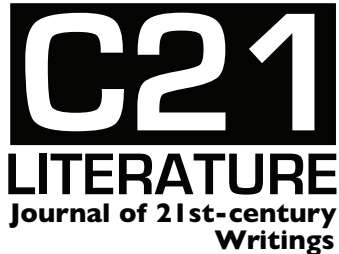




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Review

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REVIEW

BACLS 2018 'What Happens Now?' Conference Report

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Keywords: contemporary literature; critical theory; current debates; BACLS; conference

The British Association for Contemporary Literary Studies first bi-annual conference was held at the University of Loughborough 10–12 July 2018. This inaugural 'BACLS: What Happens Now' conference represents a significant milestone in the flourishing of an intellectual community of scholars dedicated to active research in the field of contemporary literary studies in the UK. Building on the official launch of the association at the English Shared Futures conference in Newcastle in July 2017, the conference consisted of thirty-four panel sessions alongside three keynote lectures. Delegates were presented with a broad conference theme, which characterised the diverse scholarship currently being undertaken in the field. The conference served as a space in which scholars collectively curated a sophisticated representation of that which is most significant in the field of British contemporary literary studies. The interrogative 'What Happens Now?' was answered in a plurality of ways, including some particularly recurring themes, such as animal studies, critiques of neoliberalism and contexts of precarity, theorising contemporary fiction, ethics and aesthetics, utopian readings, gender and queer theory, and new media and videogames. In its multifarious approach to texts, the conference offered a range of theoretical models for reading and writing in the contemporary, as well as raising questions regarding genre, form, content, and context that will surely resonate through a great number of forthcoming publications in contemporary studies.

The keynotes offered powerful responses regarding the position of the academy to wider cultural life in Britain. Dr Sandeep Parmar's (University of Liverpool) lecture

'Still not a British Subject: Race and UK Poetry' developed the argument outlined in her 2015 essay published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Dr Parmar demonstrated the continued prevalence of identity politics in literary criticism surrounding writers (specifically, poets) of colour through the language of review and the rewarding of self-foreignising in contemporary prize culture. Her lecture was a reminder of the responsibility of writers, but also of academic and popular critics in challenging racial stereotypes. On the following day, Dr Kaye Mitchell (University of Manchester) conducted an engaging conversation about contemporary fiction with Lola Young, Baroness Young of Hornsey. Baroness Young asserted the importance of reading and shared her experience of having to read 147 books in less than a year as part of her role in judging the 2017 Booker Prize. Mitchell and Young presented a wide-ranging discussion, representative of the many diverse roles that Young has fulfilled in her long and successful career. Despite having so recently faced such an endurance challenge in chairing the Booker shortlist, Young remained a convincing advocate for the fact that books are wonderful and powerful things. The third and final keynote presented by Professor Alison Phipps (University of Sussex), drew attention to the need to combat institutional airbrushing and the ways in which testimonies of sexual abuse are weaponised in the media. Professor Phipps' lecture highlighted how 'we name the problem in order to tackle the problem: there is no other way'. Collectively, the keynotes were all highly relevant to a wide range of debates within contemporary literature, but also spoke to the academy as a whole. There is a sense that the critical and creative work being done in contemporary studies means that this field is perhaps best positioned to address and respond to current politics and social events. An anonymous delegate declared 'BACLS has ruined keynotes forever!' as a consequence of the high standard and richness of ideas of each presentation.

Although the panels were varied throughout the conference, there were several recurrent themes throughout; first, there was an in-depth interrogation of post-secularity, including Dr Rose Harris-Birtill (on David Mitchell and Tibetan Buddhism), Dr Daniel O'Gorman (on Houellebecq's extremism), and Dr Caroline Edwards (on Miraculous Realism) all discussing spirituality in contemporary texts;

second, digital texts were frequently represented, with panel discussions exploring Shareveillance, New Media Literary Studies, and Videogames as (Comparatively) Contemporary Literature; finally, a sense of community and collective action was inspired through workshops (most notably Contemporary Canonicity organised by Dr Diletta de Cristofaro, Dr Arin Keeble, and Dr Rachel Sykes) and panels addressing broader concerns such as 'The Problem with Now', 'Reading Matters', and 'Teaching Contemporary Literature Beyond the Book'.

In addition to these inclusive and timely panels, an early-career roundtable offered a space for open discussion about precarity in the post-doctoral career phase. The panel consisted of contemporary literary studies scholars across the many stages of an academic career, and each speaker provided thoughtful responses to the carefully considered questions of Dr Zara Dinnen before opening up to a wider discussion. Dr Sophie Jones offered a reflection on conceiving time (as in short supply and fragmented) in the precarious post-doctoral position, which articulated the position of the post-PhD experience exceptionally well. Dr Ben Davies shared a guide for good practice developed by University English, which offered a tangible example of how hiring committees might improve the conditions of early-career employment. Those looking to write job adverts or postdoctoral research projects in the coming year might look at the examples outlined in that helpful document. Professor Katy Shaw made the important point that most academics seeking to employ new colleagues do want to be able to offer better contracts and employment opportunities, but these efforts can be undermined by institutional pressures and limited funds. It was refreshing to see a panel discussing precarity which was both honest and realistic, and yet which offered a renewed sense of the need to cultivate a supportive and sustainable scholarly community. The session served as a reminder that change for the better is entirely possible, and that this is enabled by engaging with, rather than avoiding, difficult aspects of the contemporary experience of academic life.

The conference also was the venue for the Annual General Meeting for BACLS, and as a result, the nomination of a new executive committee. Therefore, the executive committee is now as follows:

Chair – Sarah Dillon.

Vice-Chair – Katy Shaw.

Secretary – Rose Harris-Birtill.

Treasurer – Jennifer Cooke.

Web Administrator – Tom Jenks.

Conference Organiser – Zara Dinnen.

Publicity Officer – Caroline Magennis.

Membership Secretary – Mike Witcombe.

Graduate Student Representatives – Chloe Ashbridge, Zoe Hope Bulaitis, and Caroline Wintersgill.

Ordinary Members – Siân Adiseshiah, Timothy Baker, Nick Bentley, Diletta de Cristofaro, Ben Davies, and Rachael Sykes.

In the planning and execution of 'BACLS: What Happens Now' Dr Jennifer Cooke and Dr Zara Dinnen proved exceptional conference organisers, putting together a seamless event with coherent panels, arranging keynotes with relevant and wide appeal, and in providing wonderful hospitality at the University of Loughborough and the surrounding city. Thanks also to the Tarboush restaurant staff for hosting a brilliant conference dinner; it turns out that falafel, a room full of contemporary literature scholars, and England's last game in the World Cup is a truly excellent combination. With the call for the conference tender currently open for organising BACLS 2020 prospective applicants will have a high standard to aim towards!

Overall, the conference left me, as an attendee and presenter, with a sense of the significance of scale. There is work being done at the level of the miniature, in an attentiveness to the small miracles of contemporary texts and significance of even the smallest shifts of language, tone and phrasing, as well as work that takes aim at problems as large as climate change and reading in a digital age. The few days in Loughborough left me with confidence that the field of contemporary studies is in a very strong position and will continue to grow and develop. It is clear that BACLS will play a central role in this development, and will provide space for many key and collaborative conversations in the future. After all, a conversation is something in which one enters with

only partial knowledge. It is those added unexpected parts of discussion that allow for a group of scholars to become more than the sum of their individual efforts. So, here's to BACLS 2020, in which this vibrant conversation can continue.

Competing Interests

Zoe Bulaitis sits on the board of the British Association for Contemporary Literary Studies as the current graduate representative.

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