
**“Postcolonial TranslocatiOns”: 20th Annual GNEL/ASNEL Conference,
University of Münster, Germany, 21-24 May 2009**

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The 20th Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL) took place in Münster from 21–24 May this year and was attended by a total of some 300 delegates from 35 countries. The event was organized with efficiency, enthusiasm and panache by a team from the Chair of English, Postcolonial and Media Studies at the University of Münster. Chairholder Mark Stein, in tandem with lecturers Marga Munkelt, Markus Schmitz and Silke Stroh, was backed up a team of students and administrative staff. The conference featured three keynote speakers and four authors. Around 250 academics had responded to the call for papers; about half the abstracts submitted were ultimately accepted. The conference theme – “Postcolonial TranslocatiOns” – had clearly been a fount of inspiration. The resulting outpourings were channelled into intriguing-sounding sections and sessions, the promise held out by the likes of “Transcultural cityscapes”, “Imagining translocal space”, or “Translocal foods and travelling goods” being more often kept than not.

All of this took place in a highly atmospheric setting, in a historic university city with an undeniably Oxbridge charm, what with all those bikes, all

those cobblestones, all those grave groves and hallowed halls. After registration in the local *Schloß*, the conference adjourned to the seat of the hosting Department, the *Fürstenberghaus*, no less. And as for the inner-city *lake*, that’s a feature neither Ox nor Bridge can boast. Plus, as we apparently say these days – the blazing sunshine helped and the general holiday mood of summer in the city rubbed off onto the conference proceedings.

The inner structure of the conference was satisfyingly tripartite, punctuated as it was by three keynotes and three round tables (one on each full day of the event). The keynotes (in order of ‘sounding’) were delivered by Edward W. Soja (UCLA) on: “Postcolonial spaces and the struggle over geography”; Ien Ang (University of Western Sydney) on: “Intercultural dialogue without guarantees”; and Diana Brydon (University of Manitoba) on “‘Difficult forms of knowing’: Enquiry, injury and translocated relation of postcolonial responsibility”. This triad (of papers, rather than people) offered the gathering a framework of theoretical, almost metaphysical, underpinnings and orientations towards “turns” old and new, spatial and traumatic, without wholly neglecting to pepper the theorems

with actual instances from real life, notably in the case of Ien Ang's down-to-earth, pragmatic examples of how a sorely needed "cosmopolitan multiculturalism" can be cultivated in everyday life.

As for the three round tables, these panels all had something to do with celebration, memorialization and stock-taking: 25 years of *Wasafiri*, 20 years of GNEL / ASNEL, a now-vs.-then look at "The institutionalization of postcolonial studies". Despite the general conclusion that PoCo as an established university subject and/or department is here to stay, it did become apparent that there are cases where it can rapidly disappear off the radar when those who have been teaching it retire from active service. Feelings were somewhat mixed as to whether institutionalization itself might not be a mixed blessing. For many observers the presence at the conference of more than the usual quota of "Old Members" was testimony to the overall success story. This was just as gratifying as the continuing presence and influx of *young* members and *new* members – ASNEL has always justly prided itself on a healthy age spread and it's good to know and see that a generation is indeed there for the torch to be passed on to.

At four, the number of writers present was well below the ASNEL average. Three of them were showcased by the *Wasafiri* round table: "Clearing new spaces", chaired by editor Susheila Nasta. In this context, Bernardine Evaristo (London), Tomáš Zmeškal (Czech Republic), and Samir El-youssef (Palestine) came across convincingly as living evidence of the broad and varied spectrum of

imaginative writing promulgated by this unique journal. The fourth writer at the conference, Sridhar Rajeswaran (India), gave his reading in a lunchtime slot on the Saturday.

In my view, and I was not alone in this, the great cultural highlight of the conference was a performance by a youth theatre group (*Cactus Junges Theater*). No, *not* students, let alone students of English – just young people from the local community who were themselves heavily translocated. No, *not* directed by a member of the English Department but by a freelance theatre person, Barbara Kemmler. *s/wremix* was impressive precisely because it was not academic, not theoretical, not abstract, but "simply" dealt head-on with the central conference issues of translocation, dislocation, displacement, migration and the way these forces impact on human beings. The performance was moving – in various senses of the word, powerful and poignant, treating as it did the very real problems of "*Deutschafrikaner*", i.e. people – in this case, especially *young* people – of African descent living in Germany.

Amid all the stocktaking there is a very real danger of overlooking the future, so let me conclude by noting that there is indeed life after 20 and that the 21st ASNEL conference will be duly held next year, from 13–16 May – at the University of Bayreuth. The conference theme is: "Contested Communities: Communication, Narration, Imagination"; the Convenor is Prof. Susanne Mühleisen (contact: <gnel2010@gmail.com>).