



Rupture, Crisis, Transformation

New Directions in US Studies at the end of the American Century

A one-day conference
Saturday 22 November 2014, Birkbeck, University of London
10am-6pm, Birkbeck Cinema, 43 Gordon Square

Hosted by Birkbeck's Centre for Contemporary Literature, and sponsored by the AHRC

Schedule

9.30: Registration

10.00: Introduction (Anna Hartnell)

10.15: Keynote

Wai Chee Dimock, 'Faulkner Networked: Regional, Indigenous, Trans-Pacific'
(chair: Anna Hartnell)

11.15: Coffee

11.30: Panel 1

The Anthropocene and the Future of American Studies (chair: Rick Crownshaw)

Rick Crownshaw - 'American Literary Studies, Climate Change Fiction and the Future Anterior'

Georgiana Banita – 'Petrochemical Gothic: *True Detective* and the Energy Unconscious of American Studies'

Pieter Vermeulen – 'Future Readers: Narrative Knowledge in the Anthropocene'

1.00: Break for lunch

1.45: Panel 2

Technologies of Crisis (chair: Zara Dinnen)

Zara Dinnen - 'Some Reflections on Technological Slow Time'

Clare Birchall – 'Data Crisis'

Kristin Veel – 'Information Crisis'

Seb Franklin – 'Networks, Black Boxes, Switches: on the Metaphors of Empire'

3.15: Panel 3

On Weeping and Knowing Why: The Politics of Contemporary US Cinema (chair: Richard Martin)

Richard Martin, Ozlem Koksal and Dietmar Meinel discuss selected scenes from three key US films of the last decade: *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008), *Margaret* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2011), and *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012).

4.45: Coffee

5.00: Keynote

Caryl Phillips, 'The Star-Spangled Banner'

(chair: Bart Moore-Gilbert)

6.15: Wine Reception in the Keynes Library (Room 114, 43 Gordon Square)

Panel descriptions

The Anthropocene and the Future of American Studies

Rick Crownshaw, 'American Literary Studies, Climate Change Fiction and the Future Anterior'

In contributing to this panel on the future of American literary studies and the Anthropocene, this paper discusses the environmental futures imagined by recent American literature and the theoretical approaches that American Studies might engage to see whether that literature measures up to the demands of the future. In American climate change fiction there is an increasing turn towards the future anterior – the dramatization of that which will have been – in the literary imagination of near-future scenarios of catastrophe and post-catastrophe. Whether the future emplotted is (post-)apocalyptic and characterised by socio-economic and ecological collapse and species extinction, or one of resilience, adaptability and sustainability, or somewhere in between, these fictions stage cultural memories of the

Anthropocene and so an aetiology of the conditions that are imagined in the future but which are unfolding in the present of this literature's production and consumption. While the future anterior gives narrative presence to that which is subject to cognitive dissonance if not disavowal, these literary projections reveal the ways that memories of the Anthropocene are mediated – typically what such texts reveal is a melancholic attachment to life lived under a fossil-fuelled capitalist modernity – and thereby gesture towards the politics of climate change and its ideological reconstruction. What the future anterior reveals, then, are the humanist enclosures (Cohen) and disclosures of literary memory. The challenge to the theory and practice of cultural memory in representing climate change lies in the derangement of the scales (Clarke) of the humanist imagination in tracking the multiscale dynamics of environmental mutation, across time, space, species, and matter, in thinking the miscibility of nonhuman and human systems. With this in mind, this paper draws on the future imaginaries of recent climate change fiction (for example, Smith, Lepucki and Rich) in exploring the horizons, humanism and post-humanism of their ecologies of memory. Rather than teleological, the future anterior of climate change fiction is in a position to speculate on the future – depending on how it remembers the Anthropocenic past and present – thereby imagining creative political possibilities for living with climate change.

Georgiana Banita, 'Petrochemical Gothic: *True Detective* and the Energy Unconscious of American Studies'

This talk addresses the new, shifting interface of American Studies and the emerging field of Energy Humanities. Through a discussion of the anti-humanist HBO series *True Detective*, the paper shows that at this juncture American Studies must inevitably absorb the ethical narrative of diminishment and limit so closely interwoven with the Anthropocene and hydrocarbon culture. Yet in placing this show in a broader context, I argue that American Studies should respond to the formless menace of peak oil with an erudite historiography of energy concepts and a molecular hermeneutic capable of detecting energy traces in deep (literary and visual) subtexts.

From the derelict refineries that form the backdrop of iconic film noir shootouts to the morally saturated finale of David Fincher's 1995 thriller *Se7en*, where giant power lines index the primal wiring of the human mind and its high-voltage potential for irreparable destruction, an intriguing pattern has emerged around the imagination of energy and evil. The roots of this entwinement can be found in fictions of the dark romantic period, whose obsessions with exhumation and excavation resonate with the Gothic inflections of Southern literature in the mid-twentieth century at the height of the oil boom. The eclectic traces of this energy unconscious surface in the first season of *True Detective*, which drapes the literary idiom of the Southern Gothic over a sacrificial Louisiana landscape in a state of terminal environmental decline and moral exhaustion. Leaning upon a growing archive of petro-environmental photography, the series' refinery landscapes intimate a systemic, non-localizable

infestation initially associated with isolated human wrongdoing, but then gradually expanded to a morally bankrupt psychosphere as pervasive as petrochemical fumes.

The series unpacks a variety of energy discourses both within and outside traditional American Studies—geochemical, ecological, thermodynamic, and cosmological—to complicate familiar narratives of energy ultimacies. It negotiates forms of gratification and exploitation in ways that link natural detritus to human depression, and the sinister post-industrial anthropocene of toxic Louisiana to the perverted minds bred by this poisoned soil. Ultimately, I would argue, it helps us understand how the energy imaginary has invisibly shaped US literary and cultural history, and devise a melancholy methodology to anticipate its exit.

Pieter Vermeulen, 'Future Readers: Narrative Knowledge in the Anthropocene'

This presentation explores the institutional challenges facing American studies by interrogating two of the key figures of the anthropocene imagination as it is taking shape in American culture: the future archeologist and the future historian. If the former will be left to read mankind's geological footprint after its extinction, the latter will (less dramatically) chronicle historical errors that will turn out not to have been fatal. These figures recur in contemporary American fiction (from Teju Cole's *Open City* to Max Brooks's *World War Z*), but also in, for instance, historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway's *The Collapse of Western Civilization*. I show how these figures convey anxieties and desires unleashed by the radical reorganization of knowledge production in the present and how they point to the crucial role of narrative in apprehending the anthropocene: not as a device to impose meaning, but, as a way of inhabiting the present as the object of a future memory.

Technologies of Crisis

For Lev Manovich, 'the speed with which new technologies are assimilated in the United States makes them "invisible" almost overnight' [1]. This panel has been set up to consider technological conditions of crisis in US culture, and crises of technology in the twenty-first century. The 2008 economic crash made visible the technology of speculative finance, just as wikileaks, Manning and Snowden brought to light the cyclical machinations of contemporary technocratic geopolitics. Dr Zara Dinnen (University of Birmingham) will open the panel with some reflection on technological slow time, before introducing Dr Clare Birchall (KCL) speaking on 'Data Crisis', Dr Kristin Veel (University of Copenhagen) speaking on 'Information Crisis' and Dr Seb Franklin (KCL) presenting 'Networks, Black Boxes, Switches: on the Metaphors of Empire'. After these short papers there will be a chaired discussion and Q&A.

[1] 'New Media from Borges to HTML.' *The New Media Reader*. Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort. Camb., Mass.: MIT P, 2003. 13.

On Weeping and Knowing Why: The Politics of Contemporary US Cinema

This panel will discuss the political dimensions of contemporary US cinema. In lieu of traditional presentations, the panellists (Richard Martin, Ozlem Koksal and Dietmar Meinel) will offer their responses to selected scenes from three key US films of the last decade: *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008), *Margaret* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2011), and *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012). The discussion will assess how these films make specific events in recent US history visible and audible – including 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the financial crisis and the election of Obama – as well as their broader perspectives on rupture, crisis and the transformation of exceptionalist narratives. Particular attention will be paid to the relationship between genre and crisis in these films – which negotiate with the situation tragedy, the melodrama, the western and the Bildungsroman – and how their engagements with different formal and aesthetic strategies constitute distinct political gestures. Finally, the contrasting production and distribution histories of the three films will prompt consideration of how films are made and consumed today, and how US cinema is responding to and being formed by notions of vulnerability, precarity and exceptionalism.

Biographies

Georgiana Banita is Assistant Professor in North American Literature and Media at the University of Bamberg. She studied and worked at the University of Konstanz, Yale, and the University of Sydney. She is the author of *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/11* (U of Nebraska P, 2012) and co-editor of the forthcoming collection *Electoral Cultures: American Democracy and Choice*. She is currently completing her second book, a study of how the oil industry has shaped the development of transnational American literature, and she has published widely on US, Canadian, and global energy cultures, including oil movies, petrofiction, energy photography, comics about strip mining, and the role of energy rhetoric in US presidential elections.

Clare Birchall is Senior Lecturer at King's College London. She is the author of *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Berg, 2006) and co-editor of *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007). She has also edited special issues of the journals *Theory, Culture and Society* (Dec 2011) and *Cultural Studies* (Jan 2007). Her most recent research is concerned with the relationship between secrecy and transparency in the digital age. She has given talks and keynote lectures in the UK, the EU and the US on this subject and is part of an ESRC grant to fund a series of research seminars on privacy issues entitled 'DATA - PSST! Debating and Assessing Transparency Arrangements - Privacy, Security, Surveillance, Trust'.

Alongside more traditional scholarship, Clare is involved with a number of digital projects. She is one of the editors for the online journal *Culture Machine*; an editorial board member and series co-editor for the Open Humanities Press; and part of the team behind the JISC-funded *Living Books about Life* series. Clare also collaboratively produces a series of online videos entitled *Liquid Theory TV*.

Rick Crownshaw teaches American literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, is author of *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (2010), editor of *Transcultural Memory* (2014), and co-editor of *The Future of Memory* (2011). He is currently writing a book on American literature and the Anthropocene.

Wai Chee Dimock has written on every period of American literature, from Anne Bradstreet to Star Trek. She also writes movie reviews for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She argues for a broad conception of American literature, embracing a variety of time frames, bringing together materials both high and low, and scales both local and global. Her work has appeared in publications ranging from *Critical Inquiry* to *Salon*. Dimock's book, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (2006), received Honorable Mention for the James Russell Lowell Prize of the Modern Language Association and the Harry Levin Prize of the American Comparative Literature Association. This approach is further developed in a collaborative volume, *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (2007). She is now working on two book projects, 'Weak Theory,' and 'Low Epic: World Literature as Downward Recycling.'

Zara Dinnen is Lecturer in Modern & Contemporary Literature at University of Birmingham. Her research is on new media and contemporary American culture and she has articles out on the representation of programming in films, computer objects in comics, remix writing, and digital metaphors. Zara is currently working on her first book, *American Culture and the Digital Everyday*, and is co-editing collections on Narrative Theory and the work of Jennifer Egan.

Seb Franklin is Lecturer in Contemporary Literature at King's College London. His first book, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic*, will be published by the MIT Press in 2015.

Anna Hartnell is a lecturer in contemporary literature at Birkbeck. She is author of *Rewriting Exodus: American Futures from Du Bois to Obama* (2011). Her current project, *After Katrina: Race, Transnationalism, and the End of the American Century*, focuses on the reimagining of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Ozlem Koksals' research focuses on representations of the past, as well as the notions of rupture, loss and displacement in visual culture. She has published in both English and Turkish, and is the editor of *World Film Locations: Istanbul* (Intellect, 2012). Her forthcoming book, *Aesthetics of Displacement: Turkey and its Minorities on Screen* (Bloomsbury, 2015), looks at representations of displacement in cinema,

taking Turkey and its minorities as a case study. After completing her PhD at Birkbeck in 2011, she taught at Bilgi University in Istanbul, and she currently teaches at the University of Westminster.

Richard Martin works at the intersections of film, art and architecture. He currently teaches at King's College London, leads courses at Tate Modern, and writes for the Tate Research Department. He is the author of *The Architecture of David Lynch* (Bloomsbury, 2014), while his other publications include a 2012 report on the development of American Studies in the UK, commissioned by BAAS and the Fulbright Commission. He completed his PhD at Birkbeck's London Consortium, and has previously taught literature, film and critical theory at Birkbeck and Middlesex University.

Dietmar Meinel is a Research and Teaching Assistant at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany, and a PhD candidate at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin. His doctoral thesis explores animated film, US exceptionalism and aesthetic theory.

Bart Moore-Gilbert is Professor of English and Postcolonial Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is the author of numerous books and articles on postcolonial literature and theory and on the literature of empire. His most recent book is *Setting Sun: a Memoir of Empire and Family Secrets* (Verso, 2014). He is currently in the second year of a Leverhulme Fellowship, working on a project entitled 'Palestine and Postcolonialism'.

Caryl Phillips was born in St. Kitts, West Indies, and brought up in England. He is the author of numerous books of non-fiction and fiction. *Dancing in the Dark* won the 2006 PEN/Beyond Margins Award, and *A Distant Shore* won the 2004 Commonwealth Writers Prize. His other awards include the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize, a Lannan Literary Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *Crossing the River*, which was also short-listed for the Booker Prize. He has written extensively for the stage, television, and film, and is a regular contributor to newspapers and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and holds honorary doctorates from a number of universities. He has taught at universities in Singapore, Ghana, Sweden and Barbados and is currently Professor of English at Yale University.

Kristin Veel is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen. She completed her PhD at the University of Cambridge, German Department in 2008 and has since then focused her research interests on the impact of information, communication and surveillance technology on the contemporary cultural imagination. She has published the monograph *Narrative Negotiations: Information Structures in Literary Fiction* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009) and is co-editor of the collected volumes *The Cultural Life of Crises and Catastrophes* (de Gruyter, 2012) and *Invisibility Studies: Surveillance*,

Transparency and the Hidden in Contemporary Culture (Peter Lang, 2015). She has recently received a large grant from The Danish Research Council to lead a collaborative project on uncertainty in big data archives.

Pieter Vermeulen is Assistant Professor in American Literature at the University of Leuven. He works in the fields of critical theory, the contemporary novel, and memory studies. He is the author of *Romanticism After the Holocaust* (Bloomsbury/Continuum) and *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Palgrave Macmillan). He is currently working on three edited collections: on the dynamics of memory studies, on the institutions of world literature (for Routledge), and on the notion of the creatural (for the *European Journal of English Studies*).



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