

**2015 AFEA Conference, La Rochelle**  
**American Literature Graduate Seminar, May 27<sup>th</sup>**

**ABSTRACTS (in alphabetical order)**

**Teresa CARBAYO LÓPEZ DE PABLO**

University of Zaragoza

Advisor: Silvia Martínez Falquina

Topic: « Women's Empowerment and Collective Memory in Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife* and Téa Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife*. »

As Toni Morrison argues in her interview for Claudia Tate collected in *Black Women Writers at Work*, every community contains "pariahs" within it that are "very useful for the conscience of that community" (129). Such statement is very much in line with the role of them main female characters in Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife* (1998) and Téa Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife* (2010).

Both female characters share many features: their marginal condition, their impossibility to speak, their sexual (and racial, in the case of *The Tiger's Wife*) discrimination resulting from the engraving of patriarchal (and colonial) patterns in their bodies, and their link with animals. All these elements shroud them in mystery and mysticism, which is multiplied by oral tradition. Wendy Faris defines them as shamanic figures who get agency and subvert their situation from their outcast and silenced position. But at the same time, they appear as cohesive elements for their communities, giving them a sense of identity. By bringing together two different traditions in the same project I intend to highlight the borrowing of motifs, tropes and themes within the different ethnic groups that convey the US literary panorama.

Erdrich turns to traditional Ojibwe beading as a motif that parallels the scaffolding of her hybrid and palimpsestic novel. Weaved out of multiple narrators, the novel shows how the antelope wife is recovered from oral tradition and re-imagined by the characters so that she not only organises the plot but gives a sense of coherence to the community. Likewise, the deaf-mute girl known as the tiger's wife is mystified and transformed in the collective memory of the Balkans' village she once inhabited. To do so, Obreht introduces shifts of focalization that merge different discourses and realities –from myth-making to intertextual voices– which highlight the creative power of the community.

Drawing of Spivak's concept of the subaltern as well as on questions of female empowerment and storytelling as opposed to Western thought, the aim of my project is to analyse how, in the aforementioned novels, the empowerment of the community as a creative force in the form of oral tradition contributes, precisely, to the empowerment of these doubly-silenced women. As a result, feminist discourses are reexamined from a fluid and relational position.

**Yves GARDES**

Université Lyon 2 Lumière

Directeur: François Specq (ENS de Lyon)

Sujet : *Ralph Waldo Emerson : Paradoxes de la poétique*

*"I look in vain for the poet whom I describe."* Ralph Waldo Emerson

La quête du poète « idéal », inachevée par Emerson, a été poursuivie par de nombreux auteurs à sa suite. Depuis, un certain consensus critique et universitaire suggère que le poète espéré par Emerson porte le nom de Walt Whitman. Pourtant, une telle conclusion, justifiée dans une certaine mesure par les principes poétiques érigés par Emerson, peut être mise à mal au regard de ces mêmes principes. Dans *The Liberating Gods*, John Anderson passe en revue les poètes qui suscitent temporairement ou durablement l'intérêt d'Emerson et explique que même Whitman ne satisfait pas toutes les conditions pour remplir ce rôle. Dès lors, est-il possible d'évoquer un autre nom, qui réponde pleinement à la description d'Emerson ?

Pour ce faire, il est nécessaire de se replonger dans son œuvre, afin de comprendre, peut-être mieux qu'Emerson lui-même, quel poète il cherchait en vain. Ainsi, il convient de s'intéresser à *la* poétique chez Emerson. Quels sont les enjeux de la poésie américaine au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle ? Comment définir le poète américain recherché, son rôle et ses devoirs ? A quels principes poétiques doit-il souscrire pour satisfaire les exigences d'Emerson ? Cette étude permet de conclure que si Emerson se réjouit de lire enfin un « poème américain », il regrette, malgré ses encouragements renouvelés, que Whitman n'écrive pas de « poème universel ». En ce sens, le nom de Walt Whitman ne peut s'envisager que comme une réponse par défaut.

La réponse est donc à chercher ailleurs. L'hypothèse qu'Emerson incarnerait lui-même le poète qu'il décrit et espère peut être formulée, dans la mesure où l'auteur américain a eu une pratique constante de la poésie au cours de sa carrière. Une étude *du* poétique chez Emerson s'impose désormais. Ses poèmes répondent-ils aux exigences qu'il a lui-même exprimées ? Un premier paradoxe apparaît alors : ses œuvres poétiques se heurtent à une forme classique ou néo-classique qu'Emerson lui-même rejette dans ses essais. Convient-il alors de rejeter ces principes ou ces poèmes ? La réponse à cette question peut se trouver dans le souffle poétique qui parcourt la prose d'Emerson et soulève un deuxième paradoxe : comment se peut-il que la prose d'Emerson soit dans une certaine mesure *plus* poétique que ses vers ? L'étude du poétique dans sa prose semble mettre au jour des conflits entre la théorie et la pratique poétique d'Emerson. Ce qui semble primer, c'est l'intuition poétique, qui s'exprime par une pratique poétique continue.

Les principes poétiques en amont de la pratique sont donc mis à l'épreuve, et la pratique poétique peut s'envisager comme un laboratoire du langage et comme expérimentation de la pensée. La pratique poétique s'envisage donc comme un acte qui s'affranchit de la forme poétique stricte et se conçoit dans le même temps comme acte de la pensée. Il n'y aurait pas de poétique *a priori*, il n'y aurait de poétique que dans l'expérience, une poétique qui s'éprouve et s'essaie dans la pratique. C'est en ce sens que l'acte poétique met à mal les systèmes et annonce par ailleurs une pensée pragmatique. Emerson en appelle à une écriture impersonnelle, et dans son prolongement, une pensée impersonnelle, qui permette de réconcilier l'individuel et l'universel. Le poète que recherche Emerson ne doit pas seulement dire l'homme américain, il doit exprimer l'homme universel dans son quotidien comme dans l'intemporel. C'est la raison pour laquelle ce travail, au-delà des précisions qu'il entend apporter sur *la* et *le* poétique chez Emerson, cherche à montrer dans quelle mesure Emily Dickinson peut prétendre incarner le poète espéré par Emerson.

**Christelle Siw Chin HA SOON**

Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV)

Directrice : Anne-Laure TISSUT, Université de Rouen

Sujet : « Elaborations identitaires : entre Histoire et fiction dans l'œuvre de Toni Morrison et Maxine Hong Kingston »

Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston have in common this attempt at presenting the American identity and its ambiguities: what it consists in, what it includes or excludes, and who is concerned – or not. Does being American only mean being born on the American territory? Is one American or does one become American? Who has the right to claim one's Americanness, and who does not?

Studying the two writers aforementioned in order to answer those questions has turned out to be particularly complex and revealed probably expected, but nonetheless disconcerting, obstacles.

For the past 4 years, I have tried to give a definition of the American identity. Does being American mean the same thing to a person who was born and raised in a white middle-class family, to one whose ancestors were slaves working in cotton fields in the South, or to yet another one who has arrived in the country through the latest immigration wave? And if not, can several definitions be accepted, or should one be privileged? Given the wide and varied historical and cultural background of the millions of citizens of the United States of America, is it still relevant to try to define the American identity as only one and unique?

Both Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston depict, in their own ways and styles, characters trying to find their place in the American society they live in. Their struggle lies in the fact that they are caught between two cultures: the one they come from, and the one they want to be part of. To be in-between the two results in the characters being strangers to both; and their disillusion grows as they try to find their place among one of them, in vain.

Defining the self is, and has always been, a task known not only as difficult, but also as unachievable. My main goal was at first to try to understand how people from such different backgrounds could see themselves as members of one same country, and hence portray the American society in its entirety, with all its subtleties. Such project, however, appears too ambitious at times, and needs to be more specifically defined to be made. Throughout my research, it has come clear to me that several elements prevent my work from flourishing fully: firstly, the numerous facets in the two writers' works that are to be taken into account in my dissertation. Morrison and Kingston use diverse ways and strategies to express their characters' doubts about their own identity: first and foremost in their queer relation to the others and to their own bodies, but also through the constant bending, distortion, and finally renewal of the language(s) used both by the characters and by the writers themselves.

Their writings are therefore so rich that limits are essential so as to build a logical and meaningful research work that would enable me to answer the initial questions raised. But what and where are those limits? And would such limits actually not become real limits to the analysis of my topic?

Secondly, such abundance of information has made its organisation difficult: all the aspects that will be explored in my dissertation are so intricately woven together that studying them one at a time, apart from each other, almost seems nonsensical.

The questions raised above are today the main hindrances that I aim at overcoming to be able to pursue and develop my research to its fullest.

**Monika HOLDER**

Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw

Advisor : Ewa Barbara Łuczak.

Topic : « Animal Symbolism in the Writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman”

Topic for AFEA presentation : Animal Symbolism in the Writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

The aim of my doctoral dissertation is to research the presence of animals and animal imagery as well as motivations behind the literary usage of animals in the works of influential American feminist writers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically for the purposes of my application for this symposium, I propose to focus on the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Western political theory is prevalent with examples of how women and animals are cast together and the centuries-long deliberation as to whether women have souls mirrored similar discussions regarding the moral status of animals. In patriarchal society, women, along with animals, are linked as “others” and viewed as subordinate to men. As a result of prevalent political and philosophical dualism, the patriarchal society has been structured along the set of binary oppositions such as man/woman, civilized/wild, human/animal. In such scheme of things, women have been juxtaposed with men and, along with animals, accorded a subservient, secondary position in culture and civilization.

A counter view to this deeply entrenched patriarchal habit developed through a growing number of 19<sup>th</sup> century female authors who promoted a change in society and culture. They challenged traditional patriarchal roles and spoke of women’s rights to their own freedom, breaking the links to any domineering male figure in their lives. They used animal symbolism either to illustrate female oppression and exploitation, or out of empathy for those natural creatures that had also become victimized by patriarchal humanism.

As a critical component of my research, I would like to examine the use of animal imagery by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman’s commentary on her period’s animal based fashion is harsh and outspoken; much like her views on the sexual roles of men and women in society, and the stereotypes and injustices that she depicted in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and *Herland* (1915). Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a severe criticism of the overbearing patriarchal society of her day, in a semiautobiographical account of a woman treated for depression. Through the cruel treatment suffered by the narrator as part of her “rest cure”, she takes on very animalistic behaviors in her own way of fighting the oppression of her husband, and keeping her sanity.

In *Herland*, Gilman’s well-known feminist utopia, the writer uses animal analogies to explain the human condition as well as to portray biological and behavioral differences between the sexes. There are opinions that *Herland*, with a focus on a female dominated culture strongly linked with nature, is a very early precursor to the ecofeminist movement that began in earnest in the 1970s. Her perspective shared on motherhood and the environment in writing *Herland* is consistent with today’s ecofeminist ideology; also reinforced by her own personal beliefs that her move from an industrialized New England to a more natural environment in California was crucial for fostering her own health and creativity.

The research methodology of my dissertation will be based on literary and cultural texts as well as their critical responses with particular emphasis on materials related to animal studies and feminist writings.

**Gabriela JELEŃSKA**

Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw

Advisor : Ewa Luczak

Topic: "Center vs. Periphery: Negotiating Space(s) in American Indian Fiction"

My PhD proposal is inspired by Bielefield conference of 2013, "Exploring the Periphery".

The assumption behind the conference's title was that the concept of periphery still implies the existence of a center, which in turn generates and sustains binary oppositions and hierarchical structures. It further postulated that in order to make sense of the newly emergent dichotomies in cultural and literary spheres this relationship needs to be renegotiated.

My presentation took as its starting point the fact that prior to first contact, resulting in colonizers giving names to particular tribes they encountered, most tribes – regardless of their origin, language and customs – referred to themselves as "the people". It led to a conclusion, that each tribe, each nation united by a common denominator: historical, geographical, cultural, sees itself and its position as the center. No matter how small in size and how peripheral in the eyes of another, such group always perceives itself as the source, and until forced to do otherwise, always looks at itself and the surrounding world through its own eyes.

With this in mind I proposed a new perspective on the opposition reservation-town (a conflict omnipresent in N.A literature), a reversed look in which it was actually the reservation (normally seen as periphery) that constituted the center. I concentrated on the characters' journey from the reservation to the city (away from something rather than towards) only to find out that despite the fact that the latter might be perceived as center in technical and social terms (jobs, status, activity, opportunity) it is the first one that proves to be the center in the symbolic meaning of the word (identity, spirituality, community, sustenance). Unlike the Western bildungsroman character who ventures (from the periphery of his life) into the world that shapes him, the Indian protagonist leaves his community to try his chances in the outside world, only to come back, beaten, and find that reservation is the center that nurtures him.

I would like to situate my thesis in this context of periphery-center, expanding the ideas from the Bielefield proposal to encompass other oppositions. The work will be broken into sections, each of them devoted to a different aspect of the periphery-center relationship. Consecutive chapters will be devoted to SPACE, TIME, LANGUAGE and PERSON, analyzing the oppositions of: reservation-town, history-present, oral-written, and community-individual. What I find challenging in this approach is that the above oppositions allow for both, the literal level of text analysis, as well as meta-reflection on the position of indigenous literature.

One "representative" book per chapter ("Ceremony" by Leslie Marmon Silko, "Fools Crow" by James Welch, "One Good Story That One" by Thomas King and "Four Souls" by Louise Erdrich) will serve as illustration of the tensions caused by the clashes, and a springboard for discussion on the extent to which reservation, history, orality and community function as "center" in Native American perception.

**Nawelle LECHEVALIER-BAKADAR Meriem KEFI**

Université de Versailles Saint Quentin en Yvelines

Directrice : Paule Lévy.

Sujet : Les femmes dans la résistance durant l'Harlem Renaissance.

Sujet présentation AFEA : “The Black American Dream in Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun*”  
African-American women’s literary works in the 1920s portray a fundamental struggle against racism, sexism and class issues. The Harlem Renaissance period indeed gave a space though limited and a voice to both African-American men and women to resist a white-male dominated world through the production of an unprecedented number of Black artistic works.

Jessie Redmon Fauset, a Harlem Renaissance writer, is an example of a forgotten writer who in her work *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929) gives the reader a revisited way of an African-American female struggle to resist both white and male derogatory representations of women.

*Plum Bun* is perceived as Fauset’s “pièce de résistance”. Published in 1929, the novel is a “künstlerroman” that depicts the journey of Angela a young Black artist in her quest of identity, happiness and freedom from her hometown Philadelphia to New York and then to Paris. Her light skin facilitates her passing for white, a color which is perceived as the golden key to power, status and money. Confined in her liminal space between two different and opposite colors, she experiences a hybrid life of blackness and whiteness, oppression and freedom, middle-class and upper-class, American and European. The protagonist puts on whiteness and moves from her home to New York, the marketplace. *Plum Bun* also portrays a society of value and exchange as well as consumption and acquisition, in which women sell themselves to the man who can pay the best price. By the same token, the novel itself is framed by a nursery rhyme about marketing which is divided through its chapters: “To market, to market/ to buy a plum bun/ Home again, home again/ market is done.”

In her very limited world, Angela sees marriage to a white and rich man not as a restricted freedom, but as freedom itself and even her only way out from her tragic existence. The protagonists in Fauset’s works are seekers of money and power which seems to be their revisited definition of marriage as well as a means to reach happiness and freedom.

During this presentation, I intend to shed light on the divine combination of being simultaneously white and rich in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will examine its consequences on the inferior race as well as the inferior gender and discuss to what extent do African-American women reject their racial pride for the powerful white status and to what extent do they reject the white status for the sake of their racial pride.

Université Rennes 2

Direction : Sylvie Bauer et Florian Tréguer.

Sujet : « L’esthétique de la Cruauté dans l’œuvre de Brian Evenson ».

Brian Evenson est un romancier et nouvelliste américain contemporain encore largement méconnu en France, qui occupe une place singulière et remarquable dans le champ de la fiction américaine. Son œuvre est placée sous le signe d'une violence inédite qui lui a valu d'ailleurs d'être excommunié de l'église mormone à laquelle il a longtemps appartenu. De fait, les ouvrages de Brian Evenson exposent le lecteur à l'exercice d'une grande violence psychologique et morale. Ils opèrent une ritualisation du geste cruel et

mettent en scène son corollaire direct, le corps supplicié. « Cruauté » vient de *cruor* qui signifie le sang, non pas le sang qui circule dans le corps (*sanguis*), mais le sang qui est versé à la suite du geste violent. Le concept de cruauté fait donc fondamentalement référence au corps et aux sévices qu'on lui inflige en ce qu'être cruel c'est dans un premier sens verser le sang de son prochain afin, par extension, d'en manifester la chair sanglante. Les ouvrages de B. Evenson ne se restreignent pas à cette première étymologie : sadisme, dénuement, expérience du manque sont autant de figures de la cruauté présentées à travers son œuvre, mais on peut néanmoins remarquer que la corporalité écorchée, putrescente, éclatée des personnages est excessivement invasive mettant de ce fait en scène la cruauté dans son sens primitif comme geste heurtant le corps.

L'œuvre de B. Evenson nous confronte à l'exercice du mal qui n'est pas rédimé par un contexte psychologisant. Le geste cruel tel qu'il y est décrit n'est le fruit d'aucune détermination quelle qu'elle soit, et ne fait l'objet d'aucune condamnation morale. A ce titre, les ouvrages d'Evenson résistent : comment comprendre ces gestes de cruauté qui échappent à tout effort d'appréhension rationnelle?

Cette thèse tente d'offrir une ébauche de catégorisation générique pour caractériser une œuvre complexe et protéiforme qui ne fait référence au genre que pour mieux s'y dérober. Les ouvrages d'Evenson semblent en effet jouer avec les codes de la science fiction, des saintes écritures mormones, du conte, du gothique, du polar qui s'entremêlent, se contaminent dans un mouvement résolument postmoderne. Si cette œuvre ne se laisse pas immédiatement réduire à un genre précis, elle résonne tout de même de cette voix sombre et cruelle qui expose les personnages qui la traversent à une épreuve à la fois physique et cognitive dont le lecteur fait aussi l'expérience.

Si dans un premier temps B. Evenson a à cœur de dévoiler la violence intrinsèque au mormonisme, son œuvre envisage la violence, et plus précisément la cruauté comme fondamentalement anhistorique. Cette étude tentera d'analyser en quoi les romans, et plus particulièrement les nouvelles d'Evenson, construisent le geste cruel non pas comme le résultat de traumatismes psychologiques ou le fruit d'une culture viciée, mais comme une propension universelle, et se pose de ce fait comme l'une des caractéristiques fondamentales de l'humanité.

Ainsi, l'œuvre s'adresse aux sens presque plus qu'à l'intellect. B. Evenson crée de véritables « blocs de Sensation », une œuvre qui percute le lecteur et s'offre à lui moins selon une logique de déchiffrement symbolique que selon une « logique de la Sensation ». A ce titre, c'est presque dans le sillage de Francis Bacon (vu par G. Deleuze) que Brian Evenson conçoit son œuvre en termes d'effets. Il s'agit pour l'auteur de réussir à créer un impact physique qui attaque le corps de celui qui interagit avec l'objet d'art.

En d'autres termes il s'agira de comprendre comment et en quoi l'œuvre de B. Evenson se présente sous la forme de ce que l'on peut appeler une « esthétique de la cruauté ». Nous essaierons donc de montrer en quoi ces ouvrages nous permettent d'appréhender la cruauté *affectivement* en ce qu'ils obéissent non pas tant à une logique représentative de la cruauté mais bien à une logique *présentative* dans laquelle le lecteur est plongé au cœur d'une expérience non médiatisée.

**Paul NADAL**

Department of Rhetoric, U.C. Berkeley

Advisors: Judith Butler (Rhetoric) and Colleen Lye (English)

Dissertation Topic: *Remittance Culture: Literature, Finance Capital, and the Global Dispensation of the Philippine Nation*

My dissertation project is an attempt to write a history of how the Philippines became one of the world's largest labor-exporting economy by bringing into comparison two seemingly distinct objects: novels and remittances, or the money that migrant workers send and the literary fictions that Filipinos produce abroad and at home. To trace the historical development of novels and remittances is to uncover a twentieth-century story about the rise of the English-language Filipino novel as it coincided with American interventions in the economic transformation of the Philippine economy. Working within a Philippine-U.S. comparative framework, I combine literary and economic history in order to pursue what my dissertation theorizes as *remittance culture*, an analytical- interpretative framework that understands remittances not only as capital, but as social form and rhetorical figure. Specifically, in turning to the literary evolution of the Filipino novel in English, I show how remittances illuminate more than the circulation of money: they are driven by and give form to the movement of bodies, ideas, and texts across time and space. The novels I study are therefore read as exemplary literary representations of both the social basis underlying the geographical dispersion of Filipinos in search of work abroad and the legacy of American colonialism in the financialization of the Philippine economy.

My dissertation is based on the idea that such global transactions of bodies and money are not only conveyed through various economic instruments and technologies; they are also expressed and shaped by the literatures produced by Filipinos in the Philippines and abroad. The readings offered in my dissertation are grounded precisely in the question of how literature and other cultural forms adapt and resist finance capital's signifying system by presenting new forms of looking and representing, and the ways of living and being in the world that their narratives suggest. I take as a point of departure that prior to and beyond capitalist value remittances represent the care of the migrant for those they have left behind. I ask: How does this work of care behind Filipino remittances endure and live beyond the fleeting temporality of money? How might an understanding of remittances as social form bring into view not only the spread of finance capital on a global scale, but also lines of human activity: socio-subjective practices and experiences that limn—to borrow a phrase from Hannah Arendt—potential forms of world making. Indeed, it is toward recognizing and recovering such potential forms of world making that I close read the various narratives of war, memory, colonialism, development and modernity in the Filipino novels that I consider in my dissertation. In proposing *remittance culture* as a way to comparatively thread together a certain history of Philippine-U.S. literary and economic relations, my dissertation project ultimately aims to articulate the historicity of Filipino literary form, and therefore the potential historical intervention I see at work in their narratives.