

ACLALS 2013 Report

By Farah Moosa, Camille van der Marel, and Danielle Wong

The 16th Triennial ACLALS Conference, “‘The current unbroken / the circuits kept open’: Connecting Cultures and the Commonwealth,” was held in Gros Islet, St. Lucia from August 5th-9th and contained a strong CACLALS presence. ACLALS Chair and Head of English at the University of the West Indies Mona campus Dr. Michael Bucknor opened the conference with a reading of Caribbean poet and scholar Dr. Edward Baugh’s poem, “Sometimes in the Middle of the Story,” to highlight the theme of cultural connections and disconnections. A key line from Baugh’s poem also appears in the conference title. Noteworthy events at ACLALS included a welcome reception at Prime Minister Dr. Kenny D. Anthony’s official residence during which delegates were addressed by Anthony and entertained with a live outdoor band, and the Caribbean premiere of Derek Walcott’s most recent play, “O Starry Starry Night,” which was beautifully staged at Samaans Park and attended by Walcott himself. Such events, together with excellent plenary discussions, panel presentations, literary readings, and book launches made ACLALS 2013 an intellectually stimulating as well as memorable experience.

PLENARY PRESENTATIONS

Following Dr. Bucknor’s official welcome, Dr. Shu-mei Shih, Professor of Comparative Literature, Asian Languages and Cultures, and Asian American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, gave the opening keynote address. Dr. Shih’s lecture, “From World History to World Literature: The Post-Slavery Plantation Arc,” encouraged ACLALS members to re-imagine the existing categories that define the field of ‘world literature.’ As an alternative, Dr. Shih suggests the image of the “entangled mesh” as a guiding metaphor. This argument, based on Édouard Glissant’s understanding of relationality, aims to avoid reductive models of centre and periphery—the problems with which are further developed in her and Dr. Françoise Lionnet’s *Minor Transnationalism* (2005)—and better demonstrate how systems of power pull and reshape a multiplicity of interactions across the infinite intersections of differing cultures. Relationality *is* methodology here. Dr. Shih applies what she terms the post-slavery plantation arc of oscillating and incomplete trajectories to both our historical moment, a historical moment perhaps uncritically defined as uniquely ‘globalized,’ and to a much deeper, often overlooked, history of cross-cultural interactions that do not fit within a classic binary of colonizer and colonized. Her proposed shift requires refiguring world literature as a series of enmeshments and arcs, and not as a cohesive field that may not itself actually exist.

In the spirit of ‘refashioning the futures’ of commonwealth, postcolonial, and global literary studies, the 2013 executive made the concerted — and these reviewers would suggest invaluable — decision to engage two emerging scholars amongst the conference’s plenary speakers. The first of these was Dr. Omaar Hena, an Assistant Professor of English at Wake Forest University. His lecture, “‘The Sea Was My Privilege’: Circuits of Global Economy in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*,” offered a close reading of sections from Walcott’s long poem in order to reflect on how the poetic form resists the value systems encoded in global capitalism. How, Dr. Hena asks, does poetry resist the violence of an economy of equivalent exchanges? Concurrently, how does a globalized economy actually hold poetry together by making connections between otherwise disparate people and histories possible? Dr. Hena’s lecture, part of a book-length project on global poetic modernisms and the long poetic tradition, demonstrates

how *Omeros*' figures, those who cannot imagine value outside of economic exchange, are the least able to succeed within a poem where value is derived from loss, poverty, and expenditure. Outside of its specific focus on Walcott, this plenary also encouraged its audience to consider how critical worth is appreciated within a piece of literature through academic investments and what that does to canon formation within the fields of postcolonial and global literary studies.

Dr. Phanael Antwi, an Assistant Professor of English at St. Mary's University, was ACLALS' second emerging scholar plenary speaker. His presentation, "Bodily Black: Dub Poetry as an Ethical Encounter in the Black Atlantic World" is part of a larger project on the embodiment and soundings of afro-Atlantic culture. Working towards a dub epistemology as anti-epistemology, Dr. Antwi's presentation described dub poetry as respecting neither national nor generic borders, challenging neoliberal logics of capitalism, and creating connections across the nodes of the Black Atlantic. Through examples taken from artists such as D'bi Young, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, and Lillian Allen, this presentation countered existing arguments that have defined dub as a primarily masculinist or misogynistic form to show its deep if under-recognized history of female performers, rooting dub within a feminist epistemology. In particular, Dr. Antwi demonstrated the ways in which dub has been uniquely able to convey women's intimate labour within colonial empires and transnational times alike. The form, he insists, is one that depends on the body of its performer. Paired with this call to reconsider the ethical work at play within dub poetry, those in attendance for Wayde Compton's plenary at the 2013 CACLALS conference in Victoria, a lecture which likewise examined the poetics and praxis of dub poetry, will note the rising significance of the dub form to a contemporary poetics of diaspora and transnationalism within Canadian scholarship.

In her paper, "Caribbean, Caribbean: Culture Queer Sexualities and the Literary," Dr. Alison Donnell, Professor of Modern Literatures in English at the University of Reading, asked what it means to speak about the Caribbean as a queer place, especially given its histories of homophobia as well as its hallmark identity as a culturally and ethnically heterogeneous region. For Donnell, conceptions of sexuality that are "heteronormative or homo(deviant)" are inconsistent with such understandings of the Caribbean, an anomaly. To conceive of the Caribbean as a queer space, Donnell suggests, has both epistemological and ontological value. Through a reading of various Anglophone Caribbean narratives that deal with issues of belonging, Donnell illustrates how we can think about "Caribbeanness alongside queerness" thus recognizing the Caribbean and its multiplicity of cultures as already interrupting and disrupting the gender normativity too easily ascribed to the region.

Dr. Asha Varadharajan, Associate Professor of English at Queen's University, was the conference's final keynote speaker. In her presentation, "Cosmopolitan Civilities: Open Circuits in the New World Order," Varadharajan theorized "connection" as both translation and transaction and emphasized global currents as non-teleological flows, as well as the temporal over the spatial, in order to situate her intervention within current scholarly debates on postcolonial temporalities. She provided an analysis of Warwick Thornton's short film *Country Song* to contend that Thornton takes on the possibility of a nonsynchronous relationship between cultures and that the film represents ways in which the refusal of coevalness can be useful for cultures. She also gave the example of Nisha Pahuja's documentary *The World Before Her*, which juxtaposes Miss India contestants and the women of the Hindu nationalist group Durgha

Vahini, suggesting that it presents the traditional and the modern as complementary, redefining the “before” as past and future, an “unbroken current between tradition and modernity.”

In addition to the lectures, ACLALS featured a plenary conversation between Edward Baugh and Derek Walcott. One of the most memorable events in the conference, the auditorium was silent as the event, which Baugh referred to as a “once in a lifetime occasion” took place. As Baugh’s comment suggests, their conversation marks a moment in St. Lucian literary history. Baugh and Walcott discussed the struggle towards the institutional establishment of West Indian literature as well as Walcott’s new play, which centers on the relationship between Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh during their time in Arles, France. In particular, Walcott spoke to the importance of continuing to support Caribbean artistic and literary productions, which, in the case of his play, meant working with Caribbean actors and actresses. He also continued to emphasize the need for a national theatre in Trinidad. When Baugh asked how Walcott feels now, given that his commitment was to “name the place” (meaning St. Lucia and, perhaps by extension, the Caribbean) and that he returned home after being away for a period, Walcott replied that the island is “too beautiful to abandon” and noted that his daughter is a writer, his son a painter, and that the actors in his play are Caribbean — all of which are “a fulfillment” for him.

KEY THEMES

Topics addressed in the panels included diasporic histories and trajectories, especially within the Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean and South Asian diasporas, as well as cross-cultural contact within various spaces. Another predominant theme was the economies of texts and circulation, a recurrence that bodes well for the upcoming EACLALS conference “Uncommon Wealths: Riches and Realities” to be held in Innsbruck, spring 2014. The ‘currents’ of the 16th triennial’s title were reinterpreted across the plenary talks and panels alike as ‘currencies’, resulting in generative conversations about the economies that allow (and limit) textual circulations, representations of the economic within literature, and the economies of critical pedagogy within a global post-secondary system. Other topics included the digital shift in archival work and the digital shift in memory; the notion of “postcolonial futurity” and haunting as modes of analysis and reading; popular culture across the Commonwealth and its relationship to globalization; gender and indigeneity; and the gap and overlap between text and visual/theatrical performance.

READINGS AND LAUNCHES

ACLALS featured fantastic lunchtime readings from local and international writers, including Earl Lovelace and Sharon Miller from the NGC Bocas Lit Fest, Trinidad and Tobago’s annual literary festival, and St. Lucian and Jamaican authors published with Peep Tree Press, including up-and-coming St. Lucian poet Vladimir Lucien, Velma Pollard, and Tanya Shirley. Dr. Selina Tusitala Marsh’s energetic and charged reply to stereotypes about Pacific Islanders in her collection *Fast Talking PI* was a great hit and offered further reflections on Gauguin, who likewise featured in Walcott’s *O Starry Starry Night*. Books launched included Bill Ashcroft, Ranjini Mendis and Julie McGonegal’s *Literature for Our Times: Post-Colonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (Rodopi 2012), Susan Gingell and Wendy Roy’s *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond: Interfaces of the Oral, Written and Visual* (Wilfred Laurier 2012), Joy Mahabir and Mariam Pirbhai’s *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women’s Literature* (Routledge 2012), Anna Guttman’s *Writing Indians and Jews: Metaphorics of Jewishness in*

South Asian Literature (Palgrave Macmillan 2013) and John Robert Lee's *Bibliography of St. Lucian Creative Writing* (Mahanaim 2013).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The success of this summer's ACLALS conference speaks to the quality of its organizers' and participants' scholarly practice, the brilliant creativity of poets and authors who make this work both possible and pleasurable, St. Lucia's incomparable beauty and hospitality, and the patient support of so many volunteers (including those from Sir Arthur Lewis Community College and Open Campus, St. Lucia). For those present, "The current unbroken" was five days of intellectual engagement, friendship, and inspiration that we have brought back to our home institutions. All thanks must be extended to the ACLALS executive, the Conference Planning Committee, and the Local Organizing Committee, and especially to Chair Michael Bucknor and Vice-Chair Dr. Evelyn O'Callaghan (University of the West Indies, Cave Hill), both of whose consistent good humour and wit welcomed all and set a tone of convivial fellowship for the conference.