

Conference Report | **Contested Solidarities: Agency and Victimhood in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures** | Peri Sipahi and Rita Maricocchi

The 32nd annual conference of the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies (GAPS) was organised by Frank Schulze-Engler, Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Katrin Bartha-Mitchell, and their fantastic team at Goethe University Frankfurt. Spanning four days of insightful scholarship, engaging conversations, and delicious food and drink, the conference interrogated concepts of solidarity and the implicated subject and raised questions about how contemporary postcolonial scholarship intersects with practices of activism, agency, and collaboration. While it would be impossible to recount the multiple keynote lectures, roundtables, and 29 panels of the conference in their entirety, this report does offer glimpses into select moments.

Following the warm welcome and opening remarks from the team in Frankfurt, the Geoffrey Davis Memorial Lecture held by Harshana Rambukwella emphasised conceptual flaws of many approaches to solidarity on a global level. His talk “Deep Solidarity? Reflections on Post-colonial Solidarities in a Moment of National and Global Crisis” singled out the prevalence of hierarchical structures that often accompany expressions of solidarity. Rambukwella discussed anger as a basis for solidarity and argued for “disenchanted solidarity” as a productive lens for understanding Sri Lankan post-civil war conflicts. His contribution offered a critical way of viewing solidarity by stressing a need for “deep solidarities” that offer horizontal rather than vertical alliances.

Similar thoughts echoed in Panels 2 and 6 organised by Jennifer Leetsch and entitled “Ecological Solidarities, Vulnerabilities and Resistances, Part I: Climate Vulnerability” and “Part II: Multi-Species Encounters”. To start, Baldeep Kaur’s paper offered a thought-provoking reflection on the nature and the infrastructures of colonialism and how these impact postcolonial and decolonial frameworks. Drawing on a wide array of approaches and concepts by, amongst others, Tiffany King, Sylvia Wynter, and Anna Tsing, Kaur theorised waste colonialism and framed the ruderal as a lesson of remembrance revealing colonial afterlives. Following that, Alisa Preusser, recipient of this year’s Graduate Recognition Award, built on these points via the lens of kinship, asking the pertinent question of how it is possible to maintain place-based relations when the land has been laid waste by colonial infrastructures. Incorporating Max Liboiron’s works on waste, Preusser argued that Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s and Craig Santos-Perez’ (video) poetry make visible colonialism’s ongoing breach of kinship and the severance of

relational bonds between Indigenous peoples and their Land. Trang Dang continued with a focus on Indigenous survivance and resistance and forms of human-nonhuman solidarities in the novel *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline and Hannah Nelson-Teutsch concluded the first panel with a theorization of “scrappy reading” as the art of fragmentation and decomposition of empire by investigating Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*.

The second half of the panel series continued with Apala Bhowmick’s examination of the collapse of species boundaries in Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, focussing on the shared losses of human and nonhuman animals and contrasting them with the depiction of the figure of the hunter-dictator. Christina Slopek then built a case for ecological solidarity represented through female bodies in Edwidge Danticat’s novel *Claire of the Sea Light*. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of rhizomatic multispecies, Slopek demonstrated that representation of relations between female bodies and non-human nature interrogates Anthropocene forms of agency. As the last talk by Arunima Bhattacharya was unfortunately cancelled, Kylie Crane concluded with an investigation of cross-species imaginaries. Crane showed how Tade Thompson’s Afrofuturist *Wormwood* trilogy negotiates the encounter between human and fungi as a negotiation of mutual responsibility and solidarity. Both panels testified to the importance and productivity of including diverse approaches within the framework of postcolonial studies such as ecocriticism, Indigenous studies, and multispecies studies.

Another highlight of the first day was Panel 7, “Beyond Victimhood in African Literature”, which included papers by Silke Stroh, Alex Wanjala, and Tanaka Chidora. Stroh’s paper on Tendai Huchu’s relatively unstudied and multi-genre short story corpus and Wanjala’s critical survey of Yvonne Owuor’s novel *Dust* were complemented by Chidora’s engaging talk examining parenticide in NoViolet Bulawajo’s novel *We Need New Names*. Chidora argued that the novel extends a subversive Zimbabwean literary tradition of using childhood as a framework for critiquing the nation. In his reading, the children who are supposed to be beneficiaries of nationalism in the postcolonial state are actually victims of the new nation, a victimhood challenged in the novel by the act of re-naming.

In the evening, participants filed into the lecture hall one last time for a literary roundtable with Sinan Antoon, moderated by Katrin Bartha-Mitchell and Nuha Askar. In between reading from his work, amongst others his novel *The Book of Collateral Damage*,

Antoon provided reflections on language and (self)translation, suggesting that the untranslatable might in fact be an act of solidarity.

Turning from his own literary work to discuss the poetics of knowledge production on the next morning, Sinan Antoon critiqued the ways in which knowledge about Iraq is produced in the West, and more specifically in the United States. In his keynote “Discursive Violence and Dismembered Memories”, Antoon highlighted the epistemic violence waged alongside and as a part of the U.S. and European military involvement in the Middle East. In his discussion of Sargon Boulus’s poetry, Antoon unpacked notions of fragmentation and dismemberment on multiple levels, including the body, community, geography, cultural memory, and the archive. A particularly interesting question from Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor brought the notion of epistemic restitution into the conversation, highlighting how the destruction of archives in Iraq and the knowledges held within them also creates fragmentation on an epistemic level which needs to be addressed when pursuing scholarship in and on the region.

The topic of war carried over into Panel 12, “Beyond Victimology - War Narratives in a Decentered World”, in which the four presenters used literary texts from different geographic and cultural contexts to meditate on how war narratives work with concepts of victimhood and agency. While Lukas Lammers, Alessandra Di Pietro, and Nuha Askar spoke to issues of memory, voice, and agency in a range of contemporary novels, Victoria Herche’s paper looked closely at the literary ethics of storytelling in the context of war. Considering Nam Le’s short story “Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice”, Herche brought to the fore the ways in which the text navigates and reflects on questions such as who owns a story, who remembers stories, and what the limits of sharing others’ stories are, in this case in the context of the Vietnam war and resultant Vietnamese diaspora. Her paper thus contributed an impulse for self-reflection when writing about and disseminating the stories of others.

Panel 14, “Moving the Centre: Affect, Implication, and Agency in Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures II”, offered a compelling focus on the intersections of affect theory and postcolonial studies. Whereas much scholarship focuses on negative emotions such as fear, shame, and trauma, Jenny Leetsch’s paper encouraged a view of the re-appropriative potential of love. Creating a dialogue between scholars such as bell hooks and Sara Ahmed, she established love as political discourse and as a postcolonial ethics of care that allows for solidarities with ‘the other’. Focussing on another form of affect, Caroline Kögler spoke about forced separations of

parent-child attachments in the context of enslavement and colonialism and posited these as manipulative strategies to ensure traumatic attachments between enslaver and enslaved. Navigating affect theory and traumatic bonding, Kögler located early ruptures of the idealised and romanticised traditions of the “grateful slave” trope and instead emphasised the cultivation and protection of kinship networks essential to Black resilience in the 18th century. Bénédicte Ledent closed the panel by tracing the emotional and sensory entanglements as well as establishing a conflicted form of solidarity between a daughter of a plantation owner and an African enslaved person in the two novels *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore* by Caryl Phillips.

A highly anticipated event of the second day was certainly the roundtable with Michael Rothberg, whose foundational theorisation of the titular implicated subjecthood provided one of the thematic clusters for the conference. Rothberg presented eight theses on differentiated solidarity and the implicated subject that sparked thoughtful responses from the other roundtable participants as well as a lively Q&A session after his presentation. Among the most prevalent theses were the ideas that solidarity is situated, not universal and at the same time a process of dislocation. Rothberg suggested that specifically implicated subjects have to aim for a differentiated solidarity that is/has to be uncomfortable. This also proved to be particularly relevant to think through in the academic context, where issues such as class and privilege play a role in how solidarity is and can be extended. In particular, Tanaka Chidora’s response as a roundtable participant critically challenged the concept in wondering what it means to write like an implicated subject. Putting this question to white South African writers such as Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, and Damon Galgut, Chidora’s response illustrated the potential difficulty of connecting implication to solidarity and even to concrete change. Although the discussion could have continued, considering how slippery the notion of implication proves to be, participants were eager to head upstairs for the conference dinner, which brought everyone together to digest the many unfinished thoughts over wine and delicious Ethiopian food.

Somewhat groggy from a late night of chatting with colleagues and friends, old and new, conference participants made their way back to the campus to start with another round of panels at 9:30 am. An overarching focus on practices of reading and analysing literature with postcolonial and anticolonial frameworks appeared in both Panel 19, “Colonial and Postcolonial Memories”, and Panel 24, “Violence and Survivance”. Several talks worked closely with Rothberg’s implicated subject such as Rita Maricocchi’s talk on (trans)national memory in the

Humboldt Forum as represented in Priya Basil's film essay "Locked In and Out" or Sanghamitra Dalal's talk combining the implicated subject with Hannah Arendt's idea of collective responsibility to investigate the network of implicated subjects within the novel *We, The Survivors*, ultimately confronting us with the idea of the implicated reader. Oluwadonni Talabi's paper also took a focus on the reader to argue for a reading of Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* that "abandons what we know" in order to consider other ontological realities which can unlock a reading of the un-gendered realities of the text. Also picking up on the notion of implication, this time embedded in ecocritical theories, Peri Sipahi introduced forms of climate victimisation of Pacific Islanders peoples and examined the rejection thereof in Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry collection *Iep Jāltok* and her collaborative video poem "Rise". Issues of agency and victimhood were present in Sayan Chattopadhyay's paper on Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* and Zoë Miller's talk examining Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Through the problematisation of using slavery as a metaphor, Miller's talk, the final of the two panels, once again emphasised the ways in which readers are implicated in how they approach the text.

The end of the third day devoted time to recognising outstanding work by early career scholars during the awarding of the GAPS Graduate Award (Stefanie Kemmerer), Graduate Recognition Award (Alisa Preusser), and GAPS Dissertation Award (Magdalena Pfalzgraf). This was followed by a heartfelt laudatio from Katja Sarkowsky to Frank Schulze-Engler celebrating his contributions to the field of Postcolonial Studies and to the GAPS organisation not only in his scholarship but also in his relationships with colleagues, early career scholars, and students. The ZIAF night of African Literature, which was also open to a wider audience, then capped off the third day.

On the last morning of the conference, the audience was in for an enriching keynote by Johannes Riquet entitled "Circumpolar Solidarities, Collaborative Geographies and Indigenous Spatialities: Mediating the 21st-Century Arctic." Riquet centred on his collaborative work as part of the Mediated Arctic geographies project and discussed its methodologies as a scaffolding to question how art can function as a political form of solidarity. Subsequently presenting a vast array of different art forms such as film, comics, cartography or hiphop music, he traced transindigenous, circumpolar, and planetary solidarities. Especially thought-provoking was the display of an Indigenous circumpolar map that not only decentered and reframed the world from a polar perspective, but also subverted colonial cartographic and naming processes.

The concluding roundtable offered insights from Graduate Award recipient Stefanie Kemmerer, Alex Wanjala, Sinan Antoon, Mark Stein, and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, touching again on the contested and unresolved nature of “solidarity”, as made apparent by the numerous scholarly and literary contributions of the past four days. Mention was given to the important questions this thematic focus raised about our positionalities as researchers, the content we choose to confront our listeners with when presenting our work, and the ethics of care too often overlooked in academic spaces. Finally, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor’s poem captured small moments and forgotten details of the past four days, reminding us that the GAPS 2022 conference was, after a period of pandemic-driven Zoom-only conferences, a long-awaited opportunity to exchange, discuss, and generate ideas in person.