

**Conference Report: GAPS 2021 – Science, Culture & Postcolonial Narratives  
May 13-15, 2021, Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg**

In a second year of pandemic disarray, science in the shape of digital technology facilitated a virtual, transcontinental GAPS-conference 2021, organized by a team of the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg. A carefully crafted and welcoming conference platform made use of IT's engaging and participative possibilities to foster debate, networking and personal exchange. Framed by public discussions about vaccine justice, life ticker-like communication of the latest research results and politically varied approaches to tackle the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic, the title of the conference could not have been more fitting: "Science, Culture & Postcolonial Narratives" sought to acknowledge the central position of science in current postcolonial debates. These were reflected by the variety of panels which also offered discussions on science's conflicted past as a method for constructing knowledge and thus power. The postcolonial, as suggested by GAPS president Cecile Sandten, offers a critical mode to identify the strategies of science involved but also the tools to carve out new ways of thinking and conducting science. While some agreed to this perspective, others did not, advocating for decolonisation as the more radical and thus more suitable approach.

In his keynote speech, Warwick Anderson offered an overview oscillating *Between Postcolonial Histories of Science and Decolonial Science Studies*. He introduced decolonisation as a necessary step as dominant knowledge systems persist and indigenous knowledges are often just gestured at in an attempt to demonstrate decolonization. However, he stated that decolonisation is not a destination but an itinerary, a process in which narratives do not play a part. While postcolonialism has not become obsolete, it lacks the radical critiques that he deems necessary to refigure agency, authorship, and sovereignty. Which mode to choose eventually depends on "what is the more effective way to voice colonial critique".

As the conference continued, it became clear that narratives were not as indispensable. On the panel "Science and Speculative Fiction I", Indrani Das Gupta drew heavily on the Heideggerian concept of *Worlding*. Worlding as undertaken by postcolonial science fiction makes for a highly unstable and hybrid genre that resists definition and therefore appropriation by established epistemologies of science-fiction literature. The worlding of genres is programmatic in a reinvention of futures where asymmetries and hierarchies based on the colonial past are rejected. This was evidenced in Christin Höne's presentation on the *Anticolonial Politics of Science Fiction* in the work of Jagadish Chandra Bose. It highlighted how Bose successfully undermined Western attempts of imperial control based on science through merging science fiction with elements of magical realism. Victoria Herche and David

Kern interrogated the contemporary role of science against the backdrop of human and more-than-human circular discoveries through which Ted Chiang's fiction disrupts dominant cultural discourses to find new ways of conceptualizing science.

The panel "Digital Narratives and Global Crises: New Perspectives on Literacy and Agency" discussed contemporary interrelations between science, digital modes of teaching and learning, and the global climate crises, suggesting scalar literacy, transculturality, and integrating hashtags as forms to negotiate global issues collectively. The panellists of "Narratives of Anthropology" shed light on Anthropology as a historically situated field that set out to 'knowing' an Other, in which strangeness is constructed but also countered through a politics of existence and seclusion.

Banu Subramanian's following keynote speech equally highlighted the historical entrenchments of science in the colonial project. Botany's vocabulary has exceeded the plant-based boundaries of the field and seeped into current discourses of national purity and mythical national pasts. To challenge those narratives, she contrasted the colonial practice of the Herbarium, understood as a decontextualized botanic imagination replete with colonial histories of extraction and appropriation, with the Plantarium, a new mode of analysis which allows for the engagement with complex human-plant relations and the histories and environments that produce them. On the succeeding panel "Imperial Knowledges", Rajani Sudan tied in on how (data) mining is a necessary practice for today's IT-based technologies. She highlighted how the extractive practices and their precarious consequences in the Global South are no more transformative than technologies relying on fossil fuels. Science and information technologies thus perpetuate existing power structures and developments such as climate change rather than offering solutions as often claimed. On the panels "Science and Postcolonial Environments I and II", narrating extinction as an event in which all terrestrial life is implicated and a zoological aesthetics to study death was counterposed with literature that reflected on science's involvement in obscure cloning practices as a new expression of consumer capitalism and the employment of magical realism to remove the environment from a scientific and rational grasp.

The first day of the conference was completed by Pettina Gappah's entertaining reading of her novel *Out of Darkness, Shining Light*. With her protagonists challenging notions of science and knowledge during colonialism through wit and intelligence, the stage was set for the following presentations discussing the complex relationship between science and indigenous knowledges.

On the panel "Science Fiction and Indigenous Epistemologies", Julia Gatermann's talk on "Bodies of Knowledge" analysed Larissa Lai's novel *The Tiger Flu* in which a global

pandemic calls for new ways of adaptation. The hybrid outcome of western science merged with holistic indigenous knowledges becomes a means of resistance to colonial oppression and science's implication in this process. Resistance not only transcends the ways in which knowledge is produced but also deeply transforms the human body. In another talk ("Negotiating Indigenous Knowledge"), Ana Carolina Torquato investigated literary works which understand the opposition between science and vernacular medicine as productive and complementary. In fact, modern science owes much of its achievements to this productivity. Concepts of indigeneity were also central in Harshanna Rambukwella's presentation '*Patriotic Science: The COVID 19 pandemic and the Politics of Indigeneity*' ("Science, Power, Knowledge and the State."). Based on the Sri Lankan context, he discussed how the initial lack of treatment for COVID-19 at the onset of the pandemic facilitated the (ab)use of indigenous knowledge to promote a nationalist discourse on science and health that is still deeply inflected with anti-colonialist sentiments. The following talk by Anton Kirchhofer further investigated the tension between different conceptions of science against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War as depicted in Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost*. The panel "Science, Technology and Postcolonial Nationalism" complemented these talks, focussing on science as a narrative of progress for envisioning a (postcolonial) future in which science was 'appropriated' to be able to participate in both science and progress, to preserve or overturn an existing social order, or to create a new postcolonial nationalism. Jaspreet Singh's moving reading of his prosaic and poetic works, in which science is ever present, concluded the second day of the conference.

Josie Gill's keynote on *Black Literature and Science in the Age of Coronavirus* discussed the relationship between science and racism. With knowledge about black life being asymmetrically produced by a knowledge system, storytelling emerges as a new relational and interdisciplinary method for telling, sharing, listening to and hearing black knowledge. This approach is marked by a move away from the presumed objectivity of science to the value of experience that fuels a search for racial justice and decolonisation, a term which, she emphasised, cannot be separated from its activist origins. In this vein, the panel "Narratives of Science, Narratives of Race" negotiated concepts of Blackness and anti-Blackness, the literary construction of white feminist utopias, and non-linear reading strategies to depict the complex connection between race and Caribbean identity.

Rebecca Macklin's presentation on *Storytelling and Environmental Crisis* discussed how the thread of submersion due to climate change induced flooding of indigenous land produces indigenous futurity and futurism in which forms of imagining centre on indigenous narratives and epistemologies. While storytelling is important to ground and pass on indigenous

knowledge, fears of extraction of that knowledge and its insertion into colonial knowledge scripts prevail. The “Forgotten Histories of Science” intended to shed light on how gendered bias in science marginalised non-white and non-male figures. Counterfactuals were then discussed as a solution through offering alternative histories while also highlighting science’s both empowering and exploitative potential (“Science and Fiction in Postcolonial Counterfactual”). The potentially threatening impact of technology in postcolonial science fiction, with technology increasingly blurring the lines of self and other, led to discussions of genetic kinships – both metaphorically and literally – to represent global and interpersonal relations (“Postcolonial Posthumanisms”).

On the panel “Postcolonial Narratives of/ and Space Exploration”, the entanglements between (colonial) pasts, science and the spatial future were discussed. Hedley Twidle focussed on the palimpsestic histories of and competing interests in the South African Karoo as a site of indigenous, colonial and space memory where deep time conflicts with the historically more recent past. Science in the form of the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) and the rewilding of the former farmland have formed an unlikely liaison in the Karoo, now a nature reserve, to promote South Africa’s postcolonial astronomic endeavour. Jens Temmen showed in his presentation how science and the colonising project are by no means disentangled. The NASA Rover missions are used to market an extra-terrestrial future through post-human life-writing by anthropomorphic, tweeting Mars Rovers to create new NASA missions. Offered as a solution for climate change, the NASA Rover missions perpetuate capitalist fantasies in which the colonisation of Mars becomes a techno-liberal and hip business model whose reverberations of a colonial past are starkly ignored.

The final keynote lecture was held by Graham Huggan and interrogated the relationship of science, nature and how discourses on invasive species foster conservationist approaches to nature that hold on to normative ideas of landscape and contradict the resilience of nature. At the same time, he demanded invasion science to come to terms with its own history as its language is repeatedly appropriated by populists using it to promote ideological purism not just of landscapes but of nations.

The well-organized conference offered transdisciplinary views on the role and impact of science both past and present, lively discussions in which researchers pointed out continuing power asymmetries in and through science and grappled with postcolonialist critique or decolonisation as the *modus operandi* when assessing the interrelation of science and culture.

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