

## Conference Report

### ***Postcolonial Translocations* – 20th Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of New English Literatures (GNEL/ASNEL), University of Münster, 21-24 May 2009**

As the opening speeches of this year's ASNEL conference, convened by Mark Stein, made clear, the phenomenon of translocation is by no means a new one. Due to its historical and trans-cultural dimension, the topic offers the possibility of forging interdisciplinary connections. In addition, since the phenomenon of translocation metaphorically points to space and time, the topic was an apt choice for the conference that marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of GNEL/ASNEL. This occasion invited reflection not only on the history, the status quo, and the future of the Association, but also on the institutionalisation of postcolonial studies at large.

In his opening keynote address on "Postcolonial Spaces and the Struggle over Geography", Edward W. Soja (UCLA) analysed two postcolonial struggles: the politico-historical struggle over geography as a central focus in postcolonial studies and the theoretical-interpretive struggle over the privileging of history over geography. Drawing on the writings of, amongst others, Edward Said, Michel Foucault, and Henri Lefebvre, Soja emphasised that every human being is inescapably involved in the struggles over the unjust geographies in which he or she lives – ranging in scale and scope from the body (the geography closest in) to the planetary. Elaborating on the domination of social historicism in Western intellectual thought since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Soja then introduced the Spatial Turn. Ultimately, he argued for a recognition of the paradigms of space and time as deeply intertwined and balanced, and for a foregrounding (but crucially not privileging) of space not as a category, but as an interpretive perspective on the modern world.

In the second keynote address, "Intercultural Dialogue without Guarantees", Ien Ang (U Western Sydney) argued that, in Western neo-liberal nation-states, the idea of a single nation as an organic entity in a single state has often been conveniently held on to, even when such a definition of the nation-state has become impossible. Asking the central question of how to deal with multiculturalism, Ang charted a development in migration politics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century from assimilation, via integration, to multiculturalism. Ang posited that a re-emergence of the ideological emphasis on integration results in a diametrical opposition of integration and multiculturalism. In addition, it articulates a perceived crisis of the concept of plural monoculturalism, which fails to meet the reality of globalisation. Ang defined national societies as fractured social-spatial formations, and highlighted the fact that multicultural heterogeneity, as an unintended by-product of financial expediency, hit most countries unprepared. She pointed to the limitations of the value set of liberal democracy in providing guidelines for the question of how to make multiculturalism work. Since assimilationist ideas of integration can result in a refusal to recognise the perspective of the other in the national dis-

course, Ang advocated an intercultural dialogue in the double sense of association and exchange. By definition a non-utopian concept, intercultural dialogue is a never-ending process that aims for the mutual acceptance of different viewpoints and thereby orchestrates the leaky containers that are the national formations of a liquid modernity into a moving interconnectedness.

Diana Brydon (U Manitoba) suggested – in the final keynote address, “‘Difficult Forms of Knowing’: Enquiry, Injury and Translocated Relations of Postcolonial Responsibility” – that there can be no social justice without cognitive justice. She defined this realisation as the moment where enquiry and injury come together, and proposed a dialogue between postcolonial translocations, community, and suffering. Brydon went on to question the Gothic mode, which offers a reading of postcolonial nations as creatures of life-death, as a method for postcolonial analysis. In addition, she defined as one of the tasks of postcolonial scholars the confronting of the disabling inheritances that postcolonial nations must deal with. Referring to several recent novels, Brydon drew attention to the actions of reading, learning, and knowing as a trilogy of concerns. While two visual representations of postcolonial encounters offered an embodiment of the difficult forms of knowing in a colonial situation, Brydon observed that, increasingly, the local and the global fuse to produce the glocal, and proposed a translocation of postcolonial theory to the project of redefining the concept of global democracy.

The political note that was at times struck during the keynote addresses also featured, in a slightly modified way, in several of the papers dealing with postcolonial theory in general. Roy Sommer’s (U Wuppertal) positing of a crisis of the field, for instance, sparked off an almost heated discussion about the possible exhaustion of postcolonial theory. Similar issues were touched upon during the Round Table on “The Institutionalisation of Postcolonial Studies”. Featuring an impressively international cast of speakers, the discussion approached its topic from a variety of angles, including insights into the institutionalisation of postcolonial studies in postcolonial countries.

A concept that reappeared throughout the conference was the notion of cosmopolitanism. A session on “Translocating Cosmopolitanism”, for example, pointed out two areas in which the translocation of cosmopolitanism comes to play. Firstly, the emergence of a new understanding of cosmopolitanism brings up questions as to the transition between traditional and more recent understandings of the concept. Secondly, the use of models and theories from other disciplines when dealing with the concept is in need of further investigation. Following this line of thought, Gesa Mackenthurn (U Rostock) argued that the old (political, universalist), and the new (aesthetic, culturally oriented) notions of cosmopolitanism each belong to different cultural registers, and must therefore be seen as existing next to, rather than following, each other.

Apart from a session on “Translation and Translocation”, which unfortunately had to tackle its own problems of location, papers were also held in view of such diverse topics as “Gender and the Postcolonial”, “Narrative Translocations: Strategies and Techniques”, “Transcultural Cityscapes”, “Postcolonial Film Cultures”, and “Translocal Foods and Travelling Goods”. In addition, the conference held

several “School Teaching Forums”, which focused on the teaching of postcolonial literatures in secondary schools, and “Under Construction” sessions, offering MA and PhD students the chance to present their work to an international academic audience. Unfortunately, only one research project, by Jutta Weingarten (U Giessen), was presented at the Poster Session.

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Association was marked by a Round Table on “GNEL/ASNEL and its Institutional Locations” and the “ASNEL Anniversary Exhibition”. Likewise, *Wasafiri* celebrated its 25 years of existence with a Round Table on “Clearing New Spaces” and a first session of readings by postcolonial authors (Tomáš Zmeškal, Bernardine Evaristo, and Samir El-youssef, followed by Sridhar Rajeswaran two days later).

A performance of the play *s/w remix* provided an entertaining, yet critical engagement with the everyday lives of young, black and white Germans, while a guided tour of Münster for non-members of ASNEL, and an enjoyable conference dinner wound up the truly well-organised and inspiring set of conference activities.

**Barbara Gafner and Marijke Kähler (Bern)**