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IASH Final Report – Dr Guy Stevenson

Aims

The main purpose of my postdoctoral fellowship was to research a book I'm writing on the politics of 1950s and 60s literary school The Beat Generation. I aimed to look particularly at the impact of Beat ideas in Britain, drawing on records of the 1962 International Edinburgh Writers' Conference – a major transatlantic literary event – to consider the relationship between British and American philosophical and political approaches among experimental authors. Through this, the plan was (and is) to challenge conventional assumptions about literary progressivism in the post-war period, highlighting politically and philosophically reactionary aspects of the Beats' work to reassess the influence of a historically significant movement on the larger culture, in their time and ours.

Knowledge exchange events

The fellowship gave me a number of opportunities to share my work – within my own discipline and further afield.

In April, I travelled to Athens with other IASH fellows to participate in a conference on 'Democracy and Cultures', organized by the European Consortium for Humanities Institutes and Centres. Here I gave a paper that was an extension of my research on the Beat Generation at IASH. It used the Beats to explore the emergence of progressive identity politics in the 1950s and 60s and to consider what happens to heretical cultural ideas when they enter the mainstream and come under fire from new heretical movements. The presentation drew interesting questions relating to art and political rebellion, to the mainstream commercial absorption of heretical cultural values, and larger issues of racial and class identity politics. I discovered common ground with my co-panelists on questions of literary obscenity and the inefficacy of avant-gardes. I also found it useful to re-connect with main conference organizer, Angeliki Spiropolou (Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, London) whom I've met through our common work in modernism studies, and to meet and exchange ideas for collaboration with professor of theology, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (Lund University).

In May, the final month of my fellowship, I gave a work-in-progress talk at the institute. I outlined my two main hypotheses, that: 1. The 1950s and 60s literary American counterculture was informed by a pessimistic, anti-humanist philosophy that contradicts its reputation for philosophical optimism and political progressivism; and 2. this provides the historical

context for public discourse on social justice today, as well as the backlash against it. This generated helpful discussion with other cultural studies fellows about racial and gender political aspects to my project. It also helped me to formulate a response to reader reports on the book I'm writing.

I closed my time at IASH with a one-day Susan Manning seminar on the 1962 International Edinburgh Writers' Conference – at which I shared my findings from the National Library of Scotland's transcripts of the event and discussed new ideas relating to its attendees with specialists from the English and History departments at Edinburgh, Strathclyde, Glasgow and UCL. The seminar was the result of three months of contact with members of staff in Edinburgh's school of Humanities Edinburgh. It involved contributions from professors Randall Stevenson and Alex Thomson, and Dr Angela Bartie – who were all instrumental in my decision to apply for a fellowship at IASH, and whom I have plans to collaborate with in the near future.

Finally, the fellowship led to my participation in 'performance hangout' project, organized by a colleague at IASH, Dr Owen Parry at the start of June. This event, which asked questions about the dynamic between performer and audience in experimental artistic settings, gave me the opportunity to share my ideas on what the 1960s counterculture can teach us about our current political and cultural situation. I gave a short talk here on the growth of a new subversive counterculture from the right rather than the left since 2016, and on how we can use the history of the original counterculture to understand and respond to this.

Publication outputs

While at IASH I worked on the following publications, now either at or near completion:

1. 'Anti-Humanist Modernisms', Special Issue of the literature and critical theory journal *Textual Practice*. I edited the bulk of the essays contained in here during my time at IASH, and wrote both the introduction and my own article contribution. All materials have now been submitted, and we expect publication in first quarter of 2020.
2. *Anti-Humanism in American Modernist Literature* (previously entitled *Disdaining the Tribe: Anti-Humanism in the American Counterculture*), monograph for Palgrave MacMillan. I wrote the 3rd and 4th of 6 chapters for this book while at IASH. All materials are contracted for submission in December 2019. The book is set to be published in 2020.

The following publications are in preparation, based on research I carried out at IASH:

1. 'Cluster: The Edinburgh International Writers' Conference, 1962', a set of 6-7 essays drawn from the Susan Manning Seminar, to be proposed for publication by the Modern Language Association journal PMLA.
2. Feature article on political correctness and alternative standup comedy (commissioned by *Prospect* magazine). This will make use of my research into the 1960s counterculture as well as interviews with IASH sabbatical fellow, Dr Jonathan Wyatt.

Conclusion

I was only at IASH for three months, but found the time hugely rewarding. As well as time and space for research, it introduced me to a number of interesting scholars in my own field and beyond. I was and am extremely grateful for the daily intellectual stimulation and the welcoming environment Steve, Ben, Donald and Pauline have created here.