

Conference Report, ASNEL and GAST, joined conference on “Postcolonial Justice”

This year's joined ASNEL and GAST conference, which marked the 25th anniversary of both associations, focused on the topic of “Postcolonial Justice”. Papers were invited that addressed topics such as postcolonial justice and the politics of reconciliation, postcolonial justice and globalisation/aesthetics/language/media, postcolonial justice in the marketplace, postcolonial justice and academic practice, to name but a few. The core questions that permeated the four-day conference centred on the agency and power implicit in the act of executing justice; in how far systematic justice still upholds the binary of the self as perpetrator and the other as hapless victim; and on the responsibilities that the witnesses of injustice have in a globalised media world. It is a very timely topic and the conference organisers excelled at putting together a conference programme that had it all: thought-provoking keynotes and panels, a poster session for early-career scholars and a teacher's workshop, author readings and film screenings, and a social programme that offered plenty of opportunity for socialising.

To offer a more detailed topical insight, I decided to focus on Saturday's events in the following few paragraphs. Benita Parry, in her keynote lecture on the impossibilities of postcolonial justice, stressed the legal and philosophical discourses in order to provide a platform from which to critically enquire the conference programme as such. Parry questioned from the outset whether a shared concept of justice, which we often assume in our discussion of postcolonial justice, does indeed exist. When we are talking about postcolonial justice, does the self ever really know what justice means for the other? Can we ever eradicate social, political, and aesthetic differences in order to arrive at norms that are valid across nations and cultures, across time and space? The answer, for Parry, is and must be a resounding no, because there is no “transcendent reason or divine law” that teaches us how to be just. Moral universalism does not exist, because morality as such is a social construct. According to Parry, there is nothing invariable about morality. It is, and always must be, “their morals and ours”, because morality builds on ethical stands that are incompatible. Morality cannot bridge conflicting interests in the world. And not to take these conflicting interests into account is not to do justice to the multiplicity of interests. Any assertion of universal principles dispenses with any notion of multiplicity and individuality that postcolonialism as a discipline is built upon. It also dispenses with any notion of justice, seeing that justice “is respecting the singularity of the other”, as Parry paraphrases Jacques Derrida.

I found Parry's keynote lecture truly engaging and also fitting, seeing that one of the conference's main objectives was to critically engage with the idea of postcolonial justice itself. Is it possible? Can it ever be just? And does the conflation of two so highly contested terms, justice and the postcolonial, ever yield definite answers? In deconstructing both terms,

Parry very convincingly showed that a lack of answers does not necessarily diminish the search for these answers and the discussion of the issues at stake. Parry raised questions that pervaded much of Saturday's discussions, both in and out of sessions. What position are we speaking from when we talk about postcolonial justice, and do we sufficiently take the privilege of that position of speech into account?

This question finds its repercussion in Kirsten Sandrock's talk on "The Poetics of Justice in Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton*" in the pre-lunch panel 4d on "Justice in the Literary Field". Sandrock mainly focused on the narratological aspects of the book and how the role of the author and the role of the narrator and focaliser relate to questions of justice. Sandrock related her talk back to Parry's keynote by differentiating between law and justice. Law, as a possibility of executing justice, is also always part of the machinery of power and is thus implicated with questions of authority. And this authority is granted to people who have access to that executing power. Thus, the question really is, what is this power that is needed to execute justice? In the case of Rushdie's *Joseph Anton*, this power lies in the narratological structure of the book itself. As an autobiography written in the third person the narrative evokes objectivity, impartiality, neutrality, and truth, which are largely considered preconditions for executing justice. Also, on the level of content, Rushdie stresses that some values are, or at least should be, universals and absolutes: Freedom, for Rushdie, is human nature and not culturally relative. As Sandrock pointed out, this is how the narrative of the book, which focuses on the Fatwa years, denies the legitimacy of the fatwa and questions the right of anybody who declares themselves to own authority to proclaim justice. Justice, for Rushdie as for Parry, is deeply implicated with power. But in opposition to Parry, Rushdie challenges the notion of cultural relativism, which he considers the death of ethical thought. This is also where the power of the narrative's focaliser and the authority of the book's author merge. Rushdie uses the focaliser within the narrative to set things right and he uses his authority as a well-known public figure to restore personal justice outside the narrative. The discussion afterwards then questioned whether that act of exerting justice is truly just, which again was very much done in the spirit of Parry's critical enquiry into the idea and ideal of postcolonial justice itself.

In that panel's second and last talk, Carola Briese talked about "Postcolonial Justice in the Literary Marketplace: Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction in the Literary Field". Briese focused on literary marketing and its effects on the circulation of fiction. She addressed notions of justice such as reconciliation and recognition and argued that postcolonial fiction has a transformative potential on the literary marketplace, both in terms of content and in terms of the networks within the literary market that they create. Briese analysed and compared the covers, press releases, design and marketing of different novels by postcolonial writers and argued that this para-text has a strong impact on the public. Although marketing does not change the text itself, it can change how the novel is received. Briese also pointed

out how global media creates narrative about narratives and how these meta-narratives to an extent still rely on colonial stereotypes of the exotic other. Stereotypical cultural narratives are being used to appeal to specific readerships and in this process, marketing specifically highlights certain cultural narratives and silences others, Briese argued. What I took away from the talk is that this intertext that is being created is as worthy of evaluation as the text itself when discussing questions of power, the role of the author, and the position of power as a position of speaking and being heard – and of writing and being read.

The question of being seen and the power that bestows on the subject was the topic of the post-lunch keynote by Suvendrini Perera on “Visibility, Atrocity and the Subject of Postcolonial Justice”. Perera questioned the possibility of international justice in the aftermath of wartime atrocities and focused on the Sri Lankan Civil War between the Sri Lankan government and the militant organisation Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. For Perera, this war against terror raised crucial questions on the possibility and legitimacy of a “just war” and how particularly postcolonial countries deal with their violent present as a result of their violent past. What are the terms on which the atrocities of the past enter discourse of justice and international order of the present?, Perera asked and focused on the dynamics between retribution for colonial atrocities and justice in the postcolonial world. Perera continued her discussion of international responsibility and recognition versus national laws and sovereignty with the example of war crimes committed on the territory of sovereign states that are globally visible due to media coverage. This international attention, though often enough denied or insufficient, nevertheless has the power to allow for the accountability of war crimes and can thus reinstate international law and human rights, so Perera. This question of responsibility and recognition struck me as crucially important, because it shows that the power to execute justice comes with a moral responsibility that can be very difficult to discern.

The round table discussion on “American Studies as Postcolonial Studies” concluded the academic part of Saturday's programme. Rüdiger Kunow, Gesa Mackenthun, John Carlos Rowe, Katja Sarkowsky, and Nicole Waller discussed the intersections of American studies and postcolonial studies in such an engaged way that I doubt that by the end of the event there was anybody in the audience who was not convinced by the merits that a cross-fertilisation between the two disciplines would prove mutually beneficial. Parallels were drawn both on the topical and the institutional level, but also fissures were explored, such as the Americanisation of modern missionary movement which exports faith-based politics to other parts of the world and is therefore from a postcolonial perspective, and from the perspective of queer theory and LGBT rights, highly problematic. The discussion also focused on the complex role the US itself plays as a nation within the field of postcolonial studies. There is a tension between the status of the US as a postcolonial nation and as an imperial power. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, the US were therefore largely excluded

from postcolonial discourse, while postcolonial theories, however, found their way into American studies. Among the panellists there was consensus that both fields are now ready to see how they can mutually benefit from each other and the only questions that remained were how we can now implement the kinds of intersections that were highlighted on the institutional level.

As I have done these past four days, I found this year's ASNEL/GASt conference to be highly intellectually stimulating. All the talks I listened to challenged comfortable and homogenising readings of culture and asked how justice can really be achieved in a present that is still marked by its colonial past. The intellectual vigour of discussion was, as always, impressive and very much had me looking forward to next year's conference – the first GAPS event in the history of ASNEL.

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