

Report on GAPS 2021 Annual Conference ‘Science, Culture, and Postcolonial Narrative’

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GAPS Annual Conference 2021 on ‘Science, Culture, and Postcolonial Narrative’ was initially planned to be held at Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg from 13-15 May, but it had to move to the online platform, owing to the continuing rage of the COVID pandemic. The conference’s theme could not be timelier, enduring as we were, a second, or in some places, a third wave of the pandemic. The ongoing rampage of COVID and the way it has uncovered, among other things, a deeply unequal system in most parts of the world necessitated a reflection on the role of science – its relationship to us as well as the power hierarchies within a globalised world. Through its wide range of trans-disciplinary presentations from scholars across continents, the meticulously crafted online conference generated stimulating discussions around those concerns and many more.

The conference commenced with the president, Cecile Sandten’s warm welcome note in which she mentioned the particular significance of this year’s theme, an area that had not been addressed before in past GAPS conferences. Reiterating the paradoxical nature of science as both ‘harbinger of humanity and instigator of destruction’, she emphasised the importance of the postcolonial as a ‘critical mode of analysis’, hoping for the conference to probe the political economy of our time while also attempting to find alternative modes of ‘intervention and equal distribution’.

With the first keynote, the scholarly dialogue tackled head-on the uneasy tension between the postcolonial and decolonial approaches. In his thought-provoking keynote entitled ‘Between Postcolonial Histories of Science and Decolonial Science Studies’, Warwick Anderson reflected on this tension-ridden area between these approaches whose seeming opposition, according to him, is more performative than substantive. His argument was to treat the decolonial metaphorically (an idea that some other scholars would later challenge), the metaphor being a powerful tool for re-imagination. Nonetheless, moving beyond the schematic binary of postcolonial and decolonial, he proposed a

reformulation of the postcolonial, incorporating the radical and activist aspects of decolonial critique.

On one of the parallel panels, 'Science in Speculative Fiction, Indrani Dasgupta discussed select literary texts by Amitav Ghosh and Vandana Singh, demonstrating how these narratives problematise the dominant Western epistemologies and the rigid definition of the genre of science fiction.

Dasgupta's theoretically rich paper, particularly the introductory part on the postcolonial reworking of the so-called Western science fiction genre, set the ground for Christine Hoene's engaging paper on Bengali scientists Jagadish Chandra Bose's short story 'Runway Cyclone'. Bose's fiction, written in colonial times, integrates science fiction and magical realism, using these generic elements as mutually constitutive instead of mutually exclusive. Particularly illuminating was Hoene's analysis of Bose's text as adumbrating a 'philosophy of science' that accommodates space for both Western science and Indian philosophy. Such a merging, Hoene averred, can be considered as a politics of science that is effectively anti-colonial. The potential of the genre of speculative fiction was again addressed in Victoria Herche and David Kern's paper on Ted Chiang's short fictions, which examined how the texts suggest scientific discovery as circular, even paradoxical and 'productively ambiguous', which in turn challenge dominant cultural ideas.

In her robustly interdisciplinary, illuminating and poetic keynote address, Banu Subramaniam articulated 'an epistemology and aesthetics that celebrates the fragmented' and recognises the ravaged history of colonialism. To understand Botany and its disciplinary foundation, she argued, 'is to reckon with its deep entanglements with the histories of colonialism, conquest and slavery.'

Nonetheless, in her project of decolonising Botany, she did not reject the science of Botany but rather embraced it in order to work from within to unearth and critique the discipline's formations. Bringing together Humanities and Science through Feminist Science and Technology Studies and Queer Studies, she developed a methodology that accounts for the interwoven world of nature and culture.

The first day of the conference was well concluded with a joyfully engaging reading by Petina Gappah of her latest novel, *Out of Darkness, Shining Light*. Set in nineteenth-century Africa, the novel follows the journey of Halima and Jacob as they carry the corpse of David Livingston from Africa to England.

Inspired by real characters who inhabited the margins of dominant history, her meticulously researched novel uses brilliant imagination to bring to life the character of Halima, her fearless protagonist with ‘outrageous tongue’, whom the audience loved. What emerged from the discussion was the concerns of alternative history and knowledge making, ideas that ran through the subsequent days of the conference.

The second day started with Josie Gill’s keynote entitled ‘Black Literature and Science in the Age of Coronavirus’ that focused on Blackness and racial science. While she foregrounded the continuing structural, institutional racism and the impact of these on Black health (evidenced in the Covid-19 pandemic and its disproportionate toll endured by Black people), she also examined the methodologies of resistance, offering an incisive reading of Katherine McKittrick’s *Dear Science and Other Stories*.

On the panel ‘Postcolonial Posthumanism’, Hasan Serkan Demir presented an engaging reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s latest novel *Klara and the Sun*, within the postcolonial and posthumanism studies framework, illustrating how the novel evinces power asymmetries and renders the Western scientific knowledge production morally ambiguous. The next paper by Paul-Haman Rose addressed the emergent field of post-biogenetic kinship, arguing for the transformative potential of literary fiction to rethink the imageries of kinship in today’s globalised world. Contending that postcolonial fiction is particularly potent for such an interrogation into the nature and meaning of kinship, Rose examined the works of such eminent writers as Amitav Ghosh and Zadie Smith to demonstrate how their narratives appropriate and radically reimagine kinship discourse. The conversation on science, power and knowledge took a different turn to examine their relationship with the postcolonial nation-state in Harshana Rambukwella’s paper in another parallel panel. Discussing the effect of Covid-19 in Sri Lanka and how it has come to instigate a certain kind of indigeneity that is parochial and dubious in nature, Rambukwella argued that this kind of nationalism, often politically weaponised, requires us to rethink any uncritical celebratory concepts of indigeneity.

Day three offered the panel on Science and Postcolonial Environments in which Virginia Richter’s presentation on Jim Crace’s compelling *Being Dead* explored the novel’s use of the contrasting aesthetic modes of zoology, the elegiac and the romantic. She examined the linguistic, epistemological and aesthetic tension

that permeate the narrative, particularly realised through its depiction of death and decay in terms of human animality. Striking a contrasting note, the novel, she argued, also generates a poetic reconstruction of the lives of the dead, bringing zoology and poesis together in an ambivalent aesthetic mode.

In the final keynote lecture, Graham Huggan took a postcolonial and ecocritical approach in foregrounding how the biological processes are translated into cultural terms, a double-edged process with its own strength and loopholes. He argued that invasion science has yet to reckon with the burden of its own history. Talking about the translation between the realms of biology and culture, he contended that scientific language is not metaphor-free but rather vulnerable to the metaphor being (mis)appropriated, especially in a xenophobic context. As a potential alternative to the invasion narrative, he offered the eco-narrative, upholding its inclination towards empathy and cooperation. Like the previous keynote lecture, the emphasis in his talk was to form solid connections within the disciplines of natural and social sciences, and arts. In his concluding remark, Huggan advocated for more scientific literacy among Humanities scholars to better deploy the interdisciplinary methods to understand the entangled world of biology and culture. He stressed more on interdisciplinary 'praxis' rather than 'discourse', a concern he voiced again in the concluding roundtable discussion.

The roundtable discussion provided an opportunity to reflect upon the ideas and debates generated throughout the conference. More than summing up, the discussion in the roundtable conclusion raised further critical enquiries. What came up often over the course of the conference, as Julia Gatermann mentioned, is imagining alternative subjectivities and finding alternative epistemologies.

While being sympathetic towards such an effort to find alternative epistemology, Harshana Rambukwella offered a counter-position and a cautionary note. What he identified as the fundamental idea that recurred throughout the conference was 'a problem of alterity'. He emphatically argued that knowledge is fundamentally co-produced at the deepest level. What has become known as dominant Western epistemology of science owes a vast body of knowledge acquired from across the world. However, the history of such an acquisition has been erased. The very nature of knowledge (co)production resists an outright rejection of dominant epistemology (be it of science, modernity or democracy) since such hurried attempts for alternative frames

often lead to narrow parochialism. He used the example of Sri Lanka and other South Asian countries where a narrow understanding of indigeneity often translate into deeply problematic policy-making. He concluded by drawing on Edward Said's idea of 'affiliation' that enables a critical mode that is more contextually and historically situated.

On the whole, the conference accomplished its goal to explore the interrelated nature of Science, Culture, and Postcolonial narratives while also facilitating and fostering critical engagements through and across different disciplines, providing impetus for not only more rigorous and wholesome transdisciplinary collaborations but also to extend the critical conversations beyond academia.