

HOW TO BE A WOMAN DURING THE TRUMP ERA

An Undergraduate Colloquium at
Toronto Metropolitan University



"Melania Trump Wore a Jacket Saying 'I Really Don't Care' on Her Way to Texas Shelters," *New York Times* 21 June 2018.

Monday, 10 April 2023
9:30 AM - 11:00 AM

Program

WELCOME

9:30-9:35 AM

Land Acknowledgment

Greetings: Dr. Amy Peng, Associate Dean, Innovation in Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Arts

Introductory Remarks, Dr. Irene Gammel, Executive Director, MLC Research Centre

#METOO AS CREATIVE RESISTANCE

9:35-10:20 AM

Institutional Liability in Kate Russell's My Dark Vanessa

Brenda Aleman

The Role of Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita in Kate Russell's My Dark Vanessa

Anna Nová

Unreliable Narration in Kate Russell's My Dark Vanessa

Klára Lopuchovská

Trauma, #MeToo, and the Memoir: Chanel Miller's Know My Name

Nora Dempsey

Fraternity Culture and Campus Violence in Miller's Know My Name

Lucinda Sande

GRIEVANCES & SOCIAL JUSTICE

10:20-10:55 AM

Mortality and the Elderly During COVID-19: Adichie's Notes on Grief

Songlee (Jane) Pyo

Black Eulogy in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Notes on Grief

Lannii Layke Pettiford

Cyberbullying in Kate Baer's I Hope This Finds You Well

Taranveer Bhangal

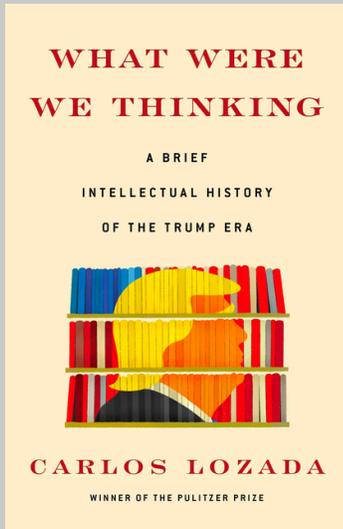
The "Thingness" of Words in Kate Baer's I Hope This Finds You Well

Cassandra Lubiana

CONCLUSION & THANK YOU

10:55-11:00 AM

Colloquium Abstracts



How did contemporary American literature respond to the crisis of the Trump years and beyond? Against Trump's prejudice driven by racism, sexism, and xenophobia, what did it mean to be a woman in an explicitly misogynistic environment? The era witnessed the rise of the literature of the #MeToo movement making visible sexual abuse and harassment, as well as the poetic resistance against misogyny and racism on social media, along with evocations of vulnerability during the pandemic. In two public colloquium panels, students explore these questions and themes through contemporary American literature, while also drawing on the insights from guest lectures given by distinguished American authors and scholars visiting this experiential learning class. Collectively, these papers engage with books that Pulitzer Prize winner Carlos Lozada, in his 2020 book *What Were We Thinking: A Brief Intellectual History of the Trump Era*, calls the resistance against the Trump presidency.

PANEL I: #METOO AS CREATIVE RESISTANCE

Brenda Aleman, "Institutional Liability in Kate Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*"

What responsibility does an institution have in protecting a minor from sexual abuse? This paper draws on the concept of "due diligence" as defined in the 2016 article "In Their Hands: Restoring Institutional Liability for Sexual Harassment in Education" by legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon noting that "due diligence requires that known human rights violations, or those of which an entity should have been aware, actually be remedied and prevented from recurring" (2038). In the case of the fictional Browick boarding school in New England, as critically

depicted in Kate Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), the school authorities failed in their due diligence to investigate warnings and put an end to the abuse of female students.

Anna Nová, "The Role of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in Kate Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*"

In Kate Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*, Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955) functions as a central intertext. In this Trump-era novel, English teacher Jacob Strane's seduction of underaged Vanessa Wye is shown to follow the template of Nabokov's middle-aged literature professor Humbert Humbert in his seduction of 12-year-old Lolita. By using *Lolita* as an intertext, Russell reverses Nabokov's 1950s male-centred script by providing a 21st century script, revealing the long-term damage on a student who has fallen into the trap of romanticizing the *Lolita* story.

Klára Lopuchovská, "Unreliable Narration in Kate Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*"

In his article "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction," literary scholar Bruno Zerweck observes that unreliable narration in modern fiction is often determined by a "detective framework" (78). In other words, unreliable narrators unintentionally incriminate themselves, giving the reader crucial though indirect information about their state of mind, as seen with Russell's protagonist Vanessa Wye who refuses to admit that she was victimized by her teacher Jacob Strane, persistently ignoring what her friends and readers see: that Strane seduced and coerced her into sex entrapping her in her past.

Nora Dempsey, "Trauma, #MeToo, and the Memoir: Chanel Miller's *Know My Name*"

Whereas Russell uses fiction, many #MeToo authors use autobiographical accounts, such as the memoir.

According to life writing scholar Ilana Blumberg, the memoir weaves a complicated weave, "the distinction between the 'I' who was narrating and the 'I' who was being narrated" (98). This paper argues that Chanel Miller's *Know My Name: A Memoir* (2019) uses the genre to articulate past trauma and pain. First published in the wake of the Trump era, Miller's memoir functions as a high-risk #MeToo story, depicting the sexual assault the author suffered in 2015. Miller publicly connects her

experience to other survivors through, first, her published victim-impact statement and, next, her memoir.

Lucinda Sande, "Fraternity Culture and Campus Violence in Miller's *Know My Name*"

In *Know My Name: A Memoir* (2019), Chanel Miller takes readers inside the night of her assault at a Stanford University fraternity party in 2015. This presentation explores fraternity culture as integral to understanding the circumstances of Miller's story and her perpetrator, Stanford student athlete Brock Turner, who was convicted of felony rape in 2016 and sentenced to six months in prison. By drawing on social scientist Cortney Franklin and her colleagues' article "Sexual Assault on the College Campus: Fraternity Affiliation, Male Peer Support, and Low Self-Control," the presentation explores how fraternities can create peer pressure and a climate supportive of rape.

PANEL II: GRIEVANCES & SOCIAL JUSTICE

Songlee (Jane) Pyo, "Mortality and the Elderly During COVID-19: Adichie's Notes on Grief"

The Trump era was marked by the pandemic, as seen in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's memoir, *Notes on Grief* (2021), where the loss of her elderly father unfolds a complex process of change. Having to let go of

pre-COVID-19 expectations related to ideas of longevity and health, the daughter must accept “intimations of mortality” (Scarre 63) and the materiality of the body. This presentation draws on philosopher Geoffrey Scarre, who argues that the pandemic made middle-aged citizens realize that “life is a riskier business” than previously thought. Ultimately, Adichie’s memoir is a process of acknowledging a sense of her own vulnerability and mortality.

Lannii Layke Pettiford, "Black Eulogy in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Notes on Grief*"

This presentation draws on Black Studies scholar Felicia R. Stewart’s 2017 article “The Rhetoric of Shared Grief,” exploring Black eulogistic rhetoric to affirm the connection between the griever and the deceased. Arguing that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Notes on Grief* functions as the daughter’s eulogy for her Nigerian father, this presentation explores the dual dimensions of the black eulogy as both a celebration of her father and as a way of anchoring her relationship with him and creating community during a pandemic. The presentation considers Adichie’s text in the *New Yorker* alongside the illustrations by artist Lossapardo.

Taranveer Bhangal, "Cyberbullying in Kate Baer's *I Hope This Finds You Well*"

In their article “Defining Cyberbullying,” psychologists Elizabeth Englander and her colleagues define cyberbullying as

aggressive intimidation with “intent, repetition, and power imbalance” (140). While the term “cyberbullying” was first used in 1999, the Trump era witnessed a rise in online hate speech against women and racial minorities fueled by Trump’s own online misogyny to which Kate Baer’s 2021 poetry collection *I Hope This Finds You Well* offers a resisting antidote, poetically calling out Trump. In each poem, the hateful text received by Baer online becomes the source text for her response in support of women.

Cassandra Lubiana, "The 'Thingness' of Words in Kate Baer's *I Hope This Finds You Well*"

Kate Baer’s *I Hope This Finds You Well* (2021) is a powerful anthology of what Baer calls “erasure poems” (xi). The poems originate in the polarized comments—both hateful and supportive—her readers posted on her website in response to her blogs. The erasure technique involves blacking out specific words from the original message, the striking empty space on the page representing the hateful comments. This presentation argues that Baer draws attention to the materiality of words in building relationships, like Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory” suggesting that objects, regardless of size or purpose, have agency affecting human emotions, actions, and relationships.

ORGANIZERS

Irene Gammel and Jason Wang

The students in *ENG 417 Special Topics in American Literature:*

How to Be a Woman During the Trump Era

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