncertainty.

To challenge these pejorative perceptions about epiphany in the contemporary context, this paper draws on the etymology of epiphany and examples of liminality from the work of two British women poets: Alice Oswald and Liz Berry. Oswald occupies a significant position in the landscape of contemporary British poetry, appearing frequently in newspapers, on the festival circuit, on prize-lists and lecture programmes; Berry is a relative newcomer, publishing her debut collection in 2014. Even though both poets are distinct and distinctive, their poems often explore the potential of liminality and the dissolution of boundaries as alternative iterations of epiphany.

Jo Dixon is a graduate of the MA in Creative Writing at Nottingham Trent University and a practice-led PhD candidate at the same institution. Her PhD is a creative-critical exploration of epiphany in contemporary poetry in the work of Kathleen Jamie, Alice Oswald, Liz Berry and her own body of work. Her poems have appeared in New Walk, The Interpreter’s House and Furies: A Poetry Anthology of Women Warriors (For Books’ Sake). In April 2016, ‘Skegness Wake’ was commended in the Writing East Midlands inaugural poetry competition. Her debut poetry pamphlet: A Woman in the Queue, was published by Melos Press in March 2016.
From *White Teeth* (2000) to *Swing Time* (2016): Zadie Smith, the changing face of mixed race in Britain

This paper will investigate the significance of Zadie Smith’s writing to the exploration of British mixed-race identity. Zadie Smith burst onto the literary scene in 2000 with the release of *White Teeth*. Both the novel, and her profile as a young, mixed race author, were co-opted as symbols of a multicultural Britain where mixed race was receiving increasing levels of attention and cultural recognition, becoming an official census category in 2001.

As one of the most high-profile British authors since the start of the millennium, Zadie Smith has placed British race relations and mixed race at the centre of her work; from *White Teeth’s* Irie Jones in 2000, to the transatlantic, mixed race Belsey family in 2006’s *On Beauty*, and most recently the unnamed, mixed race narrator of *Swing Time* in 2016. Using Smith as a case study, this paper will look at what sense of mixedness is made available through Smith’s work and assess whether conceptions of mixed race identity and British attitudes to race have changed across the last two decades.

Shantel is a PhD Candidate in English Literature at the University of Birmingham. Her thesis looks at the ways in which discourses of race are constructed and circulated through the marketing of contemporary authors of mixed race. It aims to assess what sense of mixed race identity is made available both through their work and through their presence as cultural figures.

The theme of escape in short stories by post-millenial women writers in relation to modernist writers.

This paper intends to use the theme of escape to map post-millenial women’s short story-writing by drawing parallels with the modernist women short story writers. Escape as a theme can mirror the complexities of these two turns of the century since the contemporary world –post 9/11- is breaking away from the postmodernist era -navigating through uncharted waters- just like modernism marked the escape from the restraints of realism. I will argue that the short story is not only the ideal vehicle to express the epiphanic moments of crossing borders or assuming a new identity because of its condensed form but it is also an ideal medium to examine the shift to a new literary and cultural era. Through the close reading of short stories by contemporary writers (Ali Smith, Sarah Hall and Zadie Smith) in relation to modernist short stories (by Virginia Woolf and Kate Chopin) I will embark on framing how the theme of escaping one’s established reality is understood in the dawn of the two new centuries and how this understanding is expressed in terms of form. In my effort to shed light to the evolution of the idea of selfhood and of its construction in contemporary women’s writing I will attempt to sketch the post-millenial theoretical framework that points to the pertinence of these two moments in literary history.
Eleni is a 1st year PhD student at the University of Cyprus, working on 21st women short story writers in relation to short story writing in the 20th century. She has a BA in English Literature (University of Athens, 2002) and an MA in Studies in Fiction (University of East Anglia, Norwich, 2003). I live in Corinth, Greece and I work as a High School teacher.

>> SHAREENA HAMZAH Z. (Swansea University)

Jeanette Winterson: Literary preacher converting conformist mentality

This paper discusses how Jeanette Winterson acts as an intellectual writer and performs as an agent of change to challenge taboo ideas about sexuality and gender in contemporary society. Winterson is an award-winning British author and an influential figure in English-language literature, who has been described as ‘one of the most gifted writers working today’. Her writing covers numerous branches of philosophy, concepts of spirituality, and deep intellectual issues in ways that connect strongly with readers, scholars, and critics alike. This paper will focus on Winterson’s latest activities in the public sphere and her most recent literary work, The Gap of Time (2016), to argue that she is not merely a writer – she is a modern preacher, contributing to the negotiation and reconstruction of perceptions in society on issues such as passion and love. Winterson ‘creat[es] emotion around the forbidden, which is also what [her arts] does, to go into those forbidden places’, and this paper discusses how relationships, which should be beautiful unions between people, have been coded only for the means of production. In her recent public appearance at the Hay Festival 2017, she talked about the positive aspects of marriage, love, passion, and freedom, and the perils of sologamy. These issues will be related to her literary works to show how her art offers a new type of moral guidance to overcome conformist, outmoded thinking.

Shareena Hamzah Z. is a final year PhD researcher at Swansea University. She is currently working on her PhD, on fetishism and alternative psychoanalysis in the works of Jeanette Winterson, 1985 - 2015.

>> AMY McCAULEY (Aberystwyth University)

The Category of ‘Woman’ in Transition: Verity Spott’s ‘Trans* Manifestos’

Verity Spott’s Trans* Manifestos examines the way(s) in which certain labels – labels often valued by those active in ‘identity politics’ – have the potential to manage and constrain the kinds of dialogue we can pursue. Spott’s writing repeatedly questions narratives which disgorge from those labels of ‘identity’ we apply to ourselves and to others, and places these narratives under intense linguistic pressure. By interrogating language as a carrier of power structures – structures which organise and advocate our experience of the gendered ‘imaginary’ – Spott articulates the struggle to inhabit a single narrative or identity. “Internalize any one narration” Spott says, “Make it work. It won’t.”
Spott’s interrogation of the either/or paradigm proposes a thoughtful resistance to ‘naming’ and suggests the usefulness of resistance via ‘anti-naming.’ In this paper, I will explore Spott’s work as a source of struggle for articulations ‘around the edges’ of established discourses. I will argue Spott’s strategic problematisation not only of traditional binary categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’, but also of the category of ‘Trans’ gestures boldly towards the idea that gender is not, after all, a destination. Spott says, “‘Trans*’ supposes transition, but where is that transition from and to?” I will also examine Spott’s suggestion that Trans* might involve experiencing ‘gender’ as a provisional, precarious and temporary mode of being, and consider how we might usefully apply this to the category of ‘woman.’ As we consider contemporary notions of ‘Women’s Writing’, Trans* Manifestos seems a useful text through which to re-examine what we mean by ‘women.’

Amy McCauley recently completed a PhD at Aberystwyth University and won a Northern Writers’ Award (2016). She works as Poetry Editor for New Welsh Review and as Editor of Creative Response for the feminist visual arts website MAI Journal. She is an independent scholar, with interests in trans-genre writing, auto-frictions and feminisms.

PAULA MCGRATH (University of Limerick)

Mining the Critical for the Creative: Trauma in A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing

My project lies at the intersection of critical and creative writing. It considers the possibility that in contrasting strategies used by Eimear McBride to represent trauma in her novel, A Girl is a Half-formed Thing, with those used by Annie Ryan in her stage adaptation of the text lie unexploited strategies for the representation of trauma in the twenty-first century novel. It analyses both approaches within the context of current literary trauma theory, which redefines trauma beyond its Freudian origins to embrace the possibility of a range of responses to trauma. McBride uses tools of literary modernism such as stream-of-consciousness and fractured syntax to evoke the mind of her troubled protagonist. This strategy aligns with dominant literary trauma theory, notably that of Cathy Caruth, which follows the psychoanalytic model. However, current literary trauma theory views the modernist techniques which grew from this model as problematic in contemporary fiction; its strategies may be over-used and formulaic, no longer equal to new understandings of trauma (Gibbs, Balaev). In contrast, the space of the stage requires the embodiment of interior thought. Ryan’s adaptation uses McBride’s words; but, uttered aloud, syntactical and other modernist strategies are effectively neutralised. It is significant that McBride trained in theatre. Her grounding in stage technique is evident from Girl’s first-person, present-tense narrative, addressed to “you”, which is perhaps why Ryan saw the unnamed, traumatised Girl’s story as “performable”. This interstitial space between McBride’s words and Ryan’s production provides fertile ground for new approaches to writing trauma.

Paula McGrath is a Government of Ireland (Irish Research Council) PhD scholar of Creative Writing at the University of Limerick. Her doctoral project is entitled “Narrative Strategies for the Representation of Trauma in Fiction: Theory and Practice”.
Her undergraduate degree in Single Honour English is from Trinity College, Dublin, and she holds an MA in Women’s Studies from University College Dublin (UCD), and an MFA in Creative Writing, also from UCD.

Her debut novel, Generation, was published in 2015 (JM Originals). Her second novel, A History of Running Away, was published in July 2017 (John Murray Press). She is also a creative writing teacher.

>> JESS OLIVER (University of Sussex)

Mazing the Minotaur back: Ali Smith and Surveillance

The state of contemporary ‘new’ surveillance has been characterized by sociologist Gary T. Marx as ‘prob(ing) more deeply, widely and softly than traditional methods, transcending (natural and constructed) barriers that historically protected personal information.’ The methods of digitally assisted surveillance have proven to be a generative muse to Ali Smith, who weaves a way of thinking about perception and 21st century lives in her post-Millennium body of work that is humane, rich and deeply political. Indeed, her most recent novel Autumn is notable for its speedy publication following the outcome of the EU referendum is steeped in the frictional nature of this cultural moment.

Appraising a society in thrall to a surveillance that is in turns utopian and dystopian, Smith’s novels The Accidental, How to Be Both and Autumn explore the upheavals of identity presented by defining moments in contemporary history in opposition to a creeping homogeny of narrative, called ‘the danger of a single story’ by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

The paper, taken from my research concerning digital interventions in 21st century public and private lives will explore Smith’s artistry and identify her key responses to phenomena such as CCTV, internet porn, smartphones and the bricolage of culture enabled by digital means. It brings into focus the liberating trajectory of her narratives, the power of confronting what is at the centre of the web of the unseen, and the new dynamic of watching and being watched.

>> Jess is a PhD candidate and associate tutor at the University of Sussex researching the response of contemporary novelists to digital culture, and how it intervenes in both the public and private spheres.

>> JESS ORR (University of St Andrews)

Ali Smith and the Twenty-First Century Reader as an Agent of Change

‘It’s all about the reader, really’

The contemporary writer Ali Smith has played a significant role in reigniting an ongoing preoccupation of the literary community, about the role of readers in generating meaning from literary texts. Despite the text and author centred approaches that have dominated the discipline, Smith has been vocal about the neglected role of everyday readers as valuable literary critics and
interpreters. Her fiction frequently uses characters who read as a pivotal narrative strategy to challenge authority and traditionally held assumptions. From her first novel Like, to a rapidly expanding canon of post-millennial writing, the figure of the reader dominates the pages of Smith’s fiction. Exchanges between readers and texts are sometimes amicable, at other times volatile, and reveal the power of stories to disrupt and transform individuals’ perspectives and attitudes. Artful (2012) is a particularly interesting example of this; originally delivered as a series of lectures, it uses a fictional narrator who reads and interprets the half-finished lecture notes to challenge the critical authority of their original author. Through her playful and inventive approach towards the depiction of readers therefore, Smith raises important questions about the value and integrity of those who are positioned outside academic discourse, and their potential to bring fresh and meaningful perspectives to well-worn works of literature. More so, Smith hints that in times of social and political turmoil, the actively engaged and participatory reader might be a model for disrupting and re-imagining the stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves, beyond the limits of the literary text.

Jess Orr is a third year PhD student in the School of English at the University of St Andrews, undertaking a doctoral research project on the role of the reader in the fiction of Ali Smith. She also works with real readers in a variety of contexts, from community reading schemes to literary festivals and events. This year she became Reader in Residence at the Glasgow Women’s Library, which has involved, amongst other projects, helping to organise the first ever festival of Scottish women’s writing.

Lian Patston (University of Southampton)

“What does it mean to be this other person?”: Affinity and Digitization in the works of Chris Kraus and Dana Spiotta

There is a long history of literary and cultural fascination with the stranger. However, recent works by Chris Kraus and Dana Spiotta reveal a contemporary approach to stranger that echoes Kwame Appiah’s philosophical question: “how much do we really owe to strangers?”¹ This paper explores how we can respond to this in the present moment, without the benefits of hindsight or prophesy, by paying attention to the temporal ‘moments’ in Kraus and Spiotta’s novels.

The novels of Dana Spiotta and Chris Kraus create temporal moments that contrast the stranger and the digitisation of technology. I will show how feelings of affinity show how the stranger is resistant to time, whilst the digitisation of technology indicates time is moving forward. I show that this temporal clash occurs in Spiotta’s Innocents and Others and Kraus’ Summer of Hate, yet temporal moments structure a way for narrative to mediate this conflict. I argue that these novels demonstrate how technology and the stranger are linked within novels’ narrative through a ‘moment of affinity’ and a ‘moment of collapse. This is in order to reveal how temporal moments problematize Kwame Appiah’s notion of “clearheadedness”.¹ In conclusion, this paper sheds new meaning on the contemporary stranger by revealing how a moment of affinity is underpinned by the increased passing of time that that digitisation brings.
Lian Patston is a first year PhD student in the department of English at the University of Southampton. Her research focusses on the understanding digital technology and the stranger in contemporary fiction.

CARLY ROBINSON (Birbeck, University of London)

The Becoming of Contemporaneity through Experimental Fiction

In this paper, I seek to situate the expression of contemporaneity through experimental forms of contemporary literature as a mode of temporal-reflexive being in the world, grounded in subjective self-awareness as a bonded relationship between author and reader. I will be looking specifically at a feminist form of experimental narrative as a development of modernism which engages the contemporary in a reflexive in-process perpetual becoming. Moving on from the modernist desire for the new, this form of experimental fiction uses the modernist techniques of stream of consciousness style writing and alternative presentations of the development of time combined with an estrangement of language to offer a new presentation of the contemporary novel.

Using the Deleuzo-Guattarian theory of becoming as my theoretical framework, I would like to suggest the direction of the contemporary novel is ultimately attuned to a more progressive and challenging form, combining self-reflexive lines of questioning and accessible philosophical ideas bound up in readily available and easily readable fiction. My approach is to combine a reading of the Deleuzian theory of becoming through the novels of Eimear McBride and Ali Smith with a view to assessing their value for contemporary literature as accessible experimental narratives which explore alternative representations of the temporal subject. Looking specifically at the deployment of liminal and fractured language together with the unconventional presentation of time in the works of both authors I hope to show how these techniques imbue the works with a self-reflexive contemporaneity.

Carly completed my BA in European Philosophy and Literature. with Women’s Studies and my MA in Women’s Studies at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. I am a first year PhD student in the department of Arts & Humanities at Birkbeck, University of London, supervised jointly by Dr Caroline Edwards and Dr Nathalie Wourm. Her thesis is an interdisciplinary exploration of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of becoming with a view to deploying it as a model in the service of a progressive feminist politics within contemporary fiction.
A bubble in the vein: suicide, narrative form and the rejection of neoliberalism in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* and Miriam Toews’s *All My Puny Sorrows*

Building on my new research on how contemporary fiction narrativizes chronic mental health issues, this paper discusses how two recent North American novels by women writers can be read as confronting and rejecting neoliberal values of selfhood in their exploration of suicidal depression through narrative form. Here, I will discuss how contemporary fiction opens up new ways of understanding mental health as symptomatic of an unsustainable neoliberal worldview — not only as critiques of neoliberal discourses of success and ‘wellness’ but also as offering possibilities of resistance. Both Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* (2015; US) and *All My Puny Sorrows* by Miriam Toews (2014; Canada) are recognisably ‘realist’ novels – yet both employ narrative features that disconcert the reader: Yanagihara’s second novel has been criticised for its melodramatic elements and its lack of historical, temporal specificity, whilst *AMPS* continues Toews’s autofictional insertion of her immediate family’s tragic experiences with suicidal depression. Rather than viewing such formal choices as self-indulgent or naval gazing, I argue that these fictional explorations of suicidal depression and, crucially, the community around those individuals who wish to no longer live can be interpreted as a protest against neoliberalism’s placatory myths of the individual and the attainment of personal ‘success’. Rather than ‘downbeat’ or even distressing, I read both *A Little Life* and *AMPS* as narratives that disconcert neoliberal discourse and assert their discontent with unsustainable ideals.

Amy Rushton is a Lecturer in English Literature at Nottingham Trent University, joining shortly after completing her PhD in English and American Studies at the University of Manchester in 2016. Her research intersects with postcolonial studies and world systems theory, emphasising the important role of literary criticism in articulating and challenging ongoing structural inequalities across the globe. She is currently publishing new material on movement and stasis in recent African diasporic fiction, alongside revising her monograph on contemporary African fiction, tragedy and neocolonialism for publication in 2018.

Straight Talk: The Confession of Heterosexuality in Contemporary Women’s Autofiction

Criticism of 21st century women’s autofiction asserts that the genre enables female authors who are not taken seriously as theorists point-blank to assume a platform as theorists of themselves. Such readings place autofiction within the long feminist theoretical traditions of situated knowledge, personal criticism, and autobiographical investigations of the self in domestic, embodied, and relational spheres. In this paper, I argue that contemporary women’s autofiction serves a further important purpose in the theoretical landscape, by countering the critical neglect of heterosexuality within Western academic feminism.
Examining three contemporary works of autofiction—Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be* (2010), Dodie Bellamy’s *The Buddhist* (2011), and Trisha Low’s *The Compleat Purge* (2013)—I claim that each author-narrator describes their experience of sexuality through themes of shame, failure, abjection, and self-loathing, a gesture that can be understood as a *confession* of heterosexuality. This confession attempts a feminist violation of the conspiracy of silence surrounding women’s experience of sexuality, what Kathi Weeks calls the demand that “heterosexuality privatize women such that they forget their generality as a class” (2017). All three texts assume a mimetic relationship to other women’s experiences of heterosexuality, an assumption that is also *memetic* insofar as it mirrors the currents of confession, identification, and repetition of contemporary internet culture. Yet by presenting heterosexuality through the act of confession, the texts reinscribe the notion that heterofeminine abjection is something experienced in private, thereby foreclosing the possibility that heterosexuality could be a site of collective class struggle. The confession of heterosexuality in autofiction thus remains a significant yet muted feminist project.

Indiana Seresin is a postgraduate student in English at the University of Cambridge. She holds a BA from Harvard University with highest honors in Comparative Literature and Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Her research interests include feminist and queer theory, race and ethnic studies, 20th and 21st century literature, critical heterosexuality studies, and affect theory. She is currently working on a study of experimental kinship formation as depicted in the life writing of Samuel R. Delany, and a collaborative project about feminism and heterosexuality with the writer Jessa Crispin. Her research at Cambridge is funded by a Newton Scholarship.

**LUCY SHEERMAN (Independent Researcher)**

‘Inviting and forbidding at the same time’: The hope that comes from love for a ‘damaged’ hero

While fan fiction is considered by its authors as a safe space in which to explore identity, sexuality and fantasy it is also frequently a world populated by dangerous figures - vampires, sadists and creeps. The antecedents of these figures are Heathcliff and Rochester and other Byronic anti-heroes who populated the Brontes’ novels, unrepentant and uncompromising, in a long line of dark and dangerous characters, to whom fan fiction and romance novels have continually exposed their narrators.

Fan fiction’s re-enactments of the escapist pleasures of peril and rescue and wish-fulfilment are rooted in endlessly retold and re-discovered literary precedent. In *Jane Eyre* fan fiction the heroine repeatedly opens the door to the bloody chamber to find, once again, where the bodies are buried and all the sordid backstory and obscure hinterland such revelations reveal.

Just as Jane Eyre found in Bertha’s unbridled passion a reflection of her own moral ambiguity and excess, so contemporary writers and readers continue to return to re-imagined red rooms for the self-discoveries therein.

In my paper I will consider the troubled romantic hero in the four Mills and Boon ‘fan fiction’ Governess Tales published to celebrate Charlotte Bronte’s bicentenary. By examining the way in which these novels resist and reinforce the original themes of *Jane Eyre* I will examine how the role of the compellingly unsympathetic and damaged hero is represented now. Finally I will consider
how the utopian possibilities of romancelandia’s happy ever after are achieved, in the light of the
gothic shadowing such figures cast.

Lucy Sheerman was an artist in residence at Metal Peterborough where she co-created a new
Evensong for Peterborough Cathedral. She has been working on a series of fan fiction versions of
iconic novels including Rebecca (Dancing Girl Press) and Jane Eyre. Her writing and reviews have
been widely published. Two plays, including a collaboration with the Apollo astronaut and poet Al
Worden have been commissioned by Menagerie for the Hot Bed New Writing Festival.

MALIN CHRISTINA WIKSTRÖM (University of Abderdeen)

Fighting the Stigma One Word at the Time: the Representation of Mental Health in Janice
Galloway’s Jellyfish

Although society is changing and there is now more openness and information accessible about
mental health problems, the stigma surrounding mental health that still exists discourages
individuals from seeking help. Mental health problems are often portrayed negatively, incorrectly
or prejudicially in the media. To fight these alienating and hurtful presentations it is important to
support, encourage and spread informative and realistic narratives of what a day in the life of a
person with mental health problems can be like.

In her short story collection Jellyfish (2015) Janice Galloway deals with topics such as living in a
psychiatric ward, being medicated, self-harming, having flashbacks and experiencing psychosis. It
becomes apparent to the reader how different every individual experience is and how challenging
it can be to put these experiences into words. Galloway is giving a voice to individuals experiencing
mental health problems, and living with the attached stigma, in today’s society. She does not shy
away from conflict, criticising the current political class’s lack of interest in handling the NHS properly
and confronting the idea that depression does not exist.

In my presentation I will analyse a few short stories that tell honest, realistic and important stories of
how people cope with mental health problems. I will discuss how Galloway’s writing is taking a step
in the direction of using creative writing as a tool to combat social stigma towards mental health
problems.

Malin Christina Wikström is a PhD student at the University of Aberdeen (in the School of Language,
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