

Conference Reports



“The Postcolonial and the Material” – 27th GAPS Conference, University of Augsburg, 5-7 May, 2016

The 27th GAPS conference opened with a welcome by the president of GAPS, Katja Sarkowsky, who right from the start articulated the task for the following hours and days: namely to confront the “material challenge” GAPS had set itself with the topic of this year’s conference. What that meant would be voraciously and vividly discussed in the panels and keynotes to come. The second welcome was provided by the conference convenor, Annika McPherson. She started by commenting on the “precarious material conditions of organising a conference in Bavaria on a bank holiday,” not only hinting at the always precarious state of the arts and humanities but also at the material, corporeal commitment at stake. With her introduction, she initiated the process that would inform the following days: weaving an intricate web of connections with the help of “many threads coming together,” constituting the very material of the conference. Exemplary for this process were the pattern books from Augsburg’s State Textile and Industry Museum which featured on the conference poster and the woven dish towels which were given to the keynote speakers as presents. Of course, I can only provide a partial overview of the proceedings, but in the following I will do my very best to at least present some of the colourful and multi-faceted threads, scraps and frayages that made up the fabric of the conference.

The official opening was followed by the first keynote lecture by Prof. Shoba Venkatesh Gosh, Head of the English Department at the University of Mumbai. Gosh talked about Hindi cinema whilst taking up strands from gender studies, film theory and visual culture. She concentrated on the nexus between public and private spheres and led us through three film that on various levels dealt with the troubled narratives of national female identity. To do so, she made visible the materiality of cinematic language as well as the processes of interruption and intervention inherent to the visual tactics of film. Her discussions of the Indian Bengali drama *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964) opened with the first minutes of the film which show a scene of embroidery. This was interesting not only within the theme of weaving and knitting that Annika McPherson suggested, but also because of the significance of the needle work which stands for the domestic femininity the film highlights, simultaneously offering up alternative models of female affect and desire. The theme of gender and femininity, and in direct connection to that the notion of mobility and validity of female desire, became also apparent in the two other films Shoba introduced us to: *Mother India* (1957), a tale of the idealised, prototypical mother figure within constraints of nationality and

domesticity, and the 2008 melodrama *Jab We Met* which both questions and reinforces heteronormative notions of corporeality, sexuality and gender.

The keynote and its spirited discussions were promptly followed by talks picking up the threads offered in the opening addresses and the first lecture. The panel I chose featured Ifeoluwa Aboluwade on material culture and translation in Femi Osofisan, John Nkemngong Nkengasong on literary dig sites in Linus Asong and Bole Butake, and Katrin Berndt on Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*. The first two papers very eloquently discussed the materiality of theatricality and stage productions, processes of digging up, of carrying and transporting – as such, they positioned material culture as an active agent which people use for constructing meaning in their communities. The third paper posited a counterargument to the first two talks, as it focussed on trauma, war and murder and convincingly offered up an alternative way of approaching the material within the postcolonial. The three talks were followed by a stimulating discussion on memory, archaeology and violence. Of course, I also would have loved to listen in on the other panels (especially Janice Bland's talk on refugee and verse narratives or the film screening of *Welcome to the Smiling Coast. Living in the Gambian Ghetto*), but such are the trials and tribulations of every conference that is as well put-together as this one was.

After the first round of panels, everyone had the opportunity for a little breather and a snack and after the lunch break we re-assembled to enter the second round: It was now time for my own talk and I was pleasantly surprised by the warm and collaborative atmosphere offered both by my panel chair Jan Albers and the other participants: Martin Riedelsheimer and Korbinian Stöckl from Augsburg, and Valérie-Anne Belleflamme from Liège. Martin and Korbinian talked about debbie tucker green and via the materials blood, coffee, and hair brilliantly connected discussions on cosmopolitanism (Appiah), ethics, and discourses of human rights with three of her plays (*Dirty Butterfly*, *Stoning Mary*, and *Trade*). Valérie offered an elegant analysis of Gail Jones' works and in numerous close readings carved out the urban psycho-geography put forth in the novels *Five Bells* and *A Guide to Berlin*. Following my own talk on the Youtube Web Series "Strolling" by Caribbean-British film maker Cecile Emeke, we had a wonderfully lively discussion which extended well over the allocated time frame into the evening. Again, it goes without saying that I suffered from a severe case of FOMO ("fear of missing out"), especially regarding Caroline Kögler's talk on critical branding and Anamika Purohit's talk on home and belonging in Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* in the parallel panels.

The day ended with a triple treat at the State Textile and Industry Museum Augsburg (tim for short, and a former Kammergarnspinnerei), one of the collaboration partners for this year's conference. The site of the museum linked the discursive patterns and thinking structures delineated within the conference to the material space and graspable history of the city we found ourselves in. This connection was brought to the fore in the second keynote of the day, given by the director of the tim, Karl Borromäus Murr, titled "The Interplay between Local and Global - Importing US Cotton into Augsburg in the 19th century." Murr provided us with a fascinating history of the cotton trade, branching out from Augsburg to

Africa, the Americas and other parts of Europe. In linking cotton to systems of classification, consumption, and slavery, his keynote literally wove together the past with the present. The following award ceremony was hosted by an ever sprightly and entertaining Peter Marsden and GAPS rewarded its graduate award to Yann Le Gall and its dissertation award to James Ogone (both from the University of Potsdam). Historical overview and celebratory ceremony were interspersed by poetry readings by Kei Miller who enchanted the audience by spinning tales of two materials in a stunning and moving performance. In "Place Name: Oracabessa," he interconnected the stories of colonisation, gold digging and plantations with that of place, language and belonging: "Could someone / please go back in time and tell Columbus, in Taino there / is no word for gold." The second poem he read was not his own but someone else's, namely Robert Pinsky's "Shirt": "The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams, / The nearly invisible stitches along the collar [...] The buttonholes, the sizing, the facing, the characters / Printed in black on neckband and tail. The shape, / The label, the labor, the color, the shade. The shirt." Acknowledging the historical materiality of colonialism and the cotton trade (what is a shirt made from if not cotton?) as well as the overarching conference theme of weaving (how is a shirt made if not woven?) that Annika McPherson kick-started in the morning, Miller brilliantly put into poetry and performance the theoretical concepts afoot during the keynotes and panels. The magic and buzz of his poetry was transported over into the very last part of the evening: the conference dinner held right in the museum's restaurant nunó where we ended the day with great food, drinks and conversations.

Friday, the second day of the conference, started off with a keynote by Bhekizizwe Peterson, Professor of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg with the title "Spectral Performances: Narrative, Aesthetics and the Material in Post-Apartheid South Africa." For me, who had never really immersed herself in the field of South African history, politics and culture in great depth, this talk was enlightening and greatly appreciated. Peterson described the entanglements of Empire, Apartheid, and Post-Apartheid by shedding light on blind spots caused by often inexistent or harmful negotiations of history, "the unfinished business of Apartheid." He located his discussions within three sites of contestation: activism, decolonisation, and black pop culture. He argued for the making of counter-narratives to tell lived experiences, and argued against the regulation of narrative, the systematic monitoring of official (hi)stories. His careful and sensitive exploration of dead black bodies, of mass produced clothes that are burnt, of goods destroyed and of statues erected and pulled down as forms of possible resistance offered new ways of thinking about materiality within a South African context.

I continued my education in things South African in the following panel which featured a talk by Laura Zander on the works of Nadine Gordimer and a talk by Kirsten Sandrock on Nigerian Chimamanda Adichie's third novel *Americanah*. Both talks were illuminating and graceful and provided a deeper insight into the two writers. They presented an analysis of the material in literature via the negotiations of space: the uncanny house/home in Gordimer and the global, diasporic

spatiality in *Americanah*, be it either the Nigerpolitan club in Lagos, the detention centre in Manchester or the sprawling space of the migratory city London. I would also have loved to listen in on Julian Wacker's talk about *Penny Dreadful*, Sarah Fekadu-Uthoff on routes of exchange and cultural contact zones in Tayeb Salih and Amitav Ghosh or Lars Eckstein on "Recollecting Bones." In the next round of panels (after lunch break), I chose a panel on the politics and poetics of food. The materiality of consumption, culinary traces and the bodily experience of hunger was illustrated in a talk by (unfortunately absent) Kai Wiegandt on Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* as well as in an evocative talk by Sarah Knor on Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* and Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*.

The afternoon offered an eclectic program where everyone could choose amongst the offered diversions to their heart's content: There was a brown bag reading with Futhi Ntshingila and John Nkemngong Nkengasong which combined literature and food; there was the *Under Construction* panel which enabled PhD students to share their research; there was a film screening of *Zulu Love Letter* (2004) directed by Ramadan Suleman; there were teachers' workshops ("Afrika"-Bilder im Unterricht) and a city tour; and there was a guided tour of the State Textile and Industry Museum. The GAPS Annual General meeting ended a day packed full to the brim with inspiration, dialogue, exchange and input.

The last day of the conference began with another appearance of Kei Miller – albeit not in his function as wordsmith and performer *extraordinaire*, but in his function as lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London. His keynote with the title "If I Could Write This on Zinc, I Would Write This on Zinc" offered up different "paths" that led us to tin roofs in Jamaica, to orange scrap books, the failures of Microsoft Word in the face of wilful language, to new media and old writing tools, and to graffiti on walls. In sharing with us the materials he writes on, with, about and through, Miller skilfully and poetically circumscribed locales near and far, whilst constantly engaging in processes of disturbing and rethinking genre, art and representation.

The keynote, which for me was one of the conference's highlights, was followed by a last round of panels which in their complexity and diversity can be seen as exemplary for the many materials the conference covered. To bring all the threads together, I experienced a conference characterised by a welcoming tight-knit community, by numerous interwoven affiliations, and by not only fruitful and enlightening but also exceptionally enjoyable exchanges. Special thanks go to the ever smiling and incredibly helpful organising team for my very last minute dinner ticket and many wonderful tea and coffee breaks. I'm looking forward to next year's conference and the continuation of our collective process of weaving, knitting, and interlacing.

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