

MELVILLE, CONRAD, and the Concept of Life: Celebration & Sorrow

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“Life” has become an increasingly polarizing concept. Even the urgency of climate change and our global pandemic – which deepens shared understandings concerning the fragility of life – can serve to hurry us past reflection on the ways in which “life” is conceived in discourse. This panel provides space to consider notions of “life” through two cosmopolitan authors who offer varied treatments of the concept, allying it with their own artistic activities, probing the ethical and cultural assumptions of their time, and offering powerful perspectives onto our own. Indeed, whilst the shared oceanic aspects of Joseph Conrad’s and Herman Melville’s fictions continue to challenge the place of the human, we hope to interrogate their conception of life as a countervailing cultural construction.

The panel, chaired by Mark Deggan (Simon Fraser University), consists of three papers and a responding commentary, and is a joint venture of the Joseph Conrad Society of America and the Melville Society. It focuses upon discursive, aesthetic, and cultural articulations of “life,” and contemplates the varied human processes at the heart of these two major contemporaries.

"There are sacred things in life": Typee, An Outcast of the Islands, & Benjamin's "mere life."

JAY PARKER / Hang Seng University of Hong Kong

“A Tale of Two Leaps: Benito Cereno, Lord Jim, & Unreliable Narration in Art & Life”

JUSTINA TORRANCE / Harvard University

“A Passing Phase of Life’: The Biopolitics of Empathy in Joseph Conrad’s *Narcissus* (1897)”

BASSAM SIDIKI / University of Texas at Austin

RESPONDENT

CHRISTIAN HAINES / Pennsylvania State University