

'No Theme'

LLEWELYN HOPWOOD

Issue 15 of *Oxford Research in English* is exceptional. Not only due to the standard of writing and the breadth of interests covered, but also due to the editorial experiment it contains. *ORE* has only ever published themed issues. The Autumn issue (kindly) borrows its theme from the always fruitful English Graduate Conference, while the theme for the Winter issue is conceived by committee members seeking to find a topic that is focussed enough to encourage high standard contributions but wide enough to ensure that enough articles can be submitted. It was decided this year that it might be beneficial for both authors and the journal for this to change.

ORE's mission statement is to help fledgling academics get their foot in the door of academic publishing by providing both an accessible platform and a rigorous, and hopefully helpful, editorial process. As such, most of its submissions come from postgraduate students and are, for the most part, adapted from university essays. With that in mind, the problem with the themed issues is that only students who happen to have written essays that match either theme are eligible for consideration. Not only does this exclude many potential contributors, but it often leads to excellent articles having to be turned away simply because they do not fit the theme or because their virtues have been marred by the author's attempts to crowbar it into their articles.

Issue 15 is an experiment in which we requested submissions on *any* topic related to English language or literature, with no overarching theme: a 'No Theme' issue. As expected, the number of submissions sky-rocketed and the committee and peer reviewers faced the challenging task of whittling them down to the following seven peer-reviewed articles, two feature articles, and one book review.

We begin with Serena Alagappan's in-depth analysis of Nyssa Chow's *The Story of Her Skin*. This genre-bending, interdisciplinary website contains everything from photographs and video clips to historical prose and audio clips as Chow interrogates systemic colourism across five generations of women in her own family in Trinidad. Using media theory as a

framework, Alagappan argues that the medium—or multimedia—chosen by the author to convey her message is the message itself; an inconsistent and fragmented narrative that could not be told in a print book. Next, Meena Venkataramanan explores the concepts of ‘Afropessimism’, ‘social death’, and ‘allyship’ within the African-American community, which receives sharp yet witty criticism in the satirical novels of Paul Beatty. The notion of irreversible social death is portrayed as absurd and while Afropessimist ridicule of white allyship is indeed supported, it is complicated by the argument that other marginalised groups can be genuine allies to Black suffering. We stay in the world of contemporary literature for Danny Shanahan’s ‘From Paisleys to Palestine’, which explores the works of three Kashmiri authors, all of whom have several intersecting identities: as writers of fiction, journalists, academics, public intellectuals, and human rights activists. Shanahan seeks to understand and explain the significance of these overlapping roles and how they tie into the internationalisation of the Kashmiri dispute in these and other early anglophone Kashmiri texts.

The second half of ‘No Theme’ deals with literature from England and begins in the early modern period. Seán O’Neill’s contribution on the so-called *Parnassus* plays, performed at the turn of the seventeenth century, considers the formation of personal identity within these works that provided an environment in which student participants could enact styles of selfhood. O’Neill concludes that, despite adopting a critical stance towards academic education as a form of self-fashioning, the *Parnassus* playwrights inculcate a dexterity of self-conception through dramaturgy beneficial to graduates entering the working world. Paige Allen then takes us to the much-loved *Wuthering Heights* as she explores how a character’s trajectory can be traced through their reaction to illness. Allen’s useful reminder that nearly the entire novel is conveyed through a spell of convalescence—a phase of ongoing recuperation following illness and also a liminal period in which time moves differently and one’s identity is uncertain—foregrounds a network of time, illness, performativity, and identity. The principal body of articles concludes with a study of the importance of sound in the poetry of Alice Oswald. Eliza Tewson listens to Oswald’s work and argues that her poetry is self-consciously aware of its status as a listened-to object, and that this knowledge informs its presentation of the act of reading as a contingent, collaborative interaction with its reader. This, then, shifts our understanding of her poems from being fixed products to reveal a more fluid process where language is vivid even after being printed on the page.

Variety continues with the issue’s feature articles. The first considers specialist and amateur knowledge as Amy Wells delves into the essay form.

We learn how the nineteenth-century essay in particular situated itself as anti-expert, anti-professional, and anti-specialist. We also learn how this positioning engaged with academic criticism, which itself was a leading contributor to the development of the essay genre in the first place. Then follows one of the first literary studies of one of the earliest surviving instances of slave literature from the U.S.A. Reid Anrod considers the poetic skill of David Drake—aka ‘Dave’, an early nineteenth-century slave and artisan—by examining the interaction between the utilitarian and artistic functions of the pots upon which Dave’s verse was inscribed. Fittingly, a review of one of the first histories of the index sits at the end of this issue, where an index would lie. Grace Khuri reviews Dennis Duncan’s *Index, A History of the*, which charts the 800-year history of this finding aid; a history dotted with a great variety of curiosities, intrigue, and academic and creative cross-pollination, which we hope you too will find among the ‘No Theme’ articles.

Lastly, this issue marks the end of my tenure as co-editor and indeed member of the *ORE* team. Thank you to all committee members with whom I have worked, particularly Ann Ang and Zachary Garber. More recently, however, I would like to thank Flynn Allott whose intelligence and entertainment made academic editing a stimulating world.