

Hosted by Timo Müller, Christina Wald, and Dominik Steinhilber (and aided by a wonderful team of yellow-badged student assistants), the annual GAPS conference took place at the University of Konstanz between May 17th and May 20th, 2023. Over the course of several days, scholars from all across the globe presented their research on postcolonial infrastructures, applying the terminology broadly and with an interdisciplinary inflection, presenting on a variety of topics – roads and railways, trade and education, digital and health infrastructure, energy grids, petrofiction, migration and border studies, the tourism industry, architecture, gender studies, ecocriticism, and considerations of genre and methodology – of which only a small slice can be captured adequately in this conference report. Hosting almost 100 speakers and 33 panels, this year’s GAPS conference showed clearly the importance of reading the infrastructural turn through the lens of postcolonial studies.

In front of a packed hall on Wednesday evening, Homi K. Bhabha, the first keynote speaker and Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University, held the Wolfgang Iser Memorial Lecture on the infrastructures dominating racial life. Leading with an explication of the mystique of nationalism, which always finds itself predicated on a nostalgia for a supposedly golden age (that is, an age without certain minorities), Bhabha soon came to present some of the infrastructures perpetuating racial violence. Citing ‘screen memories’ as one example, he argued that there is a general perception of veracity attached to flawed media representation of minorities – allegations which then find themselves embedded within the very fabric of society, thereby justifying a host of regressive politics ranging from raising the bar for legal immigration to methods like stop-and-frisk. But how to come to terms with the trauma evoked by the racist and ontological violence perpetrated against the body? A violence – here Bhabha cited W. E. B. Du Bois – which occurs “not everywhere, but anywhere,” indicating a sense of trauma that can scarcely be captured by statistics on racial violence alone. In the tradition of Walter Benjamin, Bhabha answered this question through the method of montage, juxtaposing scenes of death and breath as he tied together the murder of George Floyd with deaths exacted by the Covid 19 pandemic. But outside of academic lectures, he remarked, there also remain fiction, documentary, perhaps even a sense of ontological extension of the body through an Iphone’s video camera – methods, all things considered, which might capture more vividly the anxiety of trauma, and the unpreparedness for violence, than the call for empathy alone. After Bhabha’s illuminating lecture, attendees met for the conference warming, where they deepened discussion on the talk, made new acquaintances, or renewed old ones.

Thursday began with the opening remarks of the conference organizers and the then acting president of GAPS, Cecile Sandten, sketching out the potential for a broad application of the term ‘infrastructure’, before handing over to Elleke Boehmer, Oxford Professor of World Literature in English, who held the second keynote lecture titled ‘Infrastructure, Narrative, and Intervention’, presenting the results of two projects – *Planned Violence: Post/colonial Infrastructures and Literature* and the *Narrative Intervention Project* – both of which ask important questions about the intersection of infrastructure and narrative. How can infrastructure enable worldmaking? How can narrative be used as a form of infrastructure to further ‘self-envisioning’ among young readers in postcolonial societies? Which infrastructural needs – such as schools, teachers, literary markets, etc. – are prerequisites for narrative to successfully intervene? Which narratives become harmful infrastructure that constricts rather than enables? And how can storytelling serve as an effective tool to speak about and deal with trauma, without having to make the subject of said trauma explicit? While presenting and answering these questions, Boehmer led the audience through a plethora of

examples and sources, ranging from Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) to narratives of ghosts, hyenas, and superheroes, and ending with a passionate advocacy for more critical literary and educational infrastructure to be made available in postcolonial societies. Or, in the words of Boehmer herself: "More. More. More."

After a brief coffee break, the first panels were host to varied discussions ranging from Indian to academic infrastructures. Panel 1, which concerned itself with historical perspectives, started off with David Walther, who presented a model that sought to capture the functions of spaces of exchange – stores, trading posts, and markets – in colonial and postcolonial literature. Afterwards, Alicia Haripershad spoke about the role of education in the colonization of Zambia and South Africa between 1880 and 1930, specifically mentioning the various forms of authority (legal and otherwise) afforded to missionaries while also flagging up ways in which heteronormative Victorian ideas, such as the woman at the hearth, found themselves inflected in missionary schools. Likewise drawing on an impressive range of archival sources, Sofie Fingado then presented her work on carceral architecture in the post 9/11 era, arguing that the dehumanization of prisoners at Abu Graib was by no means an exceptional or isolated case. Indeed, Fingado proved through a complex web of relations reaching from Abu Graib to Guantanamo Bay, Miami, Lenawee County, and even the UK, that carceral architecture has become so refined over time that the architects of prison complexes are flown across the world to erect replicas of cell complexes which have proven efficient for the process of dominating and observing inmates.

During the lunch break, where the University of Konstanz provided a buffet of vegetarian food options, scholars also had the chance to present posters on projects under construction. Here, Lionel Sango provided a linguistic perspective on apologies in Urban Cameroon, Nadine Ellinger sought to interrogate the dichotomy of the good/bad mother dyad, focusing on the maternal voice found in Adébáyò's *Stay with Me* (2017), and Julia Ditter presented the early stages of a project investigating the representations of energy infrastructure in 19th century periodicals, arguing that much of our contemporary understanding of said infrastructure is rooted in such analyses.

Well-fed and ready for more input, attendees resumed with the exchange of ideas concerning the intersection of infrastructure with narrative, ecology, architecture, sound, borders, and hydropower. It came as an unwelcome surprise that panel 7, intending to deal with ecological violations in Africa, could not take place due to visa problems encountered by two of our colleagues. Their work on Kenyan literature would have certainly proven illuminating, and their being unable to attend provides a sad (and wholly unnecessary) commentary on the abject state of visa infrastructure itself. In panel 8, colleagues from Britain dealt in more detail with Indian architecture and the idea of home, as Zehra Kazmi spoke to the Hindu-Muslim spatial intimacy found in the ruins of Lucknow, showing the interactions of tenants and landlord in the ruinous haveli of the movie *Gulabo Sitabo* (2020). Continuing with an analysis of the haveli in this well-curated panel, Sheelalipi Sahana then presented a paper on the gendered nature of the haveli courtyard, which finds itself imbricated in a panoptical interplay of vision and power, and to which the character Laila in Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) provides a counter-narrative by recreating haveli traditions on the protagonist's own terms. Concluding the panel, Fatima Z. Naveed highlighted the narratives of women writers in the predominantly male Progressive Writer's Association (PWA). Specifically, she talked about the large number of women who found themselves abducted during Partition, and how Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (1951) illustrates the idea of home-as-prison.

The last round of panels on Thursday showed once more a broad application of the term infrastructure, discussing issues as varied as public transport, language, methodology, and indigenous infrastructures. On panel 17, dealing with energy infrastructure, Jochen Monstadt presented on the heterogeneous ways in which the Tanzanian city Dar-es-Salaam has structured its energy grid, ranging from premium services and conventional grids to individual solutions and a preponderance of illegal solutions in rich (walled) neighborhoods and compounds. In particular Monstadt argued that one ought to recognize that the Western ideal of a networked and homogenous city grid is incompatible with the hybrid reality found in many African cities. Afterwards, Michael Rubenstein advanced the argument that even without direct references to petroleum, many texts can be considered petro-fiction, as the legacy of oil buttresses all later conceptual ideas of energy. Specifically, Rubenstein provided an array of images picturing individuals within pipelines to support his point that it is impossible to adequately look at a medium through itself (here: pipelines). Bringing the panel to a close, Jennifer Wenzel then considered the narrative grammar of infrastructure, asking whether infrastructure is in fact transitive or intransitive, and if indeed it is the former, where precisely that agency can be located. Here, as elsewhere concerned with infrastructure, was stressed the dyad of visibility/invisibility, as well as the question of access.

In the evening, Peter Marsden presided over the award ceremony, detailing with humor and panache his fraught way to Konstanz, his initial reaction upon glimpsing the university's brutalist architecture, and the development of reform universities in general, before presenting the Graduate Award to Lena Amberge for her astute analysis of emotional responses to climate problems in her project "Worlds of Loss: Absence and Grief in Australian Climate Fiction". The Recognition Award went to Katharina Anna Maria Krumpeck for her thesis "Resisting monophony: Collectively plaiting together voices as decolonising Oceanic feminist strategy in four Wan Smolbag plays", which fused linguistics with literary and cultural studies in an analysis of four Oceanic plays. The ceremony was followed by a superb appearance from Australian author Tara June Winch, who read from her latest published work *The Yield* (2019) – an emotional performance to which only one conclusion could be reached, namely that it was almost criminal for Winch to have abstained from such readings for a lengthy period of time. Indeed, as one left the venue afterwards, the impression became near unavoidable that there could have scarcely been a better end to this densely-packed day.

Friday morning saw colleagues ascend to the university grounds for a variety of panels once more, ranging from urban configurations to migration, the environment, postcolonial Britain, and the publishing industry. In panel 22 – "Genre and/as Infrastructure" – Anki Mukherjee presented on the ways in which Anappara's *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* (2020) showed slum residents' struggle against state forces, in particular how that struggle is encapsulated in a politics of stealth (e.g. the avoidance of eviction) and a sense of narrative agency. Attaching itself perfectly to Elleke Boehmer's prior use of the idea of the "envisioned self" – originally employed by Steve Biko – Professor Mukherjee's point on narrative agency is illustrated via the creativity of *Djinn Patrol's* young protagonist, who imagines himself to be a detective, thus becoming invincible in the face of the depredations suffered in the slums. Afterwards, Svetlana Seibel considered the options a utilization of Attic tragedy opens up in contemporary discussions on indigenous justice, such as questions about ancestral remains, ownership rights, and museums. In particular, Seibel considered the complex and ambivalent nature of Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 B.C.), and how those aspects find themselves reflected in the indigenous reinterpretation of Piatote's *Antikoni* (2019). Concluding the panel, Katrijn van den Bossche presented her work on Natasha Brown's *Assembly* (2021), considering it an example

of an anti-novel which imitates the conventional scheme of meritocratic social mobility narratives while simultaneously subverting such an easy categorization through a mode of detachment and non-engagement.

With the first round of panels on Friday coming to a close, colleagues moved to a hybrid event fusing scholarly presentation with theatrical performance. In the capable hands of Mandla Mbothwe and Mark Fleischman from the Magnet Theatre, South Africa, attendees were led through a series of participatory acts that saw them discard their shoes, store and exchange dreams, and become involved in a ceremonial proceeding capable of inducing, in the words of the presenters, “intense spiritual stimulation.” The initial performance having set the mood, the presenters then delineated the history of South African theatre before situating their own practice more closely, describing it as being based on sensory impressions (especially odors as opposed to typical modes of pictorial representation), a circular staging involving the viewership, and a sense of orality and improvisation which proceeds according to a rough script but nevertheless enables actors to spawn their own narrative strands, expressing their individual histories. This was then further illustrated through a rendition of *Antigone*. After the performance, the University of Konstanz provided another superb lunch, as well as a didactics table chaired by Roman Bartosch.

The panels following lunch dealt with museums, nuclear infrastructure, infrastructural violence, and works under construction, highlighting the conjunction of women and postcolonial infrastructure. Panel 26 – “Infrastructures and Migrants” saw Silke Stroh present on the transmigrational movements of the Normanists from Scotland to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, providing an insight into the deep intertextual web capturing the literary and cultural history of said community. Afterwards, Ursula Kluwick explicated the divergent roles of European beaches for tourists and migrants, arguing that beach infrastructure constitutes the “locus classicus” of identity formation. Delineating vacation and fugitive spaces, and considering them incompatible but coexisting, Kluwick then took recourse to the dyad of visibility and invisibility, arguing that the latter becomes impossible for migrants on the beach.

After a coffee break, colleagues could choose between a city tour of Konstanz, organized by Kirsten Mahlke, or attending the general assembly of GAPS members, which took up the majority of the remaining day and dealt, among other things, with the election of a new board and other pressing concerns. The particulars can be read in the assembly protocol, provided by Michelle Stork. After the assembly, members congregated at the Terracotta for the conference dinner, where attendees could indulge themselves in a delicious spread of vegan and vegetarian food options as well as deserts. Discussion flowed freely and in convivial fashion, and rumors have it that some attendees migrated to other bars once the Terracotta closed its doors later on, continuing the jovial get-together far into the night.

The final day of the conference started with another round of panels, illuminating questions concerning cityscapes, the tourism industries, diaspora, and digital infrastructures. Panel 32 – “Sickness and Health” – began with the work of Annabell Fender, who talked about the governmental reaction to varroa mites in Australia, flagging up the ambivalence inherent to the government’s programs of “care”, which protects infected bees by killing them through a scheme of border control and exclusion. In particular, Fender stressed the economic pressures which ultimately configure the governmental response not as an “infrastructure of care,” but rather as a “care for infrastructure.” Marie Rose Arong then presented on the healthcare crisis in the Philippines, arguing that, as labor

migration to the US and other Western nations become the norm, the education and subsequent exportation of health care workers has become an industrial enterprise. This also finds itself reflected in literature, exacerbating the problem as alternatives to such labor migration increasingly fall out of consideration. The panel ended with Roman Bartosch, who talked about infrastructural collapse in pandemic fiction, elaborating on his collaboration with Julia Hoydis and the intersection of literary scholarship and didactics. In particular, he advocated for a stronger interdisciplinary interleaving, while also pointing out that narratives, contrary to conventional assumptions, often only model social behavior rather than being able to change it.

Finally, the annual GAPS conference came to a close with the keynote lecture of Manu Karuka, assistant professor of American Studies at Barnard College, New York. Karuka opened his lecture on the dyad of the jungle and the garden with a consideration of how those terms have been applied historically when describing Europe and so called Third World countries. As he navigated the various examples, it quickly became clear how deeply embedded the idea of the Other living in 'the jungle' (chaotic, savage, dangerous, to be exploited, etc.) has become in general parlance. Counterposed to this, Karuka then elaborated on the idea of the European garden (ostensibly a place to be protected against invasion). Having thus set out the supposed binary, he then provided multiple examples of cross-pollination. For one, he referenced the colonial British opium trade which operated under the specter of 'free trade' while forcing a shift from sustenance farming to monocultural poppy production. Secondly, he dealt in more detail with Western pharmaceutical companies which consider rainforests to be a "New El Dorado" and yet, on the basis of a flawed intellectual property system, perpetuate a fundamental asymmetry of power in issues of healthcare, exemplified by the hoarding and unequal distribution of Covid 19 vaccinations. Through all of Karuka's explanations was threaded the question which he posed at the very beginning of the lecture: Who owns the jungle? After Karuka's impressive talk, the conference organizers from the University of Konstanz, and the (now) former president of GAPS, held the closing remarks, wishing all travelers well on their way home after a couple of long days full of scholarship and illuminating talks.