

Conference Reports



“Ideology in Postcolonial Texts and Contexts” 26th Annual GAPS Conference Münster, 14 - 16 May 2015

It was a bit posh meeting in a Schloss. Yet the pressure was on this year’s hosts, the English department of the Westfälische Wilhelms University of Münster, after Potsdam’s efforts the previous year, in the outhouses of the neues Palais. The weather was also a bit on the nice side for spending the public holiday long weekend indoors, but the organisers, Katja Sarkowsky, Mark Stein and their team, made us feel warmly welcome. They also practiced a little strategic propaganda, insinuating we were especially privileged to see the usually grey Münster in the sun, and the technique certainly helped boost numbers for the excellent guided city tours. The 26th annual conference, and the first under the banner of the new name GAPS, was also the first in which the host university’s entire English Department was involved. The chosen topic, “Ideology in Postcolonial Texts and Contexts”, was thus explored from the various angles of Book Studies, TEFL, Linguistics, Variation Linguistics, and American and British Studies. The three-day programme also included the Association’s Annual General Meeting, a teaching workshop, and an impressive number of PhD student presentations. Conference tourism, then, is certainly not for the faint-hearted or sluggish of mind.

The historical and international intersectionality of postcolonial ideology was highlighted right from the conference’s opening, with Mark Stein’s example of the “Rhodes Must Go” activism at the University of Cape Town. This Welcome Address also set the scene for the day’s regional focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, book-ended by Beth le Roux’s keynote lecture on South African crime fiction and the evening reading by guest of honour, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Le Roux’s analysis of apartheid-era censorship of popular crime fiction highlighted the importance of understanding the aesthetic as caught up in politics and ideology, of which for le Roux, issues of justice and morality are significant for writers and critics. In her examples of often seemingly arbitrary censorship, persecution, and exile of South African writers, she demonstrated how politics and ideology are not only abstract, but can be a part of everyday lived reality, often enacted or enforced even on the body. This part of her discussion came to frame my understanding of and response to the conference’s theme of postcolonial ideology. Perhaps I was influenced by last year’s topic of justice (Potsdam 2014), but for me it seems ever more important for postcolonialists to not only observe and describe the trends and patterns in our field’s fiction and theory, but to also be bold enough to take a stand. While it is not too difficult to identify and deconstruct the harms of social and cultural norms (laws and policies as well as informal practices) on the indi-

genous, minorities, women, children, the marginalised and under-represented, as academics we are altogether less willing to take a moral stance: while the writer claims “this is wrong” or “this is unfair”, the critic retreats into the safety of fiction’s dissimulating strategies. I was very much looking forward to engaging with the ethics and responsibilities of postcolonial scholarship over the next three days.

Thursday closed in the beautiful rounded room of the Schloss Aula, with a pick-me-up from an up-beat Pete Marsden presenting the Graduate Ceremony Award and giving us a pep-talk on the health and vivacity of GAPS. Frank Schulze-Engler was uncharacteristically a little tongue tied introducing his literary hero, Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo, whose presence is, indeed, daunting. It would be hard to think of another writer who has made a greater impact on both postcolonial fiction and theory than Ngũgĩ, and I think we all had high expectations of his reading and discussion. Instead of weighty words of wisdom, we were treated to a performance, from a trickster figure who encompassed in storytelling life, theory, and literature. Through reading from and adding digressions to his memoirs, he demonstrated how story creates connectedness of time and place. In one example, a visit from the previous week in Germany joined with a memory from his early childhood in Kenya. For Ngũgĩ, life is narrative, a timely reminder for us scholars to keep the primary text and its motivations firmly at the centre of our academic *raison d’être*.

After Africa’s day on Thursday, Canada took up the baton on Friday, with a keynote lecture by Mavis Reimer and lunchtime reading by Larissa Lai. Although Reimer’s paper was billed as the TEFL keynote, her presentation was relevant not only to future teachers but also demonstrated significant knowledge of book studies and postcolonial literary and cultural studies. It was an excellent example of how to handle a large corpus of writing with attention to both close and distant reading. Her work on Canadian Young-Adult fiction examined the representation of the child and the construction of the nation through analysis of child homelessness. The topic was highly relevant to our rethinking of the parameters and content of the postcolonial domain, which was reflected in the broad range of questions and animated discussion that followed her talk. Many of us came away from the session with a list of new novels to read from her extensive collection.

The highlight of the parallel sessions, which were all dense and admirably put together by the organising team, was the tea breaks in between, when there was time to discuss the papers and hear about those we unfortunately missed. The true sign of a successful conference might best be measured by the amount of tea and coffee consumed and the general hubbub of the break room. It was good to see so many Münster English Department students in attendance, and for many it was their first conference experience. It is also a credit to GAPS that so many members came along without giving presentations, a show of support and collegial friendship often sadly missing today as the workloads and pressure on academics continue to increase. Many of the newcomers and imports, including from the UK, Ireland, Cyprus, Czech Republic, India, Nigeria and the USA, didn’t need to sound quite so surprised when expressing their delight at finding such an active

and interesting postcolonial studies group in Germany. By its very nature, postcolonial studies is a discipline that fosters building bridges, even more so than Eurovision, and Münster again proved the need for an international group such as GAPS outside of the US and UK “centres” of English and postcolonial literary studies.

I have now attended the last three GNEL/GAPS conferences and one post-graduate conference. Clearly the association is interested in exploring cutting-edge, current and important global debates, as evident in the conference themes; “Re-Inventing the Postcolonial” (Chemnitz 2013), “Postcolonial Justice” (Potsdam 2014), and this year’s critique of ideology. A non-conformist bent is also implied in the upside-down “A” of the new GAPS logo, an inversion that would, in my opinion, suit a little more subversion. While I left this conference feeling well supported and encouraged by my peers, I would have liked to see more vigorous debate, even contestation and argument. Within the safety and security of the association’s conviviality, the annual conference is exactly the right place to go out on a limb and experiment with more out-there ideas. This year’s theme offered an opportunity to tackle head-on some difficult contradictions and impasses that lie at the heart of postcolonial ideology, methodology, and practice. Perhaps next year we’ll throw away our scripts, roll up our sleeves, and get down to the business of arguing those gaps.

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**“Ideology in Postcolonial Texts and Contexts”
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On a sunny Thursday in the middle of May scholars from all over the world came together in Münster, a small town in the northwest of Germany especially known for the plenitude of bicycles roaming its streets, to enjoy a three day conference on the topic of “Ideology in Postcolonial Texts and Contexts.” When the participants arrived at the university castle that morning and walked into the foyer, they were met with familiar and soon to be familiar faces full of excitement. In her function as head of department of the English Seminar at the University of Münster and president of GAPS, Katja Sarkowsky opened the 26th GAPS conference with introductory words and a warm welcome. Interdisciplinarity and working together were the underlying conference themes – from the organization, in which all seven chairs of the English Seminar in Münster got involved, to the many discussions in panels as well as the following speeches and readings.

This disciplinary breadth was reflected in the invited keynote speakers from book studies, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), linguistics as well