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## Conference Report: Experimental Writing in English (1945–2000): The Anti-Canon, Palace of the Academies, Brussels, 15–16 September 2022

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‘Experimental Writing in English (1945–2000): The Anti-Canon’ was a two-day international conference held from 15 to 16 September 2022 at the Palace of the Academies in Brussels, Belgium. The principal organizers were dr. Hannah Van Hove (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Tessel Veneboer (Universiteit Gent), who organized the conference in collaboration with the research groups CLIC (Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings), SEL (Studiecentrum Experimentele Literatuur) and 20cc (Twentieth-Century Crossroads).

The conference explored connections between experimental writing, minority voices, and processes of canonization. Adopting the term “anti-canon”, the conference organizers took their cue from Ellen Friedman who theorised that literary works that undermine established societal values can be conceptualized as ‘anticanonical’. That is, if one agrees that literary works that enter the canon solidify – often normative – societal values.<sup>1</sup> In this case, the conference spotlighted experimental writing in English by authors from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1945–2000) who are thought to have written from non-normative positions, e.g., feminist, queer, middle-class writers, or writing by people of colour. The post-war period is generally associated with an increase of formal literary experiment due to the advent of postmodernist writing, and little scholarly attention has been devoted to literary experimentation by women, queer, middle-class, or Black writers of that period.<sup>2</sup> In general, the conference posed three questions:

To what extent can the notion of anti-canon represent a shared condition for the politics of experimentation? In what ways does it engage with, and perhaps suggest a move beyond, certain categories – such as that of “women’s writing” – as the “other side” of dominant literary form? How might anti-canonical works of literature subvert established ways of looking at the world and at society?

With these questions in mind, the conference focused on examining the connection between thematic and formal experiment. Moreover, much scholarly work has placed the literature of fringe writers in a particular identarian category without considering their aesthetic contributions to literary writing because such authors explicitly engage with socio-political questions in their work. By adopting a research focus that connects thematic to formal experiment, many of the contributions moved beyond existing studies that have solely analysed the often socio-political themes that such writers touch upon. Hence, the presented papers considered ways in which literary form operates with and/or against established conventions.

It is provocative to organize an academic conference that ties fringe writers to a concept such as the ‘anti-canon’ because such a focus implicitly suggests that their

writing might have found its way into the academy. Moreover, the conference's location at the historical Palace of the Academies in Brussels referred to this problem of categorization. As Hannah Van Hove mentioned in her opening address, the Palace of the Academies has housed European Kings and Queens and is now the headquarters of The Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium. As such, the conference's location itself embodied notions of establishment, power and 'canon' that were to be discussed over the course of two days.

### **DAY 1: Identity Politics, Affect, and Literary Form**

Since multiple panels were scheduled concurrently, picking a panel proved a daunting task. I decided to attend panels based on my own research interests and PhD project, which focusses on 21<sup>st</sup>-century African American self-reflexive plays. In the panel 'Re-forming Identity', Florian Zappe (Independent Scholar, Berlin) engaged with U.S. writer Kathy Acker's philosophy of identity from a Deleuzian-Guattarian perspective and argued that the author's work goes beyond identarian issues to which her work is usually relegated. Luna Chung (University of Arizona) took the 1998 novel and poem anthology *Watermark* as an example of how experimental Vietnamese American literature can contest hegemonic expectations of being labelled as 'minoritarian literature' that would solely engage with the traumas of the Vietnam War. Tara Stubbs (Oxford University) looked at a selection of African American sonnets to question ethnic labels such as 'African American' in relation to poetic genres. Rounding off the panel, Juliette Bouanani (Paris Nanterre) provided a critical reading of American feminist poet Lyn Hejinian's literary and theoretical work, in which the poet rejects binary oppositions such as 'canonized' vs. 'experimental' or 'male' vs. 'female' writing. By grouping together papers that focus on North American writers, but each with different positionalities, the panel problematized a tendency in both academia and wider society to push these writers into a political corner.

If the first panel engaged critically with labelling authors according to political affiliation, the next panel's title 'The Twists and Turns of an African American Anti-Canon' seemed to recentre the debate to identity politics. Still, because of the panel's focus on African American poets' experimentation with textual material, the presentations refrained from a purely political reading. Jesper Olsson (Linköping University) analysed Norman Pritchard's early 1970s poetry collections as instances of concrete poetry while connecting poetic, material experimentation such as visual patterning to theories of cybernetics. Solveig Daugaard (University of Copenhagen) moved the discussion into the 1990s with an analysis of the book design of Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge* (1995). Finally, Christa Holm Vogelius (University of Copenhagen) offered us a glimpse into the

21<sup>st</sup> century through a reading of Claudia Rankine's image-texts *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004). These nicely interwoven presentations offered an insightful historical overview of the interplay between canon and material, literary infrastructures of experimental African American poets.

The next panel I attended, 'Affects, (Un)readability and Reception', focussed on readerly affect and readability, which I find interesting given my theatre background. Of course, theatre and dramatic texts address their implied audiences and readers in a very different way than novels, but it was insightful to hear how other media and genres aesthetically engage with their recipients. Taken together, the panellists provided us with an eclectic corpus both in terms of writerly positionalities, and the literary genres and media that were scrutinized. Iris Pearson (University of Oxford) started off by discussing British author B.S. Johnson's readerly gaps in his novel *Trawl* (1966). Salomé Honorio (CEComp/FLUL- Faculty of Arts, University of Lisbon) followed up with a discussion of Kathy Acker, while Andrew Hodgson (EHESS Paris) provided a general overview of the potentialities of ergodic literature. Chris Clark (Independent Scholar, Southampton) moved the discussion to intermediality by presenting British author Ann Quin's use of photography in her work, while Kelly Krumrie (Western Colorado University) extended the discussion into the realm of mathematics through an exploration of U.S. writer Pamela Lu's novels.

The first day ended with a keynote by Anthony Reed (Vanderbilt University). Reed's lecture offered a sneak peek into his newest work on Black lyric theory. Reed observed that many Black poets have cited, adapted, or completely reworked canonized verse and lyric traditions but that, despite these aesthetic strategies, their work has not often been read as part of canonized traditions. Reed discussed the work of different writers from Jamaican American poet June Jordan to African American writer Amiri Baraka's engagement with the blues. Additionally, he also discussed multiple examples of autobiographical writing by Afro-descended writers. In doing so, Reed demonstrated how we can approach such writings from a canonized lyrical lens while also taking the colonial roots of these poets' experiences into account.

## **DAY 2: Periodization, Bodily Knowledge, and Literary Form**

The second day of the conference began with another set of stimulating panels. As the title suggests, the panel 'Postmodernist and Philosophical Expressions' dealt with issues of literary and philosophical movements, periodization, and aesthetics. Steven Forbes' (University of Edinburgh) paper connected William Demby's experimental novel *The Catacombs* (1965) to the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In doing so, Forbes made a strong case arguing why the work of African American writers

should not only be valued for their socio-political message, but also for their complex integration of philosophical ideas, i.e. 'cubist time', in their writing. The next paper by Adam Guy (Oxford University) considered existential philosophy in the medium of theatre. By reading Nigerian playwright John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's play *The Raft* (1978) alongside his earlier memoir *America, Their America* (1964), detailing Clark-Bekederemo's time as a fellowship grantee in the U.S., Guy interwove literary-critical and biographical elements to sketch a picture of the international trajectories of postcolonial and existential thinking during the 1960s. While the first two papers clearly focussed on literary reflections on existential philosophy the latter two presentations took postmodernist poetics as a focal point. Indian writer Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables* (1981) were discussed by Suhasini Vincent (University of Paris II – Panthéon Assas) from the perspective of displaced immigrant experiences. Adopting a postmodernist take on the fable form, Vincent drew attention to practices of shape-shifting in Namjoshi's stories that formally echo both fluid 'Western' and 'Eastern' conceptions of sexual identity. Finally, Kerry-Jane Wallart (University of Orléans) circled back to the medium of theatre, and more specifically, the dramatic genre of tragedy. Taking Chicana writer Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* (1995) as a case study, Wallart explored how postmodern tragedy can question stereotypical female representation through the figures of Medea and La Llorana. I felt that time was a recurring topic that – maybe unintentionally – ran through all four papers. While Forbes engaged this topic head on, the other presenters also discussed their corpuses in terms of temporal constraints in considering what a postmodernist aesthetic entails in the light of experimentalism.

The panel 'Writing the Body' treated different literary forms as expression of bodily identification. The central question guiding the panel was: How can literary forms transpire bodily knowledge and identification? In this sense, one might say that this panel and the panel 'Re-forming Identity' took a different approach to identity politics. Joule Zheng Wang's (University of Amsterdam) paper examined American queer painter and writer David Wojnarowicz's memoir *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1990). Wang focused both on the memoir's anti-canonical form and content. In terms of form, Wang named Wojnarowicz's experimental writing practice "typewriting" because the author continually switches between and integrates different narratives and genres across eight creative essays. The memoir's anti-canonical content lies in its discussion of non-heteronormative themes, in particular homosexuality and HIV/AIDS activism in 1990s America. While Wang's talk presented the creative potential of the memoir and essay forms, Julie Dickson (Freie Universität Berlin) discussed the potentials of the disruptive and anti-linear short story cycle to give voice to marginalized experiences. Although the short story cycle in itself is not that widely recognized in

academic circles, many American women writers turned to the genre in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dickson argued that the cycle's episodic and spiral form embodies the multiple identities of the female subjectivities represented in them. The panel's last paper was delivered by Simon Eales (University at Buffalo) who focussed on the work by transatlantic avant-garde writers such as Gertrude Stein and Leslie Scalapino. Eales read their work as practicing a "choreographic poetics", which allows the authors to trace how canonization also conditions the body. Interestingly, Eales delivered a performed academic paper, allowing him to align his presentation format to his main argument.

The second keynote of the conference was delivered by Georgina Colby (Westminster University) who argued for the emergence of a new feminist literary form, which she named "solidary writing". Colby tested her hypothesis through a discussion of British-based poets Caroline Bergvall and Bhanu Kapil. Her readings focused on the notion of 'form', both in an aesthetic and political sense. According to Colby, solidary writing intervenes in dominant social and political (literary) discourses by giving form to pressing socio-political issues such as racism, transphobia, class struggles or ecological crises.

The final panel I attended, 'Disorientations, Contradictions, Queer Desires', followed up on the themes touched upon during the 'Writing the Body' panel, but with a more explicit focus on writing the queer body. Alice Hill-Woods' (Glasgow School of Art) reading of Ann Quin's novel *Three* (1969) went against the grain of most Quin criticism that analyses the author's elliptical prose through a mental disability lens rather than considering her bisexuality as a potential formal factor. Hill-Woods hence read Quin's avant-garde experimentalism as a queer narrative. Quin's disorientations of time and objects and their concurrent interdependencies, Hill-Woods argued, allows readers to imagine what a queer narrative could look like. The following two papers explored the possibilities of queering genres. Carole Sweeney (Goldsmiths University) directed our attention to the marriage or romance plot, which is conventionally thought to disperse heterosexual worldviews. British novelist Brigid Brophy's *The Snow Ball* (1964) provided an interesting case study of how the (male-focussed) seduction plot of *Don Giovanni* is subverted, or queered, because the female protagonist is portrayed as the desiring subject. Next, Michael Kindellan (University of Sheffield) discussed queering the genre of "portraiture" in poetry. To do so, he presented experiments with graphic design in American poet John Wiener's *The Hotel Wentley Poems* (1958; 1965). Finally, Sophie Corser (University College Cork) interrogated her own queerness and reading processes in relation to her scientific research. Moreover, Corser specifically looked at literary representations of reading women in the novels *Temple of Delight* (1990) and *Juggling* (1994) by South-African born author Barbara Trapido. In doing so, Corser gave us a taste of how an academic panel could integrate the researcher's own

positionality. During the Q&A, Tessel Veneboer raised an interesting question, which I'm also thinking about often in the light of my own research. She asked the panellists when exactly they consider a literary form to be queer. People experience their sexuality in different ways, especially if there are other intersectional identity markers at play, so how exactly do we measure queer form? Surely, not everything that goes against the heteronormative grain should be labelled queer, and don't queer stories with heteronormative plot structures exist?

While 'The Anti-Canon' conference might have just looked at the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the questions its contributors raised are also relevant for scholarship that focusses on 21<sup>st</sup>-century experimental writing by fringe authors. In view of the Black Lives Matter Movement (2013-) or the recent threat on abortion rights in the wake of the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States (June 2022), we seem to live in an age where identarian affiliation is increasingly important. Literature, or by extension every form of artistic writing, is in my experience a space where authors can nuance their positionality and offer different, sometimes intersecting viewpoints. At the same time, as this conference continually reminded us, literature is not a neutral space of expression. The very fact that the conference explored the usefulness of the term 'anti-canon' implies that literature does not operate within a socio-political vacuum. By engaging with literary writing through the lens of 'anti-canon', I feel, can give the researcher the possibility to explore how such texts problematize dichotomies such as 'male' vs. 'female', or 'queer' vs. 'heteronormative', and more importantly, 'politics' vs. 'aesthetics' or 'canonical' vs. 'marginal' writing.

In my own research on 21<sup>st</sup>-century experimental African American playwriting I'm often confronted with similar questions. Especially because playwrights such as Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and Jackie Sibblies Drury write both in an experimental, i.e., self-reflexive way, and thematically explore underrepresented topics such as Blackness, queerness, femininity, and so on. At the same time, both playwrights have been nominated for, or have won, major drama prizes in the United States such as the Pulitzer Prize and Obie Awards. Other aesthetically experimental drama by playwrights such as Jeremy O. Harris and Michael R. Jackson has been mounted on Broadway. Since literary prizes and Broadway productions are – the latter especially within a U.S. theatre context – still important gauges for critical recognition and commercial success, I often wonder to what extent these play texts conform to 'canonized' dramatic aesthetics, despite their experimental nature. As such, I left the conference with my own specific set of questions: Is it possible to write completely outside of the academy, and is experimentalism a prerequisite for canonization rather than a counter-productive strategy?

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Van Hove and Tessel Veneboer, 'Call for Papers: Experimental Writing in English (1945–2000): The Anti-Canon', Available at: <https://clic.research.vub.be/call-for-papers-experimental-writing-in-english-1945-2000-the-anti-canon/> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> February 2023].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

**Competing Interests**

Jade Thomas is a member of The Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC). She chaired panel seven, 'Postmodernist and philosophical expressions', during the conference.

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