

Conference Report

“Postcolonial Studies across the Disciplines”, GNEL/ASNEL Annual Conference, University of Hanover, 2-4 June 2011

It is all a matter of perspective: on the one hand, white women in the 19th century were oppressed by a male society and therefore victims; on the other hand, these women were also part of the enslaving system and hence belonged to the oppressors of the African people. Similarly, the Enlightenment stood for emancipation, liberty and equal rights, excluding, however, people of African origin from these rights. It is always a matter of perspective and that is exactly what this year's 22nd Annual GNEL/ASNEL conference set as a task for itself: providing new and critical reflections on both the themes and methodologies that have characterized Postcolonial Studies. Bringing together diverse disciplines was a key concern of the conference as the title “Postcolonial Studies across the Disciplines” already indicated. Disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity were topics that were extensively dealt with and that also became evident in the wide range of disciplines that were represented by the speakers, namely African Studies scholars, sociologists, historians, British and American literary and cultural studies scholars and even a textile scholar. Altogether Jana Gohrisch and her organising team from the University of Hanover welcomed more than 130 participants from India, Nigeria, the United Kingdom, the United States, Austria, Switzerland and Germany. The conference dealt with topics like slavery and emancipation, literary genres in India or Australia as well as the influence of Postcolonial Studies on the various disciplines themselves.

A ‘different’ perspective was proposed by Sabine Broeck in her keynote lecture on “Gender and the modern abjection of blackness: Wollstonecraft’s feminism and what slavery had to do with it”. Sabine Broeck argued that the European Enlightenment has avoided tracing its own roots in the history of enslavement and oppression; she therefore emphasized the need to include the history of enslavement into definitions of modernity. In her slightly provocative talk, Sabine Broeck called for ‘white consciousness’, i.e. she reminded us to be aware of our own responsibility in the history of enslavement and to develop a critical mind towards our own traditions and their foundations – both in academia and in everyday life. Broeck further indicated that slaves have always been ‘othered’ and treated as objects, while white people have constantly claimed for themselves the position of the subject. In this context she also admonished the audience not to forget that other peoples and other cultures have other philosophies, epistemologies and theories that might differ from ours but are just as valid.

The second keynote lecture on “Postcolonial Studies and Atlantic Studies: Interdisciplinary Reflections on Slavery and Empire”, given by Tim Watson from Miami, tied in with Sabine Broeck’s lecture as far as white subjectivity was con-

cerned. Watson raised the question of how to write the history of enslavement 'from below' with 'white' reference sources only. He called for an approach across disciplines, asking us to pay more attention to the narrative forms of the enslavement stories. The same holds true for fictional texts which, according to Watson, are also crucial to understanding historical contexts. All in all, Transatlantic Studies are in need of further input from postcolonial literary studies, and Postcolonial Studies can benefit from including historiographical as well as transatlantic approaches.

In the refreshing third and final keynote "Postcolonial Textiles: Negotiating Dialogue", Jessica Hemmings from the Edinburgh College of Art introduced us to the world of textiles. With her expertise in the often gendered and marginalized field of Textile Studies and her literary approach she cuts across the borders of established disciplines. For Hemmings, the fascination of textiles lies in their ubiquity. Since textiles are all around us, they have a great impact on us and our environment. She argued that textiles are a form of communication insofar as they contain 'hidden' messages that are not necessarily expressed in writing. They can thus depict 'linguistic' fragments from an exploitative past. Jessica Hemmings stated that a possible approach could be to read textiles as a form of literature, but from a non-literary, non-textual perspective, teaching us how to negotiate dialogue "across disciplines".

A welcome change to the academic papers was provided by two readings. In the first reading, the Australian-Czech writer Libor Mikeska read passages from his yet unpublished novel *Neurotically Yours*, in which the male protagonist living in Melbourne provides insights into an 'Australian way of life' as well as into his psyche which frequently catapults him into Kafka's Prague in 1922. The second reading, organised in cooperation with the *Literarischer Salon*, presented the British-Nigerian writer Bernardine Evaristo who read passages from two of her novels: *Blonde Roots* sets up a parallel universe and presents a reversed historical perspective by giving an answer to the question 'What would have happened if Africans had enslaved the Europeans and not the other way around?' The novel *Lara* is based on Evaristo's biography as she traces her Nigerian-English-Irish-Brazilian family history. In her novels, Evaristo not only moves between the realms of fact and fiction but also between genres by combining verse and prose. In keeping with the tradition of the *Literarischer Salon*, the author was supported by the German actress Regina Lemnitz who read or rather performed passages from Evaristo's novels in German translation.

Other highlights of this year's GNEL/ASNEL conference programme included the 'Under Construction' panel where young researchers had the opportunity to present their PhD projects in order to receive feedback on their work in progress, as well as the Teachers' Workshop and the Round Table Discussion. Both the Teachers' Workshop and the Round Table Discussion were characterized by questions of (inter)disciplinarity and how Postcolonial Studies are and can be institutionalised. Two academics from the audience pointed out that one of the difficulties young scholars with an interdisciplinary background and training encounter frequently is how to find a post in academia with its strict disciplinary

orientation. The members of the Round Table agreed that it might therefore be important and helpful for young researchers if Postcolonial Studies became institutionally rooted as a discipline. However, if Postcolonial Studies were established as a separate discipline, it might lose its interdisciplinary diversity and creative productivity. In response to this debate, GNEL/ASNEL's president Mark Stein presented another point of view when he remarked that the discussion should not so much be about (inter)disciplinarity but rather about the research projects as such. He therefore suggested "to go beyond" the question of disciplinarity. "To go beyond" was an idea that was voiced more than once: some speakers proposed to have a debate about the application of 'European' frameworks, names and terms to non-European contexts. According to some of the speakers, it might even be time to leave the 'postcolonial' era and find alternative frameworks that mark the end of 'postcolonialism'.

Throughout the panels and readings, the participants could enjoy the view over Hanover that provided a spectacular background for the conference held in the 14th floor of the Conti building. All in all, the GNEL/ASNEL 2011 presented three tightly scheduled conference days with 32 papers in 11 panels, none of which was cancelled. Unfortunately, the tight schedule did not leave enough room for discussion after the individual lectures and panels, although more than once the desire and also the need for further discussion were perceptible in the audience. For upcoming conferences it would therefore be desirable to allow extra time for questions and discussions to promote scholarly exchange among the participants.

In conclusion one can say that the emphasis on self-reflexivity and (inter)disciplinarity at this year's GNEL/ASNEL conference made obvious that no matter what our research fields look like or which discipline we come from we should always keep in mind that there is more than one perspective and scholars from all disciplines can be inspired by and benefit from this diversity of approaches.

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