

INTRODUCTION

THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF TIME AND SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING

CLAIRE O'CALLAGHAN AND ALEX PRYCE

The literary theorist and writer Susan Sontag draws on Albert Einstein when she argues that 'time exists in order that everything doesn't happen all at once' and 'space exists so that it doesn't all happen to you', and by this standard 'the novel is an ideal vehicle of time and space' (215). Aptly, in a temporal period in which physicists are still engaging in definitions and explanations of the dimensions of time and space, and which has witnessed the close of one millennium and the beginning of another, writing by women authors has never before been more engaged with and influenced by conceptualisations of 'time' and 'space', thus testifying to Sontag's view on the capacious nature of the novel. Indeed, in the work of women writers—and specifically contemporary women writers—time past, time present and time future intermingles in fiction with notion of spaces between and beyond. So, while 'time' and 'space' are separate concepts, they are also, in the writing of women authors, inherently interconnected.

Significantly, feminist theory, politics and practice is also interested in the relationships between past, present and future, and at the same time has become more global and diverse in its varied focus. Such interest is unsurprising given that notions of space and time—which are physical, psychological, spiritual and material—underpin the human experience connecting individuals to culture, offering up diverse and rich experiences of living. The works under consideration in this Special Issue of *Peer English: A Journal of New Critical Thinking* indicate that notions of time and space are given prominence by contemporary women authors. Although, in most cases, little time has passed since the publication of the texts under discussion, the issue of immediacy, modernity and contemporariness is key to their effect and impact in our own time. Moreover, despite the success of the Women's Liberation Movement and the subsequent attention paid to women's writing by feminist scholars in the academy, the space afforded to women's writing more broadly remains contested in publishing houses and the media.

In the collection of essays presented here, the significance of Virginia Woolf's plea for women to have 'a room of one's own' provides a recurrent focal point and a thread of continuity across the collection. Woolf's impassioned call for women writers to claim their own space and write women into literary studies of the past and present continues to hold enormous influence both for women writers in their engagement with conceptions of time and space and subjectivity in fiction, and for the scholars here who interrogate these images. Woolf's passion and polemics on the past, present and future of literature combined with her dynamic work across many genres, and the undeniable resonances of her literary epoch at the turn of this century, represent the fulcrum from which many of the issues still being discussed in these articles can pivot.

As the breadth of analysis in this collection indicates, the media through which contemporary female authors explore the multiple manifestations of the temporal and the spatial extends further than Sontag's focus on the novel—in addition to fiction these essays address poetry, short stories, novellas and autobiography. They are varied in their subjects and approaches too, from queer theory to trauma theory by way of considerations of lineage, myth, feminism and the body, suggesting that at this particular moment the study of contemporary women's writing is perhaps broader than it has ever been.

It seems fitting, in the context of this broadness, that this collection is prefaced by an original piece by the writer Gwyneth Lewis. Lewis is a writer who works in many different literary forms, and her work has engaged with space, such as *Zero Gravity*, a poetry collection which draws on a family member's space flight in the late 1990s, and *The Meat Tree*, a novella based on Welsh myth set on board a space vessel and in a virtual reality. Her engagement with time has an unusually solid appearance in the poem which adorns the front of the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff. This is, fittingly, located just in front of a rift in the space-time continuum, as seen in the BBC series *Dr Who* and *Torchwood*.

Beginning with a focus on women's precarious engagements with space, Veronika Schuchter considers parallels between the specificity of specific rooms and dwellings in Jean Rhys's celebrated novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* and two of her lesser considered short fictions. Schuchter argues that not only do Rhys's depictions of space reflect the author's own troubled engagements with domestic spatialities but also that Rhys's representation of a variety of settings articulates commonalities in her character's unease in domestic settings. Schuchter suggests that while

Rhys's fictions reveals a persistent longing for domestic stability, this is always, sadly, just out of reach for her characters.

In his paper on Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*, James Bailey turns his attention to the nexus of time and space in Spark's classic novel and argues that its spatio-temporal interactions in the plot of the novel are integral to its unsettling effect. Bailey contends that Spark's novel, which focuses on the final hours preceding the death of the protagonist, emphasises the specificities of time and space and their interrelation to identity and subjectivity. His reading of the use of the present tense and ever-present tension in this inverted trauma-narrative considers how violence, and particularly sexual violence, remains a great cause for concern for women in our time.

Remaining with images of trauma, the painful and personal experience of familial horror in a patriarchal regional space is the subject of Emily Dickinson's consideration of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Considering specifically the intersection of time, space and regionalism in the history of the American South, Dickinson focuses on how the protagonist's ability to articulate the trauma of incest is both inhibited and assisted by the public sphere, the so-called 'white trash' community she inhabits. In a thoughtful mediation on Allison's harrowing text, Dickinson asks whether Allison depicts time—or the passing of time—as the only measure which can adequately respond to, and therefore offer a form of release from, familial abuse.

Libe Garcia Zarranz continues the theme of troubled international spaces in her discussion of works by Dionne Brand and Emma Donoghue. Focusing on the notion of metropolitan, urban space and the individual's position within the city, Zarranz argues that the particular representation of Toronto and London in writings by these authors seeks 'alternative logics of embodiment and space in the panorama of the unevenly globalized twenty-first century'. Zarranz shows how the gendered and racialised characters in the novels in question make new claims to the space they inhabit that raises ethical issues about legitimacy and belonging in a denationalized global city.

In Arina Cristea's discussion of city spaces, Cristea explores the 'urban imaginary' as a personally-owned space across the autobiography and fiction of Michèle Roberts. Cristea argues that Roberts offers an alterative female engagement with the city of London that challenges the anxieties of women in public space while offering new forms of pleasure for women in the metropolis.

Moving away from public space, Claire O'Callaghan's paper turns attention to the contemporary reimagining of Victorian domesticity. Focusing on the concept of home in the work of the neo-Victorian writer

Sarah Waters, O'Callaghan argues that Waters's expression of lesbianism and spatiality not only queers dominant imagery of the Victorian home but offers new understandings of sexuality and spatiality.

Complementing O'Callaghan's insights, Emma Young's reading of Emma Donoghue's novel *Landing* also explores the concept of home in Donoghue's contemporary lesbian novel. Young suggests that Donoghue not only addresses definitions of home and homeland in the context of queer migration but also uses lesbianism and long-distance relationships as a means of undermining stable signifiers of temporal-spatio boundaries.

Rather than addressing a fictional counter to grand narrative, Alex Pryce draws on the grand narrative of publishing in the contemporary period to consider how women's poetry, and particularly feminist women's poetry, was excluded from and has faded from visibility in Northern Irish culture. Pryce shows how an interrogation of the binary value-systems of patriarchal culture, and their manifestations in poetry from Northern Ireland during the Troubles, offers startling insights into the androcentricism of poetry anthologies in the late twentieth-century period.

'The Paradox of Time', as the late poet Henry Austin Dobson summarises, is not that time passes quickly, but rather 'Alas, Time stays, we go' (2). Literature is what endures, aided or hindered by the process of critical reading and thinking. Perhaps through this collection the case for recent women's writing can be made for the future.

Acknowledgements

This volume grew from the Postgraduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network's third biennial international conference entitled 'Time and Space in Contemporary Women's Writing' that was hosted at the University of Hull in September 2011. The three-day conference explored how contemporary women writers engage with and utilise the concepts of 'time' and 'space' in their writing. Sessions at the conference were organised around themes and approaches which included textual spaces, the subject in time and history, traumatic and violent spaces, global, regional and urban imaginaries, and the domestic and bodily space. From these varied panels, we are pleased to introduce this special issue of *Peer English* which includes selected revised and expanded articles based on work delivered at the conference.

We wish to acknowledge the support of the RCUK Roberts Fund at the University of Hull in sponsoring our conference and the Department of English at Hull for its generous assistance. We wish to thank Professor Ann Heilmann from the University of Cardiff and the poet and writer Dr Gwyneth Lewis for their contributions as keynote speakers who so eloquently stimulated discussion and debate on our chosen topic. Thanks are also due to Professor Mark Llewellyn (University of Strathclyde) for leading a career development workshop with our delegates. We owe a very special acknowledgement to Dr Nadine Muller (University of Hull) and Theresa Jamieson who also co-organised the initial event, and for other members of the Postgraduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network for their early contributions to this project. Finally, we wish to thank our conference delegates who have given us the opportunity to bring together a diverse response to the conference theme, and perhaps most importantly, thanks to our contributors who have enabled us to produce this research output from the event.

WORKS CITED

- Dobson, Henry Austin. *The Complete Poetical Works of Austin Dobson*. Ed. H. Milford. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923.
- Sontag, Susan. *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump. New York: Picador, 2007.