

Just Politics? Postcolonial Ecocriticism between Imagination and Occupation

REPORT

What is postcolonial ecocriticism? How do animals figure into this new school of criticism? What is ecofeminism and what role does it play concerning postcolonial ecocriticism? What do we mean by environmental justice?

These are just some of the questions that were raised and, at least partially, answered at the 11th asnel summer school at Potsdam University from 2-6 September 2013. Five days of lectures, seminars, workshops, and evening programs provided the perfect environment for bachelor, master, Ph.D. students, and lecturers alike.

The summer school was kicked off with an introductory lecture by Nicole Waller (Potsdam University, Germany) on the current trends in ecocritical and postcolonial studies. This lecture proved to be a solid introduction into ecocriticism and postcolonial studies for those not yet as familiar with these schools of criticism. In his lecture "Uneven Ecologies: Commodity Frontiers, Boom Towns, and Peripheral Aesthetics" Michael Niblett (University of Warwick, UK) introduced concepts such as world ecology, capitalism as world-ecological regime, commodity frontiers as socio-economic relations, and the materiality of literature, to name but a few. Graeme McDonald (University of Warwick, UK) discussed the omnipresence of oil in our society in his talk "Containing Oil: The Pipeline in World Petroculture" which was an excellent prelude for the reading by Helon Habila from his novel *Oil on Water* later that day. Melissa Kennedy (University of Vienna, Austria) approached a different subject in her talk "From Rubbish to Dumps: The Environment of Economic Inequality from Slums to State Housing" in which she highlighted the heavy social agenda in much of postcolonial literature and the importance of looking at issues rather than cultures. In the concluding lecture "The Cultural Politics of Prevention: Postcolonial Disaster and the Environmental Humanities", Anthony Carrigan (University of Leeds, UK) pointed out the close relationship between colonialism and catastrophe as well as the generative and destructive forces of disasters. Carrigan's lecture was the ideal concluding lecture as he took up the notions of combining theory and practice when talking about postcolonial ecocriticism, something that had been a heated point of discussion throughout the whole week.

The seminars that were held on an almost daily basis covered vast topical areas such as postcolonial ecocriticism and the Arctic, ecofeminism, film and postcolonial ecological conflict, the animal world in world-literary encounters, and postcolonial anarchism. The seminars, since they met six times throughout the week, managed to raise and even answer some of the essential questions mentioned in the beginning. These repeated meetings of the same groups offered the possibility to really delve into the respective topics and to explore a vast array of aspects that would not have been possible in just one session.

Workshops, which only consisted of one session each, covered even more ground: museum taxidermy, material ecocriticism, the political ecology of land rights, plastic and concrete, environmental imagination in Anglophone science fiction, games on economic and ecological challenges, didactics and postcolonial ecocriticism, and many more. Even though the shorter format was at times dissatisfying as discussions were hardly ever finished at the

end, the wide array of topics that were additionally covered in the workshops sparked further interest in the respective fields and stimulating discussions.

To round the whole program out, a daily evening program and a whole day in Berlin were organized as well. The evening programs consisted of a reading by Helon Habila, two screenings, and a farewell barbecue with live music. The day in Berlin could be spent either in the Museum of Natural Sciences or on a tour of either the African Quarter or a Lobby Walk through Berlin. In the afternoon, the practical side of all of our discussions was explored at the NGO World Café in the Haus der Demokratie und Menschenrechte. Here, a number of NGOs and initiatives presented their projects and products.

In conclusion, the summer school probably raised more questions than it answered but it also inspired critical thinking and discussions that will go on long after the summer school has come to an end. At the same time, it became clear throughout the week that, particularly in the field of postcolonial ecocriticism, it is nearly impossible to separate work in academia from an activist life which might not be such a bad thing after all.

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