

“Postcolonial Studies across the Disciplines”

A Report on the 22nd Annual ASNEL Conference at Leibniz University Hanover, 2-4 June 2011

What is Postcolonial Studies? Is it a discipline, a field of research or a particular approach to literary and cultural studies, informed by a specific theoretical and methodological background? These questions, raised by Mark Stein in his presidential address, were among the words that introduced this year’s 22nd ASNEL conference which aimed to focus on issues connected to the (inter- and trans-)disciplinarity of Postcolonial Studies. Under the heading “Postcolonial Studies across the Disciplines”, the Hanover conference brought together over 130 participants from Africa, Europe, India and the United States, who were encouraged to present work ranging across various disciplinary perspectives and with an explicit self-reflexive impetus. The decision to put matters of interdisciplinarity at the focus of the conference resonates with the current ubiquity of the term in the (European) academic landscape, where calls for cooperation across disciplinary lines as well as for the adoption of interdisciplinary methodologies are no longer only put forward as an ideal, but increasingly integral to research trends in the humanities. ASNEL has not coincidentally operated in this context for a long time, as the concept of interdisciplinarity – if understood as the attempt to counter the biases of individual disciplines by the inclusion of additional perspectives – easily relates to Jana Gohrisch’s characterisation of Postcolonial Studies as “allow[ing] us to look at the world from another perspective, to perceive things differently” (Inaugural Address). For us as students of interdisciplinary master’s programmes, the Hanover conference provided the chance to explore the diverse disciplinary, theoretical, thematic as well as institutional contexts of Postcolonial Studies and to make these rather abstract considerations more concrete. Being able to meet not only other students, but also post-graduates, professors and authors from all around the globe offered a rare and precious opportunity for fruitful exchange of ideas and helped us to further our own understanding of and research in this field.

As was to be expected from a conference that centred on matters of research and teaching from multiple perspectives, the papers presented in each of the 13 panels focused on a wide array of different topics, areas and regions, with panel titles ranging from (but obviously not limited to) “Production of Knowledge in the Caribbean” and “Postcolonial American Studies” to “Dynamics of Participation in Popular Culture”, “Negotiating Genres in India” and “Postcolonial Animals”. While the individual panels provided numerous occasions to see interdisciplinary approaches put to work, the three keynotes by Sabine Broeck (Bremen), Tim Watson (Miami) and Jessica Hemmings (Edinburgh) also brought their own distinct perspectives to the conference.

In what turned out to be perhaps the most provocative of the keynotes delivered in Hanover, Sabine Broeck, in her paper titled "Gender and the modern abjection of blackness: Wollstonecraft's feminism and what slavery had to do with it", argued for a re-evaluation of the history of modernity and Enlightenment from the perspective of slavery. Drawing on impulses from critical whiteness studies, Broeck pointed to a paradox in the scholarly engagement with the relationship between modernity and slavery. While much historiographical research has been done that considers the systems of slavery and enslavement as integral and formative to the development of modernity and capitalism, the humanities have paid little to no attention to that relationship and its impact on modern philosophy. The 'enlightened subject', Broeck stated, arose as a distinctly European white male (and later female) one, with white subject positions set as 'default' positions. However, reflections about the abject or 'inhumaned' status of the enslaved have not entered the dominant strands of critical theory (in both its Frankfurt School or poststructuralist versions) or Gender Studies, which inform much of the work done in Postcolonial Studies. For Broeck, this gap has troubling consequences for a contemporary critical engagement with early feminisms like Mary Wollstonecraft's, which necessarily operated within and against a hegemonic (white, male) discourse from which the situation of the enslaved was kept apart. Broeck thus generally argued for an increased scholarly self-reflexivity in the study of this 'enslavist' dimension of modernity.

Tim Watson, the second keynote speaker, opened Friday's programme with a somewhat less provocative, though certainly not less instructive paper on "Postcolonial and Atlantic Studies: Interdisciplinary Reflections on Slavery and Empire." Watson opened his talk with a consideration of the academic discourse about the history of slavery and the Atlantic world, noting that much of the research done in this area usually relies on conventional historiographical methodologies. For him, this already existing body of work could be enriched by infusing a more 'literary' methodology. Since most of the historical documents and sources were usually produced for and by white creoles and thus do not give a voice to the enslaved, he raised the question how conventional historiographical approaches can successfully contribute to a postcolonial perspective that tries to understand slave revolts in the contexts of enlightenment and abolition. Watson convincingly argued for a crossing of the boundaries between literary and historiographical methodologies in order to make sense of the 'white silence' about slave uprisings. In turn, literary studies can benefit from a historiographical exploration of the contexts of literary production. Watson aptly demonstrated this by considering how the work of the British novelist Barbara Pym can be seen as influenced by the institutional practices of her employer, the International African Institute in London.

From yet another angle, Jessica Hemmings' keynote speech on Saturday, entitled "Postcolonial Textiles: Negotiating Dialogue", also contributed to a great extent to the conference's interdisciplinary approach, as she argued for the inclusion of Textile Studies as a new and hitherto neglected area of interest for Postcolonial Studies. Because of the domestic connotations of their production,

textiles are easily underestimated or ignored rather than considered as works of art or as sites of cultural articulation. Postcolonial Studies can particularly benefit from this unacknowledged area of discourse, as textiles and textile art function as ubiquitous and often clandestine and potentially subversive tools of communication. Since they often contain actual written text, textiles might invite an application of literary theory. Hemmings was quick to point out, however, that the exclusive consideration of textiles in such terms might run the risk of disregarding or downplaying the specificities of their material. Hemmings argued that Postcolonial Studies – as well as literary and cultural studies in general – can only benefit from paying attention to textiles, as the functions of cloth, clothing and fabrics may also operate and be represented in various ways in literary texts.

While the keynotes were obviously among the most prominently discussed contributions, the papers presented in the individual panels, for the most part, turned out to be no less relevant for the thematic focus of the conference. The number of panellists and (often parallel) panels, however, makes it impossible to do justice to all of them, which is why we will only discuss a few somewhat arbitrarily selected talks here. After the ‘proper’ programme began with two simultaneous ‘Under Construction’ sessions on Thursday which provided PhD-candidates with the chance to present their projects to a responsive, yet critical audience, the second day continued with a panel on “Postcolonial Re-readings of British and American Literature.” Jochen Petzold, whose paper was first, opened with a critical evaluation of postcolonial readings of John Gay’s play *Polly* (1729), in which he called attention to the danger of anachronistically attributing anti-colonial meanings to now classic texts which would not have been accessible to historical audiences. A similarly outspoken self-reflexive approach was put forward in the paper by Frank Schulze-Engler on Saturday, in which he suggested that Postcolonial Studies’ preference for the exploration of colonial themes may obfuscate recent developments in post-independence African literatures which are no longer exclusively concerned with matters of empire and decolonisation. Another of Saturday’s panels also provided the opportunity to hear papers presented by members of a currently ongoing interdisciplinary research project at Leibniz University of Hanover, which focuses on the Caribbean and Africa after the abolition of slavery from the perspectives of both historiography and literary studies.

Discussions about the general institutionalisation of Postcolonial Studies in the German educational system and the methods of teaching Postcolonial Studies at schools were another integral part of the conference. While the latter was also the explicit focus of a teachers’ workshop, it was in a roundtable with contributors from different academic and administrative backgrounds as well as a secondary school teacher from Hanover that Stein’s introductory questions about disciplinaryity were taken up again, as the discussion centred on the institutionalisation of Postcolonial Studies. While the roundtable did not achieve consensus on the question whether the creation of Postcolonial Studies departments or specific MA programmes would help to advance the field, it was perhaps Sabine Broeck’s closing statement that was the most memorable. For her, the question should not

be whether to establish Postcolonial Studies as a discipline or not. Instead, one of the main challenges is to engage in a de-colonial pedagogy, in universities as well as in schools, that does not only include the (post)colonial 'Other' into the curricula but explores white subject positions in a self-reflexive manner and hence produces white discomfort.

Despite the slightly tight schedule and the warm weather which did not always further our concentration, the conference left us with much food for thought. As expected, the accompanying readings by Libor Mikeska and Bernardine Evaristo proved to be a welcome addition to the conference programme. Thanks to the combined efforts of Jana Gohrisch, Ellen Grünkemeier, Henning Marquardt and Ute Reuter as well as their six student helpers, the different aspects of the programme were brought together in a well-balanced and productive manner. Not least because of the association's openness towards contributions of young scholars, valuable insights into the world of academia and the generally friendly atmosphere, we are sure that this year's ASNEL conference was not our last.

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