

## Conference Report

The topic of this year's GAPS conference, held in Bonn, was important and timely. "Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World" turned the critical attention to some of the most pressing issues in the global South today; issues that had nevertheless been relatively underrepresented in postcolonial studies for some time. The event was splendidly organised – from what might easily have been the best coffee bar at a conference to brown-bag-poetry-reading-lunches and wonderful speakers – by Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, Marion Gymnich, Klaus P. Schneider, Uwe Küchler, and a well-organised and strikingly cheerful team. With panels on "Representing Refugees", "Politics and Precarity", "Postcolonial Remembering", "Gender and Subalternity", "Violence and Crime", "Aesthetics, Media and Performance" and "Environment" (amongst several regional focus areas) as well as a workshop on "Teaching Poverty and Precarity", the conference considered its topic through different prisms. The resulting picture was so multifaceted that we can only capture parts of it here. Instead of presenting a chronology of events we focus on some recurring themes and trace them in selected papers.

Keynote addresses are nominally the highlights of conferences, but they are also often its most underwhelming talks. In Bonn, none of the keynotes failed to live up to expectations, and two of them we found positively overwhelming. Neil Lazarus's talk "Stone upon Stone: Land, Labour and Consciousness in World-Literary Perspective" and novelist Yvonne Owuor's "Returning the Gaze: Phantoms in the Mirror (*or, Outsourcing Misery as a Process of 'Post'coloniality*)" must have kept echoing in the minds of anyone who heard them.

Lazarus offered nothing less than a revision of what we call Modernism. Instead of premising Modernism on literary techniques such as stream of consciousness, the decline of the omniscient narrator or a particular treatment of metaphor, Lazarus proposed reading modernist texts concerned with hunger *literally* rather than as existential metaphors.

Straddling continents and languages, Lazarus demonstrated the relative underrepresentation of rural life vis-à-vis the city in modern literature, and pointed out critics' relative lack of interest in the literary representation of the rural in modern literature – despite the fact that the countryside pushes people towards the city as much as the city pulls them. A number of problems beset the representation of the rural according to Lazarus. The dominant popular imaginary – and critical imaginary – of the rural is one of an unchanging area outside the realm of production that is destined to disappear: the peasant ploughs just as the birds sing. In fact, the countryside is just as much the field where the wheels of capitalism change the earth which people tread. Nothing illustrates this fact better than novels concerned with hunger in the countryside: a literature that presents local effects of capitalism as effects of the capitalist world system and thus deserves a label much in use these days: 'world literature'.

What made Lazarus' talk so intriguing was its successful combination of close reading with Marxist theory of capitalism and globalization. This allowed for the intriguing re-definitions of modernism and 'world literature' and a re-appreciation of African novels such as Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. To its critic Chinua Achebe, Armah's novel seemed formally to imitate a Eurocentric understanding of the genre. In fact, Lazarus argued, the novel belongs with a 'world literary', transnational modernism concerned with hunger and poverty as effects of the capitalist world system. As he brought different literatures into conversation, Lazarus impressively illustrated the productiveness of a comparative approach, which, despite an increasing interest in aspects of transculturality, seems rare within the traditional disciplines.

If there is a limitation to the model of world literature proposed by Lazarus, it is the extent to which literature is seen as a reflection of the material conditions and class structures of society. In Lazarus's account of narratives about peasants, the literary portrayal is *always* only representative of a certain class's thoughts about peasants, never of the peasants themselves. Within its theoretical framework, Lazarus's arguments were so compelling and coherent that it was tempting to buy the picture with the frame. What is more, its density and pace were as energizing as you could wish for an opening keynote. And it did strike the keynote for many of the papers that were to follow.

In one of the first panels, Caroline Kögler echoed Lazarus's opposition of the rural and the urban, highlighting the significance of 'urbanity' – albeit in a rather different context – as a highly pertinent marker in current discourses about migration. Frequently used synonymously with 'modernity' or even 'humanity', the urban can be seen to function as a flexible label that works as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. Unlike the keynote by Lazarus, this paper did not so much range across continents as focus on Europe and the anxiety caused by migrants that laid claim to recognition by performing urbanity in the infamous refugee camp in Calais. The very name of that camp – "The Jungle" – and a widespread refusal on the part of the police and the media to recognise or allow the construction of urban structures are reminders of the significance of 'urbanity' as a concept that is used to deny people the right of citizenship, or indeed, human rights.

Carly McLaughlin's paper in the same panel interestingly made a similar point about notions of childhood. Recalling changes in UK legislation that granted special rights to child asylum seekers and the massive media coverage that accompanied the arrival of the first groups in Britain, it demonstrated how childhood could be redefined under the pressure of anti-immigration anxiety. McLaughlin showed how public sympathy and the right for special protection can be withdrawn from children whose bodies, marked by the hardships endured in their home countries or on their ways to Europe, may not conform to our expectations of childhood. The chilling question lurking behind such debates was brought home by a brief discussion of the controversial photograph in which Ai Weiwei poses as the boy Alan Kurdi, who was found dead on the coast of Turkey and whose picture has become emblematic for refugees' desperate attempts to reach European shores. The paper ultimately stimulated enquiries into an iconography of migration and the economy of sympathy, empathy, and antipathy; into how media coverage affects notions of childhood and how images of children can be framed and reframed in the media to influence a public economy of sympathy. Where do we draw the line between children's rights and human rights? Similar questions were addressed by Cecile Sandten's paper about 'asylum accounts' that seek to revise hegemonic media representations – and they powerfully resonated with the later keynote by Yvonne Owuor.

Another panel focusing on Europe and the relation between Brexit and British attitudes towards migration approached related issues from the perspective of linguistic analysis. The papers by Andreas Musolff and Karin Ebelin both grappled with ways to analyse patterns in contemporary discourses about migration. Musolff essentially illustrated the difficulties of quantitative analysis to arrive at relevant heuristic items (in this case a comparison of metaphors that frequently feature in debates about immigration), whereas Ebeling sought to trace the relation between poverty, immigration, and the support for a Brexit in recent political speeches.

A reconsideration of the critical theory and its vocabulary was at the centre of another panel. Sieglinde Lemke offered a semantic analysis of the concepts of the precariat, precarity and precariousness, and presented her own ideas on precarity as a form of consciousness, and on precarious aesthetics as a politics of representation located between the Scylla of exoticism and voyeurism and the Charybdis of didacticism. Divya Dwivedi asked why we have postcolonialism but not precarism, and pointed out postcolonial theory's inability to account for precarity. She illustrated her claims by reference to the political cartoonist O.V. Vijayan's critique of the 'poverty line' as a form of sanitized language in neoliberal India. Dwivedi cited Simon During's suggestion that we should shift our perspective from the subaltern to precarity, as did other presenters. Malcolm Sen, for instance, referenced this idea in his talk on sovereignty and the subaltern, adding an ecocritical dimension to the topic by enquiring into the impact of climate change and its relation to precarity and the nation state.

Yvonne Owuor's keynote did not conclude the conference, but left us, and apparently other listeners, asking how to go on after such eloquence and such vivid

illustrations of cruelty and neglect. The Kenyan novelist (*Dust*) and Winner of the Caine Prize had already announced that she would play the role of an Old Testament prophetess in her keynote. Owuor's was an angry accusation of Western colonialism that has not stopped with the 'liberation' of the colonies. Her critique was reminiscent of Walter Mignolo's critique of Western modernity, but told in its own affecting voice and accompanied by slides that documented instances of cruelty that the sanitized language of 'precarity' and 'developing countries' covers.

Owuor's talk oscillated between horrifying particulars from the ongoing history of Western colonialism and archetypal narratives of enslavement, humiliation and murder. The Biblical story of Job, in which friends accuse the disease-stricken Job of being responsible for his own misery, illustrated the West's cynical berating of Africa. Owuor's talk has lingered in our minds because it left it to the audience to figure out whether and how the stranglehold of Western epistemologies producing and 'justifying' violence and oppression can be overcome; whether there is a foothold for political action against the injustice her slides illustrated, or whether hers was a theological rather than political talk, illustrating our irredeemable fallenness – Since when, exactly? How, exactly? – that manifests itself in starving children, murder and indifference to both. And who was the 'we' that Owuor addressed throughout her talk? Leaving the question open, she forced her audience to consider themselves. At one point, she defined 'us' as 'the advantaged'; yet her performance left ample room for reconsidering that question again and again as it confronted 'us' with a slideshow of recent human failings. At the end of her talk, she addressed the audience as her "fellow humans".

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