

Conference Reports



“Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World”, GAPS Annual Conference, May 25-27, 2017, University of Bonn, Germany

Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World? “Mind the GAPS, please, mind the gaps”

“I used to find myself saying, I can’t imagine. But I’ve since found out, you can – it’s just a case of wanting to.” (Lloyd Jones, *Hand Me Down World*, [2010], 312)

In the present context ‘mind the GAPS/gaps’ can be read in at least two ways: A report of, or a reflection on, the 2017 conference of the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies (GAPS) at the University of Bonn can necessarily only address a far too small selection of contributions and discussions. In other words, issues or questions that will surface in the following always hint simultaneously at the ‘gaps’ constituted by the presentations that I could not attend, voices that I could not listen to – it was one of the conferences where I wished I could have participated in different panels at the same time. The expression “please mind the GAPS” also resonates because with ‘representing poverty and precarity’ the organising team in Bonn and Tübingen (Marion Gymnich, Uwe Kuchler, Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp and Klaus P. Schneider) and the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies decided on a highly relevant topic for the conference that could hardly have been more urgent or timely.

Poverty certainly is one of the most crucial challenges of the 21st century, and it can hardly be disputed that the current situation of refugees as well as issues such as gender-specific forms of exploitation, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the correlation of ‘poverty and environment’ constitute topics that are negotiated and represented in a complex network of literary, linguistic and other discourses we encounter every day and all over the globe. In response, the GAPS conference in Bonn not only brought together academics from Australia, the U.K., Nigeria, Uganda, India, Germany and other nations for over 60 presentations and discussions in panels that covered a broad range of core areas, but the 350 participants also had the chance to listen to papers and readings by authors Patience Agbabi, Susan Kiguli, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor and E.E. Sule.

In an attempt to provide more space for non-Anglophone contexts, two panels (Regional Focus: Latin America I and II) introduced perspectives provided by

scholars working in the field of Latin American Studies. While the first panel covered a broad spectrum of topics ranging from the depiction of poverty in Latin American documentary films in the paper by Elmar Schmidt to Monika Wehrheim's discussion of forms of femicide in Bolaños 2666, the second panel introduced Indigenous perspectives by focussing, for example, on 'Two Sides of the Same Coin: Discursive Representations of Poverty in Yucatán, Mexico' (Catherine J. Letcher Lazo), an analysis which correlated Bhabha's concept of hybridity with contemporary stereotypes of the Indigenous population in Yucatán and forms of Indigenous self-representation.

In the context of Indigenous (here: First Australian) voices there is another panel that I am grateful for. As my teaching has a focus on Indigenous perspectives on poverty this semester, it was advantageous that my students and I could listen to Dorothee Klein's paper which illustrated how innovative narrative techniques (in, for example, Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* [2006]) may undermine "paternalistic discourses", to Viktoria Herche analysing adolescent agency in the films *Beneath Clouds* (2002) and *Toomelah* (2011) by Ivan Sen, and to Jan Alber's discussion of the functional potentials (for example, the "strategic utopianism") of a performance by the First Australian dance group *The Chooky Dancers*. The weeks after the GAPS conference have shown that these papers and the ensuing discussions keep providing us with helpful reference points for our in-class discussions.

But not only Latin American and/or Indigenous perspectives contributed to the variety of themes presented in Bonn. Furthermore the framework of the conference was complemented by a workshop with a program specifically designed for teachers (organised by Uwe Kuchler and his team in Tübingen) which aimed at facilitating the transfer of poverty issues into schools. That the discussion of (re)presentations of poverty and precarity with younger generations can be fruitful as well as challenging was addressed by Maria Eisenmann in her keynote on "The Potential of Postcolonial (Poverty) Literature in the EFL Classroom" which highlighted not only the difficult task of defining 'post-colonial young adult literature' but also processes of transcultural learning.

Transcultural interpretations were also a core issue in Neil Lazarus' keynote "Stone upon Stone: Land, Labour and Consciousness in World-Literary Perspective", a talk that concentrated not only on dominant conceptualisations of life in rural areas and its discursive positioning but also on manifold questions of representation, such as the influence of social class on the narration process. The topic of 'representations' was also addressed in Yvonne A. Owuor's keynote "Returning that Gaze: Phantoms in the Mirror" which argued that "'universalised' representations of poverty, marginalisation [and] precarity [were] merely a continuation of a coloniality" that dehumanised and commodified its objects. It is only adequate to say that with and after this keynote the stars came out over the Brunnenhof, one of the courtyards of the main university building, during a summer night's reception which concluded the first day.

On the second day Susan Kiguli discussed the work of FEMRITE (the Uganda Women Writers Association) in her talk on "Voices of Ugandan Women Writers: Positioning FEMRITE since 2006" and some of her questions, such as 'who

narrates?', 'who can narrate?' and 'from where?', were also addressed by E.E. Sule who described the role of the African writer as lying in "imagining alternative instruments of positive development" in the continent and in "developing [a] home-based aesthetics". During the lunch break writer Patience Agbabi fascinated her audience with her readings, or rather, performances from her *Telling Tales* (2014) and *Refugee Tales* (2016).



Lara Schnitker and Jule Lenzen (students at the University of Bonn) with two of Patience Agbabi's publications. Foto: Christoph

In a very different sense Christopher Hart's keynote on "Fire and War in Discourses of Disorder" also illustrated the power of words, especially metaphors. By discussing two case studies (the 1984-85 British miners' strike and the 2011 London riots) as well as an experimental study on fire metaphors, he could not only show that "[m]edia metaphors can influence public opinion" but also illustrate in what way they may "[c]ontribute to [the] demonization of already marginalised communities and [the] legitimization of harmful social practices directed toward them".

Other papers, to mention but a few, explored (self-)representations of refugees and immigrants in a variety of media (Janet Wilson, Caroline Kögler, Carly McLaughlin, Johan Jacobs, Cecile Sandten, Andreas Musolff), novel conceptualisations of the victim in Australian women's texts and South African crime fiction (Sue Kossew, Sabine Binder), questions of voice and agency in the context of street theatre in the slums of Ahmedabad (Geoffrey V. Davis), the ethics and aesthetics of representing poverty and the poor in Indian and Nigerian literature and film (Nilufer E. Bharucha, Rashmi Varma, Sridhar Rajeswaran, Stuti Mamen, Clelia

Clini, Oyèníyì Okùnroyè), gender-specific forms of precarity (Chidiebere Mariagoretti Njoku, Nirja Vasavada, Shola Adenekan, Christine Vogt-William) or the correlation between environmental and social precarity (Jan Rupp, Timo Müller).

On Saturday morning the conference concluded with a further highlight, the readings by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Susan Kiguli and E.E. Sule from their literary works. As it is impossible to find adequate words to describe this impressive event – I would rather like to express my sincerest gratitude to the authors and report that in talks with colleagues and students in recent weeks it has become clear that these readings are still reverberating. So thank you to all speakers and readers for this outstanding conference and ... yes, please mind the GAPS.

Hanne Birk (Bonn)

Conference Report

The topic of this year's GAPS conference, held in Bonn, was important and timely. "Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World" turned the critical attention to some of the most pressing issues in the global South today; issues that had nevertheless been relatively underrepresented in postcolonial studies for some time. The event was splendidly organised – from what might easily have been the best coffee bar at a conference to brown-bag-poetry-reading-lunches and wonderful speakers – by Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, Marion Gymnich, Klaus P. Schneider, Uwe Küchler, and a well-organised and strikingly cheerful team. With panels on "Representing Refugees", "Politics and Precarity", "Postcolonial Remembering", "Gender and Subalternity", "Violence and Crime", "Aesthetics, Media and Performance" and "Environment" (amongst several regional focus areas) as well as a workshop on "Teaching Poverty and Precarity", the conference considered its topic through different prisms. The resulting picture was so multifaceted that we can only capture parts of it here. Instead of presenting a chronology of events we focus on some recurring themes and trace them in selected papers.

Keynote addresses are nominally the highlights of conferences, but they are also often its most underwhelming talks. In Bonn, none of the keynotes failed to live up to expectations, and two of them we found positively overwhelming. Neil Lazarus's talk "Stone upon Stone: Land, Labour and Consciousness in World-Literary Perspective" and novelist Yvonne Owuor's "Returning the Gaze: Phantoms in the Mirror (*or, Outsourcing Misery as a Process of 'Post'coloniality*)" must have kept echoing in the minds of anyone who heard them.

Lazarus offered nothing less than a revision of what we call Modernism. Instead of premising Modernism on literary techniques such as stream of consciousness, the decline of the omniscient narrator or a particular treatment of metaphor, Lazarus proposed reading modernist texts concerned with hunger *literally* rather than as existential metaphors.