

American Literature Research Seminar TT26 Term Card

Convenors: Nicole King & Antoine Traisnel

Week 1: Thursday, April 30

Freedom, Control, and the Cultures of Circulation Gigwork

Annie J McClanahan, University of California, Irvine

16:45, Downstairs Seminar Room, Rothermere American Institute

“Freedom, Control, and the Cultures of Circulation Gigwork” interrogates the paradoxical way that gigwork has come to be associated both with freedom and slavery, both entrepreneurial independence and dominating control. It explores the history of “independent contractor” status, arguing that informalization has long been perceived as a solution to the problem of mobile workers, from sailors to long-haul truckers. It takes up the link between 21st-century gigwork and the genre of the road narrative, reading novels by Raven Leilani, Priya Guns, and Peter Mendelsund and finding in them a complex and contradictory account of both complicity and solidarity.

Week 3: Thursday, May 14

Futureproof: The Fiction of Climate Survival

Antoine Traisnel, University of Oxford

16:45, Downstairs Seminar Room, Rothermere American Institute

This talk approaches fiction as a contested terrain through which technofuturist climate ventures and speculative literature articulate competing visions of environmental futures in an age of mass extinction. As climate catastrophe and biodiversity loss intensify, science fiction has become, in Kim Stanley Robinson’s phrase, “the realism of our time,” even as counter-extinction initiatives increasingly draw on science-fictional tropes to authorise futures and reorganise present material conditions.

The past two decades have seen a proliferation of conservation initiatives—from frozen zoos to lunar arks to resurrection biology—that wager planetary survival on the reconceptualisation of life as a genetic reserve to be stored and reactivated. Cast as humanity’s “life insurance” against catastrophe, these projects rely on promissory narratives that shape the governance of ecological crisis. They signal the rise of a paradigm I call *futureproofing*, which is quietly displacing sustainability as the dominant environmental logic.

In turn, I read the speculative novels of Octavia Butler, Don DeLillo, Ruth Ozeki, and C. Pam Zhang as offering critical and ethical counterpoints to the abstraction of life—its separation from specific milieus, kinships, and cultures—undertaken by biotech imaginaries in the name of survival. Their literary experiments mobilise fiction as an ecocritical intervention, reaching beyond techno-optimism to imagine other ways of thinking and living amid environmental collapse.

Week 5: Thursday, May 28

Queer Extinctions; or, Learning How to Last

Sarah Ensor, University of Wisconsin-Madison

16:45, Kloppenburg Room, Cohen Quad

This talk asks what contemporary environmental thought's seemingly necessary emphasis on the future has rendered unthinkable, and looks to queer literature for unexpected forms of persistence that emerge "at the last": at the end of life, at the end of a family line, as the last living member of a species, perhaps at the end of the future itself. Defining queerness as a mode of collective life in which these paradigms of lasting—ending and persisting—are constitutively intertwined, I read two periods of queer extinction (the 1890s and the 1980s) for models of care, continuance, and collective action that are predicated on futurelessness. At a moment when our response to environmental and social cataclysm often involves either safeguarding the future (as we think we know it) or, alternatively, speculating and working toward alternate futures, I consider what becomes possible when we take our eyes off that nominal prize, setting our sights elsewhere and directing our energies otherwise.

Week 7: Thursday, June 11

ALRS Book Club: *The Fire Next Time*

13:00 (lunchtime seminar), Downstairs Seminar Room, Rothermere American Institute

For this lunchtime seminar, we invite you to read *The Fire Next Time* (1963) by James Baldwin and come along for a book club-style discussion.