

Conference Report

Postcolonial Oceans: Contradictions and Heterogeneities in the Epistemes of Salt Water

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This year's joint annual conference of the German Association for Postcolonial Studies (GAPS) and the International Association of Colonial and Postcolonial Linguistics (IACPL) on "Postcolonial Oceans: Contradictions and Heterogeneities in the Epistemes of Salt Water" was organised by Kerstin Knopf, Ingo Warnke, and their wonderful team at the University of Bremen. Bremen's historical entanglements with multiple processes of direct and indirect slavery, as well as the city's struggles to come to terms with its past—not only with regard to street names or restitutions but the city's incessant imperial profiteering—made for a well-chosen setting in which to further a complex understanding of the titular 'postcolonial oceans'. The ocean itself, or, as Anna-Katharina Hornidge argued in her opening remarks, the "last frontier of extraction" has continuously been subjected to colonial epistemologies; to a degree where Western understandings of oceanscapes have become inseparable from the imperial impetus of exploration and cartography, of subjugation and exploitation. This pertains not only to the seas themselves but, given the recent surge in nativist politics in the West, to all who allegedly hail from its Othered shores. In this vein, Michi Knecht's remarks offered a timely reminder that such colonial and neo-colonial understandings—Europe's violent epistemes of the sea—have always translated into immeasurable human suffering: Currently, Knecht contended, we witness the Mediterranean becoming a "saltwater cemetery at the steps of Europe's closed gates". It was thus among the conference's central concerns to rethink the seas from de- and postcolonial perspectives and positionalities, and to counter the harmful status of the oceans as mere waterways that facilitate global exploitation. Rather than a complete retelling of conference events, the following report offers snapshots of an invigorating and immensely productive conference; snapshots which work best when read alongside and in relation to the other contributions on this topic.

Throughout the conference, much emphasis was placed on the Pacific and Oceania, with panels and keynotes devoted to the regions. In a Thursday panel ("Literature #4: The Pacific"), Anna Sobral and Johannes Riquet shared insights into their ongoing book-project "Oceanic Encounters", arguing for an understanding of early Pacific cultural exchanges between Europeans and Pacific islanders as liminal moments that deeply unsettled not only European perceptions of self but their epistemic faculties, their very capacity to 'know'. Sobral and Riquet chiefly turned to Joseph Banks's diaries of the Cook voyages to elucidate a

temporary “gap between seeing and being”, arguing that they express the fragility of British imperial identity through semantic slippages that render the positions of British sailors and Pacific islanders interchangeable. At the time, Banks’s “uncertainty of perception”, as Riquet and Sobral argued, could not have gone unnoticed and the published version of his diaries have been carefully re-edited to remove all traces of opacity and uncertainty. In the same panel, Stefanie Müller’s paper on “The ‘Poetry of Salt Water’: Archipelagic Thinking and Insular Knowledges in Herman Melville’s *The Encantadas, or The Enchanted Isles*” turned to unsettling potentials in Melville’s episodic sketches of the Galapagos Islands. In reading the stories’ seeming aesthetical and structural disparity—their individual sense of lack and incompleteness—as an expression of the islands’ fundamentally archipelagic, Glissantian relationality, she examined Melville’s understanding of the *American* nation’s porous boundaries (where the texts were ultimately published).

In a panel on Friday, devoted to the audio-visual imaginations of the sea (“Media & Film #1”), Marlena Tronicke’s “What Have You Done?": Saltwater Hauntings in the BBC’s *Taboo* argued for a renewed engagement with questions of race and Empire in Neo-Victorian scholarship. While the politics of representation, as Tronicke explained, remain problematic, the spatial semantics of the sea can be understood as the show’s central decolonial metaphor, conjoining the lateral connectivity of the Empire’s disparate dominions with the vertical symbolism of surface and submersion, of repressed memory and Neo-Victorianism’s slow coming to terms with its own imperial legacies. Also linking the nineteenth century imagination of the seas to contemporary popular culture, Jan D. Kucharzewski’s “‘I’m the Captain Now’: Hegemony and Liminality in *Benito Cereno* and *Captain Phillips*” focussed on “hegemonic anxieties” of relinquishing dominance at sea. Both texts—produced more than 150 years apart—playfully threaten white, male hegemony only to eventually restore it with a vengeance, thus pointing to the ongoing symbolic significance of the globally operating, (neo)colonial Captain.

Saturday’s programme saw the entire conference moved to the German Maritime Museum in Bremerhaven, an hour’s bus ride from Bremen itself. Interlaced with talks by the museum’s historians on local collections and the prevalence of German colonial artefacts, a central focus on Pacific knowledges and knowledge production emerged throughout the day. Karin Amimoto Ingersoll’s captivating keynote address, delivered via a tightly framed, pre-recorded video, moved seamlessly between decolonial theory, her own experience, and positionality as a Kanaka Maoli, or Native Hawai’ian, surfer, and glimpses into the epistemologies of Pacific master navigators. Amimoto Ingersoll argued chiefly for a renewed

understanding of the Pacific's historical interconnectedness and affective apprehensions of the seascape that continue to elude the primarily terrestrially orientated, often violent, Western exploration. This conversation was not only taken up within the museum space and its Pacific stick chart displays—whose doubtful authenticity complicates questions of restitution—but also by Lars Eckstein and Anja Schwarz's plenary presentation of their recently published research into one of the most iconic documents of precolonial Pacific knowledge; Tupaia's map. Drawn up mostly aboard Cook's *Endeavour* in the late 1770s and misread by Western scholars, who emphasised its alleged incompatibility with Mercator projections and their (imagination of) absolute, fixed locations, Tupaia's map is, in fact, a translation of Polynesian relationalities and voyages into Western understanding of cartography and spatiality. It is thus, as Eckstein and Schwarz emphasised, not an apprehension of Tupaia's wayfinding abilities or even his epistemologies but of selected aspects he wished to share with intruding Europeans, unable to understand the master navigator's craft, and testament to the pervasive force of non-Western knowledges to understand the Pacific and its islands.

If a post-dinner reading at the end of this intense conference day might have seemed daunting to some participants—quiet conversations about the individual levels of sleep-deprivation were casually mentioned in and around the museum's lecture hall—the three invited authors, Alvin Pang, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Ellen van Neerven had no intentions to simply read from their works. In a museum setting that offered virtual-reality voyages and a much-photographed semi-wrapped sperm whale skeleton, Pang, Owuor, and van Neerven spoke and read in turns, opening up multiple conversations on their positionalities and practices as writers, but equally demanding the audience's participation. Self-conscious of possible expectations, Pang argued that “the most postcolonial thing we can do, as authors, is to not write about the postcolonial experience”, and indeed, the joint conversations strayed far and wide. Owuor's evocative prose and her extraordinary wit, Pang's ironic, aphoristic, and easily politicised verses, and Van Neerven's ability to bring an auditorium to total silence with her futurist, queer writing, made for unforeseen interconnections and relations between three vastly different Oceanic imaginations—and one of the conference's definite highlights.

In one of Sunday's opening panels (“Literature #9: Turbulent Waters”), Jolene Mathieson's “Lucretian Slime, (Post-)Colonial Fluid Parcels and Subalterity in Science Fictions of the Deep Sea” addressed what Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters have called “wet ontologies” in China Miéville's *The Scar*. In light of the novel's often overlooked epigraph by Dambudzo Marechera, the re-appropriation of Othered amphibity in *The Scar*,

becomes, as Mathieson's argued, a decolonial resignification of the imaginary monstrosity of the hidden Oceans, or "the Oceanic weird". In the same panel, Karsten Levihn-Kutzler's "Bathtubs and Hungry Tides: Flood Fiction, Littoral Communities and the Politics of Environmental Precariousness" examined the, in his words, "slow violence" of climate change in imaginations of marginalised coastal areas. Benh Zeitlin's film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* in particular, Levihn-Kutzler argued, links a flood—the central threat which climate change poses to the film's "subaltern littoral" community—to racialised violence in the United States, while at the same time espousing a potentially problematic narrative of resilience and self-help that runs the danger of obscuring the institutional contributions to the current climate crisis.

A wrap-up, or even a coherent narrativisation of such a heterogeneous, transdisciplinary, and dense conference, cannot do it justice. Therefore I will end with a brief thematic observation: In the panels and events I attended, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* was conspicuously absent, or, if indeed mentioned, then in passing only. I read this as a testament to the overwhelming success and the institutionalisation—maybe even, a taken-for-grantedness—of his work, rather than a sign of waning theoretical sway. It seems rather that, as in Robbie Shilliam's work (whose apparently wonderful keynote I am sorry to have missed), aspects of Gilroy's theses on transatlantic identity formations are fused with contemporary research on the Pacific and the Indian Oceans and their transcultural linkages, and also with current work on archipelagos from Polynesia and the Caribbean to the Arctic. If Annika McPherson warned of "simplified imaginations of global seascapes" in her opening statement, the conference offered ample proof of new directions in the study of marine knowledges and global epistemologies of the seas.