ASECS WOMEN'S CAUCUS 50th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Interview with Dr. Alison Conway, Professor, University of British Columbia

By Alexia Ainsworth

Alexia Ainsworth: What was your first contact with eighteenth-century studies? What was that experience of the eighteenth century like for you?

Alison Conway: I hated the eighteenth century as an undergraduate. My first contact must have been in a British survey course and must have been with Pope. So, the fascination started only when I arrived at UC Berkeley for my PhD, where Catherine Gallagher was teaching a course that would become the basis for her book, *Nobody's Story*, and James Turner was teaching a course on fiction and sexuality. In that semester, the two of them converted me - it was a full conversion experience, having this literature taught to me by different people and being exposed to it in a new way. Those courses, in addition to a course I took during my master's degree on women in the 1790s, laid the groundwork. That is my conversion story, which I always tell my undergraduates as well.

Ainsworth: Your first book, *Private Interests: Women, Portraiture, and the Visual Culture of the English Novel, 1709-1791*, sprung from your dissertation at Berkeley. Given your conversion story, I was wondering how your literary interests evolved during your PhD.

Conway: That dissertation topic came from an interest in feminist film theory; it was informed by Teresa de Lauretis and Kaja Silverman and the scholarship of women who were working on theories of the gaze. Now I look back on that dissertation as having been a very strange

eighteenth-century studies topic, but because Catherine Gallagher herself was not an eighteenth-centuryist, I don't think that she was overly worried about the fact that my dissertation didn't really fit into any purview other than novel studies. It really did come purely out of my theoretical interests because I didn't yet have a grounding in eighteenth-century studies, so now I look back and just think that I was very lucky to have had a dissertation supervisor who was so supportive and let me run with it. The interdisciplinary focus of the dissertation, as well, was encouraged by the eighteenth-centuryists – for instance, Michael Baxandall, who was a famous art historian at Berkeley, supervised one of my dissertation field exams and never said, "this is bonkers, what are you doing?" He just said, "sure, okay, read these texts."

Ainsworth: Do you still use film theory in your work today?

Conway: My theoretical interests have shifted, but it's always there, right? It's interesting to think of your intellectual heritage; film theory has probably always informed my readings, psychoanalysis as well, as these modes of reading were trained into me in that period.

Ainsworth: When did you first become involved with ASECS and with the Women's Caucus? How has that experience evolved over the years that you've been involved?

Conway: My first ASECS would have been 1993, when I was a graduate student. It was an amazing experience. I went to the Women's Caucus lunch - I don't even know how I knew to go to it. I had previously met Shawn Maurer, now a senior member of ASECS, so perhaps she invited me? I can't remember exactly how, but I ended up at the lunch and then realized that this

was an amazing community. I have gone to the lunch ever since. I became involved in the Caucus very quickly, becoming a co-chair and doing service work, so the Women's Caucus was essential to my ASECS experience from the start.

Ainsworth: How have you, as a scholar and as an educator, been impacted by the Women's Caucus and by ASECS overall?

Conway: Oh, absolutely, it's had a hugely significant impact. The Women's Caucus is just a wonderful place to meet people, and that sense of community has been very grounding. The conversations that arose out of the lunches were often continued during the year, and it taught me that you could reach out to people and ask for help, or ask questions, or look for support or advice, and I can't imagine how that would have happened without the lunch and without the community it provided. For ASECS more generally, I had the benefit of other mentors in the association – Bert Goldgar and Tom Lockwood, who are both now dead, came to my paper at my very first ASECS and then helped me usher that paper into press, get it into a collection of essays, and they were just simply like, "We like your paper. How can we help you?" They were incredibly generous and I was deeply grateful to these total strangers who just took an interest in my work and wanted to see it developed.

Ainsworth: How have you seen eighteenth-century studies, as a whole, evolve? For myself, I became interested in eighteenth-century studies in undergrad right before the pandemic hit. I therefore watched as eighteenth-century studies went from deeply understudied to suddenly, *A Journal of the Plague Year* becoming deeply relevant and stocked in popular bookstores. So, for

you, how have you seen eighteenth-century studies evolve over time, both in terms of theoretical scholarship, but also in terms of popular reception?

Conway: Of course I long for it to be popularly recognized at all moments, in every instance. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* has a line from *A Journal of the Plague Year*: “I'm not dead yet.” The eighteenth century is everywhere; all of its narratives are incredibly important and significant. That is, of course, the belief of any eighteenth-centuryist, but my concern is, when we no longer teach it, what will be the venue for that popular awareness? How will people know to read these texts? They knew how to read *A Journal of the Plague Year* because COVID took us to any plague narrative that was available, but what about reading “A Modest Proposal?” How will that disseminate? I hope there will be other ways for eighteenth-century literature to reach an audience, but I think the field will be transformed within the university and will only be taught in different ways – outside of courses on the time period, or under different kinds of conceptual umbrellas, such as environmental humanities or transatlantic studies. I don't think the eighteenth-century is going away, but I can see it being reconfigured, renamed. But, more broadly, there's a general crisis of higher education. What are we going to do without a body of scholars and researchers? That's my real concern, that there won't be anybody left to do the work regardless of what we call it. That’s my apocalyptic nightmare: no research, so no dissemination. That doesn't mean that eighteenth-century literature might not be read, but in terms of communicating it to the public in an informed and engaged way, it will be a challenge.

Ainsworth: How has your experience in the classroom been overall? Have you seen shifts in how students want to engage with eighteenth-century studies, even as the overall culture towards higher education has shifted?

Conway: There is a real appetite for eighteenth-century literature. When I teach something like *Robinson Crusoe*, the students recognize it as a kind of cultural barometer and they're interested in reading it, and they also can see the various manifestations of *Crusoe* and how it's played out across the centuries. But for me, the things that get lost when we don't teach eighteenth-century literature more broadly are the surprise moments. I had students loving *Joseph Andrews*! I suddenly had a group that just thought that *Joseph Andrews* was the bee's knees and wrote interesting things about it, which you could not predict. They considered it topical, and they considered it important. So, I find that we can always teach the significance of these works for our time. But then there is the problem of student reading. I have had students who have said, "I can read 100 pages and that's sufficient, I get it," a philosophy major who believed that with a work of philosophy you have to get to the end, but you only need to read 100 pages of *Pamela* to know what's going on. We have some students who won't read a whole book, which is a larger systemic problem that I don't know how we're going to speak to.

Ainsworth: Shifting to your writing, now: in the past five years you've produced at least one article per year, you have published a book, and you have written numerous book reviews. I'm wondering what your writing process looks like, especially as you juggle these multiple tasks.

Conway: Well, I'm blissfully on administrative leave right now, so I get to wake up every day and just think and write. But. I would say that I need quiet blocks of time. The summers are crucial to me. I know people who write every day, but I was an associate dean for the last five years and I found the day was taken up with email, and email is highly destructive to sustained thought. So, I really had to carve out time. I'm a carver - carve out the weeks, carve out the months, carve out the time away from email, and that's where the writing gets done. Since I'm a pre-social media person, it's not as much of a draw, but I belong to the generation that didn't have email, which now I can't even imagine. Of course, email solved all sorts of problems, but having endured five years of the constant barrage of it, it seems to me like the death of the brain.

Ainsworth: More granularly, do you identify as a person who writes linearly and then edits, or are you writing pages upon pages of research to then cut down from? Has your writing practice evolved throughout your career?

Conway: I don't think my process has fundamentally changed. I start with the materials – block quotations, texts, rubrics. Then I start doing close readings. I work out the throughline as I'm writing, and while I usually start with a hunch of how the pieces are going to fit together, the risk is that the throughline won't emerge. But, that's my process: slow close reading, labor intensive, with a constant anxiety that the thesis will not hold or appear.

Ainsworth: You've shown a real dedication to doing book reviews, which I think is somewhat atypical of more established scholars. I was interested in knowing what, for you, is the rationale

for doing these reviews so consistently and what you think are the defining features of a really good book review.

Conway: I think book reviews are an important service contribution, so I think people should continue to write them. They're a way of engaging with your colleagues and acknowledging the work that they've done as a peer, so I'm actually disappointed that people turn it down or say that they're something junior scholars should do. I have tried to consistently write or agree to write when asked, but more generally when you go for your promotions or reviews and people read your work with real care and attention, it's a real gift. At the university where I spent most of my career you get to see the letters that people write, and it's like a book review, but more engaged, and that reminds you of how important it is to feel read and seen by your peers. So, book reviews form that function in my mind, and I guess my approach has just been to be as thorough and honest in my reading as I can be. For myself, when I've had people who have pointed out flaws or weaknesses in my books, I appreciate that because I think they actually are taking it seriously. I know other people who take offense or are concerned about any kind of negative comments on their book, but I think that means that they're connecting with you in some way, and that's great. So, in the hopes that other people receive whatever kind of concerns or reservations I have in the same spirit, I write those as well.

Ainsworth: Do you identify as a teacher first, or as a writer first?

Conway: Definitely teacher first, insofar as the point of the work, of the criticism, is to reach a public, and my public are my students. No non-academic is going to read my work, so if I'm not

thinking in ways that will translate into meaningful teaching modes or theoretical engagements or philosophical investigations, then I don't see the point. It has got to be a translation of the ideas into a public, otherwise it would just be writing down into a solitary hole.

Ainsworth: In that vein, what do you think is the classroom exercise, writing prompt, or other teaching innovation of yours that you feel the most proud of?

Conway: To avoid ChatGPT, I did all blue book essays in class, where the students would have a series of prompts for each novel and then respond to one of them. So, they could prepare, and they could bring in their novels, but they couldn't have notes. It felt very old-school and very honest – the prompts were not complicated; they were analytical and asked the students to answer a question about the novel. I teach the same way, Socratically, where we work through a series of questions and the answers to the questions advance our reading of the novel. They're always invited to do that orally in my classroom, and then the blue book writing felt like a good extension of that. Also, I got to see the writing without the kind of contrivance of the essay form, let alone the intervention of generative AI, which is such an issue at this point. But I've heard from colleagues that their students who don't want to use generative AI love the in-class work, because they feel like it's finally a level playing field. They've said the same thing about final exams, that they want final exams in literature classes and they want the in-class work. But this assignment was surprising to me because, of course, I value writing and practicing writing and editing and learning the craft of writing, but the blue book essays were really engaging pieces to read.

Ainsworth: You mentioned that it gave you the ability to look at their work without the contrivances of the essay form. Do you feel that the way we teach the essay right now as a genre is moving into a more outdated format that you'd like to see updated? Or, do you feel it's something that is still important, but perhaps for students who would like to pursue deeper engagement?

Conway: I love the essay form as a simple tool for teaching critical thinking, but I've always had a longstanding battle with the kinds of formulaic essay writing that students are taught, especially in high school. At one point in my career, I embarked on a mission to reach out to high school teachers in my district and I had a one-day colloquium with them about not teaching the five-paragraph essay, and teaching students to approach essay writing in a different way. I have always worked on this with my students, encouraging them to see that the essay can be a really expansive, interesting, and engaging form if you unhook it from these heavily formulated modes. So, I would say I'm a big believer in the essay outside of the pretty crude model students adhere to from high school. I love a good essay, but I've integrated creative work into essay writing so it can be elastic and engaging.

Ainsworth: I noticed that you do have a habit in your academic articles of bringing in that creative work and talking about your own personal experiences. I really love your essay *Reading with Aunt Bunty: Intergenerational Feminism and Eighteenth-Century Studies*, which is obviously so personal to you and your experience with your family, but you use that to trace the lineages of scholarship on female writing. So, I was wondering what your philosophy is regarding incorporating the self into your writing.

Conway: I think it's really useful for us all to think about what the emotional parameters are that guide our writing. And these are often buried in our unconscious. I've been working quite a bit on my great-aunt, who was an activist and a writer, and I've learned that many of us in my generation came into the undergraduate classroom and were sparked by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. We take it on and it becomes incorporated into our affect. But that may blind us, actually, to different ways of even approaching our own personal relation to what we're doing. So, I think it's really a topic worth investigating: what is your own intellectual heritage? What are the affective sparks that motivate you? Where do they come from? Who instigated them? What intellectual philosophical principles guide them? I cite an essay by Catherine Gallagher, who talks about Woolf's charismatic mode, and when I was reading that essay about modes of criticism and Woolf's affective pull, it really rang a bell. I felt, "Oh, that's so true!" But what does that mean for how I've been engaging with women's literature, women's literary history? So, yes, I think the personal is a great place to think abstractly about one's own investments.

Ainsworth: And do you, in a Rita Felskian way (thinking about *Hooked: Art and Attachment*), feel that you have to like the texts that you study? That liking something is a requirement to feel driven to write about it?

Conway: Yes, and I'm a huge literary fan so I'm always on the side of the literary. I don't think there are any texts I don't like. I mean, I have favorites, but being a fan absolutely informs my critical practice because I'm always going to say that the literary is a good thing. Other people

disagree and consider literature a tool or an ideological machine or frame ways of thinking about literature only in terms of critique, but that's not my base foundational principle.

Ainsworth: One final question: what is the most recent book that you've read? And, if it's different, what is the most recent eighteenth-century text that you've read?

Conway: I probably read a book a week or every two weeks, so it's difficult to remember! I've read a dozen books since the start of the new year, but the most important – and a must read for anyone interested in what the novel form can do – are the first three volumes of Salvej Balle's *On the Calculation of Volume*. I can't wait for volume four, coming out in April. My mind blanked when you asked because my last read was non-fiction, Stephen Groslz's *Love's Labour* – also interesting! The last eighteenth-century works I read were Defoe's works on the supernatural, *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions*, *The Political History of the Devil*, and *With his Vision of the Angelick World* were the last three delightful eighteenth-century texts I read, in preparation for the upcoming ASECS conference.