

Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers Twenty-Sixth Annual Conference October 12-15, 2023 at the University of Houston

Call for Papers

Conference Committee for 2023:

David Mikics, University of Houston
Richard Russell, Baylor University
Mary Jo Salter, Johns Hopkins University
Ernest Suarez, Catholic University

Please note: everybody who participates must be a current member of the ALSCW. We encourage participation by creative writers, scholars, critics, secondary school teachers, and others interested in literature. The 2023 membership rate for new members, graduate students, and retirees is \$52. Renewals are \$113. Membership includes a year's subscription to *Literary Imagination* (Oxford UP) and to *Literary Matters* (our online journal). Subscribing to *Literary Imagination* is the same as joining or renewing your membership in the ALSCW (<https://academic.oup.com/litimag/subscribe>). Visit our website for detailed information (alscw.org).

Proposals of approximately 300 words and a C.V. should be sent as email attachments to David Mikics at <dmikics@gmail.com> and Ernest Suarez at <Suarez@cua.edu> on or before June 1, 2023.

Seminars

1) Echoes of *Harmonium*: 1923-2023

Moderator: Esther Schor, John J. F. Sherrerd '52 University Professor, Princeton University

The centenary of *Harmonium*, Wallace Stevens' remarkable debut volume, is upon us. This seminar attends to echoes of *Harmonium* and/or its music more generally: its "spontaneous cries," "choirs of wind and wet and wing," "droning of the surf," and "odious chords." Scholars, critics, and writers are invited to "quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything," including the volume's silences and obliquities; to broach *diachronic* echoes within the book, of earlier poems, prose or music; or *synchronic* resonance among the poems of the volume. How does *Harmonium* reecho in Stevens's later works? Much of our attention will be on reverberations of *Harmonium* in poems of the century that followed, and in our reading and writing lives. Participants are

invited to explore [“The Harmonium and How it Works”](#) and/or the instrument’s surprising [transit](#) from Western Europe to India. Finally: Is there a global *Harmonium*?

2) Art and Activism in the 956: The Texas Rio Grande Valley in a Multimedia Perspective

Moderator: Roberto Tejada, Hugh Roy and Lille Cranz Cullen Distinguished Professor, University of Houston

Though often neglected in the national imaginary, the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas has long been at the cutting-edge of multimedia art and literary practices. The region’s expressive culture points to the particulars of its past—native lifeways, settler society, U.S imperialist design—as well as to neo-colonial conditions of the present. Today, however, independent multimedia platforms and other challenges in artistic form (poetry, fiction, music, sound, cinema, visual art, and activism) are positioned to shape the future of the 956—the area code that serves as shorthand for the RGV’s distinctive and complex worldview. Topics may include but are not limited to the following:

- 956 in fiction, poetry, and journalism
- migration studies and Chicanx-Latinx expressive forms
- sound studies in the speculative cross-cultural field
- dragtivism at the border wall
- resisting SpaceX Starbase in Boca Chica
- Instagram RGV: art and activism
- South Texas film and performance as archive

3) Mystery and Secrecy: Ancient Origins, Modern Expressions

Moderator: Michelle Zerba, Maggie B. Martin Professor, Louisiana State University

This seminar invites papers on the manifestations, meanings, and purposes of mystery and secrecy. While the language of mystery evolved from ancient Greek religious rites known as *mysteria* and social practices of secrecy related to initiation and vows of silence, uses of the term expanded widely into the fields of literature, philosophy, rhetoric, and medicine. Concepts of mystery have shaped esoteric philosophy, Jewish apocalyptic literature, early Christianity, Renaissance science, Hermeticism, the rise of secret societies such as the Freemasons and the Illuminati, Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, and Theosophy. Today, mystery is deployed to sell everything from romance, exploration in strange places, and the enigmas of the cosmos to books in a best-selling genre and transformational festivals like Burning Man. Papers aimed at explicating the concept of mystery and theoretical approaches to it, or creative reflections on it, are especially welcome.

4) War Movies

Moderator: David Mikics, Moores Distinguished Professor, University of Houston

War movies often imply that the experience they describe has something essential to tell us about human values, cosmic justice or politics. What lessons do we gather from such films? What do they show us, and what do they refuse to depict? How does the filmmaker's art respond to the brutal subject matter? Papers are invited on documentary as well as fiction films. Movies under consideration may focus on combat and military planning or on the wartime experience of refugees, civilian victims and bystanders.

5) Conceiving Liberty and Equality in Antebellum America

Moderator: Dustin Gish, Associate Professor, Honors College, University of Houston

With the immortal words of Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, a national creed came into being: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." This proposition, to which the new nation - once conceived in Liberty - had been dedicated by the Founding generation, remained for decades a vow which could not be fulfilled. In drafting that Declaration, Jefferson himself condemned the American slave trade and, by implication, slavery, but the alliance for independence and the perpetuation of the union necessitated that the offensive stain of slavery continue untouched where it then existed. A scourge of Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and Amendments XIII-XV, eventually scrubbed slavery from our national fabric (though the shadow of that stain still haunts us). In the antebellum period, though facing seemingly insuperable obstacles to the fulfillment of that proposition in reality, our national creed inspired the Literary Imagination of American orators, authors, and poets, who took up the task of vividly conceiving Liberty and Equality for an American audience that could not otherwise stand in the presence of those ideas in practice. This seminar invites both papers and presentations (visual as well as textual) that reveal unexpected examples of and-or novel approaches to conceiving Liberty and Equality in Antebellum America (from Stowe and Dickinson, Poe and Hawthorne, to Thoreau and Emerson, Douglass and Lincoln).

6) Rethinking Cold War Literary Culture

Moderators: Justin Mitchell, Assistant Professor of English, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and Ernest Suarez, David M. O'Connell Professor of English, Catholic University

The collapse of the Soviet Union supposedly led to the end of not only the Cold War but also, as the political philosopher Francis Fukuyama famously declared, history itself. And yet recent events—the Obama and Trump Presidencies, the annexation of Crimea, Russiagate, the expansion of NATO, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine—have prompted some observers to suggest that the Cold War never really ended. To what extent, then, have we been sleepwalking through history?

The question is a momentous one for scholars of U.S. literary studies, which, over the course of the last decade, has seen the development of new and exciting fields, such as "post-45" and "the contemporary," organized around the Cold War and its aftermath. This seminar invites papers

that (re)consider the relationship between U.S. literature and the Cold War in light of twenty-first-century events and/or new research in the field.

We welcome papers on such topics as the institutionalization and legacy of “Cold War modernism” in university creative writing programs; the valences of American literature to public diplomacy; the relationship between literary “schools” (the Beats, Black Mountain Poets, the Black Arts Movement, the New Journalism) or genres (the campus novel, the systems novel, creative nonfiction, jazz poetry) and Cold War politics; how the Cold War shaped the transition between the literary cultures of the Old and New Lefts; and the persistence of Cold War paradigms in contemporary U.S. literature and criticism. We are open to papers on works in any literary genre, including the novel, graphic novel, short story, poetry, drama, and song verse.

7) Shakespeare and Moral Luck

Moderator: Lars Engle, Chapman Professor of English, University of Tulsa

This seminar will discuss Shakespeare's treatment of what Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel have taught us to see as the double problem of moral luck. I call it a double problem because its two aspects reinforce one another: the primary problem being the radically unequal distribution among human beings of conditions that permit or contribute to a morally satisfactory life, the secondary being the future contingencies that, beyond the actor's control, shape the moral meaning of a particular action. We will discuss whether early moderns had something approximating the idea that a satisfactory moral system would make a moral life available to everyone, regardless of social estate or intellectual or temperamental characteristics. Papers are invited on any feature of Shakespeare's plays and poems that rewards attention to moral luck.

8) Seeing Things: Irish Literature and Faith

Moderator: Richard Russell, Professor of English, Baylor University

Irish literature has often been concerned with depictions of faith, yet critics have often been reluctant to chart such engagements outside of their sociological and political resonances. Irish writing, however, has grappled with and imagined worlds and beliefs beyond our ken that animate our daily lives. This seminar will feature papers examining the role of faith in Irish literature throughout history, north and south of the present border.

9) The Forms of Contemporary Poetry

Moderator: David Caplan, Daisy Deane Frensey Chair in English Literature, Southern Methodist University

How do we understand the forms that contemporary poetry takes? How should we?

This call for papers invites a broad range of approaches and interests. Participants might consider particular forms, their development, current uses, and histories. Alternatively, they might examine the work of noteworthy poets or, more broadly, the opportunities that the present

moment offers. By sharing our perspectives and insights, we hope to clarify how contemporary poetry looks different when we pay attention to form.

10) Liberal Learning in the Literature Classroom

Moderators: Claudia MacMillan, Executive Director of The MacMillan Institute, and Taryn Okuma, Director of the Cornerstone Program at The Catholic University of America

Liberal learning is learning for learning's sake. However, the devotee of liberal learning need not learn or teach without a desired end in mind, that is to enhance the personhood of the learner. Do you believe that the literature you teach should not only increase knowledge but should also help you and your students become better human beings, better able to be in community and better able to become full-bodied individuals? If so, join us for a conversation informed by practical applications, a discussion and exchange of the ways in which we teach literature in high schools, community colleges, and universities.

Building on David Bromwich and Ernest Suarez's seminar "General Education and the Idea of a Common Culture" from the 2022 conference at Yale University, we are interested in papers that describe specific pedagogical practices that are oriented towards creating "a common culture," both in the form of assignments and syllabus construction, as well as activities and methods that foster a classroom environment that allows for respectful and productive dissent, dialogue, a more active and committed engagement with the class material, etc. We are also interested in larger programming at the department, school, or university level that also aims to create "a common culture." Central to our discussion is praxis - how is literature being taught in order to encourage students' love of literature and learning, as well as their engagement with the communities in which they live?

11) Essayists Under the Radar

Moderator: David Lazar, Professor of Creative Writing, Columbia College Chicago

Now that talk of a new "golden age of the essay" seems to have faded, the panel will discuss both the state of the contemporary essay and present the work of essayists whose work has seemed to slip through the cracks or been insufficiently valued. As a form whose boundaries have continually escaped clear definition, the essay's status and the work of its practitioners continues to be both elusive and a source of (re)discovery. Proposals are invited on the subjects of: the contemporary essay as well as individual American and international essayists who have been less noticed in the literary canon.

12) Jane Austen

Moderators: Maria DiBattista, Charles Barnwell Straut Class of 1923 Professor of English, Princeton University, and Rebecca Rainof, Research Scholar, Princeton University

Papers welcome on any aspect of Jane Austen's work, reception, contemporary adaptations of her writing, or on teaching Austen at the high school or university level.

13) Chaucer

Moderator: Megan Murton, Associate Professor of English, The Catholic University of America

Chaucer's writings resist the familiar distinction between creative writing and literary criticism, because they are often animated by a critical response to earlier literature: *Troilus and Criseyde*, for instance, is at once a romance narrative and an incisive critical interpretation of prior works such as Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. This intertwining of literary criticism and literary creation also characterizes many later responses to Chaucer's writings, from Henryson and Shakespeare to contemporary poets like Lavinia Greenlaw and Patience Agbabi.

This seminar invites papers that address this long tradition of Chaucerian reinvention and adaptation. In addition to papers on Chaucer's own response to his ancient and medieval sources and on later writers' responses to Chaucer, we welcome contributions from current creative writers who are engaging with Chaucer's works in their own prose and poetry

14) Reading the Bible as Literature

Moderator: Hannibal Hamlin, Professor of English, The Ohio State University

What does it mean to read the Bible as literature? C.S. Lewis stated provocatively that "those who read the Bible as literature do not read the Bible." Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, on the other hand, editors of *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, see the Bible as "a work of great literary force and authority, a work of which it is entirely credible that it should have shaped the minds and lives of intelligent men and women for two millennia and more." Of that familiar notion of the "Bible as Literature," Alter elsewhere writes that it is "needlessly concessive and condescending toward literature in any language." Why do we assume that to read the Bible "as literature" is a peculiar, modern, and secular activity? Jesus scarcely speaks without metaphors, similes and parables, following the earlier practice of other Hebrew prophets. Moses and Miriam, Deborah and David, Mary and Simeon are singers of songs. The Song of Songs, according to Jewish and Christian tradition, is an extended allegory. The narratives of Joseph, Saul, and David are among the most sophisticated in ancient or any literature. Given the recent expansion of literary categories and genres, is there anything in the Bible—genealogies, prayers, laws, prophecies—that cannot be considered and read as literature?

This seminar will explore the reading of the Bible as literature in theory and practice. Can the Bible be both literature and Scripture or does conceiving it as the one preclude the other? Is literary criticism, or are certain critical approaches, incompatible with religious faith? What does a scriptural text have to offer to nonreligious readers? If God is, as John Donne claimed, a metaphorical God, does this mean that his creation (the most performative of verbal acts) and revelation—the two books, of nature and scripture—are also metaphorical?

Papers are invited on particular books, episodes, or passages, on features or topics common to multiple books, or on matters theoretical or methodological.

15) The (Shared) Burden of Southern Identity

Moderator: Charles Richard, Flora Levy/BORSF Professor of English, University of Louisiana--Lafayette

In 1960, historian C. Vann Woodward published a collection of essays entitled *The Burden of Southern History*, contending that the defining element of Southern identity is the peculiar historical experience of this region of the United States, distinguishing it from the rest of the nation. More than four decades later, Charles Reagan Wilson argued for a broader, more interdisciplinary approach with his essay, "The Burden of Southern Culture." This seminar invites presentations, both creative and critical, that examine how the "burdens" of Southern identity are born by the characters that populate Southern literature and other forms of cultural expression. Especially welcome are presentations concerning how these burdens are *shared*, both within and across different communities in the South.

16) The New Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies

Moderator: Robert S. Levine, Distinguished University Professor, University of Maryland

This seminar will take stock of developments in the field of nineteenth-century American literary studies over the past two decades. It has been pre-populated by invitation, but there is room for 1-2 additional panelists. We invite proposals that both address "the new nineteenth-century American literary studies" and are examples of the new. In other words, we are looking for papers that are not simply bibliographic essays.

Plenary Panels (by invitation only):

1) Reading Close and Slow: Arts of Attention in Renaissance Poetry

Moderator: Sarah Beckwith, Katherine Everett Gilbert Distinguished Professor of English, Duke University

2) Faulkner, After

Moderator: Michael Gorra, Mary Augusta Jordan Professor of English, Smith College

3) Auden Fifty Years Later

Moderator: Mary Jo Salter, Professor Emerita, Johns Hopkins University

4) Inventing French Modernism

Moderator: Rosanna Warren, Hanna Holborn Gray Distinguished Service Professor, University of Chicago

Events:

- 1. Poetry Reading**
Ange Mlinko, Professor of English, University of Florida
- 2. Fiction Reading**
Susan Choi, Professor, Writing Seminars, Johns Hopkins University
- 3. *Literary Matters* Reading**
Ryan Wilson, Editor-in-Chief, *Literary Matters*, presiding
- 4. Presentation of Meringoff Writing Awards**
Ryan Wilson, Editor-in-Chief, *Literary Matters*, presiding
- 5. Banquet, October 14th**
Remarks: David Mikics, President, ALSCW

ALSCW Mission Statement:

The Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers seeks to promote excellence in literary criticism and scholarship, and works to ensure that literature thrives in both scholarly and creative environments. We encourage the reading and writing of literature, criticism, and scholarship, as well as wide-ranging discussions among those committed to the reading and study of literary works.