

Conference Reports



“Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis”, 24th Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of New Literatures in English (ASNEL/GNEL), Chemnitz University of Technology, 9-11 May 2013

The 24th annual GNEL/ASNEL conference took place in the city of Chemnitz, a fitting location for a critical debate on the re-invention of city spaces. In Chemnitz, sleek structures of glass and steel coexist side by side with square Soviet blocks and remnants of antebellum architecture, now attentively renovated and valorized. Renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt by the DDR government, the city went back to its original name after the German reunification. A metropolis of multiple names presented the ideal frame for the renaming of the GNEL/ASNEL (Gesellschaft für die Neuen Englischsprachigen Literaturen/Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English) into GAPS (Gesellschaft für Anglophonen Postkoloniale Studien), an event that made this Chemnitz edition a very special one.

On Thursday, May 9, the President of the University of Chemnitz, Professor Arnold van Zyl, delivered an opening speech that left an indelible impression on me, and certainly on many others. Using his own memories and interpretation of Sello K. Duiker’s 2001 novel *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, Van Zyl emphasized how colonial metropolises, after the demise of empires, do live on in spaces of postcolonial reinvention. The nature of these composite spaces – vibrating with empowering and disempowering translocations, diasporic formations and alternating political models – represented the field of inquiry for the numerous papers, lectures, and contributions delivered at this conference. How do literary, cultural, and theoretical texts reinvent the postcolonial metropolis, or the postcolonial *in the* metropolis? With this guiding question, conference convener Professor Cecile Sandten opened the floor to a debate on the politics and poetics of the postcolonial metropolis. Sandten voiced the need to refrain from defining the postcolonial metropolis, real or imagined, through Western concepts and modes, and to widen the extent of the debate.

The official opening was followed by an adrenalinic keynote lecture by AbdouMaliq Simone, professor of sociology at the Goldsmiths College in London, entitled “Black Beach: Just the City”. Simone’s lyrical language and close-to-performative rendering of his material made this opening keynote a memorable event, offering a heartwarming welcome to all participants. Starting from the assumption that the colonial metropolis is a space of incomprehensible casualties and colonial anachronisms, Simone observed the strategies through which the residents of the Black Beach district of Jakarta reappropriate the city and regain visibility in it. Simone often supported his claims with interviews and life anec-

dotes collected *in situ*. One of the most intriguing reappropriation practices entails fighting social expectations through slightly abrupt, apparently meaningless, self-referential actions, such as “build things, talk to a perfect stranger, look at birds, observing the loading and unloading of trucks”. Simone denominated this attitude “living with something more in mind”. Another fascinating concept introduced by Simone was “productivity of failure”. A suspension of mutual judgment among the residents of the same neighborhood creates a profitable space of failure, within which residents can endlessly reimagine themselves and exist in a condition of perennial flux, as “the important thing is not to stand still”. Finally, Simone emphasized “nomadism in place” as one of the most important values in the life of Jakarta residents: the urge to move, not necessarily from one place to another, but within a diversity of experiences.

Simone’s keynote lecture was followed by parallel panels and a “Renaming Debate: from ASNEL/GNEL to GAPS,” which partially tied in with last year’s debate “What’s in a name?” which took place at the annual GNEL/ASNEL conference in Bern. On the one hand, the major concern that led to the decision of renaming the Association was the difficulty in assessing the ‘newness’ of the new literatures mentioned in the acronym GNEL/ASNEL. On the other hand the term ‘postcolonial’, appearing in the alterative acronym GAPS, had to be carefully evaluated, especially after several voices have claimed that the postcolonial age has come to an end. A group of scholars including senior members and new ones presented pros and cons in both names, laying the foundation for the open debate that followed. Most of the members who took part in the debate pronounced themselves in favor of a name change, as I did too. In my view, the binomial Anglophone and Postcolonial fruitfully expands the field of analysis beyond the British Empire, including the American colonial/imperial dimension and opening up to the comparative study of empires. Under these circumstances, I am left with no doubts about whether my projects and field of research fall within the Association’s scope. Issues of belonging and inclusions were also at stake. One of the most pressing concerns that emerged over this year’s debate as well as last year’s was how to balance the Association’s vocation to interdisciplinarity with its focus on literature, and how a name could help clarify its policies of inclusion. Professor Mark Stein concluded the debate by reminding the participants that “a name cannot do all there is to do”. In line with Simone’s characterization of the city as “just the city”, Mark Stein reassuringly stated that a name is “just a name”, the work of the Association and its practices over the years will define its focus and constitution.

The first day ended with a cultural event at the City Library. The awarding of annual prizes for outstanding graduation theses was followed by a reading by Amit Chaudhuri, author of the award-winning novels *The Immortals*, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, and *Afternoon Raag*. The author, interviewed by Cecile Sandten and Kathy-Ann Tan, presented his latest novel *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013). Chaudhuri shared his experience of Calcutta, dwelling upon the stories and anecdotes that set his writing in motion, and reading generously from the book. The interview ranged from his literary career to his musical one, which he

described as the composite result of Eastern and Western influences, and his position in a post-Rushdian tradition of Indian writing in English.

The second day began at the Gunzenhauser Museum, where an impressive room was made available for the second keynote lecture, delivered by Professor Rolf Goebel (University of Alabama, Huntsville). Goebel's lecture, by the title "From Postcoloniality to Global Media Culture: Reflections on Metropolitan Topography", offered a convincing reading of De Lillo's 2003 novel *Cosmopolis* through Byung-Chul Han's notion of "Hyperculture". Han critiques Bhabha's notion of hybridity as too entrenched in the colonizer/colonized dichotomy, and therefore no longer able to capture today's world-wide-web reality, an ocean of abysmal depth and complexity. Han proposes that the present can be best described by the suffix 'hyper' – rather than 'multi' or 'trans'. Hyperculture would therefore appear as a rhizomic space featuring radical placelessness, where cultures, sounds, images, and texts dwell in simultaneity. Hyperculture does not amount to abstractness and borderless freedom, argues Han, but it opens up spaces that are inaccessible to power and yet readable through aesthetics. This assumption led to Goebel's leading question: how do we read texts in a hypercultural frame? Goebel proceeded by presenting De Lillo's protagonist, Eric, as an example of hypercultural mobility. What I found extremely fascinating was Goebel's analysis of a minor character in De Lillo's novel, the Sufi rapper Fez. Goebel presented Fez as the parody of multicultural diversity, inhabiting a hybrid space of Americanized Sufi music, with lyrics in street English and Urdu. Considering the growing popularity of Sufism in America, generating ambivalent spiritual discourses in between mystical Islam and pop culture, Fez indeed appears a brilliant embodiment of Han's notion of hypercultural identity, resulting from the coalescence of heterogeneous lifestyles and practices. The day proceeded with an event I particularly looked forward to, as it combined two of the greatest pleasures of life (at least of mine): food and poetry. During the "Brown Bag Reading," British poets Sean Bonney and Stephen Mooney performed in front of an audience quietly munching on "Subway" sandwiches.

A keynote lecture by Amit Chaudhuri – the focus now being on his academic-self, rather than his author-self – opened the last day of the conference. Chaudhuri's talk, entitled "The Artistic Possibility of Comparing World Cities: the 'Third World', the Old, and the Modern", revolved around Indian and European aesthetics of modernity, and discussed how different political discourses force us to look at modernity in the 'East' and in the 'West' as different phenomena. Can we use the same vocabulary to talk about first- and third-world cities, or do we first have to acknowledge the existence of different agendas, articulating what is acceptable and modern? Chaudhuri proposed that European and Indian cities are indeed connected through a net of concordances. "When I am in Brussels and see those red stones on the floor", said Chaudhuri, his author-self briefly resurfacing, "I see Calcutta". I was most impressed by his considerations about India's somehow hesitant modernity. "Can we choose our modernity?" Chaudhuri asked, "No, our modernities happen to us. Some modernities flourish in an area of non-recognition". Thus Chaudhuri described how India is resisting the debate on modernity,

as modernity is equated with the Western colonial venture and reminds the nation of a space where Indians were completely invisible.

Bill Ashcroft's and Diana Brydon's panel presentations should not be left unmentioned. In his paper "Utopian Sites: Re-Inventing the Metropolis in the Post-colony", Ashcroft argued that Singapore and Hong Kong call for postcolonial analysis. He focused primarily (but not exclusively) on their complicated language situation, within which vernacular English has become a space of subversion of state-imposed, monocultural language policies. Ashcroft supported his argument with poems in English by Luise Ho (Hong Kong), and Eddie Tay (Singapore). The former made clear how poetry can offer visions of the future; the latter exemplified Ashcroft's notion of "contrapuntal cosmopolitanism". Tay's poetry collection *The Mental Life of Cities* (2010) illustrated how the islands identity is articulated in the spatial disposition of a poem, opposing English words and Chinese characters on the right and the left side of the page. The space between the characters, Ashcroft argued, redefines the notion of cosmopolitanism as contrapuntal cosmopolitanism, and indicates that the identity of the island resides in the void between languages, between Chinese and English. Dyana Brydon introduced her talk "Thinking and Walking in the Settler Colonial City" with a quizzical quote from Sheila Heiti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2012): "I want to know what it's like to think in the desert versus what it's like to think in the city." Brydon used the Heiti quote as a starting point for her analysis of wilderness and urban lifestyles in the Canadian imagery, focusing on two popular 'Toronto novels': Heiti's *How Should a Person Be?* And Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* (2005).

As always, the GNEL/ASNEL annual conference proved an excellent occasion of encounter and confrontation, as well as a chance to meet old acquaintances and make new ones. The unique format offered a number of cultural events and an ample range of possibilities to present one's research - including classic conference panels, but also teachers' workshops and poster sessions. Special thanks go to the conference organizers for a smooth, carefully organized event, and to student volunteers, who kept us informed, refreshed and caffeinated throughout the whole conference.

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