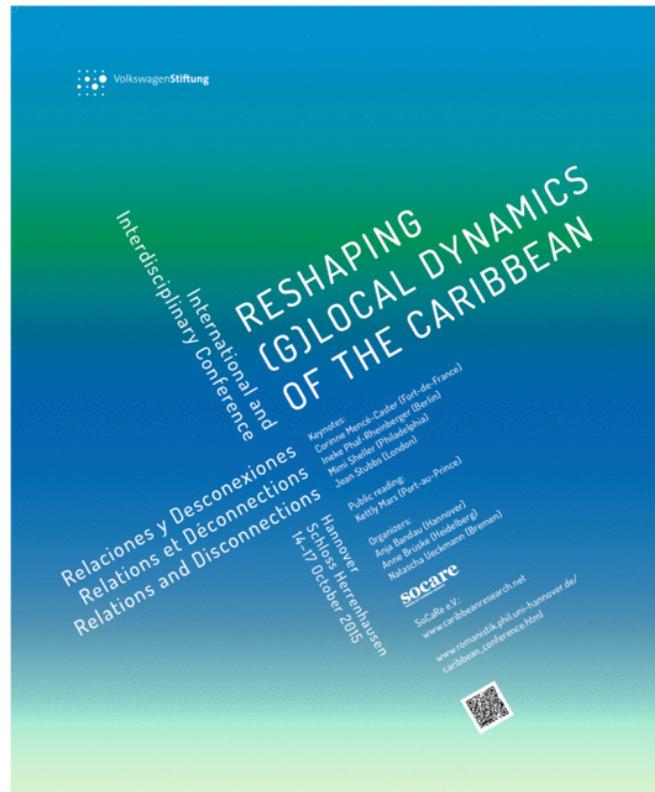


Reshaping (g)local dynamics of the Caribbean:
Relaciones y Desconexiones – Relations et Déconnexions –
Relations and Disconnections



14-17 October 2015

Hannover, Schloss Herrenhausen

Organized by Anja Bandau (Hannover), Anne Brüske (Heidelberg), and Natascha Ueckmann (Bremen)

A conference report by Sinah Kloß



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Who creates visions of the Caribbean and how are they produced? Who seeks to explore how the circulation and non-circulation of knowledge and culture occurred historically in and about the Caribbean? These were some of the key questions addressed and discussed during the conference “Reshaping (g)local dynamics of the Caribbean: Relaciones y Desconexiones – Relations et Déconnexions – Relations and Disconnections,” funded by Volkswagen Stiftung and organized by Anja Bandau (Hannover), Anne Brüske (Heidelberg), and Natascha Ueckmann (Bremen). The conference took place from 14-17 October 2015 at Schloss Herrenhausen convention center in Hannover, Germany, and was initiated by the Society for Caribbean Research (SOCARE), an international organization that coordinates and promotes research on the Caribbean across all academic disciplines. The international conference contributed to the understanding of the Caribbean by emphasizing transatlantic and transoceanic knowledge circulations. Its interdisciplinary approach created a space for dialogue and discussion on how the humanities, cultural studies and social sciences may discuss these circulations and how a critical, transcultural, and decolonial history of science may arise. During the four days of conference, more than 80 participants and 30 guests discussed and analyzed how ‘the Caribbean’ is constructed as a common cultural space. They approached the topic in four dimensions: in and between linguistic spaces and areas, in and between social and cultural practices and theoretical reasoning, in and between agents and political regulations, in and between academic disciplines.

Instead of the traditional emphasis on aesthetic continuities and filiations, the conference presented a broader perspective on the Caribbean, cutting across a vast number of disciplines and – as implied by the subtitle – negotiating the dialectic of relations and disconnections. The academic disciplines represented were, amongst others, Romance Studies, Linguistic and Literary Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Political Geography, History, and Gender Studies. Other participants included Caribbean visual artists, writers, or landscape architects. This inclusive approach was a central aspect of the conference and emphasized the benefits of combining and considering both academic and artistic approaches.

The highlights of the conference were four keynote lectures from various disciplines such as Sociology, History, and Language and Literary Studies. MIMI SELLER (Drexel University, Philadelphia) focused on “Caribbean Constellations and Mobility Justice,” critically engaged with the ethics of transport and travel, specifically: the unequal access to the right of mobility. She stressed the fact that that Caribbean mobility experiences uneven topologies, but further emphasized that in the Caribbean social groups contest the privilege of mobility among elites. Through various socio-cultural practices, such as claiming ownership and relocating of infrastructure facilitated by ‘development’ co-operations, these groups appropriate, claim and reshape ‘network capital.’ In “Politics and Knowledge: How the Havana Cigar Went Global”, JEAN

STUBBS (University College London) discussed the transnational commodity history of the Havana cigar in various historical contexts and periods. She highlighted that the Havana cigar became a global commodity as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth century and that various (g)local agents transformed and modified (production) practices to brand, contest and reproduce 'Cubanicity' since then. In her lecture "Nouvelles archives numériques des cultures antillaises," CORINNE MENCÉ-CASTER (President of the Université des Antilles, Fort-de-France) critically engaged with the complexity of cultural heritage in the Antilles. She discussed how, as a result of a scattered history that is not entirely recorded, but stored within literatures and oral memory, questions of cultural heritage remain problematic. This history is experienced differently by the various social agents and has a direct impact on the question of cultural heritage as a process of production, in- or exclusion, and storage of memories. She discussed how new digital archives, particularly the digital library *MANIOC* (www.manioc.org), create the possibility to overcome or circumvent the conflicted memories and define Antillean cultural heritage. INEKE PHAF-RHEINBERGER's (Caribbean and Latin-American Studies, Berlin) lecture "The Caribbean – in History, as a Visual Presence, and in Contemporary Writings" provided a state of the art of Caribbean Studies in Europe, demonstrating that the Caribbean has always been a socially constructed space that extends to include parts of the American continent and other parts of the world. Drawing on Caribbean literature, she scrutinized the significance of European colonization in the literary construction and representation of the Caribbean as a space, showing for example how postcolonial Caribbean writers reinterpret the concept of water to overcome its relatedness to European colonization and to signify water as a means to connect. In reference to modern-day slave narratives, she further emphasized that slavery should not be conceived as a historical period but needs to be reflected as continued experience.

Moving on to the plenary sessions, "Environment and Sustainability" by Nicholas Watts, Johannes Bohle, Esther Figueroa, Rivke Jaffe and Christian Werthmann discussed the (re)building of infrastructure in Caribbean places such as Haiti and Martinique, highlighting the need to consider the Caribbean as an urban space. Tropes of pollution as well as the notions of sustainability and environmental justice were addressed to express the inherent hierarchical relations implicit to the (re)structuring of landscapes and places.

In "Arts and Visual Culture in the Caribbean", Christoph Singler, Veerle Poupeye, and Leon Wainwright elaborated on current themes in and canonization of Caribbean art, discussing the need to (re)consider the role of movement for art and (transnational) artists, which has always affected Caribbean art and continues to do so today. The role and impact of language in the transmission and production of Caribbean art was debated in terms of whether linguistic lines and borders (e.g. the Anglophone, Francophone, and

Hispanophone Caribbean) apply to art and to what extent there exist transfers and flows. Visual artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons presented her work and emphasized the need to conceive art as a gift, specifically but not exclusively in Caribbean contexts, in order to overcome the hierarchy of who may access art.

The third plenary session, “State of the Art in Caribbean Studies”, critically engaged practices of and discourses on border-crossings as well as with the relevance of scale in Caribbean Studies. Gesine Müller, Ariel Camejo, Ralph Ludwig, Annika McPherson and Graciela Salto discussed critical reflections on the positionality of social actors, including researchers, aiming to understand different versions of the Caribbean. They specifically called for further transdisciplinary and transregional approaches.

Eight panels provided further in-depth analyses of the various topics addressed in the keynote lectures and plenary sessions: “Knowledge Circulation in the Caribbean I: Translation of Concepts” (chair: Jana Gohrlich), “Knowledge Circulation in the Caribbean II: Negotiating History” (chair: Alejandro Gómez), “Ethnopoliticization as a Strategy of In- and Exclusion” (chair: Sinah Kloß), “Theorizing Rhythm, Visual Arts, Music, Dance and Writing” (chair: Ruth Mayer), “Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean Practices: Social Fields and Decolonial Options” (chairs: Manuela Boatcă and Claudia Rauhut), “Intra-Caribbean and Transoceanic Dynamics: ‘Going Creole, Coolitude, Kala Pani...’” (chair: Gisela Febel), “Migration and Transnational Networks” (chair: Martina Urioste-Buschmann) and “Non-Knowledge – ‘Non-Histoire’ – Non-Narrativity” (chair: Gudrun Rath).

Dialogue between established scholars and young researchers was considered especially important in this conference. Junior researchers from various disciplines presented their ongoing research on the Caribbean in an independent poster session, hosted by Jorge Duany. The diverse topics addressed in this session included the development of Spanish in Caribbean language contact or even the formation of Caribbean fishery policy.

Finally, the conference was framed by various cultural events. Addressing the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, the film *Murder in Pacot* (2014) by Raoul Peck was screened in cooperation with the German-Jamaican Society at ‘Pavillon’ cultural center in downtown Hannover. The film, which alludes to renting out partially destroyed mansions to strangers in Port-au-Prince, was discussed by the audience and host Jörg Wenzel. Secondly, the Haitian author Kettly Mars presented her most recent novel *Je suis vivant* (2015) in a public reading, co-hosted by Literarischer Salon Hannover at Leibniz Universität. While Mars read parts of her novel in the original, German translations were read by actress Julia Schmalbrock. The bilingual event created a special atmosphere that continued during a conversation with the author, led by

Julia Borst, and the lively discussion with the audience. Thirdly, *Jamaica for Sale* (2008) was screened and discussed in presence of its director, Esther Figueroa, award-winning filmmaker and author from Jamaica. Again, this was a cooperation with the German-Jamaican Society. The event took place in the auditorium at the conference venue, where a spirited conversation on the Caribbean's economic dependency on tourism and the lack of sustainability in building tourism's infrastructure brought the screening to a close.

It has become clear that the leading themes of the conference were linked to socio-cultural dynamics in the (im)mobility of people, the movement of material goods, as well as the transfer of ideas, concepts, and visual art. Colonial, neo- and post-colonial discourses and practices were discussed critically at international and intra-Caribbean levels. The construction of Caribbean identities and the construction of 'the' Caribbean by various social actors such as migrants, visual artists, scholars, and writers also came into play. These discussions highlighted the economic, socio-cultural, political systems and regimes of power that have influenced the Caribbean in the past and continue to affect it in the present. However, it also became clear that these relations of power raise claims and prompt transformations amongst Caribbean social agents today. With regard to methodology, conference participants frequently emphasized that, although disciplinary borders are increasingly crossed and transgressed, the effort to continue and increase such research remains highly relevant in the field of Caribbean Studies. A shift from inter- to transdisciplinary approaches and research groups should therefore be encouraged in future research.

The organizers plan the publication of selected conference contributions.

For more information on the conference, please follow this link:

http://www.romanistik.phil.uni-hannover.de/caribbean_conference.html

A detailed conference reader may be found at:

<http://www.romanistik.phil.uni-hannover.de/12051.html>