

Contested Communities

A Report on the 21st Annual GNEL/ASNEL Conference at the University of Bayreuth, 13-16 March 2010

As the title suggests the focus of this year's conference was communities, contested and otherwise. And one of the communities all participants dealt with and lived in these four days, was what Pete Marsden called the reality of the conference as a community. I am not sure, if I would go as far as he did to consider ASNEL as an extended family, but then I have not been part of it for very long. Yet the friendly atmosphere listening to scholars of all ages and ways of life as well as to authors, the get-togethers, the discussions and talks in and between the panels and the eagerness of all to give and take criticism as well as praise and encouragement certainly made it a fruitful and experience.

Special thanks have to go to Prof. Dr. Susanne Mühleisen, Amanee Katwaroo, PD Dr. Oliver Lindner, Dr. Eric Anchimbe, Hanna Strass and the many student volunteers who put lots of time and effort into organising the conference and made sure we felt welcome and perfectly looked after. I know how much work goes into organizing such an event and I feel very grateful for all the work they have done.

A great variety of continents and communities were covered in the panels both in literature and media as well as languages, from *Contesting Europe* to *The Black Atlantic*, from *The Narrative Body* in a literal and figurative sense to *The Perception of Black British Youth in the British Media*, from *Translating Cameroon Literature* to *Applying the Speech Community*. Some of the lectures represented work in progress and were held in the "Under Construction" section. Due to the vast variety and the simultaneous presentation I won't be able to do justice to all of them, but I shall try to give an inkling of what I took away from the readings and the keynotes.

Thursday evening saw a reading of Abdulrazak Gurnah in the Iwalewa Haus, a venue of the Centre of African Studies of the University of Bayreuth. Between photographs and installation pieces of Christophe Ndabananiye we were able to listen to Gurnah reading excerpts from his recent work. One should rather say telling, for he is a storyteller in the tradition of the storytellers he writes so aptly about. And between his voice and the atmosphere of the Iwalewa Haus we were indeed a community of likeminded listeners, readers and researchers.

The next evening we had the pleasure to listen to Shani Mootoo telling of places and people very different from those Gurnah had talked about and yet letting us see similarities in perspectives and experiences. Though not in as atmospheric a setting as the Iwalewa Haus, her stories captured us as strongly and gave us another great evening filled with literature and discussion.

Saturday offered a lunch reading of Rudolph Bader's first novel *The Prison of Perspective* and a reading/performing of the British playwright Oladipu Agboulaje with the assistance of a trained actress dealing with questions of perspective, religion and life in a multicultural context. All four readings attracted a large crowd and gave all listeners much enjoyment and food for thought and discussion.

In the first keynote lecture Robert Young (NYU, USA) talked about “Community and the Common”. Tracing the idea of community through its religious roots (communion) and its secular use (engl. common & germ. Kommune) he asked the question what constitutes a community and distinguished between actual/real communities, virtual communities and imagined communities. Taking into account the second part of the conference title, the contesting of communities, he drew the conclusion that it is these contesting incidents that ultimately define the community and bring it together using the metaphor that a community is not made by a unifying narrative, but through a series of disasters.

In her keynote “Cross Talk: Jamaican Popular Music and the Politics of Translation” Carolyn Cooper (UWI Mona, Jamaica) looked inside a contested community and its language use. She proposed that to understand the language of a community one needs to understand its cultural contexts and underlying ideologies. Mistranslating leads to misunderstanding and hinders transcultural understanding. She made the point citing the famous song of Bob Marley – *No (,) woman, no cry* – in which the simple setting of a comma can make all the difference. Following these thoughts she looked at the Dance Hall culture and its DJs in Jamaica and the possible misunderstandings caused by reading their language as homophobic. She drew attention to the border clashes between the insider and outsider perspective seen in the media coverage in recent years. Her understanding of the Dance Hall DJs’ use of homophobic language as a culturally informed mode of expression that should not be taken too literally led to a lively debate. Even if homophobic stereotypes are deeply ingrained in Jamaican culture and need to be addressed, one can’t ignore the real threat these stereotypes present to real life people in Jamaica today. This perspective – differing from the view presented by Carolyn Cooper – was voiced loudly, among others, by Shani Mootoo.

The third keynote was given by Ranka Primorac (U Southampton, UK) on “The Cosmopolitan Communities of Zambian Fiction”. Giving an insight into her newest research project she professed her aim to “localise the notion of post-colonialism in Zambian literature”. Focussing mainly on literary magazines of the “New Writing in Zambia” Movement, she described the published reviews, short stories, poems and journalistic pieces as patriotic, multi-racial and criticising the ruling class, corruption and social injustice. She traced the urban versus countryside narrative and pointed to an absence of racial and Eurocentric questions. She proposed to look at the mutual influences of cultures on Zambian literature and the idea of a “patriotic cosmopolitanism”, describing it as a “local, de-colonial though largely patriarchal cosmopolitanism”, suggesting two main fields for future research: a) the definition and perception of literature in Zambia and b) investigating constructions of manhood/masculinity and the patriarchal.

This was my second ASNEL conference (and the first not at my home University), and I enjoyed myself very much. Being able to listen, learn, discuss and meet not only with other students, but also scholars and authors from all over the world is always an inspiring opportunity. And I am eager and hopeful to see many of them again in Hannover next year.

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