

American Literature Research Seminar, University of Oxford
Hilary Term 2023

Week 3. Thursday 2nd Feb

Weird Tales of the Twenty-First Century – Professor Kate Marshall

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, theory and fiction got a little weird, especially when they came together. These were decades in which not just nonhuman narrators but the desire for nonhuman narration enjoyed a minor flourishing. While some novels wanted, with varying degrees of success, to be narrated from strange vantage points ranging from sentient landscapes to orbiting aliens, other academic and cultural conversations strove to make such nonhuman entities their protagonists. The result was a set of stories that took on properties of genre without being fully transformed by it – a set of weird tales. Marshall tours this landscape by identifying three key generic hybrids which mobilized nonhuman longing to do conceptual work: The Old Weird, an alternative genealogy in naturalism and modernism for the twenty-first century's cowboys and aliens; Cosmic Realism, the scalar reach for words legible from space in otherwise terrestrial narratives; and Pseudoscience Fiction, engagements with images of the future of science, including speculative futures beyond human life on earth. Revealing the hybrid traces of contemporary crises, this paper outlines the surprising story of how genre became mood in the twenty-first century.

Week 5. Wednesday 15th Feb

'Climate Pragmatism: Experiments in Literary Pedagogy' - Professor Kate Stanley

What resources can literature from the past and present offer when confronting the urgent reality of climate change? What function might the humanities classroom serve when the future of human life seems increasingly precarious? This paper grapples with these questions by taking up Wai Chee Dimock's recent wager—that literary study in the twenty-first century demands “a trial-and-error experimental method” that she calls climate pragmatism. Cued by this phrase, my paper begins by connecting William James's pragmatist methods to his own literary pedagogy. I focus in particular on how James frames passages of literature in the terms of conversion—as sites powerfully charged with the potential to convert passive belief into interventionist action. I then survey several contemporary Anglo-American authors, including Zadie Smith, Lauren Groff, Jenny Offill, and Tommy Pico, whose recent work embodies a turn towards climate activism and exemplifies this model of conversion. As I argue, these writers employ Jamesian methods for testing the pedagogical power of art: by staging new kinds of aesthetic encounters, these author-activists seek to educate and incite audiences whose passive belief in the reality of climate change might be mobilized into daily, practical, and substantial—that is, pragmatist—action

Week 5. Friday 17th Feb. 4-5:30 pm.

Aesthetic Education: A Twenty-First-Century Primer

In this roundtable event, Nicholas Gaskill and Kate Stanley will discuss their recent 'Theories and Methodologies' section in PMLA on aesthetic education (forthcoming in the January 2023 issue). Patrick Hayes, Nicole King and Damien Maher will offer short responses, and there will be plenty of time for discussion. The introduction to the special section, co-written by Gaskill and Stanley, will be pre-circulated.

Week 7. Thursday 2nd March.

Against Developmental Time, and the Possibilities of Being Untimely - Professor Habiba Ibrahim

Developmental time—evolutionary, biological, civilizational, historical time, the time that moves toward the apex of Man—is hierarchical and exclusionary. In the modern episteme, "development"

is an epistemological technology for ordering human existence in a schema of greater and lesser achievements of humanity. This talk focuses on rejections of developmental time in the Black aesthetic imagination. As this talk submits, African American cultural producers imagine human relations to time against development. In effect, they imagine an "untimely" world in which sociality is based on non-exclusionary, non-hierarchical ethics of relation.

Week 8. Thursday 9th March:

Maladies of the Will: The American Novel and the Modernity Problem – Professor Jennifer Fleissner

What if the modern person were defined not by reason or sentiment, as Enlightenment thinkers hoped, but by will? Western modernity rests on the ideal of the autonomous subject, charting a path toward self-determination. Yet novelists have portrayed the will as prone to insufficiency or excess— from indecision to obsession, wild impulse to melancholic inertia. This talk shows how the novel's attention to the will's maladies enables an ongoing interrogation of modern premises from within, revealing the nineteenth-century American novel's relation to this wide-ranging philosophical tradition.

In works from *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter* to Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons* and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, the will's grandeur and its perversity emerge as it alternately aligns itself with and pits itself against a bigger Will—whether of God, the state, society, history, or life itself. Today, when invocations of autonomy appear beside the medicalization of many behaviors, and democracy's tenet of popular will has come into doubt, 'Maladies of the Will' provides a map to how we got here, and how we might think these vital dilemmas anew.

Full listing details are also available on the RAI website, and on the attached poster : <https://www.rai.ox.ac.uk/american-literature-research-seminar>.

Unless otherwise indicated, all events will be taking place **in person downstairs** in the **large seminar room at the Rothermere American Institute, 1a South Parks Road, OX1 3UB** at **5pm**, followed by a wine reception.

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