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TWENTIETH ANNUAL BSLS CONFERENCE

10-12 APRIL 2025
LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

For a sunny three days in Lancaster, the British Society for Literature and Science gathered for its 20th edition. Organized by Sharon Ruston, the conference featured three fascinating keynote lectures and a plethora of papers on diverse topics. It was one of those conferences where you wish you could clone yourself for the day to see every scheduled paper.

The first day kicked off with Michael Whitworth's keynote on poetry's own contribution to the field. I then stayed in the main lecture theatre to hear fantastic papers on how much scientists have relied on fiction to bring validity to their proposed paradigm shifts and on the detailed origin story of the creationist movement. My afternoon was spent listening to papers on water and how fiction imagined the paradox of ice before such molecular discoveries occurred, as well as how fiction helped capture the urgency for mitigating

pollution and the magic of witnessing bioluminescence. The day concluded with a whimsical walk to the Health Innovation Campus building, where ewes and their lambs were frolicking outdoors during the drinks reception.

My day two began with prescient questions on cloning, and how speculations on attempts to 'improve' the body or history end up propelling history to repeat itself. My first roundtable of the conference was on the subject of creepiness, where the audience was challenged to a thought experiment of what creepiness is and what it represents on both personal and cultural levels. The afternoon began with the second keynote, where animator Sydney Padua explored what the meaning of play is and how ideas are created within the space of play. The annual general meeting was next before I attended talks on the history of placebo medicine and how narratives of distrust in medicine and science arose. The day concluded with the conference dinner at Barker House Farm, with a competitive game of trivia during dessert.

I started my last day attending a panel that explored narratives in knowledge, from discussions surrounding the history of museum content and class to the storytelling surrounding the colonization of Mars as an 'evolutionary' next step. The final keynote was next as Kanta Dihal explored the origin story of the terms 'artificial' and 'intelligence'. The plenary

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

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connected to the first panel of the day for me, particularly when it turned to the subject of mind uploading and how this is also seen by some as part of transcending our Earth-bound bodies. My presentation was in one of the last panels that day and featured two other fascinating talks: one on how the role of feminized robots in fiction reflects feminized real-life expectations and the other exploring the idea that no experience we have is unique.

All in all, Lancaster University played a marvellous host. It was wonderful to see familiar faces and to make new acquaintances along the way. Always welcoming and friendly, the conference was once again a testament to the intertwining of fiction and science and a wonderland of escape from my day job.

— Grace Anne Paizen
University of Glasgow



Head on over to YouTube
for a selection of video reflections
by members of the BSLS on the occasion of
our 20th Annual Conference

[BSLS Quotes and Info Video](#)



In April the British Society of Literature and Science met at Lancaster University for its twentieth annual conference. This anniversary year began with a thought-provoking plenary by Michael Whitworth on the place of poetry in literature and science studies, in contrast to the more frequent contemporary emphasis on ‘narrative’ as a way to think about interdisciplinarity between the fields. I was inspired to add works he discussed by poets Lyn Hejinian and Veronica Forrest-Thomson to my reading list, although far removed from my own PhD research. This sort of intellectually stimulating foray into a different area of research continued throughout the conference, through the exciting and diverse combinations of literatures and sciences in the panel topics.

There was a breadth of papers, from the queer spatiality of water in *Kubla Khan* to the quantum aesthetics of Paul Valéry and Clarice Lispector to the influential discovery of the skin-penetrating X-Ray on Virginia Woolf. A personal highlight for me was the live and generative roundtable discussion: ‘Creepy

Methods for Queer Ecologies’. The concept of ‘creepiness’ was posited as a way of both knowing and not knowing when considering living, embodied epistemologies beyond the imposition of categories. The discussion prompted speculations about the meaning of ‘creepy’ as a critical framework, with academic research put forward as a creepy practice due to the sort of obsessive focus it entails.

The second plenary was given by Sydney Padua, the author of the graphic novel *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage*. Her stimulating lecture charted the unforeseen processes that led to the book’s publication, and focused in on the conditions of ‘play’—a form of thrilling adventuring and experimentation without an instrumental purpose—as a form of research. We also got to see her animated video of the Analytical Engine based on the design clues left by the pair, for the machine itself was never built in their lifetimes.

Kanta Dihal gave the final plenary, ‘A Mythology of AI’, which dovetailed with Padua’s exploration of the history of computing through Lovelace and Babbage. Dihal incisively and insightfully broke down the notions of ‘artificiality’ and ‘intelligence’ to examine the values and histories that feed into the ongoing development of AI technologies. Her historical analysis of intelligence as a unitary and measurable quality tied to twentieth-century eugenics—and still shaping the ideas of ‘transhumanist’ advocates—was particularly pertinent. This narrow categorisation made me think of the contrast with the breadth of knowledges and analytical practices of the conference papers, far beyond this affectless and mechanistic conception of intelligence. I have also added the Netflix series *Altered Carbon* to my watchlist upon Dihal’s discussion.

Included in the conference itinerary were wonderful opportunities for further discussion and networking. The drinks reception at the Health Institute Campus, sponsored by the ten-year-old ‘Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science and Medicine’ series, was a great chance to see another part of Lancaster University campus, which was looking particularly verdant on this sunny spring evening. The three-course conference dinner at Barker House Farm was also very jovial and fun. To celebrate the BSLS’s twentieth birthday, Jerome de Groot created a post-dinner quiz on the topic of the society’s twentieth conference. This quiz theme was quite challenging, but I was fortunate to have someone at my table who knew what an icosahedron is.

On Sunday, there was an optional excursion to Grasmere to visit Dove Cottage and the Wordsworth Museum. Once again, there was lovely, bright weather for our visit to this strikingly scenic part of the country. After the museum, we were led on a guided walk to ‘John’s grove’ where we got a great view of Lake

Grasmere and stood beneath the same trees the Wordsworths would have known. Our visit included a one-hour workshop in the library and archive next to the museum, where we got to see Dorothy and William's handwritten commonplace book, featuring their own ink recipe (presumably written in this very ink). We also had a nice lunch at the Wordsworth Trust, with the opportunity to sample 'Grasmere Gingerbread'—although this went very quickly!

In conclusion, this special anniversary was an immensely enjoyable, well-organised, and intellectually inspiring conference. There was a particularly warm and friendly atmosphere, which made the conference

feel particularly welcoming to PGRs like myself. Attending so many fascinating panels and meeting so many interesting and enthusiastic researchers has certainly injected some motivational energy into my own final year of the PhD. I want to say a big thank you to all the organisers, and especially to Sharon Ruston for putting together this fantastic and memorable conference. I'm looking forward to next year at the University of Strathclyde.

— Blaise Sales
University of Leeds

TWENTIETH ANNUAL CONFERENCE ONLINE, 8-9 MAY 2025



The twentieth annual conference of the British Society for Literature and Science took place at [Lancaster University](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk) on 10th – 12th April 2025 in person. It continued online on Thursday 8th and Friday 9th May to enable wider participation. The conference website is at [Conference – The British Society for Literature and Science \(bsls.ac.uk\)](https://bsls.ac.uk).

CALL FOR PAPERS

VICTORIAN INFRASTRUCTURES AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTAL LEGACIES

**SPECIAL COLLECTION AT *OLHJ* (OPEN
LIBRARY OF THE HUMANITIES JOURNAL)
EDITED BY JULIA DITTER AND IRMTRAUD
HUBER**

Infrastructures have recently drawn critical interest from anthropology, geography, science and technology studies, engineering, and humanities scholars interested in the literary, historical, and cultural life of infrastructures. In these new contexts, infrastructures are no longer understood simply as material structures such as railways or telegraph lines, but are instead considered as 'dense social, material, aesthetic, and political formations' (Appel, Anand, and Gupta 3). As critical locations for negotiating the social and political foundation of societies, infrastructures form the

'support systems of human sociality' and are shaped not just by brick and cement but by 'public imaginaries, social practices, and historical transformations' (Pinnix et.al. 12). As such, infrastructures ossify historical conditions and carry them into the future. They are material legacies of past worldviews and social organisation which may accommodate but also resist transformation.

The nineteenth century experienced an unprecedented growth of infrastructures that continue to shape our present. Technological advances in energy production, industrialisation, expansion, and extractivism enabled the development of new large-scale projects such as the construction of public transport systems, telegraphy, canalisation, the installation of gas and water supply lines, and finally the establishment of an electric grid. These are networked systems which are sustained through material construction and social practice, and they are both informed by and in turn shape cultural imaginaries, while at the same time providing the

conditions for cultural production. Far from being relics of the past, the infrastructures built throughout the nineteenth century continue to shape the present ‘in uneven yet persistent ways’ (Kirkby). The legacy of this large-scale infrastructural transformation needs to be interrogated as we strive to shape a more sustainable future.

Our special issue aims to approach this legacy in a firmly strategic presentist mode. We invite contributors to interrogate how infrastructures of the past condition our sense of political, social and ecological possibility in the present. Do they enable or hinder the potential for ecological and energetic transformations in the Anthropocene? Which alternative organisations of reality were aborted in the building of nineteenth-century infrastructures? What futurities do they make possible, and which futures do they foreclose? Literary works, historical documents, and cultural texts open up spaces for examining such questions. They register and perform the cultural entanglements of infrastructures and imagine alternatives to, or futurities of, nineteenth-century infrastructural projects. Revisiting the infrastructural legacies of the nineteenth century and the paths they laid down is central to gaining a better understanding of the multivalent effects of infrastructures – socially, environmentally, culturally – and envisioning alternative pathways toward a sustainable planetary future.

As ‘sites of conceptual trouble that refuse the easy separation of the human and the material’ (Appel, Anand, and Gupta 26), infrastructures challenge disciplinary boundaries. By inviting contributions across the humanities, this special issue aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue. We welcome contributions from literary studies, cultural studies, media history, and related disciplines that address, among other topics, the following questions:

- Which material, social, and cultural conditions underlie the emergence of new infrastructures, and how are they reflected in the cultural imaginary?

- Which underlying structures of thought or feeling condition the emergence or transformation of infrastructure, and what role does cultural production play in shaping them or giving them expression?
- What are the infrastructural conditions for cultural production, and how is the latter shaped by them?
- What are the temporalities involved in the maintenance, ruination, and transformation of infrastructures, and how could they be leveraged to sustainable ends?
- What alternative infrastructures have been imagined or tried out, and what is their resonance for the present?
- Which futures did nineteenth-century infrastructures promise? How do these promises compare to today’s realities?
- How can the entanglement of material and cultural conditions in the emergence of infrastructures be effectively theorised?

Please send abstracts of up to 500 words as well as a short bio-note to julia.ditter@uni-konstanz.de and irmtraud.huber@uni-konstanz.de by 31 October 2025. Full articles (8,000 words) will be due by 31 March 2026. All articles will be subject to a double-anonymous peer-review process.

References

- Appel, Hannah, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta. 2018. “Temporality, Politics, and the Promise of Infrastructure.” In *The Promise of Infrastructure*, edited by Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, 1–38. Durham: Duke University Press.
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EARLY CAREER ESSAY PRIZE 2025

The JLS and the British Society for Literature and Science are pleased to announce the opening of the 2025 competition for the best new essay by an early career scholar or postgraduate student on a topic within the field of literature and science.

Essays should be currently unpublished and not under consideration by another journal. Starting this year, the Essay Prize welcomes shorter contributions (4000-5000 words, inclusive of references). Entries should be sent to Martin Willis, Editor of the JLS (willism8@cardiff.ac.uk), by 5pm on Friday 6 June, 2025.



The prize will be judged jointly by representatives of the BSLS and JLS. The winning essay will be announced on the BSLS website and published in the JLS. The winner will also receive a prize of £100.

UPCOMING BSLS CONFERENCE

BSLS 21, STRATHCLYDE, 9-11 APRIL 2026

The Society invites conversations with members interested in hosting upcoming annual conferences. Please contact the chair, Barri Gold (gold@sas.upenn.edu).

The BSLS Newsletter is published quarterly in February, May, August, and November, with submissions deadlines typically the last Friday of the preceding month.

Editor: Jenni G Halpin

bsls.ac.uk