

Conference Report
**"Contested Communities: Communication,
Narration, Imagination"**
GNEL/ASNEL conference
University of Bayreuth, 13-16 May 2010

The world is a ghetto and rap is its music. This could be one of many conclusions of the 21st Annual GNEL/ASNEL conference in Bayreuth, which invited speakers from all over the world trying to map, explore and (re)think "the concept of community in postcolonial contexts" (Call for Papers). With its great undertaking to bring together several disciplines, such as linguistics, literary and cultural studies, theatre and music, the conference had been taking its title – in an almost performative way – seriously by creating a very lively, productive and intellectual challenging community contesting itself. Not only the keynote speakers Carolyn J. Cooper (from UWI Mona, Jamaica), Ranka Primorac (University Southampton, UK) and Robert J. C. Young (NYU, USA) stood programmatically for (theoretically) international perspectives, but also the multifaceted range of contributions 'travelled' around the globe covering Africa, Canada, Europe and India.

To cope with the multiculturalism that goes along with the topic, the program accommodated an extremely wide range of topics, with panel headings ranging from "The Black Atlantic", "Communities and Nation", "Postcolonial Drama", "Literary and Linguistic Representation of Diaspora", "Language, Style and Belonging in Music" and "Fictions of the City" to name but a few. For a conference audience the selection might have been (nearly) too wide to cope with, but at the same time this very width represented the difficulty to contain the term 'community' within clear-cut boundaries. Thus, while the concept was explored in the writing of the 'usual suspects' among postcolonial writers such as Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali who figured in several talks, other presentations led their audience to discover largely unnoticed literary and cinematic works, such as Roseanne Liang's *Take 3*, or, as in the case of a presentation on Al-Jazeera's documentaries on 9/11, pushed the audience's curiosity clearly beyond purely academic boundaries. These twists and revelations clearly demonstrated that the notion of 'community' is not only a highly interdisciplinary one, but also promotes critical thinking outside the common categories of postcolonial studies.

As keynote speaker Robert Young pointed out, going back to the idea of the 'common', community can be regarded as a shared space in which people participate. Created through boundaries, communities are very fragile existences, marked by a certain temporality, undergoing changes and being always threatened by dissolving. "What is contested?" asked Young and "how useful is the concept of community in post-colonialism?". From our point of view it is a very productive one, because it shows that communities in post-colonial times

come into existence (often in traumatic moments) by disruption, detecting space as an effect of displacement and translating the *belonging to* space into a *longing for* space. At the same time, the conference theme led to broad discussions of Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities', since it suggests fruitful investigation into the processes of communication, narration and imagination, which lie at the very heart of community formation.

A highlight of a different kind was once again the leap from the strictly academic sphere into the field of creative writing. Thus, the reading by Abdulrazak Gurnah at the Iwalewa-Haus, which marked the official opening of the conference, was a huge success, to judge even from the concentrated atmosphere among the audience and the seemingly never-ending line of listeners on chairs slowly making their way from the corridor into the main hall. Likewise, the other readings, by Shani Mootoo, Oladipo Agboulaje, Mbuh Tenu Mbuh and Rudolph Bader opened up a productive exchange between academic and non-academic writers. Especially the lunch readings offered a welcome break in the otherwise tightly knit conference schedule.

Talking of special events: besides the conference reception and dinner, the guided tours were great leisure activities. While one group set out to explore the historical city center and the most important sights of Bayreuth, another ventured into the subterranean depths of the Aktien Brewery and enjoyed not only a highly entertaining and enlightening tour through a chapter of brewing history, but also some delicious products of the same brewery, the bottles of which were subsequently exported as souvenirs around the globe.

All in all, the academic, creative and recreative programmes complemented each other very well and did not let the conference be overcast either by the ash cloud, which caused numerous participants to cancel their journeys, or the Bayreuth weather, which effectively contributed to the formation of rain-shelter communities.

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