

## Conference Report

The 28<sup>th</sup> GAPS Annual Conference (May 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>) was hosted by the Department of English, American and Celtic Studies of the University of Bonn. To discuss the topic of this year's conference, "Representing Poverty and Precarity in the Postcolonial World", the organizing committee had assembled an impressive three-days programme, where the subject has been analysed with perspectives from South Asia, Australia, Latin America, Nigeria and North America - and with a particular attention to how questions poverty and subalternity intersect with issues of gender, class and race. As Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp pointed out in her welcoming address on Thursday morning, the gap between rich and poor has been widening by the day in the past fifteen years and, in parallel, a growing number of works (fictional and not) has been focusing on the representation of poverty and precarity. Discussing the politics of these representations is indeed a timely challenge for postcolonial scholars, who during the conference have addressed in particular the ethics and aesthetics of re-presenting disenfranchised people.

On the first day of the conference, two keynote lectures opened and closed the sessions. In the morning, Neil Lazarus offered a compelling analysis of literary works which, built around the countryside-to-town theme, rather than following the lives of countrymen moving to the city focus on the lives of those who stay put and keep working in farms and in the fields. By focusing on the popular idea of the countryside as a place outside modern history and on questions of representation, voice and ideology (who speaks for whom? In what way?), Lazarus put these works in dialogue with postcolonial studies, offering a fitting introduction to the panels that followed, which tackled these questions in relation to the condition of refugees and asylum seekers and/or focused on specific regions such as Australia and North America. In the afternoon session, panellists carried out their analysis of representations of poverty and precarity in literature and films with panels dedicated to specific regions (Latin America, Nigeria, South Asia) and themes (from gender and subalternity to violence and crime). As it happens at conferences, one has to face the arduous challenge of choosing which panels to attend, thus missing out on other equally interesting talks. In my case, apart from the panel on South Asia where I was presenting my own paper, I decided to attend the one on violence and crime. Notwithstanding the fact that papers addressed the topic from different angles, they all blended in very well and promoted a stimulating discussion which referred to and simultaneously expanded on Judith Butler's work on precarity (a reference which inevitably recurred throughout the conference). Sue Kossew's paper, which analysed a number of Australian women's texts tackling domestic violence, addressed the question of precarity in terms of vulnerability and interdependency; Megan Jones's presentation, which addressed the representation of poverty and junk in Johannesburg and Mumbai, provided an interesting analysis of how the representation of those people whose lives depend on the recycling of junk, often portrayed as "disposable humans" (thus leading to the question, going back to Butler, of who is entitled to a "good life" and who is not), can open up spaces of subversion and resistance. Finally, Sabine Binder's paper discussed South African crime fiction that centres on the female victim, arguing for creativity as a way to challenge the precarity that comes with violence.

The keynote speech that closed the first day of the conference, delivered by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, virtually carried on the discussion on violence, interdependency and vulnerability, for it offered a reflection on the human condition and the classification of human beings. In particular, Owuor discussed the meaning of being human and the violence of being excluded, and of excluding someone, from the realm of humanity from a social, cultural and economic perspective.

Friday morning opened with the keynote speech from Maria Eisenmann, who made a case for blending EFL teaching with global concerns like poverty and precarity. Eisenmann proposed that teaching English can be an opportunity for raising political awareness and nurturing social responsibility. By focusing on the commonalities between young adult literature and postcolonial literature (both deal with questions of identity and belonging, just to name two), she suggested that bringing postcolonial texts into the classroom enhances transcultural learning and offers the possibility to discuss issues such as global inequalities, precarity,

poverty, xenophobia and racism. Apart from a theoretical discussion of her thesis, Eisenmann also proposed a series of activities that could be done with students before, during and after the reading of these texts, thus providing some practical guidance on how to run a class that would combine EFL teaching with postcolonial studies.

For those who were not attending the teachers' workshop, the day continued with a number of interesting panels, which spanned from questions of gender and subalternity to language politics, media and the environment. I attended the panel on aesthetics, media and performance, where the notion of precarity was effectively unpacked by the first speaker, Siegliende Lemke, who then proceeded with a discussion of the pivotal role that arts can play in promoting social consciousness about precarity. Kai Wiegandt proposed a reflection on the postcolonial graphic novel by focusing on the work of the Indian graphic novelists Sarnath Banerjee, whose work engages with issues such as the commodification of water and land. This was the second talk I attended on the graphic novel – the other one was delivered the previous day by Marianna Ferrara, in the South Asia panel – and given the response of the audience I would not be surprised to see more of them in the future. The panel closed with Divya Diwedi's paper on precarity and postcoloniality, which provided a compelling comparative analysis of different texts, from O. V. Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri*, to Ravish Kumar's *Ishq Mein Shahar Hona* to Dave Eggers' *The Circle*.

The second day of the conference closed with Cristopher Harts' keynote speech, entitled "Discourses of Disorder: Representations of Riots, Strikes and Protests". In his paper, Hart provided a comparative analysis of the ideology which informed the representation of the 1984-1985 Miners Strikes and of the 2011 London Riots in the British press. By providing an analysis of especially right-wing newspapers, Hart argued that the language used to frame both events was deliberately used with the purpose of legitimising the government's politics (could we talk of newspapers as Ideological State Apparatuses?) leaving little space to critical debate. He also discussed the results of empirical online-research conducted to evaluate the impact of these representations on their readers, which confirmed his hypothesis. The second day closed with the conference dinner, which gave us the possibility to reconnect with old friends and find new ones, in a very warm and welcoming atmosphere.

Saturday morning, the last day of the conference, began with another great keynote speech delivered by E.E. Sule, who spoke of African writers and argued that writers should be at the forefront of the political fight for social change. Sule argued that the African writer as activist should promote social change from within, and that s/he should challenge the (still) dominant exoticisation of Africa for western readers. Following the keynote, I attended the panel on India, which was opened by Nilufer Bharucha's analysis of the ethics of the representation of poverty in Indian literature in English, and the questions of authenticity they often raise. She provided in particular an insightful analysis of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (one of my favourite novels ever!) and of its representation of precarity, one that cuts across caste, gender and class. The second paper, delivered by

Sridhar Rajeswaran, offered an analysis of the representation of poverty in Indian postcolonial cinema from independence (the golden years of Indian cinema, with filmmakers such as Mehboob Khan, Bimal Roy and Raj Kapoor) up until the present day. The paper traced the social and economic roots of these representations, and analysed the “aesthetic of the abject” that emerged from them. This theme was then also discussed also by Rashmi Varma who explored the representation of poverty in Indian public culture, arguing that a failure in representing the poor is a failure in democracy. The paper also questioned the categories of “poor” and “subaltern” and their current (de)politicisation.

Finally, the conference closed with a series of beautiful readings offered by Yvonne Adhiambo, Susan Kiguli and E.E. Sule. I would not do justice in attempting to capture the words of these writers, and I already know that I haven’t done justice to the wonderful papers I had the pleasure to attend (my apologies for that). It was the first time I attended a GAPS conference and it has been a greatly informative experience, also characterised by openness for debate and discussion, which is of course all the more crucial given the times we are living in. So, to conclude, I am grateful to the organisers for putting up such a great conference and for choosing such a timely topic. I can’t wait to see what comes up next.

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