

Workshop Report: Regional and National Networks

The third and final two-day workshop of the AHRC-funded *Creative Communities* network took place on 24–25 January 2014, in the stately surroundings of Chawton House Library. The theme, ‘Regional and National Networks’, provided a pathway into a discussion of where, how, and under what historical conditions, communal creativity existed in the Romantic period. In their opening remarks, David Higgins and John Whale encouraged delegates to treat these meetings as workshops, and to devote time to conversation and debate around papers. We were also asked to keep in mind that, although the process of discussion was in itself valuable, we also needed to consider other outcomes of the network, whether it be a collaborative research projects, publications, or further events.

Reinforcing David’s emphasis on the communal nature of the network, we began with a seminar entitled ‘Community and Material Cultures of Print and Place’, with texts and topics expertly introduced by Emma Clery. Considering writers as diverse as William Cobbett, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Mary Russell Mitford, the groups discussed different conceptions of creativity available to communities depending upon their class, gender, and location. All the groups saw certain barriers which society placed on community, such as the high walls which separated Cobbett and Austen, the lack of access to capital that prevented some women from choosing what they read, or geographical distance, which itself fosters epistolary communities. Delegates were also intrigued by the friction between private and public in these communities, and speculated on whether a family could be a creative community, whether public ‘puffing’ of the work of members of a community was necessarily creative, and how these small groups related to Benedict Anderson’s conception of the nation state as ‘imagined community’.

After lunch, David Worrall gave a presentation on the theoretical underpinning of his recent work on eighteenth-century theatre. Matthew Ward, in a previous report, had noted the relative lack of theory at the London meeting, but the same could not be said of Chawton. Worrall mapped Manuel De Landa’s Social Assemblage Theory on to theatre audiences, and argued that each and every performance is an individual expression in time and space. In the Romantic period, these performances occurred across Britain thanks to a growing regional theatre network. The implementation of the theory, which revolved around large masses of people at an individual event, was aided by David’s extensive research in theatre archives on both sides of the Atlantic. The talk produced a lively question session, with Simon White wondering if we had evidence of audience satisfaction in regional theatres, and Gregory Dart moving the discussion to consider the role of celebrity actors like Sarah Siddons and David Garrick.

The next session, a three-paper panel, revolved around communities active in English cities. Sarah Moulden presented paper on the artist John Sell Cotman’s move to his native Norwich, after seven years in the London art scene, and showed that the East Anglian city was a regional hub for trade. Through the use of contemporary newspaper cuttings, Sarah outlined Cotman’s early forays into the market, arguing that he overestimated the wealth of this smaller community, but that later the artist proved himself adaptable to these new conditions. Adaptation was a topic continued in Jennifer Wilkes’ examination of Lit Phils in Manchester and Newcastle. These societies were founded within twelve years of each other, operated under similar constitutions, and both had roots in the Warrington Academy. But Jennifer assiduously noted the regional differences between them, with the later Newcastle society having a more local character, as opposed to the Addisonian discourse of taste and refinement that held sway in Manchester. Matthew Ward’s paper took us to what he sees as an under-appreciated turning point in Romantic culture: the meeting of science and poetry that occurred at Humphrey Davy’s Nitrous Oxide experiments in Bristol. Matthew suggested ways of looking at creativity through the inhalation of this gas, rather than the more solitary effects of laudanum, and the sociable nature of writers like Beddoes and Coleridge, who discussed their reaction to the drug. The real insights came in the possibility of a new type of comic sublime coming from this inhalation, something akin to the restorative value of the Lake District air, which Matthew hopes to explore further.

A new day was upon us and the Mr. Darcy-like ramble that some took from Alton to Chawton stood delegates in good stead for the morning’s first panel, which was based around Jane Austen and

place. Jane Darcy presented a picture of the Isle of Wight as an important creative locale in the Romantic period, long before the visits of Queen Victoria and Tennyson. Whilst showing the popularity of the island through guidebooks and prints, Jane revealed a major discovery: that Jane Austen had visited the island and mentions certain locations in a fragment of a letter. This combination of historical and literary research was an ideal lead-in to Sarah Lewin's presentation on using local Archives. By using the 'Three around Farnham' (Austen, Cobbett, and Gilbert White), Sarah encouraged delegates to look at creative communities horizontally, through the parish records of their family and friends, to produce more contextually informed maps of communities. The papers produced a number of follow-up questions, which considered the role of the Isle of Wight during the Napoleonic campaigns, and how delegates could search the huge resources of the County record offices nationwide.

In the second seminar of the weekend Simon White gave delegates the chance to discuss the role of Edinburgh as a regional and metropolitan space for literary communities. Although we discussed the machinations of Edinburgh literary culture, Simon's apposite selections allowed discussion to range from Ettrick in the Borders to the Trossachs and on into the Highlands. Much of the discussion revolved around the colossal figure of Walter Scott, and the extent to which he act as an enabler and guardian of Edinburgh's literary community. Contrasts were also drawn between Edinburgh and the London literary scene discussed at the network's previous meeting at UCL, with points raised over the centrality of periodicals in Scotland, particularly *Blackwood's*, and the more local character of the smaller city.

The workshop finished with quite a bang as John Goodridge discussed, read, and sang from works which make up *Laboring-Class Poets*, an online database of which he is General Editor. Regionalism was again at the centre of the argument, as John demonstrated the extent to which laboring-class poetry was published in Scottish communities, and gave a comparative reading of the Newcastle and Manchester poetry scenes. We learnt that peasant poets were often tied to their occupation, the bricklayer poet for example, which posed a particular problem: if these poets became successful enough to retire from their trades, then can the Ettrick Shepherd remain authentic if he is no longer herding sheep? And were these figures now part of no community, to be seen as interlopers in both literary and laboring communities? The talk ended with readings from Alexander Barrass' *Pitman's Social Neet*, a set of linked poems and songs which take place in a Stanley public house over the course of a rowdy evening. Questions over the restrictions that dialect had in allowing these poets national fame, on how important group reading was, and the level of work still to be done on finding this verse, led to more thought-provoking debate.

We ended the workshop with a 'Summing Up' session which carried on the engaging conversations of the last two days, and attempted to draw out common themes. The discussion hinged upon the variety of formations we had examined and how the everyday community of theatre-goers, the small aristocratic coterie, and the virtual epistolary communities, were all functionally and formatively distinct. The clear differences in these types of formations moved the conversation to consider whether community was always a creative tool and, if it was, did these groupings lose their sparkle once the novelty of community had worn off? Temporary holiday or travel communities, for example, can be seen as different networks, as opposed to fixed communities centred around a city or country house. Like any good summary, these various conclusions raised more questions than they settled and delegates returned to all parts of the country with much food for thought. Uppermost of these was where the network could go from here and what as a community we could create that could disseminate some of the insights that it has generated

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