

Excursions

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**41st Annual Northeast Modern Language Association Convention:
Montréal, Québec, April 8-11, 2010**

Little sister to the Modern Language Association Convention, the NEMLA Convention may attract smaller audiences than the MLA but this annual conference nevertheless pulls its own weight in terms of variety, prestige and scholarly excellence.

This year, it was hosted by McGill University and held at the Hilton Bonaventure Hotel in Montréal. The keynote address was given by Professor Alan Liu and entitled 'From Reading to Social Computing'. Professor Liu is Chair of UCSB's English Department and his address showcased his interest in the potential syntheses of information culture, cultural studies, technology, new media and literature.

Among the vast array of panels on offer, I was particularly impressed by an early session entitled 'The Visualizing Gift: Description and Material Culture in the Novel', chaired by Cecilia Macheski for LaGuardia Community College – CUNY. Macheski's paper on 'Edith Wharton's Cinematic Fiction' which read *Ethan Frome* in terms of its material objects, unearthed new connections particularly when it came to Zeena's red pickle dish (apologies to those not familiar with Wharton's novel to whom this will mean nothing). Lauren Rosenblum's paper 'An Ideal Alibi: Man Ray's Photographs and Gertrude Stein's Autobiographies' also made several insightful connections between the original cover image of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and Man Ray's photographs of Marcel Duchamp's female alter ego Rose Sélavy.

In a dramatic change of tone but no less enjoyable was a panel entitled 'Breaking Atoms: Reading Hip Hop as Literature.' Timothy Wood (SUNY Nassau Community College) led the room through an extended close-reading of Biggie Small's 'Juicy', excavating each line with brio, sensitive both to cultural context and to audience members (like myself) not particularly versed in the genre. Wood confessed that, despite being a fan of hip hop, his students often have the upper-hand when it comes to the more arcane references which, he said, made for a liberating dynamic in his classes and facilitated greater student engagement.

Following adventures in hip-hop were girl's own adventures in the panel 'Classic and Contemporary American Girl Lit: Place and Space', chaired by Susan Ingalls Lewis from SUNY. Cara Rodway from King's College spoke to 'The Motel as Half-Way House in Marjory Hall's *Romance at Courtesy Bend*.' Rodway's main thesis was that the motel functioned as a safe space, allowing the protagonist of Hall's novel to explore her sexuality and independence whilst never having to leave her hometown. In the same panel, somewhat of a guilty pleasure was Monica Swindle's paper 'Girls Bite Back: Fan fiction Resistance to *Twilight*'. Swindle showcased her extensive research into internet-based fan fiction responses to the character of Bella in the popular 'Twilight' series. Teenage girls are producing narratives of an empowered Bella, somewhat of a bland figure in the series despite, ostensibly, being its main protagonist. Swindle made an excellent case for fan fiction as a way for teenage girls to write their own proto-feminist scripts, dissatisfied with the existing narratives provided by texts such as 'Twilight'.

A personal highlight of the conference was the Women's Caucus Roundtable 'Where Are We Now? The Evolution of Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies', chaired by Sophie Lavin (SUNY). Among an array of excellent papers was Denise Witzig's 'What Do Women Want? (R)Evolution and the Catholic Campus'. Witzig teaches Women's Studies at a private Catholic college and described the many struggles her department has undergone with senior management with regards to the course. Particularly striking were Witzig's accounts of her school's attempts to put on their version of 'The Vagina Monologues', despite considerable disapproval from above and a failed attempt by management to thwart a visit by noted second-wave feminist Gloria Steinem.

The only criticism that I would have of the NEMLA conference and this also goes as a salutary warning to anyone intending to submit an abstract for next year (when it will be held in New Brunswick) is that, because of the sheer number of panels on offer, audiences can be small. I experienced this in my own panel which only had two attendees (other than the panel members, who had to be there). Hopefully, this wasn't so much a comment on the draw of the subject matter

but, rather, a result of there being so many simultaneous events in our slot. Traveling across the world to present your work to this sized audience (and none of the panels I attended were massively well-attended) could seem a wasted, not to mention expensive, trip. That said, the conference did present a worthwhile opportunity to see a wide range of papers, alongside the potentially onerous wine-and-networking sessions. The atmosphere is by no means as apparently cutthroat as the MLA convention where people are often pitching for jobs, and would be recommended as a good starter (funds willing) for those wanting to try their work out at a large conference.