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**OPPORTUNITIES IN THE EYE OF A STORM: “NEW
PATHWAYS IN ANGLOPHONE LITERARY AND
CULTURAL STUDIES IN PANDEMIC TIMES”
CONFERENCE REPORT**

Denisa Krásná, Tereza Šmilauerová and Lenka Žárská

ON the 20th and 21st of November 2020, an international conference “New Pathways in Anglophone Literary and Cultural Studies in Pandemic Times” took place in Brno, Czech Republic. The event was organized by the Department of English and American Studies of Masaryk University and hosted graduate students and researchers from various countries across the world including the United States, the Czech Republic, India, and Brazil. The keynote speeches were delivered by PhDr. Thomas Don Sparling, from Central European Association for Canadian Studies, Dr. Mathias Clasen of the English Department at Aarhus University, and Dr. Sagar Deva from the University of Leeds.

Three of the department’s graduate students, Denisa Krásná, Tereza Šmilauerová and Lenka Žárská, constituted the organizing committee. “New Pathways in Pandemic Times” was the second installment in “New Pathways,” a series of the department’s biannual conferences for emerging scholars. The event opened in the afternoon of the 20th with a short welcoming speech by Dr. Tomáš Pospíšil, a vice-dean for international relations and an associate professor of the Department of English and American Studies, followed immediately with the first keynote speech.

1. Keynote 1: PhDr. Thomas Don Sparling

The speech “‘Something We Can’t See Is Causing Us to Die’ Books: Pandemics and Canadian Literature,” delivered by Don Sparling, traced a disease trope in Canadian literature. First, it introduced seeking for the meaning as a basic human strategy in crises, including pandemic, which is particularly difficult for the Western world since they are used to being in control, not to being left at the mercy of anything we cannot see. That meaning was traditionally derived from religion, in case of European cultures from the Bible’s narrative. The resulting conviction was that any crisis came according to God’s will. Later, in the 17th century, this explanation started

to be left for a counter-narrative where a disease is anthropomorphized, portrayed as a cunning and powerful enemy. Sparling briefly shared with the audience, as an example, a story from his childhood when the spreading panic of polio epidemic in the United States was stopped with the introduction of a vaccine, causing the re-emergence of the feeling that the absence of danger is granted for the American citizens. There is, however, a hidden fear deep inside the human mind that a new disease might come at any time and erase the humankind.

Then the speaker turned to Canadian literature on pandemic, including *The Last Canadian* (William C. Heine, 1974), *The Tiger Flu* (Larissa Lai, 2018), and *The Year of the Flood* (Margaret Atwood, 2009), and defined main common topics – such as focus on climate changes and the poisoning of the environment by the humankind, religious fundamentalism, racism, and patriarchy – meaning that the genre is used to discuss current social issues. The essence of the literature is thus a message that the current social and environmental situation is unsustainable and offered solutions to it only provisional and temporary. Moreover, the authors claim the humankind as the cause of a pandemic. Therefore, wishing that the Earth overrides anthropo-dominance, the answer they provide is executed by nature itself, leading to punishment of trespassing humans by annihilation of the majority. The concluding message of the speech was the famous quote by Walt Kelly, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

2. Panel 1: North America in Pandemic Times

After a coffee break, the first panel, chaired by Denisa Krásná, began to discuss literary and cultural perspectives on various issues connected to pandemic and American society and culture. Jan Čapek, from Masaryk University, started with an analysis of the movie *The Lighthouse* (2019), “A Self-Inflicted Wound: Isolation in *The Lighthouse* (2019).” The paper explored the cinematic depiction of one of phenomena closely tied to a pandemic, the interpersonal and inner isolation, leading to tension and violence. Čapek proposed that character of the Young is haunted by a sense of guilt and unconsciously keeping himself in a vicious circle of resentment, frustration, and violence. The psychological tracing of the character was followed with a brief analysis of visual aspects of the movie’s final scene where isolation and destructive instincts result in the Young’s literal fall from grace, ending with his violent death.

The following speaker, Ivana Plevíková from Masaryk University, interlinked in her paper, “Reflections of Margaret Atwood’s Dystopias in the Pandemic of 2020,”

a literary analysis of two novels by Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), with an analysis of the current political leaders and their attitudes toward the covid-19 crisis. According to her claims, the two books present a mirror to and pre-shadow the current situation. The paper stressed the importance of the reflection of not only political and social structures Atwood borrowed from the real world when writing the novel, but also types of behavior that some political leaders continually display today. The center of both analyses was then dichotomic categorization of two types of leadership – one represented by three male leaders, Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Boris Johnson, and the other by three female leaders, Jacinda Ardern, Erna Solberg and Katrín Jakobsdóttir. The former type was characterized with a focus on an individual gain, their personal point of view, and tendencies to accepting misinformation, misinforming, and belittling the gravity of the situation. The latter type, social leaders, was described as not trying to regain the past state, capitalism, and instead focusing on the health situation and well-being of all citizens. Their attitude reflects the concerns of nature and science, they prefer a flat hierarchy in decision-making, and they concentrate on communicating with compassion and identifiability. Those two kinds were illustrated on the authoritarian leader Crake from *Oryx and Crake* and The Gardeners of God from *The Year of the Flood* that implemented flat hierarchy in their cult. The paper concluded that women as leaders tend to take lesser risk in the areas connected to health and more risk in the economic sphere, they emphasize empathy and interpersonal relationships, and put the community before an individual.

The third paper, “Québec and Its Cultural Complex: Closer Look at Québécois Psyche from Jungian Perspective” by Aleš Vrbata from the State University of Feira de Santana, presented to the audience a concept of cultural complex, developed within the Jungian tradition during 1980s and 1990s, as an interdisciplinary endeavor attempting to look beyond symptoms of collective complexes to identify an archetypal core of drama occurring in the collective unconscious. The speaker then moved to Québec as a territory compared to the Third World countries due to its colonization in the 18th century, leading to implementation of the aforementioned concept by some of Canadian historians. It explains how the unhealed Québécois cultural complex triggers a vicious circle of permanent and compulsive collective psychology based on one specific chapter in its history. In such an arrangement of psychology and politics, Québécois leaders have usually stressed the importance of “survival” by means of literature, history, language, religion, and ancestral tradition. The paper argued that the solution to such a historically given condition lies in a constructive, creative, active and conscious integration of the past.

The last speaker of the day, Martin Ondryáš from Masaryk University, discussed his paper, “The Price of Progress: Selected Contemporary Issues of Indigenous Peoples in Canada”. Ondryáš’s paper shows how the historical burden of the so-called residential schools led to various current problems of indigenous peoples of Canada. First, the issue of residential schools was described and characterized as a tool of power, enforcing assimilation to the European culture and religion of Christianity. Then the paper explored two selected current problems of the indigenous communities. The first of the topics discussed were the aboriginal gangs in Canadian Prairies (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta) which started in 1980s and 1990s and bring to their members both wealth and the sense of belonging through fraternal organization offering support and encouragement for the youth. Then Ondryáš moved to the issue of murders and kidnappings of indigenous women, which comprise almost one fourth of all murdered and missing women in Canada. The paper thus shed light on increasingly – yet not sufficiently – discussed Canadian topics.

The discussion following the panel was lively, engaging all speakers and further examining the topics of their papers and putting them into a wider, inter-field context.

3. Keynote 2: Dr. Mathias Clasen

The second day of the conference opened with Dr. Mathias Clasen of Aarhus University, Denmark and his speech titled “Simulating the Apocalypse: On the Adaptive Functions of Scary Stories”. In his paper, Dr. Clasen presented his research on the psychology of fear and entertainment, and the rising interest in horror fiction and entertainment during the pandemic. By depicting fiction as a way in which people make sense of the world, he sees apocalyptic literature and other media as a frame of reference for an unprecedented situation that the human race has so far only faced in imagination. Reading or experiencing horror or (post)-apocalyptic stories then becomes comparable to “consulting a map when in unknown territory”, which is also why the popularity of such fiction rises in the times of crises – for instance, we see rise of post-apocalyptic fiction after both World Wars. In the second part of his speech, Dr. Clasen discussed the empirical studies of his research group which took place in haunted houses concerning fear regulation and the relationship between fear and joy, and looked at fear as play, in which humans recreate horror as simulation of threat scenarios, similar to predator play which is common in animals. Lastly, Dr. Clasen introduced his recent study on whether the horror and prepper genre fans handle the current pandemic better, suggesting that these groups do indeed show better psychological resilience due to their experience with emotional regulation, supporting the idea of fiction as a crucial, adaptive instrument of orientation and preparation.

4. Panel 2: Epidemic in the Society and the Individual

The second panel, chaired by Lenka Žárská, began with the presentation of Tagrid Morad from Masaryk University on “The Relevance of Margaret Mead’s Concepts in Health and Illness to the Era of COVID-19.” In her contribution, Morad brought attention to medical anthropology and its possible role in the current pandemic, building on different approaches towards medicine and illness in different cultures. Morad discussed how some older findings of medical anthropologists such as Margaret Mead have been ignored despite their potentiality, and suggests a syndemic approach to the pandemic, calling for inclusion of different disciplines in medicine which would acknowledge the role of social forces in prognosis, treatment and health policy when dealing with the ongoing situation.

In the presentation which followed, Tereza Šmilauerová from Masaryk University examined the situation of Asian Americans in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic with the focus on the recent xenophobic race-based abuse of Asian Americans due to the origin of the virus in China. Šmilauerová brought attention to the recent cases of politicians and media fueling the antagonism towards this group with their rhetoric, tracing the current trend of ethnic violence and ostracism towards immigrants back through the previous centuries. She also discussed the emerging approaches and solutions of Asian Americans towards the situation, such as vlogging and video activism, multiracial movements, official news’ reports or activism.

The panel was concluded with Felix Purat of Palacky University, Olomouc and his presentation titled “Science Fiction as Regional Literature: A Different Perspective on Philip K. Dick and Other Sci-Fi Writers.” Purat introduced science fiction as a genre in which independence of geography and nationality seems to be a common factor, with frequent focus on the human race as a whole. He then suggested taking the opposite approach, highlighting the stronger connection the geographic context has in tying science fiction to what is generally known as “mainstream” or “literary” fiction, via the bridge of regional studies. On the example of Philip K. Dick, he showed that the science fiction author can also be regarded as a regional writer, not only when taking into account the setting of his novels but defined by the specific culture also found in other Californian writers, suggesting that the science fiction genre has the capability to generate distinctly different reactions from different geographic entities.

5. Keynote 3: Dr. Sagar Deva

The final keynote speech was delivered by Dr. Sagar Deva from the University of Leeds, United Kingdom. Dr Deva’s presentation “Why did the UK and US fail

to control Covid? Exceptionalism, Populism, and Incompetence in the Anglosphere” shed some light on the roots of the new wave of anti-intellectualism and right-wing populism in the UK and US that Dr Deva marked as pivotal in the failure of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. By tracing the history of imperialism and colonialism, Dr Deva showed how British and American identities are constructed around the belief in their nations’ exceptional character that distinguishes them from the rest of the world and is often rendered as superior. While remaining significant global powers, both the UK and US have seen some decline in their international influence and have been shattered by the recent financial crisis. Both events have contributed to the newly revived Anglospheric exceptionalism that entails anti-immigration sentiments as well as distrust in scientists and intellectuals who are labelled “elites” by right-wing populists. Large parts of the presentation dealt with Brexit that Dr Deva explained in relation to the British people’s perception of their nation as inherently distinct from other European nations and thus incompatible with the European project. He revealed, however, that recent surveys suggest a marked shift in the Brexiteers’ conviction that was shaken by Johnson’s ineffective response to the pandemic. Similarly, the presentation unmasked how the American concept of “liberty”, that has been repeatedly evoked by Trump to criticize state interference, inhibited timely reaction to the pandemic. Finally, Dr Deva proposed that Trump’s underplaying of the COVID-19 pandemic and his failure to slow down the spread of the virus in the US cost him the recent presidential election that he lost to Joe Biden despite still attracting an alarming number of voters. Dr Deva’s keynote was followed by a lively discussion about Trumpism, Brexit, right-wing populism in Central European countries, and the role coronavirus played in the US elections.

6. Panel 3: Social Breakdowns and Suffering in the Anthropocene

The last panel, chaired by Tereza Šmilauerová, opened with Tereza Walsbergerová from Masaryk University whose presentation “Taken Bad: Conspiracism and/as Sickness in Diane Johnson’s *The Shadow Knows*” evoked some of the themes and questions raised by Don Sparling the previous day, especially concerning conspiracism and so-called “plague fiction”. Walsbergerová emphasized the genre’s continuing relevance as it reveals societal ills and socially constructed ideologies that are irrelevant in the face of a larger catastrophe such as a global pandemic. Her presentation was devoted to postmodern fiction that treats society as inherently ill and uses

physical illness as a tool for uncovering other forms of postmodern suffering that Walsbergerová paralleled to paranoia, “one of the most corrosive symptoms of the condition of postmodernity” (Walsbergerová, 21 Nov 2020). She then went on to demonstrate this parallel on Diane Johnson’s feminist novel *The Shadow Knows* (1974), particularly on the conspiracism and physical illness of its two female characters, N. and Ev respectively. Walsbergerová’s careful analysis ultimately suggested that through the dichotomy of the mind and the body the novel reflects the disconnect between traditional Western feminism and intersectional feminism in the 1970s America.

The panel continued with a presentation “Representation of COVID-19 in Anglophone literature and cultural values in institutions: Learning from the past and looking to the future” by Parin Somani, an independent scholar from India. Somani’s presentation stood out from the vast majority of gloomy and highly critical talks for its positive outlook and hopeful message. Somani contended that the current pandemic has put into question the existing value systems through the disruption of institutional functioning. Moreover, her research revealed that recent Anglophone literature has witnessed the emergence of works that encourage the reassessment of Eurocentric worldview. Somani attributes this trend to the COVID-19 pandemic that she believes has re-ignited old and new social justice movements such as the BLM protests. As globalization allows for a widespread and rapid transfer of information, cultural values and diverse experiences are shared among institutions which allows for new pathways to originate in Anglophone studies. Finally, Somani stressed the importance of transcultural institutional cooperation if global success in institutional functioning is to be achieved.

The third presenter, Sarah Rose Olson from Western Washington University, USA, introduced her paper “Interspecies Pedagogies for Educating in the Anthropocene” in which she proposed the pedagogical framework of “Critical Humane Education;” an eco-educational model encouraging critical and systematic thinking (Olson, 2019). Olson first spoke of the importance of including Critical Animal Studies (CAS) in Environmental Education and Literary Studies as CAS offers unique insights of interspecies justice that contests anthropocentric thinking by shifting focus to other-than-human animals and the natural world that is viewed as interconnected. Olson then explained how she applied these theoretical methods in practice and presented research results collected from a seminar titled “Introduction to Critical Animal Studies: Theory, Agency, and Action”. Her analysis of student responses, assignments, and discussions showed that students gained new holistic perspectives for confronting socio-political issues that include interspecies justice.

Opportunities in the Eyes of a Storm

The final presentation of the conference was delivered by Denisa Krásná from Masaryk University whose paper “Sick Land, Sick Animals, Sick People, Sick Planet: Intersectional Analysis of Distance as the Foundation of Exploitative Capitalism” highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed some harmful practices that were normalized in the Western capitalist society. Like the previous presenters, Krásná emphasized the necessity of an intersectional approach to address the pressing issues of our times and revealed the link between the rights of human and other-than-human animals. As Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses and meat processing plants are reported all around the world, inhumane practices and dire unsanitary conditions in meat plants have been uncovered. Using Anna Szorenyi’s theory of distanced suffering and Karl Marx’s theories of social alienation and “metabolic rift” as frameworks, Krásná argued that *distance* is the foundation of capitalism that drives human and animal suffering and ultimately causes environmental destruction.

The conference ended on a positive note with a final lively discussion about post-modern narratives, interspecies social justice, and intersectional approaches. As several participants suggested in their presentations, the COVID-19 pandemic has opened doors to many new pathways in Anglophone studies.



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