



# The British Society for LITERATURE and SCIENCE

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## FIFTEENTH ANNUAL BSLS CONFERENCE

### A REPORT ON THE ONLINE CONFERENCE

After the cancellation of the physical conference due to COVID-19, the BSLS committee have recovered as much as possible of the hard work undertaken by Katherine Ebury, Helena Ifill, and their colleagues. Roughly a third of the accepted papers were submitted to the new online incarnation of the conference (with the potential for further papers, understandably unavailable for submission, to be delivered at a later date). Thanks, in particular, to Will Tattersdill, the papers were uploaded to the Members' Area of the BSLS website and to a Microsoft Teams group. The latter also hosted a live Welcome event by Greg Lynall on Wednesday 15 April and, on 17 April, a live AGM and keynote lecture by Martin Willis. I can hardly weigh up the complicated upsides and downsides of an online conference here, as more qualified people are doing so, and will continue to do so at an exponential rate, elsewhere. That said, the ability for both speakers and

audiences to take their time over the careful discussion of papers in a relatively formal text forum seemed to be a noted advantage of the online system.

This year's papers covered a typically wide range of content across five centuries, from the literary technologies of early modern chemical physician Mary Trye (Kate Owen) and Voltairean polygenism (Gianamar Giovannetti-Singh) to subversive contemporary Singaporean AI narratives (Graham Matthews). To do all the contributors justice in this short space is impossible, but I was particularly interested by several periodical studies papers: Ellen Packham provided a tantalising look at the editorial fashioning of 1820s engineering periodicals, while Rachel Crossland tracked suggestive astronomical imagery across the adverts of Edwardian magazines. The literary interrogation of heredity and genetic determinism provided another of the conference's most intriguing threads, pursued by Daniel Ibrahim Abdalla, Jerome de Groot, Allegra Talavera Hartley, Catriona Livingstone, and Natalie Riley, dialogically tying Henry James together with hip-hop. Research on animal studies, ecocriticism, medicine, and modernism also made characteristically strong showings.

After a smooth AGM in which improvements to the BSLS website were posited, Martin Willis delivered his keynote, 'Sleep, Labour, and Value in the Nineteenth Century'. Identifying a 'somnia-culture' that has run from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, Willis juxtaposed prevalent neoclassical representations of ideal sleep with the social forces brought down upon 'aberrant sleepers' whose somnolence stands in the way of production. He then related a nineteenth century

The BSLS promotes  
interdisciplinary research into the  
relationship between science and  
literature in all periods.

Spring 2020 Newsletter

vision of humans as sentient batteries—in need of daily recharging—to the sleep metaphors of the COVID-19 moment. Drawing upon responses to the crisis and more general biopolitical thinking from Arundhati Roy, Bruno Latour, and Roberto Esposito, Willis concluded with a call for literature and science scholars to participate in the positive shaping of the world that wakes up from coronavirus. We closed with Michael Whitworth's announcement of 2019's BSLS Book Prize winner: Gerard Passannante's brilliantly eclectic, and now even more relevant, *Catastrophizing: Materialism and the Making of Disaster*. Thank you to all who worked first to materialise the conference and to those who then saved it from disaster.

—Richard Fallon  
University College London

## CONFERENCE NOTES

### 15 – 17TH APRIL 2020

### MICROSOFT TEAMS

The fifteenth annual conference at Sheffield was moved online due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Papers and presentations were uploaded onto a private channel while each panel was provided a virtual room on Microsoft Teams where discussions could be held. Thirty-eight of us filtered in on Microsoft Teams as the opening address by Greg Lynall began, muting our microphones to minimize disruptions: “Academics, assemble!” made us feel rather Avenger-like in this time of COVID-19 before delegates split off to engage with one another virtually.

Whereas, typically, delegates would not be able to attend presentations from every panel, the online conference permitted us to view every single paper. Surprisingly, the different presentation styles did not seem to throw us off badly. Since we are based in Singapore, the hosting of the conference online also permitted us to engage with panels despite the constraints of time zones. Microsoft Teams also allowed discussion to take place for an extended duration as participants continued to use the Teams pages to comment and discuss work even after the closing address, whereas this may not have happened quite as visibly within a physical conference setting.

Special thanks to the BSLS 2020 Organizing Committee for bringing the fifteenth annual conference to fruition despite this difficult time.

#### Knowledge and the Unknown

The curation of knowledge and the problematic representation of the unknown was a prominent theme across several panels such as “Individuals and Networks”, “Form, Narrative, Vocabulary”, and “Rhetoric” where tensions between different schools of thought provoked questions about preconceived biases and mediating knowledge transmission. Ellen Packham,

Fabian Hempel, Uwe Schimank, and Rachel Crossland, in papers and discussion, engaged difficulties connected to authorship and identity. Meanwhile, Michael Whitworth, John Holmes, and Graham Matthews examined language and its intent, effect, genre, and reflection on identity. Jenni Halpin, Kate Owen, and the whole of “The Brain and Mental Health” (Rebecca Housel, Josh Powell, and Stephen Hills) investigated selective presentations of knowledge. The brain remained a consideration as Irene O’Leary focused on neurodiversity in relation to the difficulty in appreciating the signified humour of the pun. Peter Middleton interrogated the conventional codex form as a material artefact that permits the transference of knowledge beyond the linguistic elements. Alex Sherman’s analysis of non-normative uses of language resonated with Alessia Pannese’s investigations into the incorporation of automatic writing in the literary experiments of the Italian Futurist movement.

#### Multiple Temporalities and Atemporality

Some panels (“Space – The Final Frontier”, “Nuclear”, and “Genetics and Eugenics” especially) engaged with the theme of time in flux, presenting readings of temporality as non-linear while being simultaneously concerned with the notion of futurity. Rachel Crossland examined advertisements from the *Cornhill Magazine* and *Illustrated London News*, observing that they often coincided with contemporary astronomical speculations within the newspaper columns. Her views were echoed by Rachel Hill whose paper considered *Star Maker* (Olaf Stapledon, 1937) alongside “The Great Debate” of the 1920s. Helena Bacon from the “Nuclear” panel read Tom Zoellner’s *Uranium* (2009), William Laurence’s *Dawn Over Zero* (1947), and *The Hell Bomb* (1951) as Gothic novels, borrowing the haunting image of the ghost which is able to transcend time and suggesting that spectrality permitted a form of atemporality. Natalie Riley provided similar insights as she highlighted the Darwinian and neo-Darwinian features present in fiction published in the 1990s, foregrounding the ways in which the genomic scepticism present within these texts challenged genetic determinism and reductionist perceptions of the mind. In conversation with Josie Gill, Riley noted the continuing importance of studying this scepticism in relation to the potential benefits of genetic recoding. Meanwhile, Richard Fallon explored sentiments about American expansionism in the 1840s and drew attention to the multiple temporalities that span textual and actual realities. Jerome de Groot’s paper investigated how postgenomic hip hop texts allow artists to inhabit temporally queered corporealities in order to reconfigure communication, heritage, conceptions of the self, and racial identity. The haunting image of the spectre reappeared in Hannah Cooper-Smithson’s paper about Christensen’s poem *alphabet* (1981).

Meanwhile, the “Genetics and Eugenics” panel focussed on the scientific reinforcement of gendered behaviour. Catriona Livingstone critiqued the development of gender norms and futurity within the work of Virginia Woolf, likening it to the formation of a growth. Allegra Talavera Hartley investigated how perception of motherhood remained consistent throughout Charlotte Haldane’s *Youth is a Crime* (1934) and argued that scientific advancement through control over childbearing constitutes a myopic form of sexual, political, and social empowerment for a narrow spectrum of women that ultimately disempowers them in the future.

### **Renegotiations of Relations**

Delegates from the “Microbiomes” panel reflected on biological processes, ecology, and corporeality. Katherine Ebury’s reading of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939) evoked discussion of the metempsychotic and prosopopoeiac gestures found within popular science books of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, reimagining this tactic on a microscopic level. Dennis Summer also analysed the interconnectivity between different states of being. He investigated the endosymbiotic relationship between evolution and technology within surrealist films using the three criteria of the collage: ‘the gap, the seam and contested space’.

In “The Origin of Species” panel, Gianamar Giovannetti-Singh argued that Voltaire’s manipulation of the *Ezouvedam* constituted an argument in favour of polygenist views during the rise of secularization in the Elizabethan era, while Daniel Ibrahim Adballa explored the constructed role of heredity within Henry James’s and Elizabeth Robins’ plays. Conversations within the panel’s thread also revealed an interesting parallel: how the nervous system is affected by the ambient city soundscape and how automobiles were actually considered a quieter alternative to the clatter of horses’ hooves.

The “Ecosystems and Non-Human Animals” panel similarly focused on the body’s relationship to its surroundings. Daniel Bowman’s paper compared the industrial production of meat with the automotive industries; he identified slaughterhouses as an inspiration for the mass production line, which provoked questions about the ‘messiness’ and ‘cleanliness’ of animal, human, and machine relations. Bowman suggested that although cars were initially perceived to be a humanitarian invention, literary texts reveal that the automobile may not be as humane as it seemed, echoing Harriet Newnes’s observation about invisible networks of relation operating on a large geographic and temporal scale.

In the “Death” panel, Sharon Ruston’s paper shed light on the Humane Society’s methods of reviving the dead such as artificial breathing and tobacco enemas which generated some lively interactions about the presence of enemas within Victorian medical practice as an example of nineteenth century technological

advancement. Meanwhile, Ivy Chua considered the tension between the expectation and performativity of normalcy within paediatric illness narratives; she observed that the patient’s resilience was reliant on the extension of personhood beyond their prognosis. This argument raised questions concerning the death drive and the possibility of queering death as a refusal of heteronormative futurity.

The relationship between sociocultural ideals and corporeality was explored by Sheng Yue who argues that characters occupy spaces of indeterminacy and imagination within the bog—a prominent location in Irish Gothic fiction. The relationship between ecosystem, nonhuman animals, and humans was also examined by Lauren Cullen who questioned whether human-animal kinship permits a human inhabitation of the animal body and consciousness within realist fiction, suggesting that kinship is a form of shared experience. Similarly, Emma Trott’s paper generated discussion concerning connections between human and animal bodies through a shared relation to sunlight. Marta Donati’s paper also investigated the notion of transmitting consciousness through a shared experience. She engaged with the abundance of spectral narratives in the inter-war period to probe the possibility of thought transference across realms. This paper generated debate about the sociocultural and gendered constructions of grief and ghosts.

Each paper within these panels foregrounded the network of relations present between humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment despite the contrasting motivations for kinship within the literary texts considered. The process through which we enact relations became even more poignant within our own context of ecological and epidemic crisis.

### **Keynote: Martin Willis: “Sleep, Labour and Value in the 19th Century and In a Time of Coronavirus”**

Many thanks to Martin Willis who agreed to deliver his keynote live on Microsoft Teams. The real-time presentation was the closest we could have got to a live conference in the best way possible, and a fantastic epilogue to the online conference in this time of COVID-19.

From *Sleeping Beauty* to profound lethargy, Martin Willis engaged with the problematic representation of hypersomnia and sleep pollution as a result of capitalism, and the metaphorical use of sleep as a vehicle that enables the transcendence of temporalities. His paper echoed the many discussions of atemporality found across several panels and drew timely references between the past and present amidst the current pandemic.

Noting the direct relationship between economic power and protection from pollution, Willis also shed light on the suffering of underprivileged individuals as a result of capitalist inequalities. Consequently, he reiterated the views of many delegates within the conference who sought to give voice to marginalised

identities while attempting to make sense of larger unknowns.

As the keynote concluded and the fifteenth annual conference came to an end, many delegates raised a glass from their homes, celebrating the BSLS' success in its first online iteration. Once again, many thanks to Helena Ifill, Katherine Ebury, and Martin Willis for making this keynote and conference such an enjoyable and thought-provoking experience.

—*Ivy Chua and Catherine Chong*  
*Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

## CONFAUXRENCE REFLECTIONS THE SOCIETY IN CONVERSATION

Like, I suspect, many of us, I had never attended an online conference and had some reservations about how such an event would go. It's fair to say that it surpassed all my expectations! Quite apart from the pleasure of seeing the faces and/or hearing the voices of old and new BSLS friends in my own home, I also had the opportunity to 'attend' a whole range of papers that in truth I probably wouldn't have gone along to at the physical conference, due to clashing panels and the ever present compulsion to go to those papers that are most directly relevant to one's own work. This means that I have roamed further from my usual interests than I normally would this year, despite the wide range of papers always on offer at BSLS events: I read and listened to papers on hip hop and Voltaire, illness narratives and seventeenth-century women physicians, as well as my more usual modernist and periodicals-based fare. And each paper seemed more precious even than usual, and possibly even more rich with the added time to digest it without having to rush immediately off to the next. This is not to say that I didn't miss the physical conference—indeed, I found the reminders that we weren't all physically together intensely emotional at times. But I was cheered by how much everyone threw themselves into the whole online event. The discussions on Microsoft Teams were a joy to read and contribute to, and seemed to exist in a happy medium between the more formal panel-based questions and the more casual questions that one usually asks over tea, coffee, or something stronger. Above all else, I think I have come away with an even stronger sense of community than ever before, and that

seems to me to be a particularly valuable thing at this time.

—*Rachel Crossland*  
*Secretary*

During the two weeks the conference was online, there were 894 visits to the site, peaking on April 17—the day we hosted our online AGM and live keynote from Martin Willis. Video presentations (not including Martin's) were viewed a total of 319 times during this period. These numbers give only a vague sense of how many people were actually using the site, but at the very least they suggest that a healthy number of the c.110 prospective delegates to Sheffield visited at least fleetingly—and that some of the wider membership, who were not planning to travel to Sheffield, have also taken advantage. We hope that the papers, discussions, and live events—poor substitutes for the real event—were nonetheless useful and stimulating.

Our thanks are due to the thirty-six delegates who prepared and sent in presentations against a background of global turmoil; to Martin Willis for delivering a graceful keynote under pressure; to the University of Liverpool for hosting our Teams discussions; and, of course, to the organising team at Sheffield, led by Katherine Ebury and Helena Ifill. The programme of the conference-which-never-was is [here](#), and the programme of our online offerings can be read [here](#).

**Delegates who did not send presentations in - please hold on to your abstracts!** The BSLS is planning future ways of giving you a platform for your research, possibly this Winter. **The BSLS remains committed to its annual meeting**, and the 2021 gathering at Edinburgh Napier is currently being planned. But we have also been delighted by the uptake of the digital conference, and are **thinking about ways for our future events to incorporate more online elements**.

Over the next few months, I will be assembling ideas about what the society could offer to members via its site and its vimeo channel, thinking both about enhancing our research events and adding separate content. Anyone who wants to contribute to this thought process is encouraged to [contact me!](#)

—*Will Tattersdill*  
*Communications Secretary*

### FUTURE BSLS CONFERENCES

The Society welcomes early conversations with members interested in hosting upcoming annual conferences. Please contact the chair, Greg Lynall.

BSLS 16, EDINBURGH NAPIER, 8-10 APRIL 2021

BSLS 17, MANCHESTER, 7-9 APRIL 2022

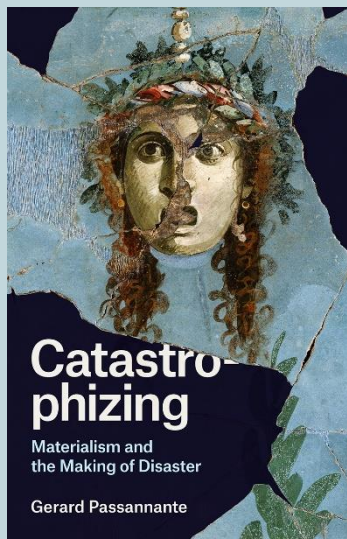
*bsls.ac.uk*

# BSLS BOOK PRIZE FOR 2019

The winner of the BSLS book prize for 2019 was *Catastrophizing: Materialism and the Making of Disaster* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), by Gerard Passannante, Professor in the Department of English, University of Maryland. This was the thirteenth year that the prize had been awarded.

Books were nominated both by BSLS members and by publishers, and we received 29 valid nominations, including monographs and collections of essays. Books by serving members of the executive committee are not eligible. The longlist was a very strong and interesting one, and there were many titles of it that would not have looked out of place on the shortlist, but eventually the jury narrowed it down to four titles. The others, besides Professor Passannante's, were:

- Elizabeth Hope Chang's *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* (The University of Virginia Press),
- Julie Orlemanski's *Symptomatic Subjects: Bodies, Medicine, and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England* (University of Pennsylvania Press), and
- Edward McLean Test's *Sacred Seeds: New World Plants in Early Modern English Literature* (University of Nebraska Press).



The book prizes judges commented on the winning book as follows:

Gerard Passannante's timely study brings together literature, visual art, and the history of science to provide rich insights into catastrophic thinking and the history of materialist thought. His accounts of analogy and of the juxtaposition of incompatible scales will be stimulating to readers working across a wide range of periods. His key idea is that the image of disaster renders the imperceptible perceptible. The book takes in Lucretian materialism, Leonardo da Vinci, John Donne, the idea of interpretation 'anything out of anything' (*quidlibet ex quolibet*), Shakespeare, Robert Hooke and microscopes, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and – in a suggestive Afterword – our current climate crisis. It has foundations of precise historical scholarship, but is informed by a wider range of historical knowledge, such that Sergei Eisenstein can inform a discussion of Leonardo da Vinci, or Samuel Beckett provides the opening to a chapter on Shakespeare. We would commend it to all members of the society and the wider Literature and Science community.

—Michael Whitworth

## BSLS FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Applications are regularly invited for the BSLS Small Grants Scheme and the BSLS Postgraduate and Early Career Conference Fund.

**THE BSLS SMALL GRANTS SCHEME** offers grants of up to £400 to promote the study of literature and science. We are open to all sorts of proposals with the exception of those that request support for individual personal conference expenses. Examples of activities for which the awards might be used are expenses for a visiting speaker, a seminar series, or a symposium. Applications for support to stage special BSLS panels at appropriate conferences (other than the BSLS 2021 conference) will be considered. The next deadline for applications is expected in early autumn.

**THE BSLS POSTGRADUATE AND EARLY CAREER CONFERENCE FUND** offers bursaries of up to £200 for BSLS postgraduate student members and early career researchers who are not in permanent posts and are ineligible for institutional funding. Bursaries may be used towards the cost of presenting research papers at conferences.

For details of eligibility and how to apply for either of these funds, please see the Funding page on the website.

For queries about the Small Grants Scheme please contact Rosalind Powell ([rosalind.powell@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:rosalind.powell@bristol.ac.uk)).

For queries about the Postgraduate and Early Career Conference Fund, please contact Rachel Murray ([R.E.Murray@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:R.E.Murray@lboro.ac.uk)).



# DEGREE CONFERRED

Louise Benson James

## Hysterical Bodies and Narratives: Medical Gothic and Women's Fiction, Victorian to Contemporary

James's thesis examines hysteria and nervous disorder in historical medical texts and the work of Charlotte Brontë, Rhoda Broughton, Lucas Malet, Djuna Barnes, and Helen Oyeyemi. It brings new attention to women writers' engagement with medicine, the instabilities of medical discourse, and the Gothic metaphors employed in both forms of writing in relation to the body. It asks questions and offers conclusions about the gendering of hysteria, the conscious agency of female writers on the topic, and the links between somatic materialism and fiction, drawn from in-depth analysis of both medical and fictional texts. (Confirmed 24 March 2020, University of Bristol)



# MEMBER ENGAGEMENTS

## ROYAL SOCIETY LATES: SCIENCE FICTION 10 FEBRUARY 2020

On a wet and windy night in February, when the wildness of the weather in the midst of Storm Ciara was the cause of greatest concern in the UK, more than 550 brave souls travelled to the Royal Society in London for a Royal Society Lates event on the topic of Science Fiction. Among these hardy travellers, BSLS members Sharon Ruston and Rachel Crossland were part of an exciting programme of events 'celebrating science fiction and the Royal Society'.

The programme for the evening was both diverse and crowded, and sadly it wasn't possible to attend or participate in everything that was on offer. My evening began with a talk by Matthew Beaumont on Darwinism and *The Time Machine*, followed by the Royal Society's own Librarian, Keith Moore. In the cosy library setting, complete with beanbags, Moore also talked about Wells, considering how some of his early short stories linked to the scientific ideas that were circulating among and being explored by members of the Royal Society at the time he was writing. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to attend Ian Stewart's talk on the science of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series, and it was difficult to get close to the drop-in stands run by scientists, but the atmosphere in the Royal Society building was warm, relaxed, and welcoming, and everybody seemed to be having a great time.

I had been asked to speak about Virginia Woolf in celebration of LGBT+ History Month and did so

through a focus on my research on quantum physics and complementarity in relation to Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando*, looking in particular at Woolf's interesting use of pronouns in this text. Topping the bill in her second slot of the evening, Sharon Ruston then explored the real and up-to-date science and medicine included in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, focusing in particular on the resuscitation methods employed by the Royal Humane Society.

Overall the evening seemed to be a huge success, and the weather certainly didn't appear to have dampened anybody's spirits. This was a great example of how people from different disciplines can be brought together in a shared space, although it would have been good to have more time to enter fully into and savour the sorts of interactions that such events can facilitate.

More information on the evening, including recordings of the talks by Stewart, Beaumont, Crossland and Ruston can be found on the Royal Society website: <https://royalsociety.org/science-events-and-lectures/2020/02/science-fiction/>.

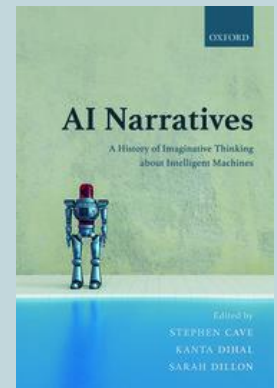
—Rachel Crossland

# RECENT PUBLICATIONS

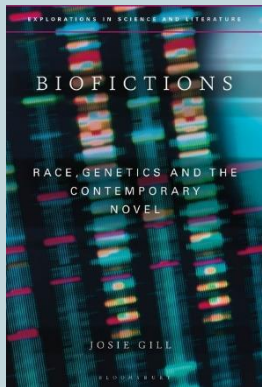
*AI Narratives: A History of Imaginative Thinking about Intelligent Machines*. Edited by Stephen Cave, Kanta Dihal, and Sarah Dillon. Oxford University Press, March 2020

Part I of this book provides a historical overview from ancient Greece to the start of modernity. These chapters explore the pre-history of key concerns of contemporary AI discourse, from the nature of mind and creativity to issues of power and rights, from the tension between fascination and ambivalence to investigations into artificial voices and technophobia. Part II focuses on the twentieth and twenty-first-centuries in which a greater density of narratives emerge alongside rapid developments in AI technology. These chapters reveal not only how AI narratives have consistently been entangled with the emergence of real robotics and AI, but also how they offer a rich source of insight into how we might live with these revolutionary machines.

If you order the book from the OUP website [here](#), you can get a 30% discount with code ASPROMP8.



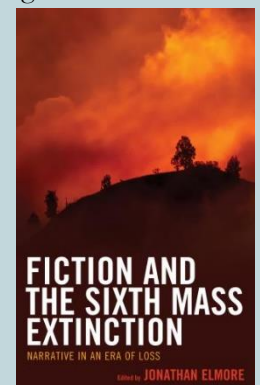
Josie Gill. *Biofictions: Race, Genetics and the Contemporary Novel*. Bloomsbury, 2020.



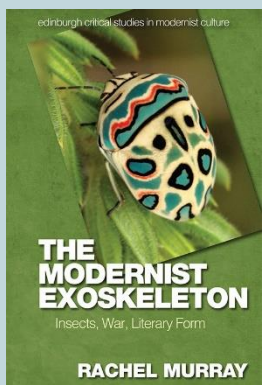
In this important interdisciplinary study, Josie Gill explores how the contemporary novel has drawn upon, and intervened in, debates about race in late 20th and 21st century genetic science. Reading works by leading contemporary writers including Zadie Smith, Kazuo Ishiguro, Octavia Butler and Colson Whitehead, *Biofictions* demonstrates how ideas of race are produced at the intersection of science and fiction, which together create the stories about identity, racism, ancestry and kinship which characterize our understanding of race today. By highlighting the role of narrative in the formation of racial ideas in science, this book calls into question the apparent anti-racism of contemporary genetics, which functions narratively, rather than factually or objectively, within the racialized contexts in which it is embedded. In so doing, *Biofictions* compels us to rethink the long-asked question of whether race is a biological fact or a fiction, calling instead for a new understanding of the relationship between race, science and fiction.

Jenni G Halpin. “Godly Mass Extinction: Robert J. Sawyer’s *Calculating God* and Extinction’s Teleologies.” *Fiction and the Sixth Mass Extinction: Narrative in an Era of Loss*. Edited by Jonathan Elmore. Lexington Books, April 2020. Pages 151-161.

In a collection focused on fiction’s engagements with anthropogenic extinctions and exploring what kinds of humanity, cultural assumptions, and relationships among human and other life variously lead into and out of mass extinctions, the final chapter takes up the god in Robert J. Sawyer’s novel, one who has been using mass extinction as a tool of genetic engineering. “Godly Mass Extinction” offers an argument for finding the similitudes and connections of life through death and out of death.



Rachel Murray. *The Modernist Exoskeleton: Insects, War, Literary Form*. Edinburgh Critical Studies in Modernist Culture, April 2020.



This book uncovers a shared fascination with the aesthetic possibilities of the insect body – its adaptive powers, distinct stages of growth and swarming formations. Focusing on the work of Wyndham Lewis, D. H. Lawrence, H.D., and Samuel Beckett, it reveals how these writers drew on popular studies of entomology as a key source of artistic inspiration. Through a series of close readings, it proposes that the figure of the exoskeleton, which functions both as a protective outer layer and as a site of encounter, can enhance our understanding of modernism’s engagement with nonhuman life, as well as its questioning of the boundaries of the human.