

American Literature Research Seminar TT26 Term Card

Convenors: Nicole King & Antoine Traisnel

Week 1: Thursday, April 30

Freedom, Control, and the Cultures of Circulation Gigwork

Annie J McClanahan, University of California, Irvine

16:45, Downstairs Seminar Room, Rothermere American Institute

“Freedom, Control, and the Cultures of Circulation Gigwork” interrogates the paradoxical way that gigwork has come to be associated both with freedom and slavery, both entrepreneurial independence and dominating control. It explores the history of “independent contractor” status, arguing that informalization has long been perceived as a solution to the problem of mobile workers, from sailors to long-haul truckers. It takes up the link between 21st-century gigwork and the genre of the road narrative, reading novels by Raven Leilani, Priya Guns, and Peter Mendelsund and finding in them a complex and contradictory account of both complicity and solidarity.

Week 3: Thursday, May 14

After *Foremother Love*: Letter to a Young Black Woman Poet

Dana Elle Murphy, California Institute of Technology

16:45, Downstairs Seminar Room, Rothermere American Institute

This talk, subtitled “Letter to a Young Black Woman Poet,” reflects on the process of making the academic book *Foremother Love: Phillis Wheatley and Black Feminist Criticism* (Duke University Press, 2025). In building a poetics for and a recounting of the ways Phillis practiced love, beauty, and sorrow, the book centers both on Phillis’s eighteenth-century contexts and on the Black feminist critical contexts that emerged across universities, libraries, literary societies, study groups, gardens, and personal papers in subsequent years, including Dana Elle Murphy’s own writing in the first quarter of the 2000s. In reflecting on *Foremother Love*, Murphy presents an epistolary invitation to join in continued creative and critical engagement with poetry, archives, and other forms of literary citizenship—past, present, and future.

Week 5: Thursday, May 28

Queer Extinctions; or, Learning How to Last

Sarah Ensor, University of Wisconsin-Madison

16:45, Kloppenburg Room, Cohen Quad

This talk asks what contemporary environmental thought’s seemingly necessary emphasis on the future has rendered unthinkable, and looks to queer literature for unexpected forms of persistence that emerge “at the last”: at the at the end of life, at the end of a family line, as the last living member of a species, perhaps at the end of the future itself. Defining queerness as a mode of collective life in which these paradigms

of lasting—ending and persisting—are constitutively intertwined, I read two periods of queer extinction (the 1890s and the 1980s) for models of care, continuance, and collective action that are predicated on futurelessness. At a moment when our response to environmental and social cataclysm often involves either safeguarding the future (as we think we know it) or, alternatively, speculating and working toward alternate futures, I consider what becomes possible when we take our eyes off that nominal prize, setting our sights elsewhere and directing our energies otherwise.

Week 7: Thursday, June 11

ALRS Book Club

13:00 (lunchtime seminar), Downstairs Seminar Room, Rothermere American Institute

For this lunchtime seminar, we invite you to read *The Fire Next Time* (1963) by James Baldwin and come along for a book club-style discussion.