Cultures of Populism: Institutions and Hegemonic Practices:

A Colloquium convened by the Wits-Uppsala-Sussex Research Group, in collaboration with the African Centre for the Study of the United States

10 to 13 July

University of the Witwatersrand, Wits Club, Braamfontein Campus West
Cultures of Populism: Institutions and Hegemonic Practices

Programme

Tuesday 9th July

18:00: Members of the organising team will call at the Rosebank Inn to meet informally with conference participants. For those interested, we can then form groups to have drinks or a meal together.

Venue: Conference Facility at the Wits Club, West Campus

Wednesday 10th July

09:00-09:20: Registration
09:20-10:10: Formal Opening – Introducing the African Centre for the Study of the United States (Chair: Professor Gilbert Khadiagala, Director of the Centre)
Brief addresses by representatives of the University of the Witwatersrand, the African Centre for the Study of the United States and the United States Embassy

10:10-10:30: Tea

10:30-12:30: Session 1 – Constructions of Populism (Moderated by Professor Merle Williams)
Professor Stephen Clingman (University of Massachusetts at Amherst): ‘Antisemanticism and the Boundaries of Populism’
Professor Roderick Ferguson (Yale University): ‘Authoritarianism and the Planetary Mission of Queer of Colour Critique’
Dr Yannik Thiem (Columbia University): ‘US Populism and the Humanities as Queer Martial Arts’

12:30-13:30: Lunch

13:30-14:50: Session 2 – Brexit and the Notion of Republicanism (Moderated by Dr Simon van Schalkwyk)
Dr John Masterson (University of Sussex): “Because something is happening here/ But you don’t know what it is/ Do you, Mister Jones?”: Politics of Populism and Poetics of Protest in Ali Smith’s Recent Writing’
Ms Robyn Pierce (University of the Witwatersrand): ‘Authoritarian Populism and the Republic of Heaven in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* and *La Belle Sauvage’

14:50-15:10 Tea

15:10-16:30: Session 3 – South African Writing (Moderated by Professor Chris Thurman)
Professor David Attwell (University of York, UK): ‘Foreword to a History of Populism in South African Literature’
Professor Sarah Nuttall (University of the Witwatersrand): ‘Populism, Fascism and Forms of Looking’

16:30 -16:40: Break for Technical Arrangements

16:40-17:20: (Special) Session 4 [connection via Zoom] (Moderated by Professor Merle Williams)
Professor Inderpal Grewal (Yale University): ‘Patriarchy, Kinship and Sexuality: Gendering Authoritarian Power’

17:20-18:45 approx.: Drinks and snacks at the Wits Club – cash bar for beer, wine and other alcohol

**Thursday 11th July**

09:00-10:20: Session 5 – Populist Formations and the US Novel (Moderated by Professor Maria Lauret)
Professor Donald Wehrs (Auburn University, Alabama): ‘Global Populism, Southern American Populism of the 1890s, and the Vexing Case of Thomas E. Watson’
Professor Merle Williams (University of the Witwatersrand): ‘Populism, Privilege and Democracy in Henry James’s *The Bostonians*: Encounters with Community’

10:20-10:40 Tea

10:40-12:00: Session 6 – US Poetry (Moderated by Dr Doug Haynes)
Dr Simon van Schalkwyk (University of the Witwatersrand): ‘Americanisation Movements and their Poetic Dissidents’
Dr Marc Botha (University of Durham): ‘Disabling Populism: Heightened Vulnerability as Divinatory System in Rob Halpern’s *Music for Porn’

12:00-13:00: Lunch

13:00-15:00: Session 7 – Hegemonies and Covert Narratives (Moderated by Professor Chris Thurman)
Professor Donald Pease (Dartmouth College): ‘Trump’s Anti-Globalist Globalisation: A New Era of Illiberal US Hegemony?’ [connection via Zoom]
Dr Sorin Radu Cucu (LaGuardia Community College): ‘Algorithms for a New Cold War? Spy Fiction, Secrecy, and the Populist Imagination in the Digital Decade’
Dr Arthur Rose (University of Bristol): ‘On Asbestos and Populism: A Covert Intersection’

15:00-15:20: Tea

15:20- 16:40: Session 8 – The Trump Phenomenon (Moderated by Dr Marc Botha)
Professor Virginia Domínguez (IFUSS and the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana): ‘Whose Populism? Trump, his Supporters, and his Critics in the US’
Dr Doug Haynes (University of Sussex): ‘Do We Choose Our Own Monsters? Jim Shaw and Donald Trump’

Evening at leisure

Friday 12th July

09:00-11:00: Session 9 – Race, Memoir and Fiction (Moderated by Professor Dilip Menon)
Professor Maria Lauret (University of Sussex): ‘Memoir in the Age of Populism: “Race” and Dogwhistling Discourse in the Work of J.D. Vance and Ta-Nehisi Coates’
Dr Adam Levin (University of the Witwatersrand): ‘The Implicated Subject in The Hate U Give and the Wider Global Narrative’
Dr Aretha Phiri (Rhodes University): “I used to always feel safe among Black people. I did. I don’t any more”: Reading Cultural Populism and the Politics of Redress’

11:00-11:20: Tea

11:20-13:20: Session 10 – Institutions and the Humanities (Moderated by Professor Michael Titlestad)
Dr Marie Kruger (University of Iowa): ‘Heritage, Narrative, and the Role of the Humanities’
Dr Wamuwi Mbao (University of Stellenbosch): ‘The Liquid University’
Professor Phyllis van Slyck (LaGuardia Community College): ‘Contact Zones: Our Politics and our Classrooms’

13:20-14:20: Lunch

14:20-15:40: Session 11 – The Global South: Africa and India (Moderated by Dr John Masterson)
Professor Kasongo Kapanga (University of Richmond, Virginia): ‘Side by Side: Populism as a Literary Trope in Two Congolese Novels and in UDPS Combattants’ Political Discourse’
Professor Dilip Menon (University of the Witwatersrand): ‘Authoritarian Populism and Parliamentary Democracy in India’
15:40-16:00: Tea
16:00-18:00 approx.: Screening of *Everything Must Fall*, dir. Rehad Desai: a film about the #FeesMustFall protests at South African universities. Discussion facilitated by Professor Michael Titlestad

19:15 for 19:30: Conference Dinner at the Rosebank Inn

Saturday 13th July

09:00-11:00: Session 12 – Political Theory, Populism and Democracy (Moderated by Professor Gilbert Khadiagala)

Professor Eiríkur Bergmann (University of Iceland): ‘The People against *The People*: Three Waves of Nationalist Populism since the Second World War’

Dr Karl van Wyk (University of the Witwatersrand): ‘(Pre)Apartheid Time: Arthur Keppel-Jones’ *When Smuts Goes* (1947)’

Professor Pablo Idahosa (York University, Canada): ‘Is There Still a Developmental Populism?’

11:00-11:20: Tea

11:20-12:40: Session 13 – Institutions and Compromised Trust (Moderated by Dr Adam Levin)

Dr Martin Thunert (Heidelberg Centre for American Studies, University of Heidelberg): ‘(Dis)trust of Experts and Contemporary Populism: the US in Comparative Perspective’

Professor Chris Thurman (University of the Witwatersrand): ‘Burying Caesar … or Praising Him? Shakespeare and the Populist Right in the United States’

12:40-13:00: Session 14 – Brief Closing Remarks (Dr Simon van Schalkwyk)

13:00-14:00: Lunch – formal conclusion of colloquium

14:00-16:00: Business meeting of the Wits-Uppsala-Sussex Research Consortium with members of ACSUS, IFUSS and other potential partners

OR

14:00-16:00: Informal excursion to Constitution Hill, led by Dr Marie Kruger (University of Iowa) – participants to indicate interest on the first day of the colloquium.
Abstracts and Bios

David Attwell
‘Foreword to a History of Populism in South African Literature’

Despite a lively debate on the implications and possible outcomes of a swing to populism in areas of South African public life, post-apartheid literature shows little sign of taking up the theme. There is, as yet, no equivalent of Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966), still the iconic treatment of populist politics in African literature in English. To find representations of homegrown populism, we need to go back to the writing of the New African generations of the early to mid-twentieth century, writing that would help us to understand what the conditions are for populism to become a proper subject for literary reflection. If, as Derek Attridge argues, the alterity of the (literary) text is such that it invites us into an encounter with strangeness and singularity, then populism—which is aggressively consensual—and the literary would seem to be antithetical forms of language. That would seem to be the point of view of writers from Thomas Mofolo to A.C. Jordan, many of whom stage encounters with populism in their fictions. During the years of the anti-apartheid struggle and thereafter, the ‘popular’ comes to replace populism as a common mantra, for good reasons. But it might be time for that to change, and indeed, the relative absence of representations of populism today might tell us something about the condition of democracy in South Africa.

Bio

David Attwell is a Professor of English at the University of York. His research is broadly based in postcolonial studies, with particular emphases on contemporary fiction and life writing, and literary history. He has published two monographs on the work of J.M. Coetzee and served as Coetzee’s co-editor for his essay collection *Doubling the Point* (Harvard University Press, 1992). He has also written on black literary history in South Africa in works such as *Rewriting Modernity* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005) and *Bury Me at the Marketplace* (Wits University Press, 2010), a collection of the letters of Esk’ia Mphahlele which he co-edited with Chabani Manganyi. His most recent work is *Poetics and Politics of Shame in Postcolonial Literature* (Routledge, 2019) which he co-edited with Susanna Zinato and Annalisa Pes.

Eiríkur Bergmann
‘The People against The People: Three Waves of Nationalist Populism since the Second World War’

Abstract

This research maps the rebirth of nationalism in Europe and America since the Second World War. As well as separating nationalist populism from other kinds within the populist family, the research offers two other main academic contributions. The first is a novel way of framing three waves of nationalist populism in the post-war era. Secondly, I will build on my previous research, mainly analysing the Nordic countries (2017) and far-right conspiracy theories in Europe (2018), in developing a scheme identifying ten common qualities of Nationalist Populism since the Second World War. This I will do by way of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).
Bio

Eiríkur Bergmann is Professor of Politics at Bifröst University in Iceland. He writes mainly on Nationalism, Populism, European Integration, Icelandic Politics and on Participatory Democracy. His latest books, published by Palgrave Macmillan, include: Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation (2018), Nordic Nationalism and Right-Wing Populist Politics (2017) and Iceland and the International Financial Crisis (2014). Bergmann is also author of three novels published in Icelandic. He is a frequent commentator in Icelandic and international media. In 2011 Bergmann served on Iceland’s nationally elected Constitutional Council.

Marc Botha

‘Disabling Populism: Heightened Vulnerability as Divinatory System in Rob Halpern’s Music for Porn’

Abstract

This paper interrogates how our current biopolitical configurations not only delimit vulnerable bodies in the present, but limit the ways in which both the body and the body politic are able to be conceived and constituted in the future. One of the key questions in addressing this problematic configuration relates to how bodies of heightened vulnerability – the body that experiences an intensified susceptibility to wounding, whether by individual, collective, structural or ideological violence – becomes simultaneously visible and invisible, present and absent, performing in this impossibly ambiguous space a divinatory function with respect to the future. It becomes necessary to grasp how this body is represented in the present, is able to appear (recalling Butler), even as its existence is threatened both in the present and, more especially, the future.

With this in mind, I wish in particular to interrogate the complex vulnerability manifested in the figure of the maimed combatant, a figure that is the subject of a paradoxical process of simultaneous appropriation and disavowal in the discourse of populism. At one pole of this discourse – the pole of appropriation – the maimed body of the returning war hero has always been a central figure in militant patriotism. At the other pole – the pole of disavowal – the maimed body is rendered invisible, the so-called collateral damage of what Eyal Weizman has discussed in terms of ‘humanitarian violence.’ Jasbir Puar’s distinction of ‘disability’ from ‘debility’ is instructive in grasping these intensities of visibility and invisibility.

The question then becomes, how might we discover an adequate means of representing the heightened vulnerability of the maimed body as a complex system of divination; a means of representation that must contain sufficient force to occasion a re-evaluation of the elisions that mark contemporary populist nationalist rhetoric? One response is to be found in poet Rob Halpern’s 2012 collection, Music for Porn. In it, Halpern interrogates the intersection of the military-industrial and medical-industrial complexes through the maimed body of the war veteran, which becomes the object of what he terms ‘devotional kink.’ The question this work poses then is whether or not a radical queer desire that interrogates the fraught distinction of disability and debility possesses the power to counteract the state assertion of a ‘right to maim.’ Is this crossing of queer desire and disability itself sufficient to disrupt the violent future which populist nationalism once again seems historically poised to actualise?
Marc Botha is an Assistant Professor in Modern and Contemporary Literature and Theory in the Department of English Studies at Durham University and co-director of Durham’s Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience. He also serves as the co-ordinator of the “Risk Humanities” theme within the Matariki Network of Universities, an international network which seeks to interrogate the intersections of risk, vulnerability, security and futurity from an interdisciplinary perspective. His research interrogates the intersection of critical theory, modern and contemporary literature, and interdisciplinary aesthetics. Amongst his most recent works in this field are his monograph A Theory of Minimalism (Bloomsbury, 2017) and two co-edited collections: Cosmopoetics: Rethinking the Worlds of World Poetry and Poetics (Palgrave, forthcoming at the end of 2019) with Heather Yeung, and Critical Transitions: Genealogies and Trajectories of Change (Bloomsbury, forthcoming at the end of 2019) with Patricia Waugh.

Stephen Clingman

‘Antisemanticism and the Boundaries of Populism’

Abstract

I want to approach the question of contemporary populism from three directions, invoking three connected themes. The first will be to draw on a model from the past, Stuart Hall’s analysis of Thatcherist populism in Britain, prescient for our time in many respects, not least in understanding the presiding paradox that Thatcher’s policies hurt many of those who supported her. Hall’s approach fused the cultural and political, yet also undermined simplistic notions of false consciousness in the repertoires of Thatcherist discourse, seeing the latter as more than simply ‘rhetoric’. It is that intersection of the cultural and political I wish to pursue here. My second theme focuses on contemporary Trumpism, understanding Trump as an ‘antisemantic’ president. Whereas in Orwell’s 1984, the slogans of power depended on the inversion of meaning (‘War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength’), Trumpism undermines the very foundations of meaning—the meaning of meaning, as it were. How this coincides with an internet environment, or even a post-postmodernism, will be a subsidiary yet significant issue. My third theme will consider the counterpart to this antisemantic universe, that having undermined some of the standard platforms of truth and meaning, on another level it rests on certain symbolic fixities, not least around the question of boundaries. How does populism conceive of the boundary? And by contrast, how do we need to rethink the nature of the boundary now in order to construct a conceptual alternative?

Bio

Stephen Clingman is Distinguished University Professor of English and former Director of the Interdisciplinary Studies Institute at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His books include The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside (1986; 2nd edn, Bloomsbury/UMass Press, 1992) and an edited collection of essays by Gordimer, The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places (Jonathan Cape/Knopf, 1988), translated into a number of languages. Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary (1998; 2nd edn, Jacana Media, 2013), a biography of the lawyer and political figure who led Nelson Mandela’s defence at the Rivonia Trial, won the Sunday Times Alan Paton Award, South Africa’s premier prize for non-fiction. Clingman’s most recent books are The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary (Oxford University Press, 2009), and Birthmark (Jacana, 2015), a memoir. Recent articles include topics on Caryl Phillips
and the biofictive, criminals and enemies in South Africa, and a triptych of essays on Nadine Gordimer. Clingman is currently at work on issues of refuge, fugitive narrative, and dwelling.

Sorin Radu Cucu

‘Algorithms for a New Cold War? Spy Fiction, Secrecy, and the Populist Imagination in the Digital Decade’

Abstract

A spectre is haunting the world today: the spectre of a new Cold War. I examine how this idea is being produced and circulated in contemporary culture under the metaphorical name Cold War 2.0, a valuable metaphor not because it describes clearly our current geopolitical situation but because it links it allegorically to the enhanced vulnerability of liberal democracies in the age of social media. My paper tests the following hypothesis: Cold War 2.0 is not simply a geopolitical narrative about US–Russia relations in the (post-)Obama years but a discursive space in which the popular imagination of world order and international security confronts a variety of populist-nationalist mythologies. Historically, spy fiction heroes from the British Bond to the American Jack Ryan mediate nationalism with globalism by suggesting that Anglo-American elite figures are the hope of the free world. Whereas spy fiction remains predominantly anti-populist, in the context of Cold War 2.0, it can serve as a useful lens to examine how the hacking of the DNC by Russian hackers, followed by the Putin-Wikileaks conspiracy, contributed to populist mobilisation in the US. This mobilisation, I argue, would not be possible without a national culture fascinated by (perhaps even addicted to) secrets, a culture that is, in my view, increasingly more confused about the important difference between privacy and secrecy.

Bio

Sorin Radu Cucu is an Associate Professor of English at LaGuardia Community College. He is the author of The Underside of Politics: Global Fictions in the Fog of the Cold War (Fordham University Press, 2013). His most recent article re-examines the Cold War reception of Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick.

Rehad Desai

Everything Must Fall Screening

Film Synopsis

Everything Must Fall is an unflinching look at the #FeesMustFall student movement that burst onto the South African political landscape in 2015 as a protest over the cost of education, and morphed into the most militant national revolt since the country’s first democratic elections in 1994.

Bio

Rehad Desai is a Cape Town-born filmmaker who returned from exile in 1990 and now lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa. Desai has a Masters in History and began making
documentaries in 1998. He formed Uhuru Productions in 2003 and has been the driving force behind the company ever since. He is also the Chairperson of the Human Rights Media Trust, formed in 2004. Over the course of his time as a filmmaker, he has conceived and produced over 20 documentary films, many of which he has directed or co-directed. Six of these films have been feature-length documentaries, produced with significant international participation and have received critical acclaim and wide festival take-up. Desai is also the founder-director of the Tri Continental Human Rights Film Festival.

Virginia Domínguez

‘Whose Populism? Trump, his Supporters, and his Critics in the US’

Abstract

With Trump as president of the United States, it is important to ask what populism means in the US. About half of the country hates him and at least a third adores him. Many did not vote for him in the 2016 US presidential election, but had a hard time voting for his opponent, Hillary Clinton. The Trump enthusiasts voted in large numbers, allowing him to get enough electoral college votes to be declared the winner but not a majority of the overall votes, which went to his opponent. Of course, part of the issue was the lack of enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton. This meant that many Trump haters did not, in fact, vote that day or voted, just not for the President.

Bio

Virginia R. Domínguez is the Edward William and Jane Marr Gutgsell Professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is also co-founder of the International Forum for US Studies (first established in 1995 at the University of Iowa, in the US) and co-editor of its book series, Global Studies of the United States. A political and legal anthropologist, she was president of the American Anthropological Association from late 2009 to late 2011, editor of American Ethnologist from 2002 to 2007, and president of the AAA’s Society for Cultural Anthropology from 1999 to 2001. She is perhaps best known for her research work on the Caribbean, United States and Israel. Her most recent publications are America Observed: On an International Anthropology of the United States (Berghahn Books, 2017), co-edited with Jasmin Habib, and the book Global Perspectives on the United States (University of Illinois Press, Spring 2017), co-edited with Jane Desmond. She also guest-edited an issue of RIAS (The International American Studies Association’s journal) that was published in Summer, 2018.

Roderick Ferguson

‘Authoritarianism and the Planetary Mission of Queer of Colour Critique’

Abstract

As an inquiry into political economy, queer of colour critique attempted to rearticulate historical materialism. In doing so, it strived to produce a historical materialism that could engage Marxism’s historic evasions around race, gender and sexuality. With regard to authoritarianism and with the fascist formations in the global north and the global south, now might be the occasion to ponder queer of colour critique’s potential for reviving and reformulating the Frankfurt School project. Made up of such thinkers as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Franz
Neumann and Friedrich Pollock, the Institute for Social Research devoted much of its energies to determining the social and psychic conditions of authoritarian states. We might ask what purchase queer of colour critique and its critical immersion in the genealogies of women-of-colour feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism, queer activism and so on might have for understanding our current moment. Towards this end, this paper points to some of the areas of affinity and activation between various critical formations that have tried to engage authoritarianism in its many gendered, racialised, and classed guises. Moreover, the paper ponders how the global spread of authoritarian formations necessitates a planetary (and not simply national or even continental) vision for recovery.

Bio

Roderick A. Ferguson is professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University. An interdisciplinary scholar, his work traverses such fields as American studies, gender studies, queer studies, cultural studies, African American studies, sociology, literature, and education. He is the author of One-Dimensional Queer (Polity, 2019), We Demand: The University and Student Protests (University of California Press, 2017), The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), and Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique (University of Minnesota Press, 2004). He is the co-editor with Grace Hong of the anthology Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization (Duke University Press, 2011). He is also co-editor with Erica Edwards and Jeffrey Ogbar of Keywords for African American Studies (NYU Press, 2018). He is currently working on two monographs—The Arts of Black Studies and The Bookshop of Black Queer Diaspora. Ferguson’s teaching interests include the politics of culture, women-of-colour feminism, the study of race, critical university studies, queer social movements, and social theory.

Inderpal Grewal

‘Patriarchy, Kinship and Sexuality: Gendering Authoritarian Power’

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss why feminist research is crucial for understanding authoritarian populism. In particular, I argue that patriarchy as a form of transnational oligarchic and racial power, one that is focused on accessing and controlling both the state and capital, needs to be reconceptualised to understand contemporary populism. Such an approach must encompass both the power of corporations and their control of the state, understanding that these domains are intimately connected to kinship and gender. Moreover, an approach that breaks down Global North and Global South differences is also critical. While there is a great deal of scholarly research on the “family firm” as a particular capitalist enterprise that exists in locations outside the North (with some exceptions), the norm in the North is understood as being the corporate firm devoid of kinship relations, or a privately held corporate firm in which family and patriarchy do not directly affect the operations of the corporation. Consequently, there is little analysis of the relation between corporations, patriarchy and the state. Hence, there is need for consideration of the ways in which kinship, marriage and sexual power remain central to contemporary capitalism and the emerging forms of authoritarianism. I argue that we cannot understand the relation between corporations, the state and geopolitics, without paying attention to considerations of race, sexuality, family and patriarchy.
Bio


Doug Haynes

‘Do We Choose Our Own Monsters? Jim Shaw and Donald Trump’

Abstract

My paper looks at current American populism through the perspective of some recent work from conceptual artist Jim Shaw, the CalArts stalwart, as he seeks ways to provide and interrogate images of Trump and consider the social and cultural contexts that generated them. From work showcased in “Repair or Revolt?” in Artforum 2018, where Shaw provided Trump-critical pieces alongside contributions from Ed Ruscha, Sue Williams and Charles Gaines, to his display at the 2018 Frieze Art Fair in London, where he printed gilt Trump wallpaper as the backdrop to his other pieces, to his solo New York show at Metro Pictures (2017-18), where a substantial body of new work on the president was shown, Shaw has been making smeared, distorted and surprising images and objects of Donald Trump. Shaw’s Trump works fits into the artist’s extant oeuvre – especially regarding his fascination with odd hairdos! – but they attempt also to locate Trump(ism) historically and psychologically. Much of Shaw’s art is a kind of politicised American Surrealism, and in the Artforum piece, curated by David Velasco, part of the latter’s provocative brief was to ask, “Do we get to choose our own monsters?” Shaw’s response includes Untitled Study (Forbidden Planet) with Trump as a cartoon alien consorting with sinister mentors like Vladimir Putin and Roy Cohn. How is this creature from space, from High Capitalism, also a creature of the American Id? To quote the 1956 film did we choose this monster?

Bio

Doug Haynes is a Reader in American Literature and Visual Culture (English, American Studies) at the University of Sussex. He also serves as the Director of the Sussex Centre for American Studies and is co-director of SAVAnT (School for American Visual Art and Text), a virtual doctoral school operating across universities in London and Southeast England. He co-edited Navigating the Transnational in odern American Literature and Culture (Routledge, 2016) with Tara Stubbs and served as the editor of Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon, an online, open-access journal dedicated to the work of Thomas Pynchon. He has published widely in journals and edited collections on the dialogue between modern American culture (especially literature and visual art) and critical theory—the tradition of thought based on the ideas of Hegel, Marx, and
Freud. His particular interests within this field are humour; affect/feeling; ideas of economy; and everyday life. He is still writing a book on humour and American culture.

Pablo Idahosa

‘Is There Still a Developmental Populism?’

Abstract

Conjunctural crises resuscitate both older depictions and newer explanations of recurring socio-political and economic phenomena while eliding others. The most recent illustration of this is the proliferation of academic and journalistic depictions and explanations of “populisms” of the current resurgence of both left and primarily right-wing populisms. The global financial crisis hatched different ideologies and goals whose electoral revolts all appear to commonly share spurning, austerity neoliberalism, corporate globalisation, and the expertise of elites and political establishments that championed them. On the right, the most significant evidence of this lies in Donald Trump’s election. Oft-seen as a manifestation of a crisis of liberal-democratic politics, his, like other right wing populisms, is not only driven by leaders of governments, but also parties and/or sectors of populations having significant influence in their countries. More than anyone, his authoritarian-populist, racially nativist mobilisation underscored by an anti-elitist discourse against political liberalism’s tradition of the rule of law, the separation of powers and the defence of individual freedom, prioritises collective security for the group at the expense of liberalism’s autonomy for the individual. It also appears to undermine forms of representative democratic tradition of equality and popular sovereignty, as well as more pluralistic, cultural expressions of progressive neoliberalism’s identity politics that have displaced those he both culturally and economically addresses. Thus, they have legitimated a style of governance that, when invoking the nation, chooses to identify only certain sectors worthy of an address of the collective action of “the people”. If, however, Trump represents a distillation of a recurrent thread, or culture of populism—a “strong”, charismatic leader who speaks in the name of the nation, or certain groups therein—like much of the corresponding academic and journalistic focus on populism, with few exceptions (e.g. Peronism), or en passant or dismissively, it elides a consideration of other forms of populism that have a genuine redistributionist thrust, seek to decrease inequality, while emphasising social inclusion, and a developmental populism that is socially democratic. In the Global South before the advent of neoliberalism, these were once seen as legitimate, and briefly saw some resurgence with the “Pink Tide” in Latin America. It is populism about national development, and a political system of transition, perhaps constructed around a party and/or a leader. What are the family resemblances and differences between these forms of populism and the new resurgent populisms of today? Is there a still a developmental populism?

Bio

Pablo Idahosa is a Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at York University. He is an internationally recognized specialist in African Studies. His publications include The Populist Dimension of African Political Thought: Essays in Reconstruction and Retrieval (African World Press, 2003) and Development’s Displacements: Ecologies, Economies and Cultures at Risk (UBC Press, 2007) with Peter Vandergeest and Pablo S. Bose. Idahosa’s research interests include, but are not limited to, the relationship between development and modernity in Africa, the relationship
between development and cultural production in Africa, ethnicity and displacement in the Niger Delta, and the politics of ethnicity, globalisation and development. He has previously served as the Coordinator of the African Studies Programme at York University and is currently the Head of Founder’s College

Kasongo Kapanga

‘Side by Side: Populism as a Literary Trope in Two Congolese Novels and in UDPS Combattants’ Political Discourse’

Abstract

If across Western liberal democracies the praxis of populism challenges the ideal notion of freedom and society, because it is being used to interrogate national polities or to enhance exclusionary practices—wallism or Brexit slogans—there is also another kind of populism practiced in the Global South that advocacy for democracy sustains. Apprehended in its local and specific dimensions proper to the DRC framework, its peculiarities lie in its aversion toward the established institutions perceived as illegitimate or ill-conceived. It manifests itself in the political discourse of the UDPS and in the discourse of two novels. My three-part paper will analyse this populist trope as it applies in two instances. The first one is the UDPS opposition populist discourse—people first—gathered from the combattants last summer. The second one is from the analysis of Mwanza Mujila’s Tram 83 (2015) and In Koli Jean Bofane’s Congo Inc.: Le Testament de Bismarck (2014).

The first part will examine the way this populist slogan, activated under the right to speech and to action, has been made a central theme of action in the novels by Mujila and Bofane. The second part will examine the way the trope, when reduced to its “legalistic” claim of the combattants, could turn into an exclusionary slogan with little room for accommodation that limits acceptability to one’s success. I will analyse this UDPS populism focusing on the members’ claims on their founders, their leaders and any outsiders. The third part will examine the consistency of this reversed trope as either a mere idealistic pronouncement, or a beefed-up strategic survivalist discursive instrument (especially now that it has become a partner in a governing coalition) in the conjuncture of opposition (or governing) occurring in an atmosphere of polarisation, exploitation and deceit. Does the substance of claims change, or does it find another target to deploy its counter-active dynamism?

Bio

Kasongo Kapanga is a Professor of French and Francophonie Studies at University of Richmond. His research focuses on discursive analysis in African and Congolese literatures and films within both pre-colonial and post-colonial contexts. He has published several articles or book chapters on V.Y. Mudimbe’s work and his reflections on the cultural life in Colonial Africa. His most recent publication is The Writing of the Nations: Expressing Identity through Congolese Literary Texts and Films (Africa World Press, 2017).
Gilbert Khadiagala

Formal Opening – Introducing the African Centre for the Study of the United States

Bio

Gilbert M. Khadiagala is the Jan Smuts Professor of International Relations and Director of the Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. He previously taught African Politics, Comparative Politics, and International Relations at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio (1991-1997), and The School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University, Washington D.C. (1997-2006). Khadiagala holds a doctorate in International Studies from SAIS, an M.A in Political Science from McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, and B.A in Political Science from the University of Nairobi, Kenya. He has published widely on African politics, foreign policy, security, mediation, and conflict resolution. He is the recent editor of War and Peace in Africa’s Great Lakes Region (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2017) and author of Regional Cooperation on Democratization and Conflict Management in Africa (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), and How Can Democratic Peace Work in Southern Africa? Trends and Trajectories after the Decade of Hope (Maputo: The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018).

Marie Kruger

‘Heritage, Narrative, and the Role of the Humanities’

Abstract

“Heritage” in its many manifestations—from museums and monuments to natural landscapes and industrial sites—continues to generate intense debates about its meaning and political purposes, its intellectual and ideological framing, as well as its relationship to broader social initiatives. Controversies surrounding confederate or imperial monuments in the United States and South Africa also shape attempts to create alternative spaces of commemoration, such as the recently opened National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama.

The political and social capital of heritage as institutionalised memory becomes even more significant if we consider the representational shift in museums towards autobiographical storytelling and interactive multimedia displays. It is this change towards multimedia approaches that explains the growing number of interdisciplinary collaborations, bringing together scholars and practitioners with expertise in architecture, film, theatre, digital media, literature and art, interior and graphic design to formulate new interpretative approaches to memorial experiences. What these professionals share is an interest in the general role museums might play in fostering more equitable, fair and just societies, and in narrative as a means of facilitating empathetic encounters between the subjects and audiences of museum displays.

Focusing on specific case studies, my paper considers the role of the Humanities in the design of structured narrative environments on memorial sites, the potential for collaborative work on such projects, and the possibilities for eliciting responsible forms of witnessing. Such efforts, however, also have to contend with competing cultural and political currents: from the commodification of heritage for commercial purposes and the redeployment of institutionalised memory in the service of political agendas to the imaginative appropriation of heritage sites in popular culture. My paper argues that, even if absorbed into hegemonic discourses and institutions, memorial sites also provide openings for alternative uses and interpretations. As
shapeshifting urban zones of multidirectional memory (Rothberg), they offer exceptional sites for intergenerational and cross-cultural encounters which allow us to explore the tensions between “cultures of populism” and popular culture.

Bio

Marie Kruger is an Associate Professor at the University of Iowa, where she teaches classes in postcolonial and gender studies. Her monograph, *Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity* (Palgrave, 2011), draws attention to fictional works that constitute a vital, yet often overlooked part of the cultural and creative exchanges in Eastern Africa. Her work has been published in several edited volumes and literary journals, including *Research in African Literatures, Postcolonial Text, Swahili Forum*, and *The Nairobi Journal of Literature*. Together with Mildred Mortimer and Maureen Eke, she co-edited a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* on “Memory/History, Violence and Reconciliation.” Her current project studies the representation and commodification of traumatic memory in South African visual culture, including film and memorial sites.

Maria Lauret

‘Memoir in the Age of Populism: “Race” and Dogwhistling Discourse in the Work of J.D. Vance and Ta-Nehisi Coates’

Abstract

Interested in writing as a mode of activism, the paper contrasts two bestselling memoirs associated with the populist rhetoric that brought Donald Trump to the presidency and with #BlackLivesMatter respectively: J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) and Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* (2015).

We begin by asking to what extent these memoirs can be categorised as populist texts in Laclau’s sense, that is: as ones which “construct ‘the people’ as a collective actor to confront the existing regime with the purpose of . . . demanding regime change”, in the words of Benjamin Arditi. The paper’s second question is how memoir as a genre may appeal to populist sentiment. The answer is twofold: Vance’s memoir unashamedly appropriates a minority rights discourse for his conservative political agenda by writing in a dogwhistling code that communicates one message (of reason and equality) to the liberal elite he seeks to critique and another (of class- and race-based resentment and entitlement) to his populist base. With Coates the answer is more complicated, and the third part of the paper contrasts Vance’s coded dogwhistling language in *Hillbilly Elegy* with the thoughtful, probing and laboured prose of *Between the World and Me*, which uses cliché only to pierce it and whose complex layers of meaning only reveal themselves on close analysis. For Coates, the discourse of “‘race’ itself is just a restatement and retrenchment of the problem” (115). His Afropessimism, far from being a retrograde force as Cornel West has argued, may yet prove a case in point for Jacques Rancière’s contention that “the new regime of meaning underpinning both literature and social science has made the very sentence contrasting ‘changing the world’ and ‘interpreting the world’ into an enigma” (*The Politics of Literature*, 23).

Bio

Maria Lauret is Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Sussex in the UK, where she is also the Lead for Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion in the School of English. Some of her most recent publications are *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature*
Adam Levin

‘The Implicated Subject in The Hate U Give and the Wider Global Narrative’

Abstract

In his upcoming work The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators, Michael Rothberg outlines the notion of the “implicated subject”. This “implicated subject” is a being who is considered to be implicated in the narrative of the perpetrator. The nature of this implication is not based on a direct association with the perpetrator. Rather, it is based on the “implicated subject’s” identification with the perpetrator’s ethnic and/or social background which creates an indirect association between him/her and the perpetrator’s behaviour and actions. In one case study, Rothberg uses white Americans’ responses to the murder of African-American youth Trayvon Martin as a lens through which to consider the complexities that arise when the “implicated subject” endeavours to shape his or her identity into that of an ally to the victim and, subsequently, populist movements which support the victim’s narrative.

In this paper, I will use Rothberg’s theory of the “implicated subject”, particularly with reference to his study of the Trayvon Martin case, as a framework through which to pursue a close reading of Angie Thomas’s 2017 young adult novel The Hate U Give and its recent film adaptation. The narrative of The Hate U Give grapples with the wrongful murder of an African-American youth at the hands of a white police officer. It portrays the responses of a group of privileged white students to this murder, highlighting the tensions that arise in defining the white racist in contrast to the white ally. Using these tensions as my point of departure, I will use my analysis of the novel and film as a starting point through which to begin interrogating how the role of the “implicated subject” as ally can be interpreted within other historical and contemporary contexts, South Africa being a particular case in point.

Bio

Adam Levin has recently joined the African Centre for the Study of the United States as a postdoctoral fellow. His research focuses on the complexities of transnational memory, Western trauma theory and postcolonial theory, and testimony, covering histories that range from the Holocaust, to apartheid and now African-American history before the Civil Rights Movement. His most recent publication is “Recreating the Holocaust: YA Dystopia and the Young Jewish Reader,” published in the essay anthology Space and Place in the Hunger Games: New Readings of the Novels (McFarland, 2014).
John Masterson

“Because something is happening here/ But you don’t know what it is/ Do you, Mister Jones?”: Politics of Populism and Poetics of Protest in Ali Smith’s Recent Writing

Abstract

Given the UK’s current maelstrom, many are revisiting claims made in the run-up to the 2016 referendum. Promises of returning glories to our once ‘great’ island have largely been debunked. In the midst of Britain’s current meltdown, Ali Smith’s writing continues to offer a beacon of resistant hope. In this paper, I consider the impact of the first three instalments of her seasonal Brexit quartet – Autumn (2017), Winter (2017) and Spring (2019), as well as her contribution to and advocacy of the Refugee Tales project. As many now admit, the 2016 referendum morphed into an oftentimes toxic debate about national sovereignty, with some in the most economically-deprived areas of the country voting ‘leave’ in populist protest against a perceived tsunami of immigration. Thinking about cultural production through the lens of activism, I examine Smith’s contribution to Refugee Tales, a project with the specific aim of ending the indefinite detention of asylum seekers. By recasting Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales in the context of the so-called migrant and refugee crisis, Smith and her fellow contributors contest the populist discourse that has engulfed discussion of these omni-prescient topics. Using Chantal Mouffe’s notion of a left populism, I consider how initiatives such as Refugee Tales might suggest counter-hegemonic strategies during and after Brexit. This sets the stage for an exploration of her (to-date) fictional trilogy, Autumn, Winter and Spring. All three novels see Smith extending the kinds of formal innovations that have characterised her work, from The Accidental (2005) through Girl Meets Boy (2007) and on to Artful (2012). Yet it is the manner in which her experiments with aesthetic estrangement capture our turbulent zeitgeist that is most arresting. While she is not a lone literary voice at this tipping-point time, Smith is one of our most sensitive and incisive. By mapping the impact of her creative contributions over the last few years, this paper will make the case for the singularity of her fictional renderings of a populism which, according to Thomas Friedman (April 2019), forces a country hell bent on suicide to confront the question of how best to kill itself.

Bio

John Masterson is a Lecturer in World Literatures in English at the University of Sussex. His research interests are Transnational African and American writing, representations of the 'migrant and refugee crisis' and Black Lives Matter. His articles have been featured in Research in African Literatures, American Literary History and The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, amongst others. His published work also includes the monograph The Disorder of Things: A Foucauldian Approach to the Work of Nuruddin Farah (Wits University Press, 2013). He is currently working on another monograph entitled Singular Stories, Shared Destinies: Re-Routing African and American Literature in the Obama Era.
Wamuwi Mbao

‘The Liquid University’

Abstract

Recent confrontations across institutions of higher learning in South Africa have brought into sharp focus that universities, though they may market themselves as spaces of critical citizenship, are not satisfying the desires of a large section of the students who occupy them. The outbreaks of forms of critique that are untidy and discomforting—students disrupting classes, occupying the built fabric of the university, or staging spectacular demonstrations that are untidy—have signaled to the possibility that the economy of knowledge-exchange symbolised by the university is exclusionary for these students. The psychic cost of these disruptions has yet to truly be measured. But what has become apparent is that we have entered a transitional after-moment, where (to quote Njabulo Ndebele) “the search is no longer for ultimate solutions, but for convenient adjustments.” Indeed, as the surging, corrosive waters of ‘Fallism’ ebb from the university, it becomes necessary to rethink the ways forms of violence enacted by the universities to defend their solidity have demonstrated the limitations of their current form. This paper is impelled by the notion that there is no single ‘university’ approached by both students and the network of employees who orchestrate its functions. It asks what other potentials might be realised if we think of the university as a liquid space, rather than a rigidly unyielding one.

Bio

Wamuwi Mbao is an English Lecturer at Stellenbosch University. His research interests are in South African post-apartheid literature, literature and trauma and literary aporetics. His work has been featured in the journals Safundi, Current Writing and English in Africa. His short story “The Bath” has been published in various collections including Queer Africa (MáThoko’s Books, 2013) and Recognition: An Anthology of South African Short Stories (Wits University Press, 2017) and has been included in Twenty in 20, a collection of the twenty most significant short stories post-1994 (Times Media Books, 2014).

Dilip Menon

‘Authoritarian Populism and Parliamentary Democracy in India’

Abstract

Contemporary populism is usually located in a crisis of parliamentary democracy in which the question of popular sovereignty begins to trump the routines of popular representation. I shall argue here that the particular form of authoritarian populism that India is witnessing under the present Hindu nationalist regime arises from the very form of parliamentary democracy in postcolonial India. This crisis assumes a particular dimension in former colonies like India, where nationalist mobilisation was premised not only on the involvement of the people but also on an exercise of discipline over them. Populism creates its own dynamic that exceeds the logic of parliamentary democracy and the idea of representation and presents popular sovereignty in the form of direct action by the people. There is a dialectic between the moral high ground of the authoritarian leader (who stands within yet above the institutions of democracy) and the vigilantism of the people. There is a fundamental break here from the inheritance of Gandhian nationalism and the postcolonial politics of the Nehru dynasty. Neither of the new authoritarian
populist regimes seeks to control the masses that act in their name. Their legitimacy is premised on the assumption that they have enabled the expression of the popular will. But there is an important continuity as well. Nationalist and postcolonial politics preferred charisma over routine; and populism over institutional forms of democracy. Authoritarian populism may, therefore, be seen as the form of parliamentary politics in our part of the world.

Bio

Dilip M Menon is the Mellon Chair of Indian Studies and the Director of the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa at the University of Witwatersrand. Currently, he is working on issues of cultural and intellectual history and is engaged in a project on the writing of history in India between 1850 and 1960. Apart from this he has been writing and teaching on issues of colonialism, modernity and migration in the Global South.

Sarah Nuttall

‘Populism, Fascism and Forms of Looking’

Abstract

When is it, we might ask, that what we identify as populism slips into forms of fascism? While some theorists insist that misnaming populism as neo-fascism enables a certain exiting of politics as such on the neo-liberal left, many others are writing with renewed and rising rigour about fascism’s contemporary face. In an interesting essay called ‘Notes on Late Fascism’, Alberto Toscana writes that he is less interested in adjudicating the question ‘Is this fascism?’ than in discerning some of the effects of projecting theories of fascism onto the present, perhaps learning something from their refraction. How can we think of acts of projection—acts that cause something to jut out or protrude—as modes of reading for the future, in darkening times? What kinds of heuristic devices operate in emerging terrains of thought about contemporary populisms and their future forms? I consider several of these heuristic devices and what they might yield for cultural politics in an era of proliferating populisms and proto-fascisms.

Bio

Sarah Nuttall is Professor of Literature and Director of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER) at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. For many years she taught the Fall semester in the English and African and African American Studies Departments at Yale and Duke Universities. She is the author of Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Postapartheid (Wits University Press, 2009), editor of Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics (Duke University Press, 2007), and co-editor of many books including Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa (Oxford University Press, 1998) with Carli Coetzee, Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies (Oxford University Press, 2001) with Cheryl Ann Michael, Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis (Duke University Press, 2008) with Achille Mbembe, and Loadshedding: Writing On and Over the Edge of South Africa (Jonathan Ball Publishing, 2009) with Liz McGregor. Recent essays include Mandela’s Mortality; Secrecy’s Softwares; Surface, Depth and the Autobiographical Act; The Redistributed University; and The Earth as a Prison? She has given more than thirty keynote addresses around the world, and published more than sixty journal articles and book chapters. Her work is widely cited across many disciplines. For five years she has directed WiSER, the largest and most established Humanities Institute across the
Global South. In 2016 she was an Oppenheimer Fellow at the DuBois Institute at Harvard University.

Donald Pease

‘Trump’s Anti-Globalist Globalisation: A New Era of Illiberal US Hegemony?’

Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that the two key slogans of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign—"America First" and “Make America Great Again”—are not declarations of American isolationism or indications that the Trump administration intends to alter the United States posture of global dominance—but the exact opposite. These statements express the core aspiration of President Trump’s foreign policy: to exercise global hegemony but without appealing to liberal norms and institutions—NATO, the United Nations, the World Bank, multilateral trade agreements, soft power, the exporting of US democracy—to legitimate US superimperialism. I will also show how Trump’s populist movement re-directs the administration’s hostility to international liberal institutions and norms in order to target the rights of immigrants and minority groups within the domestic sphere and to discredit as well the liberal institutions—the free press, the courts, regulatory agencies—that secure and safeguard these rights. The overall purpose of the Trump administration’s two-tiered strategy is to de-couple US hegemony from the liberal norms and institutions that legitimate US global dominance nationally and internationally, and to inaugurate what the MIT political theorist Barry Posen has called an era of “illiberal hegemony.”

Bio

Donald Pease is an authority on 19th- and 20th century American literature and literary theory and Founder/Director of the Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth College. He has written numerous books, including most recently Theodor Geisel: A Portrait of the Man Who Became Dr. Seuss (Oxford University Press, 2010), and over 100 articles on figures in American and British literature. He is the editor of The New Americanist series, which has transformed the field of American studies.

Aretha Phiri

“‘I used to always feel safe among Black people. I did. I don’t any more”: Reading Cultural Populism and the Politics of Redress’

Abstract

In a 1985 interview, Toni Morrison expressed her anxiety at a growing culture of individualism within black America, the effect of conservative neoliberal politics: “I used to always feel safe among Black people. I did. I don’t anymore, just because they are Black.” Her unease reveals the complexities that today attend identitarian modes of solidarity. The persistent institutional violence and disenfranchisement experienced by black Americans initiated global protest movements and in 2014 gained traction under South African higher education’s continued decolonising transformation agenda. This not only highlighted the transatlantic “terrain of a racialized global modernity” (Sides 2017); it registered, in both instances, the (violent) limitations of (explicitly) racialised populist politics.
Taking into consideration the geopolitical parallels and discontinuities between (black) American and (black) South African historical and contemporary liberatory politics, this paper will offer a “relational and interactive” reading of both countries that deliberates the “constitutive condition” of racialised populist discourses and practices (Goldberg 2009). Interpreted alongside a series of personal anecdotes and interviews, a comparative, transnational and transcultural reading in the paper of Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* (1998) interrogates the complex, humanising potential of narrative(s) to problematise the nationalist dictates of populism. Finally, it probes the literary Humanities’ capacity to provoke and stimulate spaces of institutional reform and redress.

**Bio**

Aretha Phiri is a senior lecturer in the Department of Literary Studies in English (DLSE) at Rhodes University and a Research Fellow at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) in South Africa. Her research examines the intersectional interactions of race, ethnicity, culture, gender and sexualities in comparative, transnational and transatlantic considerations of identity and subjectivity, with a focus on (African-) American and (contemporary) African literature. She has published in various accredited journals including *English Studies in Africa, Cultural Studies, European Journal of English Studies* and the *Journal of American Studies*. She is the editor of a forthcoming (Winter 2019) volume, *Re-reading the Canon: African Literary and Philosophical Possibilities* published by Rowan and Littlefield.

**Robyn Pierce**

‘Authoritarian Populism and the Republic of Heaven in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* and *La Belle Sauvage*’

**Abstract**

The chief antagonist of Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series (1995; 1997; 2000) is the Magisterium, a powerful multinational religious organisation reminiscent of the Roman Catholic Church. In the recently published *La Belle Sauvage* (2017), the first novel of the new *Book of Dust* trilogy that expands upon the original series, Pullman further explores the authoritarian populist tactics utilised by the various branches of the Magisterium to assert its authority and to exert a commanding influence over state politics. Set up in opposition to the Magisterium is the republic of heaven, which invokes the underlying principles of Milton’s republicanism and seeks to establish a democratic and egalitarian society. This paper will examine Pullman’s representation of authoritarian populism in the form of the Magisterium, as well as the democratic vision of the republic of heaven. It will show that in drawing on Milton’s republicanism, Pullman is less concerned with a specific mode of government than with the underlying principles of republicanism that seek to enable the shared participation of the members of a society in its governance and which serve as a means to circumvent the potential for tyranny that accompanies the concentration of power. In invoking Milton, however, Pullman fails to account for the tension in Milton’s politics between his support for a free and equal polity and his elitist stance towards governance founded upon a belief in humanity’s inherent fallibility. Unlike Milton, whose view of democracy is informed by a belief in Biblical ‘truth’, Pullman conceives of democracy as a system that underpins pluralism and facilitates the dynamic exchange of a socio-political collective. His representation of the Magisterium and the republic of heaven are directly concerned with the dangers posed by hegemonic ideology, as well as the oppressive forms that it can take.
Bio

Robyn Pierce is a South African academic currently studying towards her PhD in English Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand. She participated in the Crisis and Beyond: Imaginaries, Narratives, Anticipations colloquium held at Uppsala University in 2017, and has presented papers based upon her Masters research on the poetry of William Blake at the Midrand Graduate Institute Research Indaba and the Wits English seminar series. Her doctoral research expands upon her interest in British Romanticism by examining the ways in which Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials series participates in a Romantic tradition of mythmaking that seeks to revisit and revise John Milton’s Paradise Lost.

Arthur Rose

‘On Asbestos and Populism: A Covert Intersection’

Abstract

In June 2017, a Russian asbestos firm posted photos of asbestos wrapped in plastic marked with the image of Donald Trump. Indeed, Trump has been outspoken in his admiration for asbestos. He has condemned anti-asbestos legislation as a conspiracy between the mob and legislators (1997), testified that it was “the greatest fireproofing material ever made” (2005), and blamed the collapse of the Twin Towers on its removal (2012). Now, Trump’s disquisitions on asbestos and his rise as the Anglophone populist sine qua non of the contemporary moment seem wholly coincidental, even if his asbestos musings—relying upon a combination of conspiracy theory, nostalgia, and government-endorsed insecurity—track disquietingly upon the themes that won him the US presidency. But the asbestos industry has previously been associated with accounts of North American populism. Pierre Trudeau’s history of the 1949 Asbestos miners’ strike, La grève de l’amiante (The Asbestos Strike) (1956), located in the strike the origin of modern Quebec: “a violent announcement that a new era had begun.” And while Trudeau’s own populism ran counter to the Quebecois nationalism that was increasingly associated with the asbestos industry, La grève undoubtedly played an instrumental role in developing Quebecois identity. By attending to a covert intersection between asbestos and populism, via reflections on celebrity, nationalism and the Canadian asbestos industry embedded in David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest (1996) and Cory Doctorow’s Walkaway (2017), this paper offers an example of the role resource economies can play in developing a political economy of populism.

Bio

Arthur Rose is a Vice-Chancellor’s Fellow in English at Bristol University, where he is completing a project titled “Asbestos: A Matter of Time”. His publications include Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee (Bloomsbury, 2017), Theories of History: History Read Across the Humanities (Bloomsbury, 2019) with Michael J. Kelly, and Reading Breath in Literature (Palgrave, 2019) with S. Heine, N. Tsentourou, C. Saunders and P. Garratt.
Yannik Thiem

‘US Populism and the Humanities as Queer Martial Arts’

Abstract

After years of widespread political fatigue and the relatively unquestioned reign of technocratic, neoliberal capitalist governing parties, the current populist trends in the US are—if nothing else—symptomatic of and also tapping into a vital and deep conglomerate of political affects and energies. The various flavours of these populisms share a refusal of the status quo, being directed against governing elites, and mobilise collectivist and at times egalitarian potentials. At the same time, the neoliberalisation of higher education has also put the traditional Humanities at US universities increasingly under pressure. The overarching objective of this paper is to approach the surging populism and the role of the Humanities as practices of aesthetics shaping our political and existential sensibilities, as well as the material organisation of our communities and institutions.

In this paper, I will examine the tie between aesthetics, material organisation, and a distinction between authoritarian and egalitarian forms of populism and draw on feminist and queer colour work to explore how we might consider the Humanities as laboratories and martial arts for the embodied and visceral education of our sensibilities and capacities for community and institution building. Instead of centring the question “What research do we need to produce given the current contexts?” for the US Humanities in the age of populism, we might then foreground questions such as “What do we need to learn together? What practices best facilitate such learning sustainably and equitably? What are the most significant barriers to endeavours of collective learning?”

Bio

Thiem specialises in queer and feminist theory, religion and politics, and critical theory. Thiem is the author of Unbecoming Subjects: Judith Butler, Moral Philosophy, and Critical Responsibility (Fordham University Press, 2008). A second book, Ripples of Redemptive Time: The Ethics and Politics of Temporality in Hermann Cohen and Walter Benjamin is under contract with Fordham University Press. Currently, Thiem is working on a new project entitled Queer Nuisances: Race, Religion, Sex and Other Monsters drawing on queer theory, transfeminism, religious studies, critical race theory, as well as European early modern philosophy. Most of Thiem’s work to date was published under Annika Thiem, who remains Yannik’s official double as far as the government of their country of origin, Germany, is concerned.

Martin Thunert

‘(Dis)Trust of Experts and Contemporary Populism: the US in Comparative Perspective’

Abstract

If author Tom Nichols (The Death of Expertise) is to be believed, attacks on experts are part of the populist playbook in the US, the UK and elsewhere. But that is only part of the story. When populists like Trump dismiss experts as aloof elitists without common sense, they are exploiting the erosion of trust in prestigious institutions, which has also weakened the position of bearers of established knowledge. Thus, the paper will explore if and why experts really have been losing the trust of some of their audience within policy-making circles as well as the wider public, and if so, what can be done about it. The paper will demonstrate that the authority of expertise and
trust in experts is not necessarily waning, but shifting, because the knowledge sources that both policy makers as well as the media are tapping are changing and different types of experts are competing for attention.

**Bio**

Martin Thunert is an Associate Professor at the Heidelberg Centre for American Studies (HCA) at Heidelberg University, Germany. His research interests are North American political studies—especially the US presidency, think tanks, interest groups and policy advisory organisations. Since 2007 Thunert has been a research coordinator for Canada, Chile, Mexico and the US in the Bertelsmann Foundation project Sustainable Governance Indicators. He has just completed a research project entitled *Patterns of Economic Policy Advice in Germany and the United States: Organizational Models, Cultural Influences, and Advisory Discourses, with a Particular Emphasis on the World of Work.*

**Chris Thurman**

‘*Burying Caesar … or Praising Him? Shakespeare and the Populist Right in the United States*’

**Abstract**

“ET TU, BANNON?” shouted the front page of the *New York Post* on the 4th of January 2018, after comments critical of Donald Trump made by former White House Chief Strategist (and Trump electoral campaign advisor) Stephen Bannon were revealed in Michael Wolff’s book *Fire and Fury* (2018). This was not the first time that New Yorkers were presented with the comparison between the US President and Julius Caesar: the previous summer, the annual Shakespeare production in Central Park had invoked the wrath of Trump’s supporters. Yet the president’s camp has itself indulged in analogies with Shakespeare’s Caesar; when former NYC mayor Rudolph Giuliani took on the role of Trump’s lawyer, he depicted Michael Cohen as a Brutus for testifying against his former boss. That Giuliani made a further comparison between Cohen and Iago, and thus Trump and Othello, should be all the warning one needs against the use of Shakespearean paradigms to try and interpret contemporary American politics. These are, however, three among many examples of attempts to identify Shakespearean precursors to Trump—ranging from Macbeth to Richard III and King Lear—in what has become a veritable sub-genre in media coverage of his presidency. Most of these venture a critique of the president-as-demagogue. Yet Shakespeare has also been recruited by a figure like Bannon (whose Shakespearean enthusiasm is eccentric, but certainly not innocuous) into the ambit of white supremacist populism. Teased out, this narrative offers a cautionary tale for scholars in the Humanities more broadly.

**Bio**

Chris Thurman is Associate Professor and Head of the English Department at the University of the Witwatersrand. He is also a columnist for *Business Day*. His most recent book is *Still at Large: Dispatches from South Africa’s Frontiers of Politics and Art* (Unisa Press, 2017). Thurman is the editor of *South African Essays on ‘Universal’ Shakespeare* (Routledge, 2014) and *Sport versus Art: A South
African Contest (Wits University Press, 2010). His other books are the monograph Guy Butler: Reassessing a South African Literary Life (University Of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010); Text Bites, an anthology for high schools (Oxford University Press, 2009); and At Large: Reviewing the Arts in South Africa (Common Ground Publishing, 2012). Thurman has edited the journal Shakespeare in Southern Africa since 2009 and he is President of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa. His research and teaching interests include South African literature and Shakespearean performance, adaptation and translation. His work is supported by the National Research Foundation (South Africa) and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Germany).

Michael Titlestad

Screening of Everything Must Fall

Bio

Michael Titlestad teaches in the Department of English at the University of the Witwatersrand. He edits the journal English Studies in Africa and also writes stuff.

Simon van Schalkwyk

‘Americanisation Movements and their Poetic Dissidents’

Abstract

This paper considers the populist dimensions of Americanisation Movements and their influences upon early to mid-twentieth century modernist American poetry. Beginning with Roosevelt’s 1917 “The Children of the Crucible” speech, and linking this to America’s longstanding “melting-pot vs multiculturalism” debate, it reads populism as the central preoccupation of American poets as diverse as T.S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and William Carlos Williams. By re-reading well-known American modernist poets in this way, the paper discloses the populist impulse generative to both Americanisation Movements and, more importantly, the aesthetic assumptions upon which early- to mid-twentieth century modernist poetics were premised.

Bio

Simon van Schalkwyk is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He also serves as the Academic Editor for the Johannesburg Review of Books. His research focuses on American and World literature with an emphasis on poetry, travel and transnational modernism.
Phyllis van Slyck

‘Contact Zones: Our Politics and our Classrooms’

Abstract

Teaching in a large, urban, public university in the United States offers a rich context for examining ideas about current manifestations of populism. Many of our students are immigrants; some are undocumented; many are the first generation in their families to attend college: they are “the people.” In 1991, Mary Louise Pratt introduced the term, “contact zones” to define “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” Today, in our politics, and sometimes in our classrooms, “contact zones” have given way to conflict zones. The current discourse has its roots in a long and painful history of white ethno-nationalism. We in the Humanities can provide students with critical tools to confront this, tools that support the values of civic democracy. In my courses, students consider the social history of issues that dominate the news cycle. We look at contemporary immigrant experiences, for example, what propels migration, its sources, and its consequences. We also explore some of the more oblique histories of populism. The American eugenics movement, fueled by early progressivism, offers striking parallels to Trump’s agenda. Its proponents saw economic and social problems as remediable, not through education or social services but through “weeding out” the “unfit.” Finally, students have the opportunity to enhance their understanding of others in cross-campus dialogues, through initiatives such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). Through our teaching, we can revive populism in its original sense—shaping opportunities for genuine, democratic discourse across difference.

Bio

Phyllis van Slyck is an English professor at LaGuardia Community College where she teaches writing and literature courses. She has published a number of psychoanalytic readings of Henry James’s novels and is also interested in postcolonial literature, gender issues, and texts that elucidate the social and cultural construction of identity. Her most recent publications are “The Transmission of Memory in James and Proust” and “Addressing Extremism Through Literature: An Online Cross-Cultural Conversation on Mahi Binebine’s Horses of God” (forthcoming). Her current project (under review) is entitled "The Provocative Strangeness of Camus's L'Etranger and Coetzee's Disgrace."

Karl van Wyk


Abstract

South African academic and historian Arthur Keppel-Jones’ wrote When Smuts Goes as a history of a time (1952 to 2010) when the country was consumed by fascist Afrikaner nationalism, a political project whose sustained success hinged upon popular beliefs in white supremacy. Keppel-Jones’ book was published in 1947; apartheid began in 1948. This paper, briefly, considers previous scholarship on Keppel-Jones’ work (such as its depictions of race, particularly its competing popular definitions of whiteness), before beginning an analysis on the text’s temporal forms. The work has also been discussed as a dystopic text, and I use this to introduce my primary concerns: the playful temporal forms apparent in the narrative’s telling, where this
future is told as if a historical account. Derek Hook’s understanding of apartheid time is relied upon throughout, where the paper argues that the text’s multiple temporal expressions may be explained by, and perhaps even expand upon, our understanding of the logic of apartheid temporality. Finally, I briefly draw upon the shortcomings of using a theory of psychoanalytical temporality that looks back (Hook’s formulation of the theory, specifically) to read a work that looks forward.

Bio

Karl van Wyk is a Lecturer in English and Critical Thinking in the Academic Development Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. His research focuses on alternative histories and its temporal and narrative consequences. From his doctoral research, completed in 2017, he has produced a journal article titled “Catastrophism and Time in Martin Amis’s Time’s Arrow” which was published in English Studies in Africa.

Donald Wehrs

‘Global Populism, Southern American Populism of the 1890s, and the Vexing Case of Thomas E. Watson’

Abstract

Contemporary global populism paradoxically combines systemic critiques of institutionalised power inequities enriching and privileging sociocultural elites with a politics of resentment that easily slides into nativist, implicitly fascistic authoritarianism. Both politics of resentment and systemic critique, however, have deep prehistories. Resentment of overbearing “alpha males” in both great apes and human small-scale foraging communities makes them targets of often lethal attacks. Traditional hierarchical polities associate legitimate power differentials with some measure of reciprocity, whereas tyranny is identified with predatory rather than protective and equitable elite behavior. Systemic critique emerges when, as in populist discourse, customary and institutionalised social life appears not simply to be infested by bad actors but also to be “rigged” so as to ensure the enrichment of the elite and the disempowerment of non-elites. In the ancient world, enslavement through pawn debt came to epitomise systemic exploitation impervious to reform. Only utopian alternatives posited by otherworldly religions and philosophies seem to offer hope and to be untainted.

Sharecropping in the post-Civil War American South produced, for both white and black small farmers, its own form of pawn indebtedness, to the benefit of urban, corporate, and outside (“Eastern”) interests. These circumstances gave rise to a volatile mix of systemic critique and resentment politics, vividly illustrated in the career of Thomas E. Watson, a prominent Georgia politician, whose populism moved from a vision of racially inclusive class solidarity to one of virulent racist nativism. In contemplating whether and how the Humanities might work to disentangle justified revolt from reactionary resentments, so knotted together in Watson’s politics and influence, it may be helpful to consider how Faulkner’s fiction addresses notions of Southern identity shaped by Watson’s populism, preserving systemic critique but working against resentment’s toxicity.
Bio

Donald R. Wehrs is the Hargis Professor of English Literature at Auburn University, Alabama. He is editor or co-editor of four collections, most recently *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism* (Palgrave, 2017), author of three books on twentieth-century African fiction, and has published essays on Shakespeare, eighteenth-century British fiction, literary theory, and medieval romance. A senior editor of *The Scriblerian*, his research interests include neurocognitive and ethical literary theory, comparative literature, transnational studies, genre and cultural history.

Merle Williams

‘Populism, Privilege and Democracy in Henry James’s *The Bostonians*: Encounters with Community’

Abstract

According to Henry James’s own record, *The Bostonians* (1886) is a novel preoccupied with the burning question of the status of women in North American society during the late nineteenth century. The movement for feminist reform is shown initially to aspire to popular appeal, ultimately resorting to populist strategies with the support of an unscrupulous press. Juxtaposed to these radical endeavours are various strata of privilege: Bostonian culture, the prerogatives of established wealth and the lost plantation lifestyle of the South. Yet James’s capacious text, with its vivid characterisation and uneasy play with shifting literary genres, teases out these prevailing tensions to explore the current dilemmas and possible futures of democracy in the United States. As his three principal figures find themselves torn between their competing political ideologies and complicated personal needs, James correspondingly satirises the stridently popular, while subversively mocking the complacently cultured. With the parodic disintegration of notions of viable small-scale Gemeinschaft (or cohesive community), the novel unfolds the disturbingly inchoate diversity of *Gesellschaft* (or the indeterminate fluidity of the polity in the wake of the Civil War). This society in search of a form bears a close resemblance to Jean-Luc Nancy’s description of the loose interimplication of discrete singularities within a plurality of ‘interruption, fragmentation, suspension’ in *The Inoperative* – more literally, the ‘unworking’ – *Community* (1986). Yet the novel registers a supplementary perspective that may best be understood in relation to Roberto Esposito’s view of *communitas*. If the *munus* functions as an exposure to otherness and the salutary expropriations of difference, then this seemingly negative conception also provides the opening for multiple subject positions, and hence for the democratic responsiveness that may counterbalance growing populist insistence. If James’s text resists neat resolutions, its critical openness promotes the challenging engagement of a variety of committed, yet idiosyncratically flawed, voices.

Bio

Merle Williams is a Personal Professor of English at the University of the Witwatersrand and a founding research associate of the African Centre for the Study of the United States. She is author of *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel: Being and Seeing* (Cambridge University Press, reprinted 2009), and is completing an edition of *The Awkward Age* for CUP’s *Complete Fiction of Henry James*. An edited volume, *Hospitalities: Transitions and Transgressions, North and South* (Routledge), is forthcoming in 2020. Williams has published various articles and book chapters on the relations between literature and philosophy, trauma theory, Romantic poetry and
Modernist fiction, with an invited collection of existing and new essays on Henry James currently in preparation for OpenBooks. She has served as deputy editor-in-chief of the *English Academy Review of Southern Africa* and is an associate editor of the *Journal of Literary Studies*. She was recently a DAAD-BMBF research fellow at the University of Tübingen, Germany.
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With best wishes
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(ACSUS and the School of Literature, Language and Media, University of the Witwatersrand)
Cultures of Populism: Institutions and Hegemonic Practices’ investigates whether the emergence of what we might understand as a global populism demands a reconsideration of the limits of institutional forms of democracy and its cultures. More specifically, it investigates the role of the Humanities as a set of institutional practices at once representing a resource for the dissemination and production of that ‘elite’ knowledge deemed foundational to democratic society, yet equally engaging in the critical contemplation of elite, specialized or expert discourses of authority and power. Can the Humanities develop a language that is part of the solution rather than contributing to the problem?

Our colloquium also asks whether populism has grown out of resistance to the perceived power and self-interest of elites and the despair of the effectively disenfranchised, as Ivan Krastev (2011) suggests. If so, have democracy and its institutions failed or at least exhausted their socio-political possibilities and strategies for mitigation? Or is populism a form of politics turning back to those democratic values that are considered to have infused past social formations? If populism is frequently associated with the ‘return of the right’, how new is the rhetoric of the right? Or is it possible to recuperate an alternative history of left-wing populism and protest movements? To what extent does populism seek, in the contemporary situation, to appropriate the language and rhetoric of the left? And what are the interests animating this cultural swing towards nationalism and isolationism in multiple locations? How and why has violence, whether physical or structural, come to be associated with the spread of populism? Can such tendencies be contained or redressed?

In terms of the global reach of this phenomenon, we plan to investigate the various geographies associated with a long history of populism. How does populism play out in the particular spaces in which our project is rooted? How have cultural responses to populism expressed themselves, whether in the past or under current circumstances? What are the deeper or more oblique histories of populism, both across the globe and as a globalising force? How might populism anchor (or resist) attempts to speak about (or practise) transnational forms of solidarity or conflict, resilience or resistance?

Our contention is that the Humanities have a vast, untapped capacity for understanding and critiquing the complexities of those pressing and entangled issues, debates and discourses which underpin a perceived explosion of populist sentiment, marked by forms of affect mistrustful of, and generally inimical to, institutional forms of expertise, authority and power. Yet it is vital to question whether the Humanities have themselves fallen short of applying their expertise in appropriate and useful ways, or indeed whether academic institutions exercise any effective power at all. As such, ‘Cultures of Populism’ considers the continuities and discontinuities between universities and other state and social institutions. Are these institutions becoming eroded? Have they instead been empowered? What difference do such institutions make to culture? How do they produce, consolidate and/or contest existing technologies of power?

The virtue of our network is its embeddedness in a series of peculiarly pertinent, ‘exceptional’ zones through which one may analyse cultural responses to the many manifestations of what we are calling global populism. A key focus of the project falls on the productive tensions between the local and specific in their relations to the global and conceptual. For this reason, our collaboration brings into contact existing affiliations between academics from the mid-western United States, the south of Brexit Britain, metropolitan South Africa, late social-democratic Sweden and urban Australia, while welcoming prospective contributions from other regions of the globe. Given our affiliation with the African Centre for the Study of the United States,
however, we would particularly appreciate papers that engage substantially with the United States, Africa and/or their multiple relationships. This interdisciplinary colloquium considers the ways in which these and associated issues can be explored across different genres, texts, media and critical approaches. Thirty-minute papers are invited to address literary, art-historical, philosophical, political and sociological representations of populism involving, but by no means restricted to, the following areas: Exceptionalism and exceptional spaces / Rhetoric and event / Neoliberalism / Institutions / Decolonisation / Financialisation / Symptom and somatics / Populist affects and their effects / Violence linked to populism / Deep histories and genealogies / Local and global contexts / The Humanities / The global university / Anti-establishment theories or activity / The practically disenfranchised – poverty and political exclusion / Democracy and its others / Protest movements and popular sovereignty / Cultural (mis)appropriations /

**African Centre for the Study of the United States**

**What is the African Centre for the Study of the United States?**

The African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) is a vibrant multi and interdisciplinary research centre based at the University of the Witwatersrand, a global university well-known for its leading research and postgraduate training.

The Centre serves as an intellectual base for the study of the US and Africa. African owned and operated, our researchers offer analysis and stimulate scholarly and public debates about the United States as a nation and a society, and the ways Africa relates to the US. Its goal is to create African-generated knowledge and more nuanced understandings of the US as a nation and society to inform African thinking, actions and interactions, from political relations, through economic and trade relations, science and health, to cultural intersections, interactions and exchanges.

The Centre provides a space for intellectual and cultural exchanges, interactions and partnerships amongst those interested in exploring and sharing knowledge and perspectives on the multi-faceted relations and interactions between African countries and the US. It also serves as a base for visiting scholars researching and teaching in relevant areas.

ACSUS is currently engaged in two critical areas: Foreign Policy and Geopolitics, and Communications, Media, Culture and Society, and will expand into programmes such as Politics and Society, Public Health, Economy, Commerce and Society, Technology and Society, Science and Society, Higher Education, Climate Change and Climate Justice, Futures of the Youth, Rule of Law and Judicial Independence.

The Centre fundraises for its programmes from individuals, philanthropic entities, the public and private sectors and research funding organisations in Africa and the US. The Bergman family, the US Embassy in South Africa and the Ford Foundation are some of the early supporters of the Centre.