

Conference Report

“Postcolonial Oceans: Contradictions and Heterogeneities in the Epistemes of Salt water”

Joint Annual Conference of GAPS and IACPL (30 May—2 June, 2019, University of Bremen, Germany)

The epistemological possibilities inherent in the critical study of ‘oceans’ have been unpacked from diverse perspectives and positions in the Joint Conference of GAPS and IACPL on ‘Postcolonial Oceans: Contradictions and Heterogeneities in the Epistemes of Salt Water’ held at Bremen University. The four –day long conference not only witnessed the animating exchange of ideas, critical discussion among scholars hailing from different geographical locales but also offered the much-needed platform at global level for exploring epistemological, pedagogic possibilities of ‘ocean studies’. In their Call for Papers, the 2019 organizing team led by Prof. Kerstin Knopf (University of Bremen, Germany) invites the attention of scholars to the multiple dimensions and critical possibilities of the study of ‘oceans’ from multi-disciplinary perspectives.

The opening remarks made by the members of the organizing team and other officials highlighted the contradictions and heterogeneities in the epistemic, pedagogic discourses surrounding ocean studies. The steady emergence of the University of Bremen in the academic cartography had always been navigated in the opening address. The multi-layered study of oceans has been addressed in the keynote lectures delivered in the conference. Bill Ashcroft’s keynote lecture on “Oceans: The Space of Future Thinking” emphasized the futuristic possibility of ‘ocean’ for the postcolonial thinkers and practitioner. Ashcroft offered a nuanced history of the investment on ocean by the colonialists with their imperial object of “territorializing the unterritorializable”. He invited our attention to the diverse ways seas have been mapped to serve the purpose of colonialists, colonial resistance or the emergent global capitalism. Ashcroft suggested that a study of oceans could entail the unpacking of various ideas regarding the transformative power of ocean. He further stressed the need for ‘archipelagic’ thinking that problematizes the antithetical relation between land and water. The keynote lecture set the tone of the conference that witnessed the pollination of cross-disciplinary investment on ocean

studies. The very first day of the conference witnessed productive and provocative discussion and exchange of ideas on ocean from historical, literary, scientific perspectives. In the pre-lunch panel on 'The Indian Ocean' three speakers—Sukanta Das (India), Frank Schulze-Engler (Germany) and Gisela Feurie (Germany)—talked on the critical relations and connections with the Indian Ocean in literature. Sukanta Das talked on the destabilizing potentiality of salt water for the disempowered, dispossessed indentured labourers in negotiating with land-dictated givens like that of caste, creed etc. in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy, set in Bengal, China, Mauritius against the backdrop of Opium War. In his deliberation Sukanta Das emphasized on the interrogative potentiality of aquatic journey that paves the way for formation of new kinds of identity based on shared and lived experience. Highlighting the connection between Indian Ocean and the Pacific made through the Ibis, a slave ship refitted to carry convicts, indentured labourers to various colonial outposts, Sukanta Das showed how Amitav Ghosh recuperates the history of the marginalized by tracing the footprints dissolved in water. Frank Schulze-Engler's paper highlighted the need for critical engagement with Indian Ocean for the scholars working from postcolonial and cultural studies perspectives. He pointed out the huge investment on Indian Ocean made by the historians, political scientists and economists as the space has been considerably exploited for its economic and trade opportunity. Schulze-Engler situates Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* to explore the 'recalibration of Indian Ocean thinking'. In her presentation Gisela Feurie connects the emergence of South African Indian literature with the Indian Ocean through an analysis of three novels by South African Indian writers. Gisela Feurie showed how South African Studies intersects with the transnational and Indian Ocean studies by tracing the origin and gradual emergence of Indian diaspora in South Africa. Her provocative analysis traces the migration of Indian indentured labourers, merchants, and business people working in various colonial outposts.

In the second day, Robbie Shilliam's keynote lecture focused on the plurality of responses the ocean evokes in terms of its propensity towards flux, ambivalence and connection. Contrary to the popular notions about the flux associated with ocean, Robbie Shilliam argued that oceans 'root' in various ways in the analysis of Blackness. Shilliam made critical penetrating analysis to track anti-colonial connections between Blacknesses in Oceania and the Caribbean. In their joint presentation Anna Sobral (Switzerland) and Johannes Riquet (Finland) talked about the book project they were working on based on European oceanic travel. Highlighting the need

for ocean-based thinking and cultural transformations, Anna and Johannes analyzed the European ocean travel writings to show the historical and cultural transformation that took place with the arrival of Europeans in unfamiliar spaces. Stefanie Mueller (Germany) intervened in the discourse of ocean studies by suggesting the unique vantage position of fiction in representing the ocean. Stefanie's take on the epistemology of ocean concentrated on the crucial distinction between the scientific narrative like that of Charles Darwin on ocean and fictional writings like Melville's *The Enchanted Isles*. Sebastian Jablonski (Germany) dwelled on the issues of in-betweenness in cultural mapping as faced by the islanders generally and more specifically by the Pitcairn islanders. These islanders— descendants of *Bounty* mutineers and kidnapped Tahitian women —occupy the liminal space in the account of John Shillibeer. In the Conference panel on “Post-colonial Readings of European Sea Literature”, three presenters made critical discussion on European sea literature by highlighting various ideas ranging from agency, cultural interaction, reroutings associated with ocean. In her talk Virginia Richter (Switzerland) stressed on the traditional image of and thinking on ocean which is represented as something wild, infinite and eternal. She suggested that contrary to such popular belief, ocean is not to be understood as land's other but as a powerful site facilitating contact, intermixing, and cultural transformation. She analyzed Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon* as a case study of the interplay between colonialism, the mariner's craft exemplifying human agency, and uncontrollable forces of nature – the agency of the ocean. Oduor Obura focused on the routes, roots, and tropes of the invention of the travellers in ‘the darkness’ of eastern Africa. Focusing on the travel writings of early European writers, Oduor Obura showed how the conceptions and perceptions of eastern African cultures were built up by the explorers. Marijke Denger talked on the issues of cultural contact, colonialist discourse by analyzing Joseph Conrad's *The Rescue*.

In keeping with the theme of the conference, the keynote address and plenary workshops for the third day were conducted at the Museum hall at Bremerhaven. In the recorded talk on “Seascape Epistemology: An Embodied Knowledge of and Movement through the Sea”, Karin Amioto Ingersoll (University of Hawai'i) argued for the need for systematic employment of sea-based knowledge not only to make best use of marine life but to effect a conscious involvement with the planet and wither beings. Such knowledge, which she calls ‘seascape epistemology’ will help us engage with the world in an ethically responsible way, and to create a counter-politics to the dominant thought-worlds that impose rigid systems upon our identities, spaces, and places.

Tobias Goebel talked on the association between colonialism and different instruments of navigating marine knowledge. The talk made detailed discussion on the museum and objects that bear witness to the process of colonization. The interesting discussion concluded with the equally fascinating interaction among three creative personalities.

The last day of the conference witnessed the exchange of ideas in the various panels organized around certain thematic core. In the session clustered around ‘Transgressing Concepts of Sea and Humans’ three presenters dwelled on various issues ranging from epistemology, colonial investment on sea to the formation of cultural identity. In his talk Arnab Kumar Sinha (India) argued how sea assumes symbolic significance in diasporic literature. While the sea is envisaged as the space of loss, trauma, pain in the diasporic imagination and cartography, Arnab Kumar Sinha stressed on the transformative possibility of the actual sea for the diasporic people as explored in Mallika Krishnamurthy’s *Six Yards of Silk*. Geoff Rodoreda (Germany) debunks the divisive thought that argues for distinct status and identity of sea and land. Rodoreda explores the deep-seated emotional attachment of human for the sea in Australian indigenous novelist Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*. In his presentation, Murat Sezi (Germany) explored the connection between centre, periphery, colony etc. by exploring how these issues were grappled in China Mieville’s novel *The Scar*. He showed how the maritime setting works not merely as a backdrop but also raises important historical, cultural and linguistic questions.

Sukanta Das (India)