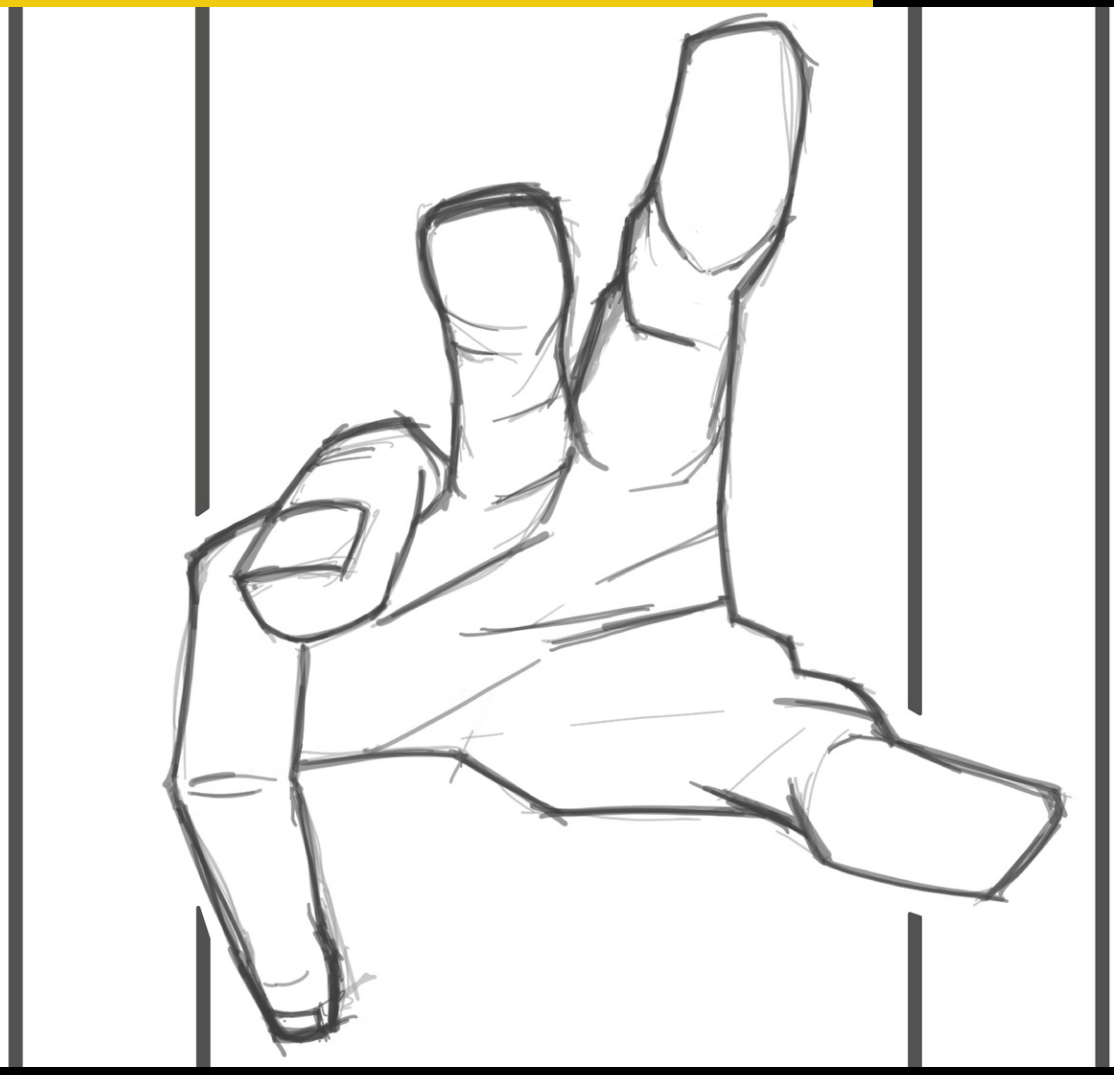
RETHINKING RESISTANCE

INTERDISCIPLINARY GRADUATE CONFERENCE

2022



22-24 JUNE 2022 • UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

CONFERENCE REPORT • COMPILED BY SHIVANI CHAUHAN, CAILEE DAVIS, STEPHANIE FRANKLIN, ALEXANDRA LLOYD, AND HANNAH SCHEITHAUER • EDITED BY ALEXANDRA LLOYD. PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHIVANI CHAUHAN AND THE ORGANISERS.

WHITE ROSE PROJECT

TORCH
THE OXFORD RESEARCH CENTRE IN THE HUMANITIES
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

THE QUEEN'S COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE

RETHINKING RESISTANCE

Introduction

With the support of The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH) and The Queen's College, Oxford, and in partnership with the White Rose Project, led by Dr Alexandra Lloyd (St Edmund Hall, Oxford), a cross-faculty committee of graduate students at the University of Oxford organised an interdisciplinary conference on the theme 'Rethinking Resistance'. The conference was held between 22 and 24 June 2022 at the Taylor Institution Library and the Radcliffe Humanities Building at the University of Oxford. The papers and events explored timely questions about the theory and practice of resistance across a wide range of contexts.

From Weimar to Theresienstadt

We were delighted to mark the start of our conference with a keynote recital performed by baritone George Robarts and Edward Picton-Turberville. This public recital in the Levine Auditorium at Trinity College presented a programme from composers including Weill, Korngold, Hindemith, Schulhoff, and Ullmann. Comprising German-language works from the 1920s to the 1940s, the programme transported the audience from the cabaret and slapstick of Eisler/Brecht collaborations in the Weimar Republic to works written in concentration camps, concluding with Ilse Weber's heart-wrenching lullaby, *Wiegala*, written in Theresienstadt in 1944. The recital was an intellectually and emotionally stimulating start to the conference.









THURSDAY 23 JUNE

RETHINKING RESISTANCE

Resistance in History and Memory (Chair: Shivani Chauhan)

In this panel, our speakers presented layered and complex images of resistance in history and memory. Barnabas Balint (University of Oxford) in his paper on Tiyul showed how a resistance movement can work towards common objectives while defined by a conflict between ideologies and practices, and how an organized form of resistance can be transnationally networked and at the same time, shaped by the intersection between the transnational and local. James Sunderland (University of Oxford) investigated an organized resistance based on international ties of historical analogy. He explored the complexities of the Jewish underground revolution inspired by divergent interpretations of the Irish Uprising. Finally, Rosalind Hulse (Royal Holloway, University of London) discussed another thought-provoking and interesting form of resistance: virtual forms of resistance on social media against traditional forms of Holocaust representation. It is a form of resistance that is still evolving; we will have to wait and see what shape it will take.

Writing Resistance (Chair: Hannah Scheithauer)

Our second in-person panel on Thursday morning explored the possibilities and challenges which 'Writing Resistance' entails across different forms and social settings. Charlotte Dowling (University of Oxford) spoke on bisexuality in post-Soviet Russian samizdat, powerfully demonstrating the interconnection of writing and activism in a genre which circumvents the professional publishing sector to make space for marginalised queer identities. Moving our discussion from the marginal to the canonical, Julia Wolbergs (Leipzig University) offered a paper which questioned the portrayal of anti-Nazi Resistance in German textbooks used for government-prescribed integration courses. These resources aimed at immigrants, she argued, provide a skewed perspective of Germany under National Socialism, tokenising victims and survivors, minimising the role of Germans as perpetrators, and foregrounding German resistance activists as positive figures of identification. Focusing on the same period in France, Robert Pike's (Cardiff University) paper continued to demonstrate the power of narrative in resistance movements and the memories they generate, as he probed the reputation of the Southern French village Vergt as a local capital in the fight against the German Occupation. Pike thus emphasised the importance of respected community members in shaping localised norms of behaviour and the capacity of earlier memories, including those of the French Wars of Religion, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Era, to catalyse resistance through storytelling and myth-making practices.







THURSDAY 23 JUNE

RETHINKING RESISTANCE

Making Sense of Resistance (Chair: Alexandra Lloyd)

Our first online panel explored the way resistance can be theorised, how it can be enacted through artistic production, and how the memory and legacy of resisters is shaped by contemporary discourses. Eraldo Souza dos Santos (Panthéon-Sorbonne University) examined the concept of 'civil disobedience' using writings by Gandhi, considering relationships between the individual and the state, citizenship, and justice. Emily Moore (University College London) provided a persuasive close-reading of Gayl Jones's text *Palmares*, considering the possibilities and limits of literature to tell challenging and marginalised stories. Finally, Maria Visconti (Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) / Brazilian Center for Nazism and Holocaust Studies (NEPAT)) explored the reception of White Rose member Sophie Scholl and the extent to which that movement might be positioned within the history of anti-fascism in Germany.

Keynote Lecture: 'Saying We to Ourselves: Reciprocity as Resistance in Recent German-Language Literature' (Chair: Hannah Scheithauer)

In the afternoon, Professor Sarah Colvin of Jesus College, Cambridge, delivered a Keynote Lecture discussing 'reciprocity as resistance' in recent German-language literature. Drawing on Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Adas Raum* and Olivia Wenzel's *1000 Serpentinen Angst*, Colvin demonstrated that these authors use the affordances of literary language to push beyond conventional understandings of resistance as the clash of two opposing forces. Their emphatically non-linear narratives, which blend disparate times and spaces and introduce characters with multiple, human and non-human, identities, embed resistance into literature's very structure. They confound the premises of an epistemic order based on selfhood and otherness, which is understood to be at the origin of multiple forms of historic and contemporary injustice, sexist and racist violence. Epistemic, aesthetic, and ethical categories thus prove to be deeply intertwined in Otoo's and Wenzel's writing, which may be read in dialogue with the models of singular-plural identity developed in contemporary philosophy by thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, John Mbiti, and Achille Mbembe. When understood according to these terms, they propose emphatically non-heroic and non-binary, yet deeply subversive, models of resistance, which opens new avenues for conceiving of apparently disparate existences as intrinsically connected and inevitably interdependent.

Poetics of Resistance (Chair: Cailee Davis)

This panel began with a paper about the intersectionality of feminist and anti-war poetry from the turn of the twentieth century through the Vietnam War in 'Muriel Rukeyser's 'Käthe Kollwitz': Vietnam war resistance and feminist poetics' by Sarah Gilbert (Oxford Brookes University). Likewise, Deborah Fallis (Leibniz University Hannover) explored German-migrants' poetry and the use of love as a radical force for change, invoking the work of Bell Hook's in her paper '(Post)migrant Poets Write Back: Love Poems of Resistance'. Turning to Portuguese epic poetry, Andrzej Stuart-Thompson (University of Oxford) illustrated how feminist poet Ana Luísa Amaral reimagines the past to give agency to female and other oppressed figures in his paper 'Portuguese Epic's Unruly Daughter: Ana Luísa Amaral and her resistance to dominant visions of Portuguese nationhood in the queerly spectral, eco-utopian poetry of Escuro (2014)'. The overarching themes of this panel included feminism, challenging the existing literary canon, and resistance as solidarity, particularly among woman and minorities.

THURSDAY 23 JUNE

RETHINKING RESISTANCE

'Sites of Resistance (Chair: Alexandra Lloyd)

Our second online panel featured three talks on different aspects of resistance through culture and the arts. Emily Collins (York University, Toronto) introduced us to a fascinating project in which specially curated gardens by the media artist and gardener Mike MacDonald became spaces of resistance. Joanna Zienkiewicz (University of Groningen) explored how resistance can be staged through music, analysing contemporary Polish protest music that speaks against the populist-nationalist party, Law and Justice. Finally, Will Weihe (The Pennsylvania State University) examined the work of the activist Joseph Bilé and resistance against German colonialism. Although focussed on the early twentieth century, the paper explored timely and contemporary questions about identity politics, power, and exploitation.

Turning Ruins of War into Walls of Revolution: Murad Subay in Conversation with Wes Williams

In this online segment, Professor Wes Williams (Director, TORCH) talked to Murad Subay (born 1987 in Yemen), a contemporary artist and a political activist, about his work. Since the Yemini revolution of 2011, Murad has launched several campaigns, turning the bullet-scarred walls and war-ravaged streets into symbols of hope and peace through his art. Vibrant hues of revolution and civil disobedience against the crumbling canvasses of war mark his signature artistic expression. Exploring Murad's library of street art campaigns in this virtual segment, we engaged with his unique style of resistance. We discovered that his art of murals and graffiti is a peaceful, yet evocative resistance against bullets and bombs and drones and power politics.

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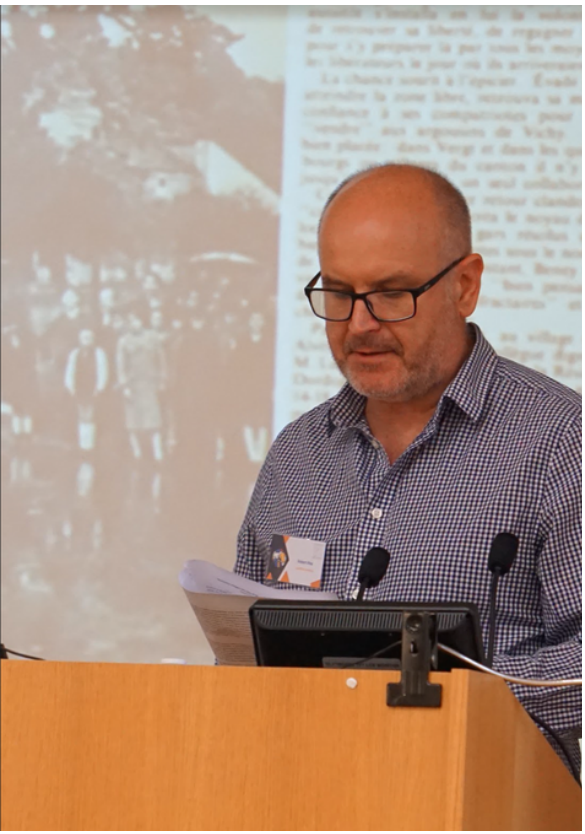



FRIDAY 24 JUNE

RETHINKING RESISTANCE

Graphic Resistance and Hybrid Forms (Chair: Cailee Davis)

Continuing the previous day's panel on 'Poetics of Resistance', the panel 'Graphic Resistance and Hybrid Forms' also focused on themes of feminism, solidarity, and expansion of literary canon. Natalia Stengel Peña's (King's College London) paper, 'Cerrucha's Trench: A Feminist Artistic Answer to the War Against Women' showcased Mexican street art installations which protested violence against Mexican women, highlighting the importance of solidarity in resistance communities. Similarly, Jill Damatac (University of Cambridge) discussed the inclusion of queer and indigenous perspectives in the works of Elaine Castillo in her paper 'Babaylan Resistance: Women's and Queer Filipino American Literatures'. Then, Deblina Rout (Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad) presented her paper, 'Graphic Protest: The Poetics and Politics of Resistance in Orijit Sen's River of Stories', which also engaged with indigenous voice, eco-protest, and the inclusion of the graphic novel as a critical literary mode of resistance. This panel was a perfect continuation of the previous day's closing panel, and the ensuing discussions on medium and artist perspective was an exciting start to the conference's closing day.

Resistance on Stage and Screen (Chair: Hannah Scheithauer)

The first of two parallel panels on Friday morning combined three case studies which considered 'Resistance on Stage and Screen'. Freya Tyrrell's paper discussed what the 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe* owed to its production company, Prometheus Films, its founder, the communist activist Willi Münzenberg, and his call for a socialist United Front against the rise of fascism. Tyrrell argued that the film, which thematises unemployment, homelessness, and political tensions in Weimar Germany, disrupts the teleology 'from Caligari to Hitler' established by Siegfried Kracauer, promoting workers' solidarity beyond the narrow limits of KPD party doctrine. The findings which Aditi Premkumar and Sumit Turuk presented in their joint paper on contemporary anti-caste cinema in India confirmed the capacity of mass media to address social inequalities and reconfigure group identities. They compared the depiction of lower-caste characters in Bollywood mainstream cinema, which has leant towards stereotyped depictions of poverty, victimhood, and violence, to recent efforts by independent filmmakers to portray a broader bandwidth of experiences made by Adivasi, Dalit, queer, and trans communities. The political force of performance became evident once more in Liam Johnston's paper on Brecht's *The Days of the Commune* (1949), a play whose cross-border imagination draws on French history to imagine new beginnings for post-war Germany. The play, he argued, critically interrogates the legitimacy of state violence and envisages the people as a sovereign community – elements which, disturbingly, did not prevent it from being instrumentalised by the East German state, where it premiered at a time of heightened repressions in the wake of the June 1953 uprising.

FRIDAY 24 JUNE

RETHINKING RESISTANCE

Theory and Practice (Chair: Shivani Chauhan)

In this panel, we discovered some very fascinating and thought-provoking shades of resistance. Jasper Friedrich's (University of Oxford) take on the grammar of emotions in political theory demonstrated that negative emotions can have an emancipatory potential of resistance against discriminations and injustices within our society. Kotryna Garanasvili (University of East Anglia) opened up another dimension of resistance. Her research showed us how literary texts written in dialect can raise a collective voice against conventional power dynamics between different registers of language. This is in turn also a form of resistance against layers of social and cultural hierarchies on a broader scale. Finally, Raju Kendre (SOAS University of London) shared the objectives of his grassroots movement *Eklayva* which serves as a resistance movement against widespread inequality in higher education in India.

Writing Resistance Lives (Chair: Stephanie Franklin)

The final conference panel drew together three fascinating papers which explored how lived experiences of resistance are captured in writing. Florence Smith (University of Oxford) presented a paper on the acts of domestic resistance by women from the Nazi-occupied Channel Islands, showing how these activities challenged gendered associations of resistance with the masculine. Maëlle Nagot (Ecole Normale Supérieure, Sorbonne Université) presented the diary of Alice James and argued that her use of impersonality subverts the generic codes of diary-writing, as focussed on personal experience, and reinvents the self to gain authorial control over the text. The final ethnographic paper from Emanuela Nadia Borghi (University of St Andrews) offered an anthropological perspective on the experiences of a Ukrainian migrant woman in Italy to demonstrate how resistance is a dynamic process of everyday strategies and practices.







FRIDAY 24 JUNE

RETHINKING RESISTANCE

Reading and Discussion with Rachel Seiffert (Chair: Cailee Davis)

The closing keynote event of the three-day conference was a reading and discussion with Rachel Seiffert. Author of four novels and one collection of short stories, Seiffert has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize, the Dublin/IMPAC Award, and longlisted three times for the Women's Prize for Fiction. Her work is often about confronting that which we might otherwise look away from, and for her keynote reading, Seiffert shared a yet-to-be-published short story about a daring moment of resistance. Set in Occupied Europe, the story explores the motivations and catalysts necessary for acts of resistance, be they daily undertakings of survival or operations of political defiance. Seiffert's reading inspired discussions on the journalistic process and handling of testimony for writers of historical fiction, and drawing on her previous novel *A Boy in Winter*, the conversation included talks of resistance and the contemporary war in Ukraine. One line — "we should all help each other" — and the female solidarity in Seiffert's short story reading once again returned discussions to a common theme of the conference: community as central to resistance and the notion of shared responsibility. The engaging reading and critical discussions were followed by a drinks reception to conclude all conference proceedings.

Final Thanks

The organisers are extremely grateful to all who helped make the conference a success: the teams at TORCH and the Taylor Institution; the sponsors; the speakers; the keynotes, Sarah Colvin, Murad Subay, and Rachel Seiffert; and the many members of the public who attended the open events.







FEEDBACK

RETHINKING RESISTANCE

We asked our speakers for their feedback on the conference. Here are some highlights!

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

'I couldn't limit an answer to one thing - the scope of papers was so wide that I learnt so much.'

'One thing?! The highlight for me was Sarah Colvin's keynote on reciprocity. Although I'm not in German Studies it was incredibly enlightening and relevant to my work.'

'Resistance is a historical and cultural product, individual and at the same time collective, which resides in daily practices, literature, cinema, and theatre, in the ideas and hopes of those who practise resistance.'

'How effective an interdisciplinary set of papers/presentations can be for thinking critically about one's own discipline and approach.'

WHAT DID YOU LOVE?

'I loved how welcoming and safe the space felt.'

'I found the conference very welcoming as a graduate student who hasn't presented in person since covid!'

'The panels were very well organised which resulted in very interesting and fruitful Q&As.'

