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European PhD-Network „Liberary and Cultural Studies“, University of Bergamo, 13-15 October 2009

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Conference Report on „After Writing Back: Present and Future Perspectives in Postcolonial Studies“

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It is quite impossible to imagine the contemporary field of literary and cultural studies without postcolonial theory. Equally impossible is to think of postcolonial literary and cultural studies without acknowledging the impact of one book, namely The Empire Writes Back (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin. The conference "After Writing Back: Present and Future Perspectives in Postcolonial Studies" celebrated the twentieth anniversary of Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin’s magnum opus and took it as an opportunity to contemplate the various directions in which postcolonial theory can go from here and now.
The conference took place at the University of Bergamo, Italy from October 13th-15th in 2009 and was hosted by the university’s Faculty of Modern Languages and Literatures together with the PhD program in Euro-American Literatures of the Doctoral School of Humanities, which is a partner of the European PhD-Network "Literary and Cultural Studies" based at the Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, Germany.

After an opening address by the conference organisers, the first plenary session began with a lecture by BILL ASHCROFT (University of New South Wales at Sydney) titled "The Multiplicity of Modernity: Globalization and the Post-colonial". Ashcroft, himself one of the founding fathers of post-colonial theory (who, by the way, still insists on using the hyphenated version of the term), shared his ideas concerning the future of a critical paradigm which has itself increasingly come under critical attack. Ashcroft called for the persistent need of exploring the diverse cultural tendencies and local identities constantly emerging on the global stage by making use of various theories, intended not as rigid schemata of interpretation, but rather as flexible and ever-changing strategies of observation. As both Fukuyama’s vision of a monolithic, Western-oriented character of modernity and his thesis of the end of history have been proven to be turn-of-the-century myths, many new global developments must be taken into account by postcolonial studies nowadays. These include, for example, the challenges raised by the politics of Islamism and post-Cold War Russia, the destruction of socioeconomic systems of the past on all continents, and the erosion of alternative and counter-cultures.

These historical shifts in the global cultural landscape bring about changes in the ways we address traditional postcolonial questions. For example, since multilateral discourses have destabilised the previously held, rigid idea of a centre/periphery hierarchy, the univocal talk of a marginalised Third World has ceased to be tenable, as the interactions of its local networks with their global counterparts are no longer represented by Western perspectives alone. Also, economic imperialism should not be considered as an all-encompassing phenomenon, but rather as one – certainly fundamental – factor of a multi-layered global whole that can only be appropriately confronted with an attentive study of the strategies used by humans for coping with the complex global dynamics of our days. It is within this context that literature, rather than reducing itself to a Westernised, late-imperialist and voyeuristic concept of Weltliteratur, can play an important role as a tool of knowledge and greater understanding of the multifarious facets of our world, and thus, even though only in a mediated way, as a factor in change.

After this challenging and theoretically comprehensive opening panel, the first parallel session – titled "Present and Future Perspectives" – commenced with ANSGAR NÜNNING (University of Giessen) and VERA NÜNNING (University of Heidelberg) discussing "Fictions of Empire and the (Un)Making of Imperial Mentalities". Ansgar Nünning reminded participants that the double meaning of the word 'fiction' (both as a figment of the imagination and as an untruthful distortion of fact or a lie) has played a key role in forging the imperialist mentality of the Pax Britannica. The British colonial empire described in literature and other narrative media has thus to be regarded as both a work of art and a fabricated ideology. Imperialist texts (whether they be books, pictures or shows) work together in constructing an invisible empire of the mind that employs stereotypes (e.g. 'Orientalisms' à la Said) and metaphors (e.g. 'the family', with white colonisers as parental and indigenous subjects as child-like figures). Imperialist narratives, therefore, are not just mimetic reproductions of the actual empire but also productive tools at its service. Vera Nünning then emphasised the joint efforts of narratology and postcolonial (literary) theory in unmasking the colonialist biases of fiction. This end can be achieved in many ways, including Foucauldian and Fanonian discourse-analyses and the Barthesian detection of redundancies that shed light on the weak points of white supremacist epistemology, thus helping reshape the cultural memory of colonial history.

Next, in his paper "Post-Colonial Studies After Whiteness: The Case of the US Army's 'Human Terrain Systems'", MIKE HILL (University at Albany-State University of New York) talked about recent developments in the strategies of America's 'war on terror' and how these are increasingly informed by a new interest in human sciences, especially in anthropology and cultural studies. Hill showed how, paradoxically, in learning to know their enemy (within but

also outside the bounds of radical Islam), US anti-terrorist intelligence authorities are beginning to reject totality and embrace diversity.

HELGA RAMSEY-KURZ (University of Innsbruck) then focused on the issue of literacy and the role it plays in the postcolonial context. Her paper "Empire Apart: Who is Speaking Now?" drew attention to the challenges faced by the non-literate subject in a technology-driven world which, according to Lyotardian semiotics, is impossible to understand without the command of various media, written or otherwise. Ramsey-Kurz recalled classic works of colonial and postcolonial fiction (Conrad, Malouf) and how they employ writing as a literary theme by stressing the importance of literature as not just a medium that distributes knowledge but also as a privileged medium that can 'travel' on its own.

The session was brought to a close by JANE WILKINSON's (University of Naples "L'Orientale") paper on "Disability's Writing Back: Postcolonial Perspectives". Wilkinson demonstrated the ways in which the relatively recent field of disability studies has been inspired by postcolonial theory. Its influence is evident in the titles of pivotal texts in disability studies, such as Sally Swartz's "Can the Clinical Subject Speak?" (2005), with its obvious allusion to Spivak's now classic postcolonialist essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). The history of the disabled subject has been – and still is – characterised by injustices similar to those experienced by the colonised subject; for example, both have been defined as 'the Other' by the establishment that calls itself 'normal'. This perception of the disabled person as abnormal or even monstrous is a far cry from Montaigne's view of disability "as simply one more variation in human form". As an example of the latter stance Wilkinson cited Ann Millet's article "Staring Back and Forth: The Photographs of Kevin Connolly" (Disability Studies Quarterly, Summer 2008, Vol. 28, No. 3). Connolly, who was born without legs, takes the stares of his passers-by as the subject matter of his photographs. Wilkinson also discussed sign-language studies and how people classifying themselves as Deaf (the capital 'D' standing for the cultural community of the deaf, as opposed to deafness as perceived only as a hearing impairment) do not necessarily consider themselves as lacking in response to their environment, but rather as experiencing it differently, or even more fully, than 'normal people'. To conclude, the discussions within the session evidenced a new direction for postcolonial theory which could be substantially enriched by the perspectives of narratology, literacy studies and disability studies, respectively.

The first day of the conference came to a festive end with an excursion to GAMec Modern and Contemporary Art Gallery where, after a guided tour of the art exhibition, Bill Ashcroft launched his new book Caliban's Voice (Routledge, 2009), which addresses a problem of dominant concern for the whole conference, namely, the relationship between colonialism and language, showing how even a dominant colonial language like English can and indeed has been appropriated and transformed by its 'colonised' speakers to convey the realities of their respective cultures and life situations.

On the second day of the conference, the parallel sessions continued with the second part of the panels "Present and Future Perspectives" and "Postcolonialism and Globalization". In the first panel ANNA RETTBERG (University of Giessen, member of the European PhD-Network "Literary and Cultural Studies"), in a paper bearing the title "Traces of Black and White: Rethinking Whiteness in Postcolonial Theory and Contemporary (Black) British Literature", inquired into some contemporary English novels – notably Zadie Smith's White Teeth and Maggie Gee's The White Family – which delve into such pressing questions as migration and racism in England, and the relationship of new forms of British youth culture deriving from cultural hybridisation (black-white) with traditional English culture and the notion of 'Englishness'.

Next, in his paper "Post-colonial Theory in Literary Praxis: Saumya Balsari's The Cambridge Curry Club", JOEL KUORTTI of the University of Turku argued that, while postcolonial theories have developed various approaches for analysing and coming to terms with the injustices inscribed in hegemonic representation, postcolonial literatures have also much profited from their confrontation with postcolonial theories, though often less visibly. Kuortti substantiated his argument by analysing Balsari's The Cambridge Curry Club (2004) as an example of literature's engagement with theory, which helps deconstruct the relationship of postcolonial theory and literary praxis – a research endeavour that has hitherto received only little attention from scholars.

LARS JENSES (Soskilde University) in "Postcolonialising the Nordic Countries" then called for addressing postcolonialism in continental Europe and other non-Anglophone areas of the world without atomising the postcolonial discourse into numerous subfields ultimately unable to communicate with each other. In particular, his paper opened an unusual and compelling perspective on Nordic postcolonialism as a field of study able to challenge, by virtue of its local specificity, Anglophone-oriented postcolonial studies. This problematic issue was taken up by CLAUDIA ESPOSITO (University of Massachusetts, Boston) in her presentation "On The Postcolonial Mediterranean", where she suggested the possibility of a cross-fertilisation between Mediterranean and postcolonial studies, which might prove illuminating and productive for both. She exemplified this claim by showing how the postcolonial Mediterranean, seen through literary texts produced after the so-called independence era of the Maghreb, evidences a transnational and transcultural approach rather than a binary centre/periphery logic. Esposito cited a number of writers from within this space that do not so much 'write back' as 'in-between', and for whom the centrality of metropolitan France is no longer as pertinent as local dimensions of enunciation (as is the case of Tarah Ben-Jelloun, who sets some of his recent novels in Southern Italy).

The parallel panel on globalisation opened with JOPI NYMAN'S (University of Joensuu) presentation on "Globalizing European Peripheries: Rethinking Migration in Monica Ali's

Alentejo Blue". Set in a small Portuguese village located, presumably, on the outskirts of the European Union and populated by tourists, migrant workers and Erasmus students living side-by-side with the 'natives', Ali's 2006 novel paints a vivid picture of a post-national community whose grassroots transformations of the traditional centre/periphery hierarchy occur via both local and global networks.

ELEONORA RAVIZZA (University of Giessen, member of the European PhD-Network "Literary and Cultural Studies") then presented her paper "'To encircle yourself and your island with this art'. Circularity and transformation in Derek Walcott's Omeros", which investigates this poem's creation of an invisible mental and spiritual society outside its historical and political counterpart – namely, the contemporary island of Saint Lucia. The author achieves this end through cognitive mapping and literary devices (e.g. referencing the Homeric intertext, the motif of pilgrimage, etc.). Employing Jameson's postmodernist narratology and Bakhtinian poetics, Ravizza interpreted Omeros as a text permeated by a healing motive that is opposed to conceptual totality and strives, instead, to transcend the traumatic Caribbean history of African slave exploitation and Asian indentured laborer – a motive that results in the cathartic renewal of cultural and individual identities.

The session closed with the paper "Beyond Postcolonialism in Canadian Theatre: Performing a Global Society" by ANNE NOTHOF (Athabasca University, Alberta). Nothof argued that although inspired by the country's exceptional cultural and ethnic variety, the contemporary Canadian theatrical scene is strangely lacking in any explicit need to 'write back' to its former British coloniser, while at the same time vigorously and consciously resisting mainstream artistic and political hegemonies.

The day's plenary session lectures were given by ELLEKE BOEHMER (University of Oxford) and GARETH GRIFFITH (University of Western Australia). In her paper titled "The World, 'the' Text and the Post-colonial Critics: The Critical Legacies of The Empire Writes Back", Boehmer inquired into the continuing relevance of Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin's groundbreaking findings made as far back as 1989. Boehmer reminded her audience of the historicity of postcolonial and English studies – two fields transformed by the publication of The Empire Writes Back. Despite its by now classic status, the book is nevertheless a product of its age – the annus mirabilis of 1989 characterised by the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the beginning of the end of South African apartheid, but also, in a more darkly prophetic way, the Rushdie fatwa and the radicalisation of Islam. That said, the audience's response was that there have also been paradigmatic changes that the authors could not have foreseen; one of the most pronounced of these is the outstanding vitality of the Indian-English novel, which has overshadowed its African and Caribbean counterparts and consequently been dubbed the 'Brown over Black' phenomenon (which is ironic, considering that The Empire Writes Back was, upon publication, criticised for being 'too Caribbean'). In Boehmer's opinion (who, incidentally, would rather omit a hyphen from the word post(-)colonial), the trio of authors were overly optimistic and too universalising in their original approach.

Griffith's provocative lecture on "Post-colonialism and the Post-secular: Sacred and Secular Transactions" considered the increasing complexity of cultural identities in the wake of recent changes in global attitudes toward religion and its relationship to secular modernity. Warning against the danger that postcolonial critique become elegiac, and thus acritical, and taking his cue from his own field research on the religious traditions and innovations of Australian Aborigines, Griffith argued that postcolonial subjects do not always and necessarily experience the challenge of religious colonisation as a deprivation of their indigenous beliefs; they are, in fact, capable of a more subtle but efficient mode of cultural resistance: absorbing Christian influences first introduced by white colonisers and adopting them into their own religious systems. In the subsequent open discussion, Griffith furthermore questioned the consolidated notions of 'sacred' and 'secular' with their resultant, oversimplifying schemata (they 'believers', we 'secular'), showing how, for example, the fetishised ideals of freedom and democracy currently being spread from the West are clear proof of the continuing existence, albeit in different forms, of a colonial uplifting and white-mission ideology bearing unacknowledged Bergamoreligious implications.

The parallel session "Recovering Identities and Shaping New Subjectivities" opened on the second day of the conference with a paper by LAUREANO CORCES (Farley Dickinson University, New Jersey) titled "Expanding the Spanish Stage for Global Representation: The Dramatic Politics of In/Exclusion". Therein, Corces discussed the current social and political sensibilities manifested on the contemporary Spanish stage. The plays and performances he singled out employ innovative theatrical techniques and a dense intertextuality – complete with Shakespeare and Kafka – to address such urgent social issues as the racism and economic hardships faced by African migrant workers and refugees, and the lingering ghost of Franco's Fascism.

For its part, ISABEL CAPELOA GIL'S (Catholic University of Portugal, Lisbon) presentation "A Question of Scale? Lazlo Almásy's Desert Mapping and its Post-colonial Rewriting" juxtaposed the travel narratives and cartography of the Hungarian explorer's travels in 1930's North Africa with their fictional re-interpretation in Michael Ondaatje's novel The English Patient (1992). According to Gil, Ondaatje, in his postcolonial rewriting of Almásy's colonial (and colonialist) texts, not only combines history and fiction, but also interweaves literal and metaphorical geography (e.g. the Conradian references to the 'empty spaces on the map'). The postcolonialist agenda of the novel becomes evident in how Almásy-the-imperialist is burned in an airplane crash – a plot turn that does not have a biographical equivalent – as if subjected to an act of retaliation (a very grim 'writing back', indeed) by the subaltern Other he sought to conquer. Moreover, the desert metaphors representing 'the liquid existence of modernity' create interesting parallels between literary and geographical spaces, evident in the motif of

the legendary lost city of Zerzura, supposedly buried in the sand, which has a textual equivalent in the palimpsest.

In her presentation titled "The Shifting Network of Power and Disgrace in Coetzee's Disgrace and Waiting for the Barbarians", LIDAN LIN (Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne) analysed these two novels in the South African Nobel laureate's oeuvre with regard to the question of desire in the context of colonisation and its aftermath. According to Lin, Coetzee's casting of former colonisers in the role of victims points to a sacrificial theme underlying the postcolonial narratives. In Disgrace, for example, Lucy's willingness to have her rapist's baby and marry the man responsible for the attack against her and her father in exchange for being allowed to remain on her land is tantamount to the white population collectively agreeing to come to terms with a new life of compromise in post-apartheid South Africa.

Southern Africa remained part of the focus of EITAN BAR-YOSEF'S (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev) presentation, as well. In a paper titled "Zionism, King Lobengula, and the Great African Adventure", Bar-Yosef demonstrated a distinct yet uneasy connection between Zionism and Third World colonisation. The cultural-historical link between the Jewish pioneers in Palestine and the Boers in South Africa was evident in the Old Testament-influenced identities of both communities. What is more, Herzl was inspired by Stanley's travel accounts of the 'dark continent', and there were plans for the Jewish state to be founded in Uganda. Bar-Yosef also put forward a case study of the children's book Lobengulu King of Zulu (1935-6) by Israeli author and illustrator Nahum Gutman. Borrowing plot and genre elements from H. Rider Haggard's classic Victorian adventure novel, King Solomon's Mines (1885), Gutman's work is a cocktail of biases, both colonialist (the young Israeli colony taking up her 'white man's burden' for Africa's benefit) and anti-colonialist (the Israeli protagonists as 'the black men of Europe' who have themselves been freed from their racist ghettos). Far from being a matter of black and white, Israeli nationalism consists of shades of grey.

On the last day of the conference, the panel "Present and Future Perspectives" continued with MARIA TERESA FERREIRA (Catholic University of Portugal, Lisbon, member of the PhD-Network "Literary and Cultural Studies") delivering a paper on "Writing in the Margins: Postcolonialism as paratext in Ondaatje's The English Patient", where she analysed Ondaatje's work according to the category of 'eccentricity' as a possibility for a non-restrictive, fluid identity formation. In Ondaatje's novel the four outcasts inhabiting the Villa San Girolamo in fact negotiate their respective identities by narrating travels across imaginative geographies, and keep their identities open by a wilfully performed fictional work on memory.

The following paper by ANDREW MARTINO from Southern New Hampshire University, "Message in a Bottle, Narrative and the enigmatic Figure of V. S. Naipaul", shows how in his later works The Enigma of Arrival and A Way in the World, Naipaul challenges the notions of both 'postcoloniality' and the 'novel'. By giving form to narratives that are at the same time fiction, memoir, essay, historical and political reflection, Naipaul performs a decided aesthetic

break from conventional narrative and generic patterns, asserting himself as a postmodern thinker writing in the postcolonial world who is actively trying to reconcile the two.

The prefix 'post' informing the whole conference "After Writing Back" was also at the center of the final keynote lecture by professor HELEN TIFFIN (University of Tasmania). Tiffin began by summarising the various usages of the prefix 'post' since 1989, and then considered some of the ways in which 'post-humanism' has been and is being defined. Questioning Donna Haraway's vision of cyborg/animal coupling – which turns out to be too optimistic for Tiffin – she considered the ways in which the 'post-human' subject is envisioned by Peter Goldsworthy in Wish, Margaret Atwood in Oryx and Crake and Indra Sinha in Animal's People.

Overall, the conference was extremely successful in bringing together scholars not only from the field of postcolonial studies strictu sensu, but also from bordering disciplines, and in dealing with analogous issues within the wider field of literary and cultural studies. It is easy to understand the reason for this if one considers that from the 90s onward, the 'cultural turn' in globalisation studies pushed postcolonial theory into the position of a master discourse, a sort of 'Grand Theory of Global Cultural Diversity', as Ashcroft provocatively (and a bit ironically) defines it. Postcolonial language thus became the language of global cultural studies at large. Its success might be explained by the perspective on global modernity that it enables, namely as a multiple and dynamic whole which cannot be simply described in terms of a univocal Western globalisation of the world – a version of the story that is both facile and superficial. Instead, global modernity becomes an infinitely adaptable system in which culture – every single culture – as the expression of both human subjectivity and its power to transform the external world brings about precisely this difficult work of adaptation. One of the lessons of The Empire Writes Back that still holds today is, in fact, a strategy of active reception and accurate observation of "how people change the world that is changing them" (as Ashcroft says, quoting Berman). This guiding principle enables us to understand how diverse culturally (i.e. locally) based modernities are able to communicate and circulate globally – and, ultimately, become productive agents of globalising dynamics, themselves.