

SEAC

Société d'Etudes Anglaises Contemporaines
-Society of Contemporary British Studies -

CALL FOR PAPERS

Congrès de la SAES. Université de Rennes 2 - 1 au 3 juin 2023. « Transmission(s) »

Atelier 5 :

Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines (SEAC) / La Nouvelle de langue anglaise

In its etymology, transmission, from the Latin *trans* (beyond) and *mittere* (to send), evokes images of crossing, passage, circulation and communication, which bear echoes in a variety of domains, be it science, technology, biology or social and cultural practices. The prefix *trans-* implies a relation to the other as a message, object or thought circulates from an originator to a recipient, who, in literature and arts, may be a writer and a reader, a playwright and an audience, an artist and a viewer or listener (as in the CD and accompanying book *Transmissions* released by Blackford Hill). Processes of transmission raise questions of legacy, heritage, inheritance and influence which will no doubt be addressed in our workshop. As Walter Benjamin has it, “[e]xperience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn” (*Illuminations* 84). Transmission may be welcome as a way to preserve memories, histories and cultures (passed on from one generation to the next), transfer knowledge and craft (from teacher to pupil, master to apprentice) and hand down valuable objects (within families or communities). But it may also imperil when it involves diseases or viruses (biological or technological, as in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* [2004] in which the main protagonist unwittingly spreads a computer virus).

If the transmission of painful memories and histories down generations guarantees that they are not forgotten, they may also haunt later generations, as emblematised by the concept of postmemory coined by Marianne Hirsch to identify “an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked to cultural or collective trauma” (Hirsch and Kacandes, *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust* 14). The questions Hirsch and other theoreticians of trauma studies and memory studies raise are ones that writers and artists struggle with, for instance “How is trauma transmitted across generations [...]? How is it remembered by those who did not live it or know it in their own bodies?” (Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory* 11) – to which we may add: how can an event that has not been directly experienced be transmitted in a work of fiction or visual art? In *Memory Unbound*, Lucy Bond, Stef Craps and Pieter Vermeulen point out: “as the Holocaust begins to pass out living memory, the question of how memories of survivors of historical traumas are transmitted to, and inherited by, members of later generations has become another area of intense inquiry” (2). In their creative works, writers and artists record the obstacles and hindrances to transmission that emerge when distance with original events becomes incommensurable but also when facts or events are deliberately erased or hidden (by a country, a family or an individual), when communication is made impossible (because of migration and geographical distance, political censorship, technological issues etc...) or when painful experiences prove unspeakable and ineffable. But writers and artists can play an ethical role in transmission by pointing to gaps, silences and broken circuits, and creating new circuits of transmission, for example through what Irene

Kacandes calls “transhistorical-transcultural co-witnessing” when readers or audiences from different societies or living at a later time in history are willing to engage with someone else’s story (Kacandes, “From ‘Never Forgetting’ to “Post-Remembering’ and ‘Co-Witnessing’” 202-203).

Scottish writer Jackie Kay, the conference’s guest of honour, on whose literary production this workshop would welcome contributions, questions the possibility of transmission for adopted children in her collection of poems *The Adoption Papers* (1991) and in *Red Dust Road* (2010), an account of her own search for her biological parents. Conscious of obstacles, writers and artists often imagine modes of transmission which may not be verbal or testimonial but involve performance, images, objects, music or other media. For instance, in Jonathan Coe’s *The Rain Before it Falls* (2007), an elderly woman describes on tape twenty photographs relating to her family’s history for the benefit of a blind girl she has not seen for twenty years. Photographs, material objects and memorabilia may act as what Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer call “points of memory” while foregrounding “the fragmentariness of the vestiges of the past that come down to us” (Hirsch and Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender and Transmission” 141).

In literature and arts, the concept of transmission brings to mind literary and artistic filiations, modes of legacy and intertextual practices, and makes one wonder what and in which forms past models and traditions may transfer into the present, often going through processes of transformations, appropriations and reconfigurations. Notions of (intellectual) transmission are central to many modernist texts, whose indebtedness to previous sets of references and epistemological models, such as aestheticism or Victorian philosophy, has been explored in the past decade. Even radical literary experimentation is thus shown to enter into continuing forms of dialogue with the past, as was suggested in such studies as *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism. Continuities, Revisions, Speculations* (eds. Bénédicte Coste, Catherine Delyfer and Christine Reynier. London: Routledge, 2017) or “Virginia Woolf’s Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy” (Christine Reynier, *Philosophy and Literature* 38.1 (2014): 128-41).

In a much more literal understanding of the term, transmission also calls to mind the importance of radio and sound waves in the works of various modernists who integrated the then-new medium into their texts. One thinks of Virginia Woolf’s “The Leaning Tower” and its references to Hitler’s radiophonic speeches – an aspect of the author’s work that may be developed in the wake of the 2019 conference of the French Woolf society (Société d’Études Woolfiennes), devoted to “Virginia Woolf and the Age of Listening”. Radio waves, and vibrations in general, were central to the modernist world-view (see for instance *Vibratory Modernism*. Eds. Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), as scientific discoveries of the early twentieth century, alongside less rational practices—spiritualism in particular—all relied on an understanding of the world in which transmission was found to be at work on the level of physical, but also mental or spiritual forces.

Contributors may examine what writers mean to share with and transmit to their readers, starting for instance with writers’ forewords to their work. It might also be interesting to consider works that have been published after a writer’s death, unfinished works that may never have seen the light had a scholar not found a lost manuscript in an archive—Melville’s *Billy Budd* comes to mind. Collections of “uncollected” stories would constitute other possible examples for, obviously, the author may not have intended to bring those texts to light. After all, what is inherited after someone’s death is what the dead had intended to share—it may include just about anything but, at times, the will may indicate that some items should be

destroyed. What will be kept or discarded leads to questions related to the symbolic value of each object. The inheritor thus creates his/her own heritage using various fragments, as Béatrice Jongy and Annette Keilhauer suggest in the introduction to *Transmission/Héritage dans l'écriture contemporaine de soi* (Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2009). For that reason, they believe that the notions of heritage and transmission can be looked at through the prism of what Ricoeur has called “mutualité” (8), an angle some presenters might decide to take. Autobiographical fiction and autobiography being central to Jongy and Keilhauer’s collection, they insist that transmission is selective: authors choose what they want to tell, they are selective, and mean for their experience to teach readers a lesson or, at least, to serve as potential advice or warning. The didactic purpose should therefore be taken into account.

When it comes to the short story, contributions could include studies of local color fiction which meant to describe a specific place or region positively or, at least, realistically. Here again, the author’s goal is to portray particular situations in order to share his/her views on class, race, gender... Authors as diverse as Charles W. Chesnutt, Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Kate Chopin or Zora Neale Hurston could provide for stimulating discussions. Likewise, the Southern Short Story, with its emphasis on history, lends itself to an analysis of transmission—how do writers such as William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell or Katherine Anne Porter tackle lynching in the South? How are social differences, sexual orientations presented in works by Carson McCullers, William Goyen or Dorothy Allison? We should not leave aside ethnic short fiction, blue-collar fiction, for the parallel stories they tell about the Other America. What can be made of women’s stories? Before the 19th Amendment, how did women writers perceive the woman artist? How did things change after 1920? Do Poe’s classic theories about the short story still influence the writing of contemporary short stories? What story do magazines tell nowadays? What has the *New Yorker* done to influence the writing of a specific form of short fiction?

The workshop organised jointly by the Société d’Études Anglaises Contemporaines (SEAC) and the *Journal of the Short Story in English* welcomes proposals that address the concept of transmission from a wide range of perspectives, the directions suggested above being non-exclusive. Papers may take as their focus British literature and visual arts of the 20th and the 21st centuries. Contributors may also turn to the genre of the short story in English from the 19th to the 21st centuries.

Proposals for papers in English (300 words + short bibliography) and a brief biographical note should be sent jointly to Vanessa Guignery (vanessa.guignery@ens-lyon.fr) and Gérald Preher (gerald.preher@univ-artois.fr) before **November 30th 2022**.

Papers will be submitted for publication to the peer-reviewed journals *Études britanniques contemporaines* or *The Journal of the Short Story in English*.