

Shifting Grounds: Postcolonial Translocations

The Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL) held its twentieth annual conference at the University of Münster between 21-24 May 2009 in Münster, Germany. The conference was coordinated by Mark Stein, Silke Stroh, Marga Munkelt, and Markus Schmitz, all of whom are based at the University of Münster. Around 300 delegates from thirty-five countries attended.

This four-day conference featured three major keynote speakers, four prominent authors, and 100 presenters whose abstracts had been selected from around 300 submissions. This event explored translocation, an increasingly significant theme of postcolonial studies. The conference promoted a critical evaluation of postcolonial texts and media while investigating their institutional academic contexts. The concept of “translocational identity” is part of a new debate in postcolonial theory. From border regimes and border crossings to translocal space, from translocal food to cyber diasporas and diasporic literature, participants sought to address major paradigms of post-colonial critique.

Commencing the conference, keynote speaker Edward. W. Soja (University of California) defined the conference’s context with remarks of post-colonial spaces and the struggle over geography. In an era of global relocations and diasporization, it is important to stop and think about the influence that the exodus of immigrants has on individuals, communities, and nation states. With these remarks on our mind, in the afternoon of the first day Silke Stroh (University of Münster) emphasized this point and presented translocation and colonial British diasporas by providing theories and practices of transmigrations and by exploring how the transmigrants are positioned in relation to their various old and new locations as well as to other populations encountered there. Her emphasis on transmigration revealed the conference’s aim by pointing out that the world has entered a phase where notions such as transnational migration and cultural hybridity are frequently debated.

In the morning of the second day, keynote speaker Ien Ang (University of Western Sydney) spoke on the debates about “integration,” multicultural transformations, and past and present postcolonial translations. Nora Ann Escherle (University of Bern), whose paper’s conceptual focus was on the entanglement of cosmopolitanism with religion, analyzed religious “othering” and the cosmopolitan gaze in postcolonial Indian English novels. The

session on transcultural cityscapes explored translocal spaces, hyphenated narratives, and relocated subjectivities. Simultaneously, in the “African Revisions” session, the Nigerian tradition of short fiction and postcolonial renaming was discussed before diaspora memory and identity in contemporary new-world African fiction.

During the session on “Postcolonial Film Cultures,” Ellen-Dengel Janic analyzed the new modernity in *Slumdog Millionaire* within the framework of two newly discovered terms: “slum tourism” and “poorism.” She highlighted the film’s problematic capitalizing on the spectacle of the third world city, and her presentation was extremely well received by those in attendance.

The conference also featured readings by poets and novelists. Samir El-youssef, who was born in the southern Lebanese Palestinian refugee camp of Rashidia, has been living in London since 1990, and has authored six books, including novels, short stories, and essays, was welcomed to the conference on Wasafiri evening. His identity completely summarized the conference’s outlook, as he defines himself with these words: “It’s a question of loyalty in two dimensions – I’m a citizen-exile or citizen-refugee.”

Audio and visual representations explored translocal exhibitions of contemporary African art and constructions of dress in African visual art and fiction. Foodways serving as markers of difference and confirming distance from home, the way food and foodways feature as markers of national and personal identity, was highlighted by Jonathan Highfield (University of Rhode Island) during the session on translocal foods and traveling goods.

Ingrid von Rosenberg (University of Dresden) presented a paper on representations of the British city in contemporary Black and Asian British visual art. Her overview focused on both the chosen media and the concerns of individual artists. The presented artists’ motivations varied from social criticism of racial exclusion to ironic self-assurance, playful hope in the power of integration, and the wish for peace between the Muslim community and the British majority. Delegates from eight different fields participated in the “Translocating Postcolonial Studies: Recent Interdisciplinary Developments” panel discussion program, where they presented a multi-layered discussion to analyze and strengthen interdisciplinary dialogue in postcolonial studies.

In the session on “Transcultural Cityscapes,” David Stoop (University of Cologne) gave a valuable presentation on the city’s intercultural transformations by drawing from the example of the recent mosque debate in Cologne and its media coverage. By showing how mosque conflicts are overloaded with cultural and religious interpretations and closely linked to

common pictures of “the” Muslims, he highlighted how far mosques can be interpreted as visual heterotopias that disturb the symbolic space of a city and how this debate leads to an “intercultural transformation of space” that can be described as an integration process on a symbolic level. Postcolonial misunderstandings, misreadings, ignorance, and chauvinism were highlighted by Roy Sommer (University of Wuppertal). His main question was how postcolonial theory can respond to heterogeneous, sometimes conflicting, interests and needs without denying “otherness” or resorting to antagonistic positions such as outlined by Huntington.

While the roundtable discussions outlined the institutionalization of postcolonial studies, school teaching forums presented teaching practices on postcolonial literatures in secondary schools, including topics like the global village, multicultural Britain, and young adult fiction. The discussions following the sessions were thought-provoking and engaging.

On the closing day, Diana Brydon (University of Manitoba), the final keynote speaker, questioned injury, inquiry, and agency formed through colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism by focusing on fictional texts that both embody and thematize difficult forms of knowing in colonial situations. In her closing remarks, she highlighted the continued relevance of postcolonial studies as regards the political mission of the postcolonial and by stressing the current questioning of the traumatic turn in postcolonial studies.

Overall the conference, which revealed strong discussions, comprised an international and multidisciplinary representation of scholars. It provided a fresh impetus for dialogue, but particularly, it was rich of insightful and forward-looking presentations by major international experts in the field of postcolonial studies. With fresh insights, the twentieth ASNEL conference was a grand success and has set a target for future conferences both in terms of the number of papers presented and delegate attendance. Indeed, one of the event’s most constructive aspects was the discovery of new spaces that can be defined as “translocational space” and new connections in the diaspora. Constructing key links between comprehensive theoretical approaches, the conference offered an opportunity for in-depth analysis for the space where different translocational/diasporic identities can meet.

The 2010 ASNEL conference will be held at the University of Bayreuth.

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