

# **The 17<sup>th</sup> Triennial Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) Conference, Stellenbosch, South Africa, July 11 –15, 2016**

**“stories that float from afar”**

## **Ideas of postcolonial culture: inclusions and exclusions**

In a piece recorded in 1873, only fifty kilometres from the ACLALS 2016 conference venue, //Xam storyteller //Kabbo argues his case for returning to his home in the northern Cape from Cape Town where he had been first a prisoner in the Breakwater prison and then a language and cultural informant for the linguist, Wilhelm Bleek. The home to which he refers is one that is already literary rather than tangible, for //Kabbo and his community have been displaced by settler invasions and their pursuit of a livelihood criminalised. //Kabbo can never really return home because home, in Homi Bhabha’s unforgettable formulation, has been rendered unhomely, invaded by history, the oppressive force that “captures dreams and redreams them,” to borrow a phrase from *The God of Small Things*.

A reading of //Kabbo’s piece today exhibits the thrilling power of world literature in English to rescue from the abyss of natural and human history, aesthetically ordered feelings and ideas, and enable their uncanny enunciation in the space of the present, in our minds, writing and seminar rooms. At the same time, the text signals the limits and dangers of the idea of world literature in English. The phrase, ‘stories that float from afar’, has come to signify the ability of stories to transcend temporality and place, to speak to us of inaccessible experiences from a time that has gone, along with the quagga, a species of zebra, which, not coincidentally, disappeared in the wild in the 1870s, the same decade as //Kabbo’s enforced sojourn in Cape Town. //Kabbo, though, is not celebrating the ability of stories to cross cultures and time but mourning their inability to exist apart from a community of meaning, of telling and, crucially, of interpretation. The phrase comes from the sentence: “For I am here; I do not obtain stories because I do not visit so that I might hear stories that float from afar.”

Today we are confronted with the irony that the literatures in English from around the world that we teach and study often come from countries whose scholars and writers cannot easily travel to conferences or access journals or books or are forced to live outside the countries of their birth. Many of their compatriots are excluded by language, class and education from reading their books. This does not mean, of course, that these are people without literature, culture or learning. Written literature in English in Africa, we should remember, is only the tip of the iceberg. Most literature is not written and is not in English. An over-reliance on writing and English brings its own sort of exclusions with it.

This conference represents an opportunity to explore the dangers of ahistorical relativism, cultural appropriation and neo-colonial forms of exclusion and inclusion as well as the paradoxes inherent in notions of postcolonial and world culture. It is an invitation to consider

ways of approaching literature and other cultural forms in a spirit of greater hermeneutic receptivity and with increased theoretical rigour. How can we build on the sorts of critical self-reflexivity that is already embedded in feminist, queer, postcolonial, ecocritical and transnational approaches to literature and culture? How can we interrogate the power structures that authorise particular people to speak and to produce knowledge about literature and, simultaneously, ask which kinds of interpretations, discourses and modalities of knowing are screened out in the process? How, in a gendered, class-ridden, multilingual, fluid and ideologically plural, often violent, environment, can different voices become audible? How do we respond to the power of those nodes of financial hegemony that try to decide for us what counts? And how do we guard against the triumphalism of English?

This is the first ACLALS conference to be held on African soil since the 1970s and the first ever to be held in the Western Cape. For centuries the Cape has been the crossroads of the world. It looks east across the warm Indian ocean and beyond to the Pacific, west across the Atlantic and beyond to the Pacific, south to the Antarctic, from where the whales and penguins come, and north into the African interior. The Western Cape is a melting pot of peoples, languages and cultures, home to people with roots in every quarter of the globe, not least in southern Africa itself, a part of the world which has always been part of human history. The engraved ochre found in Blombos Cave, 300 kilometres east of Cape Town, represents the earliest known evidence of human aesthetic activity, dating back some 100 000 years. Today the region is a vibrant cultural hub. It is multilingual, multicultural and multi-religious; it is hybrid; it is queer; more than any other major city of the world, Cape Town is home to diverse species of plants and animals as much as it is home to people. At the same time old exclusions persist. The scars of slavery, colonialism, genocide and apartheid are still raw. Forms of exclusion, related to class, race, education, place of origin and language, co-exist alongside new forms of inclusivity, accommodation and hybridity. The Cape is riven by identity politics and nationalisms of various kinds and its extraordinary biodiversity is threatened by climate change. It is a region as violent as it is beautiful. In short, the contradictions of the contemporary world are brought into sharp focus in the Western Cape and, with it, the urgencies and the contradictions inherent in the practice of cultural studies today.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Triennial ACLALS Conference invites scholars working in a variety of media (literature, linguistics, film, the visual and musical arts and popular culture) to present papers in the area of the conference theme - the idea of postcolonial culture today: its inclusions and exclusions.

The following are among the questions and topics the conference hopes to explore:

- The idea of world literature in an unequal world
- The relationship between regional literatures and world literature
- The exclusions and inclusions of Commonwealth and postcolonial literature
- Literary value, production and circuits in a neoliberal world
- What is lost and gained by various forms of periodisation and classification
- Excluded genres and modalities of knowing
- Orality and writing
- Gendered inclusions and exclusions

- Transnational eyes: the ocean as conceptual tool
- Writing lives: memoir, autobiography, biography in postcolonial contexts
- Questions of reception: travelling texts
- Hidden communities of cultural production and interpretation
- Education, technology and power
- Multiculturalism and indigeneity
- The possibilities and limitations of a world language
- Languages and localities
- Proliferation and postcolonial culture
- Addressing conflict, violence, trauma
- Tradition and modernity
- Rethinking hybridity
- African literary visions of the world
- Literature for children and its illustration
- Literature for young adults
- Migration and Diasporas: gender, sexualities, class, race
- Desire: its freedoms and its tyrannies
- Representations of religion and spirituality
- Ecologies: natural and imagined
- Film: postcolonial inclusions and exclusions
- Climate change and the practice of cultural studies
- Migrations: forced and desired
- Performance and public art
- Literature, culture, art and social justice
- On writers, artists and public figures who have passed on in the last few years: Chinua Achebe, Stuart Hall, Nadine Gordimer, Mbulelo Mzamane, Gabriel García Márquez, Doris Lessing, Nelson Mandela, Kofi Awoonor, Doris Lessing, Seamus Heaney, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Maya Angelou, Khuswant Singh, Mafika Gwala, Andre Brink, Chris van Wyk and Mavis Gallant.

We hope to attract a large and committed group of scholars to this gathering, which can make an important contribution to expanding and diversifying the archive of our knowledge of literatures, languages and cultures. The South African /Xam storyteller //Kabbo in the 19<sup>th</sup> century bewailed his inability to visit his home where he might “obtain” the many “stories that float from afar”. We invite scholars from the many shapers in the storehouses of narratives in their multiple forms to bring and to share these stories in Stellenbosch in 2016.

The conference is being organised by the English Department at Stellenbosch University, in association with the English Departments at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, the Stellenbosch Literary Project (SLiP) and the District Six Museum.

**The conference dates are 11 to 15 July 2016.**

**200-word abstracts should be sent to Professor Shaun Viljoen (e-mail: [scv@sun.ac.za](mailto:scv@sun.ac.za)) by the 10 December 2015.**