

## **PLENARY OPENING ROUNDTABLE: “Common Movements, Uncommon Resistance”**

Bill Ashcroft (University of New South Wales, Australia), [b.ashcroft@unsw.edu.au](mailto:b.ashcroft@unsw.edu.au)

Lucienne Loh (Brunel University, West London, UK), [Lucienne.Loh@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:Lucienne.Loh@brunel.ac.uk)

Mark Mathuray (Royal Holloway – University of London, UK),  
[Mark.Mathuray@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Mark.Mathuray@rhul.ac.uk)

Frank Schulze-Engler (Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany), [Schulze-Engler@em.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:Schulze-Engler@em.uni-frankfurt.de)

The papers in this panel will trace the genealogy of the term “commonwealth” in cultural and literary studies from the 1930s to the present while being attentive to a variety of contemporary socio-political contexts and geographical locations. The two specific, but diverse contexts of South East Asia and South Africa offer sites for the tension between the utopian values of the commonwealth and the politics of resistance underpinning postcolonial studies. These tensions are evident across contemporary literature from these regions which resituate identity politics within the contentious terrain of sexuality, language, gender and history. Indeed, the term, “Commonwealth” was rejected in the 1980s in light of the more politicized nomenclature “post-colonial” which engendered a less benign perspective for reading literature and culture within the commonwealth. In questioning the term’s contemporaneity and its links to the erstwhile British empire, we aim to ask what is at stake in readers, writers and critics being identified institutionally as Commonwealth citizens who may or may not embrace a postcolonial stance.

Bill Ashcroft offers a theoretical engagement with the transformation of the term “Commonwealth” over the past two decades. He argues for a critical assessment of terms such as “New Literatures in English” and “Postcolonial” by exploring the extent to which these terms are geographically dispersed and politically displaced. These terms underpin divergent aesthetic and intellectual assumptions underlying the production, reception and teaching of literature and culture.

Tenuous links to the Commonwealth in the South East Asian context manifest themselves through social divisions which privilege European languages and culture as distinctions of class, but further determine social status and political power. Yet paradoxically, the concept of being a commonwealth citizen is reflected in the legacy of a democratizing process that offers culture (including the acquisition of English) as a means for class mobility within commonwealth nations, thereby resisting and complicating the politics of postcolonialism. Lucienne Loh reads *The Harmony Silk Factory* by the Malaysian writer, Tash Aw, as a basis for an exploration of this paradox.

Mark Mathuray departs from the interrogation of the idea of the Commonwealth to attend to one of the significant silences in postcolonial criticism i.e. the lack of critical engagement with the homophobia present in much postcolonial literature. Apart from

literature from South Africa both during and after apartheid, the representation of homosexuality in African texts has been universally perjorative. Homosexuality is figured in various negative ways: as racial and geographical marker (Africa vs. the West, Black vs. White, Arab vs. indigene), as exploitative, as indicating various forms of imperialism, and, thus, alien and alienating. The depiction of the abjected and degraded homosexual works to check the slippage between homosociality and homosexuality in order to produce figuratively both the nation and the community. Mathuray will focus on those texts (Soyinkas *The Interpreters*, and Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*) in which the registering of homosexuality seems to be in excess of these processes, where economies of desire rest uneasily with and trouble analyses of the imperial economy, where the figure of the homosexual escapes, however temporarily, from his pathologisation, where sexuality both orientates and dis-orientates.

Finally, while the idea of the Commonwealth is largely a fragmented and historically detached term, deliberating on the future perspectives of Postcolonial Studies in Cyprus inevitably confronts ACLALS with its own professional politics and ethics. Frank Schulze-Engler argues that the political rift running through the island signals central questions deliberated in the process of European unifications. He explores these concerns within the accession of Turkey to the EU and the making and unmaking of European identities particularly evident within the immigrant communities in European cities. Exploring the dynamics of postcolonial European literatures and cultures necessarily constitutes an intervention into these questions. The contact zones between Europeanization and Postcolonial Studies urgently need to be addressed in order to initiate an urgent and overdue reappraisal of both 'Europe' and the 'postcolonial'.

## **BIOS:**

Bill Ashcroft is Professor of English at the University of NSW. He is a founding exponent of post-colonial theory, co-author of *The Empire Writes Back*, the first text to examine systematically the field of post-colonial studies. Author and co-author of sixteen books, including four second editions, variously translated into five languages, he has also written over 140 chapters and papers and is on the editorial boards of ten international journals. Present research interests include post-colonial utopias and post-colonial approaches to transnational writing.

Lucienne Loh is an Associate Lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London and Brunel University where she teaches contemporary literature, critical theory and postcolonial studies. She received her PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and was a visiting Research Fellow at the University of Warwick. She has published various articles on V.S. Naipaul and W.G. Sebald and is currently completing her monograph, *Postcolonial Aesthetics and Politics: The Country in Contemporary Literature* which is being considered by Palgrave Macmillan. She is an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* and Book Review Editor for *Contemporary Literature*. She also co-edits the newsletter publication of the Postcolonial Studies Association and serves on its Executive Committee.

Mark Mathuray lectures in the English Department of Royal Holloway, University of London where he previously held a Leverhulme Early Careers Research Fellowship. He studied and taught at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa and received a PhD from the University of Cambridge (Sidney Sussex College), as a Gates Scholar. He has published various articles on religious discourse in African Literature and has recently published his monograph, *On the Sacred in African Literature: Old Gods and New Worlds* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009)

Frank Schulze-Engler is professor for New Literatures in English at the Institute for English and American Studies at Goethe University in Frankfurt. His publications include his doctoral thesis on East African literature (*Intellektuelle wider Willen: Schriftsteller, Literatur und Gesellschaft in Ostafrika 1960-1980*, Essen 1992), co-edited volumes of essays on African literature (*African Literatures in the Eighties*, Amsterdam/Atlanta 1993), postcolonial theory and globalisation (*Postcolonial Theory and the Emergence of a Global Society*, Frankfurt/M 1998) and the teaching of the New Literatures in English (*Crab Tracks: Progress and Process in Teaching the New Literatures in English*, Amsterdam/Atlanta 2002), as well as numerous essays on African literature, comparative perspectives on the New Literatures in English, postcolonial theory, transnational culture and the cultural dimensions of globalisation. He has recently co-edited *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities* (Amsterdam/New York 2008).