

Anne Carson and the Unknown: Explorations in 21st-Century Experimental Poetry

UCLouvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, 24-25 May 2023

Keynote speakers:

Laura JANSEN, Associate Professor in Classics and Comparative Literature, University of Bristol

Ian RAE, Associate Professor of English, King's University College at Western University

Christine WIESENTHAL, Professor of English, University of Alberta

This international conference on Canadian author and translator Anne Carson aims to stimulate discussion about an aspect of her work that has been little explored thus far: the unknown. The unknown—which has conceptual roots in, inter alia, the fantastic and psychoanalysis—is, however, a key notion in Carson's writings. Elizabeth Harvey has recently explored aspects of the unknown in Carson's oeuvre in relation to the *incognito*, which she connects to “madness, death, silence, dementia, mourning, prophecy, frenzy, anachronism and sleep” (2021: 106). Moreover, Carson's focus on the unknown can be linked to her characteristic juxtaposition of the poetic and scholarly in her writing. In *Symbolon: The Poetry of Anne Carson* (2015), Drew McDowell goes as far as to claim that Carson's greatest achievement lies in “her recursive questioning about the relation between poetry and knowledge” (247). McDowell is not the only scholar who has noted the importance of questioning—a prerequisite when engaging with the unknown—in Carson's work (e.g. Upton 2005). In *From Cohen to Carson* (2008), Ian Rae has remarked that Carson's “preferred subject of inquiry is [...] a centripetal force whose centre cannot be reached” (258). In light of this crucial aspect of thorough re-interrogation, how does Carson's work (re)configure the relation between knowledge and poetry, including examples that test the boundaries of the genre? In particular, given Carson's renown as an innovator of form that breaks the mold of generic expectations, we might ask what alternative modes of thinking her poetic experiments produce.

Such repeated—or even “obsessive” (Upton 2005: 28)—inquiring can also take the form of a creative practice of “erring,” described by Laura Jansen in her introduction to *Anne Carson / Antiquity* (2021) as “a sense of straying from the accepted or expected course or standard of things and, pointedly, what happens as one stands on the edge of certain matter and jumps into the unknown” (5). Errancy is here conceived as a route into understanding how the unknown operates in Carson's work. But the unknown is not only related to such “route[s] to the strange” led by the potential of language (Sze 2021: 64). Johanna Skibsrud has addressed the idea of the other as an unknowable in *The Poetic Imperative* (2020) by analyzing the ability of the poetic subject to write past its own boundaries and enact “the possibility of constantly reconfiguring the relation between telling and not telling, self and other” in Carson's work (14). Moreover, Christine Wiesenthal has identified a “deliberately elliptical”, “parsimonious poetics” in Carson's oeuvre that considers the excised and unknown in a tension between affective grief and “ironic economic rationalism” (2020: 196, 205).

This conference thus explores the notion of the unknown in two specific ways: we invite scholars to delve into these unexplored areas of Carson studies, but we also seek to home in on the specific explorations of thought in Carson's work. More specifically, we seek to enquire what Carson's oeuvre can reveal about the epistemologies of 21st-century forms of experimental and probing poetry. How are women, including those from a (distant) past, portrayed in Carson's work and how are the

discourses surrounding minorities and people that have historically been rendered invisible critically treated in her writings? Which functions do language and the use of translations have in this context? In what ways can experiments with genre and media contribute to an alternative form of knowledge? What role do emotion and affect play in this story?

The conference therefore deliberately focuses on a broad understanding of the concept of the 'unknown.' It invites new understandings of the term to probe, explore, and celebrate the more analytic end of Carson's breadth of work across a variety of genres and themes. We invite contributions on a range of topics, including, but not limited to:

- Questions of knowledge formation, including of the self, in Carson's writing;
- Feminist issues in Carson's work, such as the depiction of women as unknowable;
- Questions of otherness and monstrosity in her work;
- The concept of polychronicity, in particular the juxtaposition of classical and modern thought, antiquity and postmodernity in her work;
- The role of affect(s) and its (their) relation to knowledge in her work;
- Reflections on Carson's reinventions of genre, such as the prose poem and other hybrid forms;
- Deconstructionist readings of Carson's writings and her approach to language;
- Translation studies and the role of ancient Greek/Latin in conceptions of knowledge;
- Intermedial methodologies focusing especially on the role of the visual in her oeuvre;
- (New) material studies and the role of the medium in disseminating knowledge;
- Carson's afterlife: authors who critically engage with the thinking of Carson in their own writings, or explicitly position themselves in relation to her oeuvre, and what their writings can teach us about Carson's work.

Proposals (ca. 300 words) for 20-minute papers and a biographical note should be sent to annecarsonconference2023@uclouvain.be by **12 September 2022**. We also welcome panel proposals of two to three papers (ca. 300-word overview plus 300-word individual abstracts / max. 90 min.), as well as experimental or creative-critical approaches to papers (incl. round-table discussions, performances, etc.). The committee will communicate their decisions by October 2022. Selected contributions will be considered for inclusion in a peer-reviewed volume or special issue of a journal.

In order to foster as much discussion as possible, this conference is planned as an on-site event to be held in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, but conference speakers may present a paper online if unable to attend in person.

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