

U.S. Culture in the Age of Experts

MLA 2013, Boston, January 3–6

Collaborative (nonguaranteed) Session Proposal from the American Literature Section and Literature and Science Divisions.

Participants and Paper Titles:

Timothy Melley, Associate Professor of English, Miami University

“Strategic Irrationalism: Psychological Warfare, Public Relations, and the Cold War Public Sphere”

Scott Selisker, Postdoctoral Fellow in English, University of California, Santa Barbara

“The Pathology of Extremism: Brainwashing, Cults, and the Story of Patty Hearst”

Rebecca Lemov, Assistant Professor of the History of Science, Harvard University

“In Search of ‘Humanness’: The Human Document Just After World War II”

Priscilla Wald, Professor of English, Duke University

Commentator and Chair

U.S. Culture in the Age of Experts

What the historian Ellen Herman described in 1995 as an “age of experts” has recently begun to transform American literary and cultural studies. Literary production between the 1940s and the early 1970s, notoriously difficult to periodize, is being re-conceived in terms of the rise of the social sciences in the U.S., as well as the new institutions, media ecologies, and forms of address proper to this new age of experts. This panel addresses these new developments in the study of the American mid-century in order to tease out their broader consequences for both American literary studies and the Literature and Science subfield. The panel builds on an emergent scholarly emphasis on the concrete connections between science and literature, between scientific and literary forms of language and the cultural roles that science and literature play in this key transitional period. For example, Priscilla Wald’s *Contagious* (Duke, 2008) shows how narratives and metaphors circulate *between* literary and scientific descriptions of contagion; alternately, Stephen Schryer’s *Fantasies of the New Class* (Columbia, 2011) freshly emphasizes the shared ambitions of mid-century novelists and social scientists. Our panel brings together additional new perspectives on literature and the U.S. culture of expertise, and the papers chart how new ideas in the period circulated between state agencies, scientific research programs, legal strategies, memoirs, archival projects, and fiction. By returning to the “age of experts,” this panel promises to uncover both cultural themes and methodological issues that persist in contemporary cultures of science, interdisciplinary literary criticism, and U.S. public culture.

Timothy Melley’s paper, “Strategic Irrationalism: Psychological Warfare, Public Relations, and the Cold War Public Sphere,” argues that the roots of U.S. postmodernism lie partly in the Cold War growth of psychologically informed tactics for strategic communications. Such strategies included the growth of public relations, the use of

psychological experts in state propaganda and corporate advertising campaigns, and the formation of the Division of Psychological Warfare and other military and federal agencies. Melley argues that the rise of scientifically informed strategies of communication fundamentally altered the conditions of public knowledge in postwar Western societies, generating the pervasive culture of skepticism that marks a defining feature of literary postmodernism. Melley argues, moreover, that Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) performs a trenchant analysis of this transformed public sphere, in which scientific expertise served state and corporate interests and contributed to public cynicism and skepticism.

Scott Selisker's paper, "The Pathology of Extremism: Brainwashing, Cults, and the Story of Patty Hearst," explores the complex interchanges in the decades after WWII between political culture, scientific knowledge, and literary exploration as they coalesce around the *topos* of the cult. Since the late 1960s, psychological and sociological research on cult membership, by Robert Jay Lifton, Stanley Milgram, Margaret Singer, and others, has shaped popular understandings of extremist religious or political belief as pathological. This understanding of the cult, a distinctive social formation that involves coercive persuasion, Stockholm syndrome, and charismatic leadership, expressly excludes cult believers from membership in a rational, democratic public sphere. Selisker examines a defining moment in the cult's rise to prominence in recent decades, the Patty Hearst trial of 1976. By examining Hearst's own communiqués and memoirs, expert legal testimony, and the treatment of Hearst in two post-9/11 novels by Susan Choi and Christopher Sorrentino, Selisker charts the interchanges between literary and scientific understandings of the cult, both of which contributed to the cult's enduring position in the American imagination.

Rebecca Lemov's paper, "In Search of 'Humanness': The Human Document Just After World War II," examines the history of yet another form of scientific discourse, the "human document," which promises to complicate understandings of literature and science as fundamentally different forms of knowledge. Amid energetic methodological discussions, specialists including Gordon Allport and Dorothy Eggan spearheaded efforts to collect, collate, and control vast stores of knowledge that might amount to x-rays of the hidden self. This ambitious archival project emphasized, rather than instrumental forms of knowledge about the self, documents and fragments with literary, "human" dimensions: letters, random notes, diaries, psychoanalytic interviews, life stories, results of Rorschach tests and even descriptions of dreams. These texts all shared the real-unreal quality of a dream, and all afforded access to what scholars referred to as "humanness" in its developed specific and its shared universal forms. Lemov asks why and how humanness became a particularly pressing problem in these years and explores this methodology's paradoxical stress on "materials" and materialization: human documents promised to render the ephemera of subjective reality both material and scientifically legible.

Although the papers address three distinct relationships between scientific and literary endeavor, together, they attest to the important cultural presence of the social sciences, and their role in shaping American understandings of human agency, individualism, and humanness itself. Priscilla Wald will comment on the papers, addressing the points of connection between them, their relationships to the state of the field, and perhaps points that draw on her own closely related current research project,

entitled “Human Being After Genocide.” A leader in both of the panel's affiliated subfields, Wald is well situated to address how these new emphases in Literature and Science will continue to transform how we periodize, understand, and teach twentieth-century American literature. Moreover, her comments and perspectives on new methodologies within Literature and Science will be of interest to scholars of other national literatures and historical periods.

Following the three papers and commentary (each limited to fifteen minutes), the stage will be set for a wide-ranging discussion with our audience. We expect a robust attendance from scholars of American literature and Literature and Science, and the panel will likely attract others with interests in the cultural and political dimensions of scientific expertise more generally.