

“Commodifying (Post-)Colonialism”

A Report on the GNEL/ASNEL annual conference, University of Regensburg , May 22 – 25, 2008

Of all the GNEL conferences I have (intermittently, I should admit) attended since my ‘initiation’ into the field as a graduate student in 1999, I found Regensburg one of the most engaging, and, indeed, topical. This has to do with a feeling of unease with the institutionalised discourse of postcolonial studies, an unease which may perhaps be illustrated by an anecdotal reference to an earlier event. Let me briefly turn back, therefore, to the last but one EACLALS conference in Malta, 2005, which opened with a keynote lecture by Robert Young. I do not in fact remember too much about the actual lecture except that it revolved around refugees and Europe’s strategies of fortifying herself against ever increasing flows of ‘illegals’. What stuck, however, and harrows me to this day is a photo that Young showed: The photo depicted a drowned African who obviously died during an illegal crossing, washed upon the beach of a Mediterranean shore probably not very far from the very Malta where we were all gathered. The most irritating bit in the photo, however, was not the dead body of the African itself, but the sight of two Northern European tourists comfortably camping under a gaudy umbrella some 100 meters further down the beach, obviously steadfastly refusing to have their expensively paid-for vacation spoiled by the unpleasant affair.

There was much food for thought in this image, and I found some of the questions it begged addressed in another keynote by South African veteran poet and political activist Dennis Brutus who spoke about his grassroots activities in the anti-globalisation struggle. It was the final night of the conference, however, which really put me off again. The night hosted the conference dinner which also promised the official pronouncement of the venerable winner of the 2005 Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, a prize that in the previous year went to Caryl Phillips for *A Distant Shore*, a narrative about a refugee who, unlike the one in Young’s photo, narrowly made it into Britain (only to be murdered by a gang of skinheads). I missed out on the event staged at the flashy five star deluxe Radisson Bay Point Resort as I considered € 40 for dinner (drinks not included) slightly beyond my regular budget. But from hearsay it must have been a fine party which saw splendid evening dresses; the food was apparently reasonably good, and Andrea Levi a worthy winner in Caryl Phillips’s footsteps.

Whatever I am trying to say with all this, I was very much looking forward to a conference that promised “a critical self-reflection on the institutional status of Postcolonial Studies today” in the larger framework of “(Post-)Colonial Commodification”, and I was not disappointed. Rainer Emig managed to draw a wide range of contributors to Regensburg, most of whom really had valuable ideas about the socio-economical implications of transcultural practices in the (post)colonial world, be they artistic or academic. I was altogether slightly less impressed by the

invited keynote speakers (even though I must admit I only heard three out of four) than by some of the younger presenters (doubtlessly profiting from the important work of some of the keynoters). I by and large found the papers very astute and critical, offering great historical depth ranging from 17th century English drama (Betsy van Schlun) via 18th century travel literature (Oliver Lindner) and 19th century American trade cards (Nicole Schröder) to the present day; geographical diversity (with papers covering Canadian, Caribbean, North, West, South, and Central African, Australian, New Zealand, South Asian, Middle-Eastern and Irish contexts, even though papers on multi-ethnic Britain were by far the most frequent); and an interest in a wide range of media, including film (in papers by Ellen Dengel-Janic, Stephan Laqué, Birte Heidemann) and, as I found most invigorating, popular music (Carla Müller-Schulzke, Sabine Nunius, Johannes Salim Ismaiel-Wendt). Many papers had revealing things to say about the relationship between cultural practices and the marketplace, indicating, perhaps, that the future of postcolonial studies is less easily fooled into the utopian promises of what Paul Gilroy has called “corporate multiculturalism”. Some papers (most notably that of Frank Schulze-Engler among the ones I attended) indeed also triggered discussions about the kind of theoretical and political engagement institutionalised postcolonial academic discourse wants to, or is indeed able to, pull off. And even though the answers given were neither new, fully conclusive nor optimistic, I thought it reassuring – and this extends to the entire conference – that there is a level of critical debate and self-reflexivity at work in our field.

Big up for Rainer Emig and his team for making this possible, for unobtrusively and effectively organising a great conference in a city I found quite stunning, and for finding a spot on a university campus that must rank among the, let us say, least attractive in Germany which was really quite charming. It was good to see that this GNEL conference for the first time gave away a prize for best MA/Staatsexamen thesis (rather than host Commonwealth Writers’ Prize ceremonies). Just as the chief organiser’s outfits progressively changed from suit-and-tie on the first day to trainers and Hawaii shirt on the last, I felt increasingly comfortable at this conference. I believe it was a valuable experience for all who attended, and I am looking forward to the proceedings to be able to catch up with the papers I missed.

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