

Institute of Modern Languages Research
Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writing
Symposium

Women's Writing and Science

18 May, 2018

Room 243, Senate House

Abstracts

Benjamin Dalton (King's College London): *"Forms of Freedoms: The Plasticities of Catherine Malabou and Marie Darrieussecq"*

This paper brings the work of the contemporary French philosopher Catherine Malabou into collision with that of the writer Marie Darrieussecq, considering both as thinkers of plasticity. Catherine Malabou is known for her interdisciplinary elucidation of the concept of plasticity across continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience, as well as many other domains. Malabou figures plasticity – the characteristic of being plastic – as a mutability or transformability endemic to all forms of life: an anarchic material property that entails capacity for creation and invention, but also for destruction and explosion. She investigates and uncovers plasticity in many different sites, be it the neuroplasticity of the human brain, the plasticity of the epigenetic gene, or the plasticity that she sees to describe the working of the Hegelian dialectic. Across all of the sites, Malabou's plasticity demonstrates structures are not innate or predetermined, but always open to transformation and to the creation of new forms. Darrieussecq's work, I argue, resonates strongly with Malabou's as an interdisciplinary philosophy of transformation in its own right. Across her literary oeuvre she stages numerous encounters with scientific thought, taking a particular interest in neuroscience and the brain, whilst her famous depiction of a woman's violent metamorphosis into a sow in *Truismes* (1996) thinks mutation between the scientific and the fantastical. Looking primarily at *Truismes* and her most recent novel *Notre vie dans les forêts*, I argue that Darrieussecq, like Malabou, conceives of a plasticity as life's capacity to mutate and to open itself up to freedom. This paper will pay particular attention to how Malabou and Darrieussecq bear witness to the capacities of plastic life, and take up the task of writing the experience of transformation as both an ethical injunction and as a political possibility.

Dr Sonja Stojanovic (University of Notre Dame): *"Bodies in Conflict in Élisabeth Filhol's La Centrale [The Nuclear Power Plant]"*

Through the eyes of Yann, a worker awaiting to know whether he has reached his annual occupational dose limit in an incident, we are thrust into the underworld of nuclear power plants. As one of the men who travel across France hopping from plant to plant, from one seasonal maintenance assignment to the next, Yann is afraid of overexposure, not necessarily for health reasons, but rather because it signifies forced unemployment. In this paper, I will consider how Élisabeth Filhol, in her novel *La Centrale [The Nuclear Power Plant]* (2010), depicts the conflicts centered on the body of precarious workers. Due to their reliance on their bodies' tolerance for radiation exposure for gainful employment, we see how, for these men, their own bodies can at a moment's notice turn into their most treacherous enemy. Analyzing Yann's memories, explanations, and questions as he undergoes evaluation, I will also consider, from a biopolitical perspective, the mechanisms and regulations that allow these bodies to be seen and used as necessary cogs in the nuclear machine, which will ultimately spit them out as waste. Finally, I will show how the plant itself

becomes the central body that needs to be tended to (its veins, its heart), no matter the cost; it is a configuration that posits the plant not as an individual site, but rather as an all-encompassing devouring female body (la centrale) – we move back and forth from Chinon, Le Blayais, Belleville-sur-Loire, Civaux to Chernobyl – that always houses the potential for disaster and catastrophe.

Dr Aifric Campbell & Anita Chandran (Imperial College London): *“Creative Writing and Scientific Identity”* (title tbc)

This joint session explores the experience of teaching and participating in Imperial College’s programme in Creative Writing for STEMM students, focusing on thematic choice and fiction as exploration of identity and social commentary. Aifric Campbell discusses writing women at work in technology and financial engineering based on her novels *On The Floor* (2012) and *Scarlett and Gurl* (forthcoming). Anita Chandran discusses the lack of role models for young women scientists in popular culture and the contribution creative fiction can make in “resurrecting” forgotten figures; in so doing, she draws on extracts from her own short story “Surface Tension”, a creative treatment of the life of Agnes Pockels, a self-taught German chemist who revolutionised the field of physical chemistry.

Dr Jean E Conacher (University of Limerick/CCWW): *“Processes of recovery in Helga Königsdorf’s Respektloser Umgang [Fission]”*

This paper focuses upon the debut novel of the East German mathematician and author, Helga Königsdorf (1938–2014). *Respektloser Umgang* (1986, translated into English as *Fission*, 2000) explores the boundaries of illusion and reality in a series of encounters between the narrator – bearing strong biographical similarities to Königsdorf – and Lise Meitner, the Austrian-Swedish physicist who collaborated with Otto Hahn and others on the discovery of nuclear fission in the 1930s and 1940s. I examine how Königsdorf exploits various processes of recovery in challenging the ‘standard story’ of societal and personal narratives, both to reinstate an important historical figure marginalised by exile and gender, and to raise more fundamental questions, emerging in part from that reinstatement, of individual and collective responsibility and agency.

Dr Emily Jeremiah (Royal Holloway, London): *“Transpositions: Ulrike Draesner’s Aesthetics of Encounter”*

This paper discusses Rosi Braidotti’s notion of ‘transposition’ – ‘an intertextual, cross-boundary or transversal transfer, in the sense of a leap from one code, field or axis into another’ - in the light of German writer Ulrike Draesner’s engagement with scientific discourses and practices in a number of her works. Draesner’s texts consistently explore questions relating to humanity and ethics especially as these intertwine with the issues of family, parenting, and legacy. Drawing on a range of texts including the short story ‘Gina Regina’ and the novel *Mitgift*, the paper asks how literature can animate debates about reproductive ethics and kinship, and vice versa, highlighting the literary text itself as a site of transposition, or creative reproduction.

Prof Karen Leeder (New College, Oxford): *“Twin Spin: the role of science in Ulrike Draesner’s poetry”*

This paper links with that of Emily Jeremiah but will examine the way contemporary science makes itself felt in Ulrike Draesner’s poetry. Draesner is one of a number of contemporary German poets who explores aspects of contemporary science in their work contributing to a renaissance of the poets doctus. She has long been interested in science and bound reflections on it into her work even when ostensibly dealing with other issues. This paper will touch on her interest especially in reproductive technology, recent brain research and epigenetics. Issues addressed would include the role and status of the poeta doctus, the relationship between science and literature for Draesner, and the gendering of such interests. The paper will take some examples of poems and her essays on the subject looking at how such interests make themselves concretely felt in - and change - the form of her poetry.