

Talking Contemporary Fiction A Conversation

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Z: The Contemporary Fiction Seminar (CFS) started off as a reading group in 2009 for postgraduate students...

B: ...which we all were at the time.

Z: Which we all were at the time at Birkbeck; although we sent round an email advert hoping to have other London-based postgraduate students come. Tony had been doing his PhD for a year and then me and Bianca and some of our colleagues that study the contemporary period – Sam McBean, Holly Pester – all started our first year PhD and...

B: ... there was a bit of a vacuum at that time of anyone working on contemporary things and Tony had been waiting to have people who were...

T: Well, people who weren't Victorians or Modernists, or Early Modernists!

Z: We started talking about things that we were reading, and Tony mentioned he would like to establish something for people working on the contemporary.

T: Our PhDs at Birkbeck also coincided with a couple of conferences which the department already had planned – the Tom McCarthy conference and the Lethem one in summer 2010.

Z: We should also say that we all had the same supervisor.

T: Joseph Brooker.

Z: Who, although he doesn't necessarily work on the contemporary, was amassing a group of us who had intersecting research areas. Joe Brooker was planning a one-day event on the author Jonathan Lethem and I was doing quite a bit of research on Jonathan Lethem and I think that started the conversation with us about the reading group.

T: I think our first two sessions were on McCarthy's *Remainder* (2001) and Lethem's *Fortress of Solitude* (2003).

B: I remember! One of the things that was great about the group as a new PhD student was that we were able to lead groups so early on into the research process. I remember I led a session on Patrick Neate's novels and there wasn't much written about them yet, so it was incredibly helpful to bring them into a bigger forum. To have a group of people giving their sustained attention to the texts I was reading at that time was important to the development of my project.

Z: I think everyone felt that. So Sam McBean led a session on *Fun Home* (2006), which has become a really foundational text – not so much for all of us in research but for all of us in teaching – to help think about the ways in which we translate research in the contemporary into teaching the contemporary. Also, what was really nice was that, as the reading group went on, we got people coming from other universities.

B: That's right. I think for me, coming from a Masters which wasn't really contemporary focused, I really needed to learn what contemporary studies was from fellow students.

T: I think that's an interesting slippage, 'contemporary studies'. We spoke quite early on as to not being restricted to just literary fiction. I think expanding to include things like comics and genre fiction, or young adult fiction, as we did, was quite important; rather than feeling restricted, drawing on people's research – research backgrounds, research capabilities, research interests – to come in and kind of lead sessions played an important role in that.

Z: That ran for about a year and a half as a reading group.¹ What we'd been doing as a group was cemented by one-day conferences. It seemed like an important aspect of what we were doing in the reading group; to work on authors who we might then engage with in other, more per-

sonable ways. As well as the one-day author conferences and CFS, the Institute of English Studies [IES] hosted a couple of different groups which we were also attending: Sam McBean was running a feminist theory reading group. Because we were talking about the fiction and talking about genre and talking about disciplinarity within CFS, but we were getting this really nice theory component from the stuff from the Critical and Literary Theory Group hosted jointly between IES and Royal Holloway. That inspired Tony and I to move the reading group to IES and to set it up more formally as a seminar series, and that's the version that's still running today.

T: We got minimal funding, but it enabled us to invite academics working in the field to present work in progress or important research. At the first session at IES we had Dan Lea come and talk about authenticity; it's worth stressing that Dan Lea teaches at Oxford Brookes; he's the general editor of Manchester University Press, so he's quite involved in writing on the contemporary but also soliciting, editing and publishing stuff on the contemporary. That's now continued with getting established academics as well as friends and colleagues, and authors such as Cathi Unsworth and Richard House. It was never a set or formulaic thing – it was really a forum to approach the question of how to study the contemporary.

Z: I think we both felt that it was quite important to have sessions not solely on literature; we wanted to hear from speakers who worked on film and TV. We had a session with Janet McCabe and Kim Akass on HBO about production, the business side to HBO, how they kind of built the monopoly on a particular kind of television and a more recent one on games and gaming culture which moved between game theory and video gaming practices. I think that it's been important not to just have literature. We felt strongly that we didn't even need to deal with that issue; that it was an implicit part of contemporary studies, even if it is literature focused, it has to be about other forms, other media.

B: The group has always handled itself with a certain confidence in terms of setting the agenda and that's really helped to give it a particular character. That's definitely a part of its draw. People attending the contemporary fiction seminars come from different areas, they're not necessarily thinking about the same issues, but it's a great place to find new connections.

Z: This was raised recently by Bob Eaglestone in an article in *Textual Practice* about what it is to research and study contemporary literature. The article came out of the keynote that he gave at our 21st-Century British Fiction conference in 2012.

B: Yes, it's quite satisfying to see that that conference, which, in a sense, sprung from the group, has been turned into an article which we can then feed back into our discussions, which in turn will be printed in *C21 Literature*, one of the journals which is highly praised by Bob in his article. You can see that research network lighting up! It's encouraging to see; the discussion never really closes.

Z: One of the things that Bob's article, important and provocative as it is, doesn't deal with, is the proliferation of media, of how you study contemporary literature not as a literary study but as a type of cultural study.

B: Which is why we've called our undergraduate module we teach at Birkbeck 21st-Century *Fictions* rather than *Literature*, I suppose.

T: It came out of the 2012 HEA Conference 'Teaching 21st Century Fiction', which brought us into the orbit of Katy Shaw. She was organizing and invited us to say something. We came up with this idea of proposing a course.

B: And so the network lights up again!

Z: At the time we were barely teaching contemporary literature. Tony had snuck *From Hell* and psychogeography on to the courses we were teaching. The obvious question to us was 'well what course would you design'? Our research is really different – so then we had this really nice challenge of thinking how would we team-design a course, and what would that look like. And how could it reflect our research interests, and where were the problems in converting what we do with our research and what might be a valid (I use the word carefully) framework to teach undergraduates?

T: We divided it up into our three research areas – Historiography/Memory, Digital Culture, Transnationalism – and selected indicative texts, and the approaches for the course, highlighting the challenges that would come up in teaching those texts. Such as, for instance, how to teach something like *McSweeney's* (an American quarterly literary journal that demands being considered as an object as well as a means of disseminating literature) and also to kind of almost undermine our own course title, because it wasn't dealing just with fiction. The argument was always that non-fiction narratives would use the same tropes of emplotment as fiction narratives do.

T: A major feature of our events to date has been having the author under discussion present during the discussion. And again that produces lots of debate, a kind of productive anxiety – this is one of the chal-

lenges of contemporary fiction, that the author is still alive, so if you're able to invite them along you can kind of comment on that. Perhaps it is a generational thing: these authors have tended to be reasonably young. Perhaps, to make a tangential reference to Bob Eaglestone's article, with Lethem and Miéville, their own personalities kind of blurred the geek and the scholar. There was a telling line when China Miéville responded to the conference and said 'I am one of you guys', which was kind of quite gratifying.

Z: Actually Lethem talked about that as well. He said that he never completed his higher education but had just got an honorary degree that week and was really enjoying feeling part of the academy. And McCarthy, Lethem and Miéville teach.

T: The Miéville event was a brilliant day and there is a publication coming out of it, but an important thing again was the screening – we showed *Deep State*, which was his collaboration on a low-budget short film ('avant-pulp', he called it) – which came out of a political engagement with the torture memorandum the American government used to justify torture methods. But it kind of related contemporary studies to contemporary practice because it was an avant-garde collaged film and his role was to add more estranging science fiction methods on top, so there is a kind of collision.

Z: Perhaps your phrase there is quite key to the way the single-author event with the author present has worked, which is a relation between contemporary studies and contemporary practice. And this also responds to Bob Eaglestone's question: we do make value judgements all the time and there is a self-selecting movement at work in the way we often approach contemporary culture – you tend to be drawn to authors/artists/filmmakers who are producing contemporary practice that is itself a contemporary study, or a study of the contemporary. When we hold these events with the author, the boundaries don't seem to matter so much, these writers and artists consider themselves to be undertaking a parallel project to us as academics. There is definitely synthesis there. Perhaps that is one way in which we make value judgements – regardless of whether we talk about a writer of genre fiction who sells millions or a writer of literary, or 'serious' (to use Eaglestone's phrase) fiction; we are talking about writers who show similar investments and engagements to us as academics and researchers.

B: Geoff Dyer is an interesting figure in that sense. In his early writing he talks about academia as a restrictive place that takes the life out of loving literature, somewhere that the writer ought to give a wide berth. He seems to have changed his mind on that, and it occurs to me that

perhaps the change isn't in him, it's this phenomenon which Tony is talking about, in which authors and the academy, in terms of contemporary literature anyway, seem to want to talk to each other. Bob also suggests, though, that the presence of living authors complicates what we do. What do you make of that?

Z: It is a weird one because I am constantly picking up in my teaching when first years go to the authors to locate the meaning of the text and I am telling them it doesn't have to matter. But then if an author is writing or speaking critically around their work then – Bianca, you used a phrase earlier to say it could be a kind of parallel critical text, parallel with the theory or literary journalism we might use to read something, and I think that is true. I think there is a fear that a living author can talk back to your reading of their work. That very rarely happens in the case of academia (more so for reviewers perhaps); it seems highly unlikely an author would find an obscure literary theory journal hidden behind the paywall of an academic publisher in order to comment on how you had read their work, and so actually the conversation isn't as two-way as it could potentially be. You are free to counter an author's assertion, you don't have to engage it. So in this way you are free to disregard the author's presence but also to make use of it.

T: It is more the situation that the death of the author is so often misread. The author is not the final arbiter, the final theological meaning, as Barthes puts it. I think that counts in terms of blurring that line between fiction and non-fiction. A lot of comics and graphic novels that find their way on to contemporary literature courses are non-fiction ones and often the encounter with the author is really important. Just to think of *Maus* (1991), by Art Spiegelman: Spiegelman returns to it again and again; he justifies his strategy of representation and in fact he has just published an archive of that work, *Metamaus* (2011), in conjunction with Hillary Chute, who is an academic.

Z: And you have to think about that with memoir as well. With someone like Dave Eggers – you can't not deal with the author figure; his first literary work was a memoir, an autobiography. There is a way in which the author demands to be seen. A whole area of study of contemporary culture has to be to do with issues of authorial intention, plagiarism, appropriation, legitimate or not, and then the author figure is destabilized and unsettled in a way perhaps that Barthes would have been OK with; the author is nonetheless a point of encounter.

B: This is it. I think the unsettling and destabilization process is very constructive, because, and perhaps this is one of the ways in which academics do differ from the fan – if the fan enshrines the author as the

ultimate authority and fetishizes them, the academic is more prepared to be critical and in dialogue, and to deconstruct that idol that the fan has created. Bob Eaglestone's article suggests the boundaries of what differentiates what we do from outside the academy are becoming fragile, which is potentially problematic I guess. How do you feel about that?

T: That's coming back to this idea of literature as literary fiction. That debate has already been had in cultural studies. The idea of the 'aca-fan', as Henry Jenkins puts it, the fan-scholar. On the one hand... well, this is a question we might want to consider. Are people more affectively invested in the artefacts of popular culture, whether it's a comic, or an SF novel, or a figure that you leave in a box – are people more invested in that than in their copies of *Ulysses* or *Atonement*.

Z: I think it is a myth that needs debunking: that academics writing about older literature somehow are less fans than academics writing about contemporary culture, or to say that academics that we associate with particular literary figures weren't fans, and then became academics, or even that there aren't non-academic fans of Joyce, of Eliot. To assume that this is a contemporary thing is misleading. Studying and teaching contemporary culture means being able to be more open about your position; you are in the default mode of defending yourself as fan/consumer/one-of-the-multitude. You encounter so many academics who teach on things that are canonical because they are canonical, and not because these are the texts that they research, and that they love. Courses just sit there for years with no one really caretaking. It's nice to be able to say 'I want to teach these things because I think they have value and they give us something, but also because I really love them and I think these students will love them.' We should be able to convey that, to marry an enjoyment of something and a critical use-value of something.

B: Absolutely, it seems to be there's always this panic about the popular. There's a lingering suspicion that contemporary fiction is too much fun, can't possibly be a subject of study.

Z: That's one anxiety: that because contemporary culture is something that is consumed by all academics – that most academics are likely to read/watch/consume contemporary culture regardless of their research interest – it is somehow not a distinct, or suitably difficult area of research. How do we go about studying the contemporary? This seems to come to the heart of much of what we've been talking about; there exists training for people working with manuscripts, for people working with archives, modernist studies, an assumed professional code of practice. What does the equivalent look like if your subject is contemporary literature and culture?

T: The workshops will be beyond just selecting the latest book by Ian McEwan,² and beyond just subjecting it to textual analysis. Which isn't to mean we should abandon close reading, but to look at the state of theory now, discuss how we construct contemporary archives, take into account audiences, communities, public engagement, author engagement – something that happens more in film studies and cultural studies but less so in literary studies.

B: I think, in a sense, we've moved away from the seminars which say what is contemporary fiction, to say...

T: ... this is contemporary fiction...

B: ... THIS is contemporary fiction! Although one of the things I'm most pleased about with the module is it retains that open-ended feel which the research seminars had. We can enable students to push the limits of the discipline for themselves, to surprise us by how they respond to the module.

Z: Actually the name of the module is something we did debate. Although fiction enables you to talk about television, film and graphic narrative, it cuts off the non-fiction, the literary essay, academic writing as a kind of creative practice, which I think that all of us felt that we also deal with in our research. The CFS postgraduate forum (once we moved to IES) hosted Holly Geisman, a documentary film-maker undertaking a PhD at Roehampton who was working on a documentary on ethnic food restaurants in the UK and she was concerned, as some of our speakers have been, that what she was presenting was not 'fiction'; we just felt that it didn't actually matter. When you discuss the status of documentary-making, you are discussing a craft of contemporary culture and we wouldn't limit our series to fiction. So the module, seminar series, and conferences – although we tend to stick to 'fiction' because it takes us away from having to talk about a novel – we undermine the 'fiction' aspect all the time.

B: We like to undermine.

Z: We do like to undermine!

Notes

- 1 Early sessions of the reading group were led by various colleagues from the University of London who have been incredibly supportive. Special thanks to Dan O'Gorman, Matt Sangster, Xavier Marco Del Pont, Henderson Downing, and Gill Partington.
- 2 CFS are convening a series of three one day skills development workshops for postgraduate and early career researchers of contemporary culture. (<http://researchingthecontemporary.net>)

References

- Contemporary Fiction Series, <http://events.sas.ac.uk/ies/seminars/332/Contemporary+Fiction+Research+Seminar>
- Eagleton, Robert (2013) 'Contemporary fiction in the academy: towards a manifesto', *Textual Practice*, 27(7): 1089–1101.