

"Contested Communities: Communication, Narration, Imagination"

21st annual GNEL/ASNEL conference, Bayreuth, 13 - 16 May 2010

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Taking up where last year's conference on "Postcolonial Translocations" in Münster left off, the aim of this year's convention in Bayreuth was to explore the notion of contested communities through not only literary, but also linguistic, perspectives of enquiry. As a result, the 11 panels that crystallised from the submitted paper proposals extended from investigations of literary and linguistic representations of diaspora to explorations of language crossings in transnational music cultures. The title of the conference itself, "contested communities" invited, of course, much speculation and a range of interpretations. While some chose to focus on the notion of "contestation", others zoomed in on the idea of "community", both actual and imagined; Robert Young's keynote lecture, titled "Community and the Common", for example, centred on the latter. Both interpretations were, indeed, invited by the call for papers, which sought out abstracts that examined how "membership in communities [is] achieved, manifested, tested or contested", but also ones that would "critically investigate the usefulness of the concept of community" and propose new and alternative forms of communities that have arisen in the current era of globalisation and digital communication. Interestingly, some of the papers also went beyond the cfp's recommended focus on "processes of communication" in communities, using it as a launching point for exploring the impediments in communication (or the ways in which acts of communication themselves are contested) in an era of technological progress where the speed and ease of the former is almost taken for granted.

One of the benefits of a conference on a smaller scale is perhaps the fact that the panels, as well as keynote speeches by Carolyn Cooper, Robert Young, and Ranka Primorac, cohered convincingly – dare I say, organically. After doing the usual rounds of panel-hopping (thankfully, there were only a maximum of 3 parallel panels at any given time), I found myself able to establish points of comparison and nodes of linkage between panels that explored different genres altogether – for instance, the session with the heading "British Asian diaspora" (effectively a panel on Hanif Kureishi's writings that included a paper on the role of music in *The Black Album*) and the one on "language, style and belonging in music". There was also a noticeable focus on African literatures, languages and cultures throughout the panels (as reflected in the panel headings "performing African theatre in the North: companies, concepts, communities" and "contemporary African narratives" for example), keynote speeches (especially Ranka Primorac's keynote lecture on "The Cosmopolitan Communities of Zambian Fiction") and readings at the conference, which was unsurprising given that the University of Bayreuth's renowned Institute for African Studies is one of the strongest and leading centres for African Studies around the globe. At present, the IAS comprises around 50 professors and 50 other researchers who are engaged in research in Africa and who teach Africa-related courses (according to the IAS website). The institute's co-operation with the Iwalewa House (founded in 1981 and now an integral department of the IAS) also ensures the continued study and documentation of contemporary African culture, literature, art and music in Germany.

For me personally, the highlight of the conference was the privilege to see the two highly-acclaimed writers Shani Mootoo and Abdulrazak Gurnah in the flesh. Both authors were very approachable, and the conference attendees enjoyed engaging with them not only on an intellectual, but also personal, level after their readings. The personal note was one that carried forth throughout much of the conference, which, rather refreshingly, did not shy away from tackling the issue of homosexuality – from the anti-homosexual references in Jamaican dancehall cultures and music, which Carolyn Cooper dealt with from an unconventional, if not entirely convincing, perspective in her keynote lecture, “Cross Talk: Jamaican Popular Music and the Politics of Translation”, to the passages that Shani Mootoo chose to read from her latest novel, *Valmiki's Daughter*, which included explicit scenes of lesbian sex. As the personal is undoubtedly political in this day and age, the heated debate and emotional cross-fire that arose in the aftermath of Cooper's keynote speech reflected some of the basic contentious issues with which postcolonial studies today still remains saddled, issues that are not always brought out into the open so candidly. These include: Who has the right to speak for whom; from which privileged positions we, as academics in the field, articulate our convictions; and how our cultural upbringings, class backgrounds, gender, and sexual orientations influence the positions we critique as well as, inversely, those we adopt and – let's face it – teach/encourage our students to espouse as scholars in the field of postcolonial studies and literatures.

The relentless May showers throughout almost the entire duration of the event did not dampen the moods of the conference attendees. In fact, it was a very memorable annual gathering in Bayreuth – one that, in my opinion, will be a tough act to follow (*kudos* to organisers Susanne Mühleisen, Eric Anchimbe, Amanee Katwaroo, Oliver Lindner and Hanna Straß). Having said that, I am very much looking forward to seeing familiar faces, colleagues and friends again at the next GNEL/ASNEL conference on “Postcolonial Studies across the Disciplines”, which will take place at the University of University of Hannover, 2-4 June 2011.

“Narrative in Drama” 19th Annual Conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE), Paderborn, 3-6 June 2010

Mark Berninger (Mainz) and Christoph Henke (Augsburg)

What might seem a paradoxical title, i.e. the combination of theatrical performance and narrative, proved a thought-provoking and very fruitful theme for the 19th annual conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE) in Paderborn. In a fascinating counter-current, or complementary movement to the performance and body-oriented “postdramatic” theatre, numerous English-language playwrights have recently based their plays on the arguably most fundamental of communicative modes: narrative. This year's CDE-conference explored the frictions and opportunities caused by this move, which juxtaposes the creation of stable meaning through narrative emplotment with the obvious fictionalisation and unreliability of “tall tales”, contrasts monologue with the dialogic mode, and combines the power of the spoken word with the physical aspects of theatre.

In her opening key-note speech entitled “The Epistemology of First-Person Narrative”, Janelle Reinelt (University of Warwick) directly addressed the seeming paradox of the conference topic by asking whether narrative is not obsolete in contemporary drama. Her answer to this was however that, especially in plays aiming at autobiographical self-