

“Postcolonial Translocations”

A Report on the 20th Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of New Literatures in English (ASNEL/GNEL), University of Münster, 21-24 May 2009

It has always been one of ASNEL's aims to bring together well-established and young academics, teachers, students and authors; and this year's conference has been no exception. Some 300 participants from 35 countries attended the conference. From Thursday to Sunday – after the conference warming at a local brewery on Wednesday evening – they were invited to listen to the readings of four writers, to three keynote addresses, and they could choose from 125 papers that were given in eight sessions with five to seven parallel panels, including a school-teaching forum. To my knowledge, almost all panels seem to have had a reasonably large audience, including those panels that were scheduled for Sunday, the last day of the conference. In organising this conference Mark Stein, the convener of the conference and the current Head of the English Department at the University of Münster, was supported by Silke Stroh, Marga Munkelt, Markus Schmitz, a secretary and a large team of students.

Due to the large number of contributions and their simultaneous presentations, I will not be able to do justice to individual papers. I shall therefore concentrate on the general aspects of the conference, on its topic and programme, and especially the keynote addresses, the ‘Under Construction’ section, the round table and panel discussions, and the authors' readings.

In the opening address on Thursday, Mark Stein welcomed the guests and explained that the topic of the conference had been inspired by Kwame Kwei-Armah's play *Elmina's Kitchen* that premiered in London in 2003. Set entirely in the eponymous restaurant in Hackney, London, the play transcends its limited setting and reaches out in space and time, thus creating ‘postcolonial translocations’. This deliberately broad topic allows for the inclusion of many ideas, texts, theories, regions and disciplines, as the panel titles indicate: ‘Postcolonial Film Cultures’, ‘Transcultural Cityscapes’, ‘Narrative Translocations’, ‘Translation and Translocation’ – to name but a few. Yet, there was also a downside to this inclusiveness: with a topic so vague the contributions easily lack cohesion. All too often the term ‘translocation’ was not defined or made productive for a particular context but simply taken for granted and used as a synonym of ‘dislocation’. Consequently, many of the papers and panels did not foster continuous debates but rather resulted in a collection of individual questions or comments.

In his plenary talk “Postcolonial spaces and the struggle over geography”, which marked the beginning of the academic part of the conference, Edward Soja, Professor of Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles, called for a ‘re(dis)covery of space’. He suggested that scholars can use space as an interpretative perspective even in non-spatial discourses, rather than privileging time

over space or history over geography as has often been done. On Friday morning, Ien Ang, Professor of Cultural Studies and founding director of the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, delivered her keynote paper on "Intercultural dialogue without guarantees" in which she called into question myths about social unity and integration. Instead, she promoted intercultural dialogue as a more productive way of responding to global migrancy and multiculturalism. The final day of the conference opened with the keynote address by Diana Brydon, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Globalization and Cultural Studies at the University of Manitoba, on "'Difficult forms of knowing': Enquiry, injury and translocated relations of postcolonial responsibility". She began by quoting Homi Bhabha, "Where does a subject of global enquiry and injury stand or speak from? To what does it bear relation, from where does it claim responsibility?" Brydon then reflected on postcolonial studies, analysing literary and visual texts that challenge assumptions and categories that have been central to the postcolonial.

Like the keynote addresses, the 'Under Construction' section has been an integral part of the annual ASNEL conferences. Contributors – both junior and advanced scholars – are invited to present their projects in the early stages in order to receive feedback from the audience. This year five M.A. and doctoral students gave presentations. Most people in the audience were fellow (doctoral) students who can, of course, give helpful feedback and good advice. To my mind, however, the speakers' benefit would have been greater if more professors and other well-established academics had attended the sessions and commented on the projects. Drawing on their experience in supervising and evaluating such theses, they can give feedback from a different perspective which would add nicely to the ideas brought forward by younger academics. In the general meeting of the ASNEL members Gerhard Stiliz suggested inviting senior colleagues to attend the poster sessions so that they can give feedback on the projects presented there. It might be worthwhile to broaden his idea and to include the 'Under Construction' section in such an invitation as well.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the foundation of the association and of its annual meetings, the programme of this year's conference also included an ASNEL Anniversary Exhibition in which previous conferences, summer schools and important publications were represented. Curated by Ursula Kluwick, Claudia Perner and Frank Schulze-Engler, this 'history' of ASNEL is all the more remarkable since many of the posters and documents on display were private copies supplied by individual members. In keeping with this commemorative and future-oriented approach, the conference programme also included round tables and panel discussions in which selected speakers from different research areas, disciplines, universities and countries reflected on the past, present and future of postcolonial studies. The panellists sketched the development of the institutionalisation of postcolonial studies, also discussing the aims and benefits of introducing and establishing this field. The issues they addressed include the professionalization in the field, the widening of the canon by including New English Literatures in (B.A./M.A.) study programmes or in the school curriculum, funding, the relations between regional and postcolonial studies or between different

associations such as the German Association of University Professors of English and ASNEL. Two topics in particular have shaped the debates. Firstly, can and should postcolonial approaches be institutionalised as a particular field of postcolonial studies or is it more productive to think of them as a perspective, as a methodology in which postcolonial questions function as tools that are applied to various texts and fields? In this context, Diana Brydon coined the metaphor of postcoloniality as a virus that has spread and that penetrates into hosts, fields and structures in order to change them from within, even at the cost of killing the host. Secondly, interdisciplinarity was another key issue: in order to bridge the gap between specialists and generalists, several speakers suggested collaboration in teaching and research. Scholars from different fields would thus be able to achieve broader insights without losing in specificity. In this respect, it was good to see that academics from various disciplines such as Linguistics, American Studies or Cultural Studies attended the conference and that the programme also included a linguistics panel on 'Language and identity in diaspora communities'. Although many of these arguments were not new, I considered both the exhibition and the discussions to have been effective in that they shed light on the development of ASNEL and stimulated a reflection on our field and approaches which we often take for granted.

There was also another reason for celebration, namely the 25th birthday of *Wasafiri: The Magazine of International Contemporary Writing*. The programme included a discussion with Bryan Cheyette, Bernadine Evaristo and Suman Gupta, guest editors of *Wasafiri* special issues, chaired by the magazine's founding editor Susheila Nasta. Three fairly short authors' readings by Bernadine Evaristo, Tomáš Zmeškal and Samir El-youssef followed the round table. On Saturday Sridhar Rajeswaran read from his work. Unfortunately, however, a panel discussion ran late, causing quite a few participants to miss the reading. This is all the more unfortunate since the communication between authors and academics, especially through the authors' readings, is a much-appreciated characteristic of the ASNEL annual meetings. In addition to the readings, the participants were invited to a theatre performance of *s/w remix*, a recent production of 'Cactus Junges Theater' in Münster, exploring what it means 'to be German'.

Bearing in mind the large number of delegates and papers, it was good – and surprising – to see that there were fairly few last-minute changes in programme, none of them major. Furthermore, almost all presentations were held at the 'Fürstenberghaus' so that we did not have a hard time finding our way through different university buildings but could enjoy the coffee breaks and prepare ourselves for the full and tightly-scheduled programme.

The next ASNEL conference will take place at the University of Bayreuth on 13-16 May 2010. The convener Susanne Mühleisen, a linguistics professor, will take up ideas from this year's panel discussions and bring together interdisciplinary perspectives by addressing the topic "Contested Communities: Communication, Narration, Imagination".

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