

**“Postcolonial Studies Across the Disciplines”: A Report on the 22nd Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of New Literatures in English (ASNEL/GNEL) at Leibniz University, Hanover, June 2-4, 2011**

Its transnational and interdisciplinary approach has confronted postcolonial studies with the task of defining boundaries from the very beginning—a task that has shaped the discipline’s self-conception and its methodological foundations to a remarkable extent. The boundaries in question were not just national and geographical ones: when postcoloniality began and whether it has ended are matters of ongoing debate, as is the relation of postcolonial studies to neighboring disciplines such as literary studies, cultural studies, history, and sociology. This last aspect can hardly be dissociated from the others: any reflection on disciplinary boundaries will carry implicit or explicit assumptions about the time and space of the postcolonial. In recent years many have suggested to extend that time and space as far as possible—that is, to think of postcolonial studies as a set of methods for studying any society of any period, rather than as a delimited field of studies. If time and space lose their definitory value, the question of disciplinary boundaries (and transgressions) is bound to take center stage in the self-definition and self-reflection of postcolonial studies.

The 2011 ASNEL/GNEL conference took its thematic cue from these developments. “Postcolonial Studies Across the Disciplines” was an occasion for methodological reflection but also for questioning, extending, and redrawing the boundaries of the organization’s pursuits. Three keynote speakers from three different countries and disciplines addressed postcolonial concerns from various angles: Sabine Broeck, an Americanist, demanded that postcolonial studies posit enslavement as a central (if unacknowledged) aspect of modern Western sociality; Tim Watson charted the emerging discipline of Atlantic Studies through the lens of the historiography of slave revolts; and Jessica Hemmings from the Edinburgh College of Art offered reflections on textile and textual interweavings in the postcolonial realm. The panel speakers, too, came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Beside the ‘core’ program of the New English Literatures, there were papers on British and American literature, on the history, geography, and linguistics of postcolonial countries and regions, on religion, music, politics, and translation. Following the very postcolonial assumption that the margins often reveal more about a society (or, in this case, about an association) than the center, and for the very practical reason that other reports from this conference are likely to focus on the keynotes and readings, in the remainder of this report I will summarize not the keynotes but a selection of panel papers. I am not implying that these were the ‘best’ papers—a humanly impossible claim given that there were parallel panels—but I do think the summaries give a sense of the many-faceted, necessarily arbitrary but always enlightening experience that the conference offered for the individual participant.

The very first panel focused on postcolonial readings of British and American literature. Characteristic for the self-reflexive rigor of the conference, it opened with a problematization of such readings: Jochen Petzold made a convincing and timely case against anachronistic interpretations of John Gay’s *Polly* as an anti-slavery piece. Postcolonial critics, he argued, are too eager to read Macheath as an anti-colonial hero, as one who “chooses the politically marginal position,” merely because he becomes a pirate and appears in blackface. He pointed out that the blackface scene is a joke—a disguise to escape the ladies’ attentions—and that the play in general is much less about colonialism than it is about metropolitan politics and society. Rather than a fighter against colonialism, Macheath emerged from Petzold’s reading as a postcolonial antihero: instead of confronting the system outright he (mis)functions as a rogue within it and unwittingly exposes some of its internal contradictions. (I was reminded of the protagonist of Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*.) In the next paper, Barbara Buchenau examined early American captivity narratives through a

postcolonial lens. It soon became clear that the unusual subject matter necessitated a widening of that lens. For one thing, American slavery existed in forms other than the classic middle-passage variant: indentured and forced labor from India was in many ways comparable to African slavery, and Native American captivity and enslavement, the focus of the paper, was a considerable factor in early American history as well. The second extension suggested by the paper was methodological: it demonstrated that strategies like mimicry could also be found among European captives, for example when Catholic missionaries who had undergone torture by natives cast themselves in the role of the martyr or saint.

The (trans)disciplinary implications of such extensions were addressed by Claudia Perner in an Americanists' panel later that day. Pointedly titled "Hijacking the Postcolonial?" her paper discussed the recent transnational turn in American studies (incidentally, the topic of the annual German Association of American Studies conference two weeks later) and the opportunities and risks it entails for postcolonial studies. On the one hand, this turn has been centrally motivated by concerns and methods introduced by postcolonial studies, and thus promises opportunities for cooperation and convergence between the two fields. On the other hand, many postcolonial theorists have warned that the specific concerns of economically and geographically disadvantaged peoples in the global South might lose scholarly attention and political edge if they are equated with and dissolved into the American situation. That such a cross-disciplinary approach can be made productive in American studies, at least, became clear in Carl Plasa's paper the following morning. Plasa identified a broad range of intertexts of various cultural and geographical origins in Robert Hayden's poem "The Middle Passage" and used postcolonial concepts and topics to reflect on the links between the poem's "hybridized textuality" and its political impact both in the United States and on the slavery debate in general.

The theoretical potential of such integrative approaches for postcolonial studies itself was demonstrated by Katja Sarkowsky's paper in one of the concluding panels of the conference. Titled "Reconceptualizing Participation: Postcolonialism and Cultural Citizenship," it interrogated from a postcolonial perspective the question of a politically and culturally committed literature. Rather than measure literature by a fixed political agenda, it suggested, we should think of the fictional text as a medium for participation in and reflection on forms of cultural belonging. In its attempt to conceptualize a postcolonial *littérature engagée* without neglecting the specificity and autonomy of literary expression, it addressed a concern palpable in many other papers and discussions during the three days at Hanover. Indeed, as a first-time attendant of the annual conference it seemed to me that this continual attention to questions of literary form—an aspect often shoved aside in politically motivated criticism—is one of ASNEL/GNEL's distinctive contributions to contemporary postcolonial debate.

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