

# Workshop: Encountering Development in Postcolonial Fiction

17-18 May 2018

Research Project: Concepts of Development in Postcolonial Kenyan Literature  
Austrian Science Funds (FWF)

Department of African Studies  
Department of Development Studies

In this workshop we delve into literary representations of worlds and relations global development created. Development programs, the structures of funding and projects, transcultural contact zones constituted by international organisations and more essentially, the languages and epistemologies of developmentalist approaches have not gone unnoticed in literature and the arts. For decades, writers, filmmakers and artists from the Global South have witnessed the transformation of their worlds through the ideologies and practices emerging from the field of development cooperation and humanitarian aid. More often than not, their stories differ significantly from institutional discourses, bringing to the fore excluded voices, experiences and conceptualisations of the encounter with 'development'. These different ways of knowing shall be elaborated as a matter of *what* – in terms of contents - but equally *how* – in terms of narrative choices and aesthetics – postcolonial literatures know about processes of directed change and the governance of aid.

Questions to be addressed include: What is the place of fiction in making sense of the social realities created by international development and aid? How has the daily contact with discourses of development shaped the mental and intellectual landscapes expressed in works of imagination from the Global South? How has fiction represented the (foreign) 'expert' – either in the shape of a person, an organization, or, metaphorically, in the form of 'expert knowledge'? How have works of imagination received the development industry, its international and national actors, its material signs and promises? Who desires 'development' and for what reasons? What meanings do narratives give to epistemologies, subjectivities and practices encountered in the field of development cooperation and international aid? What are challenges posed by works of imagination to modes of knowledge production in social and political science and vice versa?

Interdisciplinary in scope, the workshop assembles contributions from African Studies, Political Science, English Studies, History and Development Studies on the grounds of a shared interest into crossing conventional boundaries between literary studies and social sciences. The workshop is open to the public.

## WORKSHOP PROGRAM

**Thursday, 17 May 2018, Department of African Studies, Seminar Room 3**

13:00-13:15	<p>Welcome</p> <p><b>Adams Bodomo</b>, Head of Dept of African Studies  <b>Petra Dannecker</b>, Head of Dept of Development Studies</p>
13:15-14:00	<p>Introduction of research project: <i>Concepts of Development in Postcolonial Kenyan Literature</i></p> <p><b>Martina Kopf</b></p>
14:00-15:00	<p>Presentation and Discussion of Paper 1</p> <p><b>Veronica Barnsley, University of Sheffield</b></p> <p>Topic: <i>Getting the Child Out: Midwifery, Neonatal Care and Development in West African Fiction</i></p> <p>Discussant: Esther Katheu Mbithi</p>
15:00-15:30	<p>Coffee Break</p>
15:30-16:30	<p>Presentation and Discussion of Paper 2</p> <p><b>Esther Katheu Mbithi, Kenyatta University</b></p> <p>Topic: <i>“When many people together do one small thing ...” – A Reading of Wangari Maathai’s Unbowed: One Woman’s Story</i></p> <p>Discussant: Veronica Barnsley</p>
16:30-17:30	<p>Presentation and Discussion of Paper 3</p> <p><b>Christiane Schlote, University of Basel</b></p> <p>Topic: <i>Representation, Commodification, Glamourisation: Humanitarian Aid in British Drama</i></p> <p>Discussant: Hanna Hacker</p>
18:00 – Open End	<p>Workshop Dinner (Invited guests only)</p> <p>S T A D T K I N D / Café / Bar / Restaurant          1010 Wien, Universitätsstraße 11</p>

**Friday, 18 May 2018, Department of African Studies, Seminar Room 4**

9:15-10:15	Presentation and Discussion of Paper 4 <b>Hanna Hacker, University of Vienna</b> Topic: <i>Break Out in a Sweat: Remembering Bodies in Aid Workers' Memoirs</i> Discussant: Christiane Schlote
10:15-11:15	Presentation and Discussion of Paper 5 <b>Ayšem Mert, Stockholm University</b> Topic: <i>Logics of Development: From Colonial to Sustainable Developmentalism</i> Discussant: Eric Burton
11:15-12:00	Coffee Break and Finger Food
12:00-13:00	Presentation and Discussion of Paper 6 <b>Eric Burton, University of Exeter</b> Topic: <i>Civilization under Colonial Conditions: Development, Difference and Violence in Swahili Poems and Travel Logs in German East Africa, 1889-1914</i> Discussant: Ayšem Mert
13:00-14:00	Wrap-up session and final discussion Chair: <b>Margarete Grandner, University of Vienna</b>

**Venue**

Department of African Studies  
Universitätscampus  
Spitalgasse 2, Hof 5, Seminar Room 3 (Thursday) and 4 (Friday)  
1090 Wien

**Convened by:**

Dr. Martina Kopf  
E-Mail: [martina.kopf@univie.ac.at](mailto:martina.kopf@univie.ac.at)

## Abstracts and Participants

Veronica Barnsley

### ***Getting the Child Out: Midwifery, Neonatal Care and Development in West African Fiction***

Practices of midwifery and neonatal care are both embedded in diverse local traditions and diverse social structures in postcolonial Africa and are subject to efforts by the UN and NGOs to address the 'global challenges' reformulated in the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015. This paper focuses on the representation of midwifery and neonatal care in recent novels from Nigeria and Ghana. It analyses how these texts narrate, negotiate and critique midwifery and neonatal care, which are frequently points of contention in discourses of development and global health.

Given that the study of Southern childhoods is still for the most part defined by the perspectives and politics of the global North, it is important to consider the strategies used by postcolonial writers to resist the imposition of predetermined models of childbirth and childcare through development programmes. The diverse practices of midwifery and neonatal care in West Africa (and across postcolonial locations) and the range of experiences that children go on to have (whether marked by poverty or privilege) do not have to be characterised as lacking but can be analysed for their complex engagement with and reformulation of global developmental agendas involving mothers and children.

This paper uses Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* (2010) as a case study, with references to Taiye Salasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and other texts to illustrate the argument. The representations of midwifery and neonatal care in these novels raise issues including intergenerational knowledge, religious practices, and FGM; the priorities and perceptions of North and South clash and the meaning and purpose of development as it relates to global child and maternal health is challenged. *Tiny Sunbirds* straddles the divides between local and global, indigenous populations and international organisations, colonised and coloniser, and as such demonstrates the capacity of postcolonial literature to contribute to urgent debates on development and global health.

Eric Burton

### ***Civilization under Colonial Conditions: Development, Difference and Violence in Swahili Poems and Travel Logs in German East Africa, 1889-1914***

The Swahili coast has a long tradition of historiographical poetry. In this paper, I analyse a set of historiographical poems, travelogues and a more prosaic "History of Development" written by Swahili poets during the period of German colonial wars and colonial rule. I argue that by comparing different poems and travelogues, we come to see most qualities assigned with civilization (and, later, development) – including discipline, orderliness, literacy, cleanliness and technological superiority – were not an appropriation of Europeans ideals, but deeply rooted in Swahili sociocultural patterns. The shift of perceptions of civilization that we can see in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century has to be embedded in a broader historical framework that articulates literary entanglements between Swahili and German scholars with experiences of colonial violence. The texts also reflect a sense of cultural loss and epistemic inequalities. Also, while the poems and travelogues are informed by images of superior and inferior groups (*wastaarabu* and *washenzi*), these differences were not couched in terms of temporality – that is, groups were considered "civilized" or "barbarian," but not backward

or progressive in a temporal sense. At the same time, these categories were not static, but applied flexibly to reflect own experiences, as I show in the case of a travelogue of a journey through Russia. Change most clearly associated with German colonialism was of a technological kind. A source so far unstudied, Hemedi bin Abdullah's *History of Africa* from ca. 1914, illustrates the perception of the colonial impact from a contemporary, yet culturally particular perspective.

Hanna Hacker

### ***Break Out in a Sweat: Remembering Bodies in Aid Workers' Memoirs***

This paper focuses on narrative topoi of the body and embodiment in "development"-related contact literature. My reading is framed by feminist, post-colonial and intersectional theoretical approaches.

First, I present parts of my corpus, i.e. first-person narratives from the "field" by (Western) aid workers, volunteers and experts with experience in African countries from the 1960s through the 2000s. Subsequently, my paper reflects upon writing as a bodily practice in the context of development work and discusses critical approaches to corporeality in a transnational perspective. Finally, I concentrate on the „outbreak“ and the „breakthrough“ performed by bodies in some of the texts in my corpus. In what ways can episodes where corporeality suddenly "breaks into" the narration contribute to our understanding of embodiment, desire and, last but not least, violence within development?

My paper is punctuated by auto\_biographical and auto\_fictional quotes from notes, diaries and letters which I composed during my stay as aid worker in Sub-Saharan Africa around the year 2000. Thus, it does not fully comply with the usual requirements for a scholarly text – it would not pass any peer review, I guess. In my oral presentation during our workshop I will elaborate a bit further on this aspect. Furthermore, I intend to outline in which directions my research continued after the publication of this paper as a chapter in my book "Queer Entwickeln" (2012).

Esther Mbithi

### ***"When many people together do one small thing ..." – A Reading of Wangari Maathai's Unbowed: One Woman's Story***

Wangari Maathai was a humble scientist and an activist whose life-long passion for tree planting, environmental conservation and equitable distribution of resources eventually won her the Nobel Peace Prize. *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* is her memoir, first published in 2006. A reading of *Unbowed* is, effectively, a reading of the Kenyan story: from a perspective that is totally different from the dominant and more celebrated narrative. Postcolonial writing, and reading, covers a multitude of areas, issues and themes. Rarely does it include the memoir of a woman. Indeed, not many African women have had their life stories captured in writing, much less in their own hand. *Unbowed* is a record in clear, simple language of Wangari Maathai's journey from the idyllic paradise of Ithi, through the treacherous socio-political system, to the upper echelons of power.

While *Unbowed* may increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style, it is more about acceptance and moving on, each doing their best for the common good. It provides inspiration for the young who crave an education; women who desire freedom and achievement; and leaders of integrity everywhere. It plants that all-important seed for development through transformative leadership and social justice.

Ayşem Mert

***Logics of Development: From Colonial to Sustainable Developmentalism***

This paper focuses on the historical development of one of the most dominant discourses of contemporary global politics: Sustainable development (SD). It starts with discussing the phantasmal space that developmentalism and environmentalism, the two narratives that comprise SD, occupy in modern times. By doing this, I aim to show the historical and modern roots of western affirmation of developmentalism. Using one of the most relevant colonial novels, *Max Havelaar* by Multatuli, I trace the colonial origins of developmentalism. Next, I juxtapose this analysis to those of two post-colonial novels: Ben Okri's *Famished Road* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Here my goal is to reveal how the dominant colonial narrative had to give in to nativist/populist discourses in the aftermath of the WWII. The idea of development colonized the hearts and minds of the newly emerging national elite during the post-colonial struggles to establish new regimes.

Finally, the SD paradigm emerged as a response to yet another populist demand: the demands for ecological conservation and protection of wilderness. Analysing *The Monkey Wrench Gang* by Edward Abbey and the following responses from the international governance elite reveals how the response to these demands assumed a universal and benevolent (if not charitable) image and how this was revealed in the official documents and institutions of global governance of sustainable development, wherein the 'ontological absence' of the colonized was re-constructed and re-legitimised in a novel semiotic network.

Christiane Schlote

***Representation, Commodification, Glamourisation: Humanitarian Aid in British Drama***

The figure of the refugee and asylum seeker has been one of the most important protagonists in contemporary drama and fiction. But while their analysis as objects of humanitarian intervention has been essential in post-World War II refugee discourses, the figure of the international aid worker remains under-analysed. Drawing on discourses of global media ethics and literature and human rights, this paper examines the nexus of aid workers' ambiguous role as "hero and myth-maker" (Knightley) and "disaster gypsies" (Norris) and potential new modes of interventionist literary and theatre practices in a selection of recent dramatisations and fictionalisations of humanitarian aid.

**Veronica Barnsley** is a lecturer in Contemporary Literature at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on cultural representations of childhood and development, predominantly in South Asian and West and Southern African fiction. She is a co-founder of the Northern Postcolonial Network (NPN). She also has an interest in forced migration and runs Material Stories, an arts-based project working with refugees and asylum seekers in Sheffield.

**Eric Burton**, PhD, Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Exeter, is a Global historian/Africanist with a background in development studies and anthropology. Interested in the history of socialisms, East-South relations, and decolonisation. His PhD is about interactions between German development personnel from both East and West Germany and Tanzanian counterparts in the context of the Cold War. It was part of the research project entitled "Experts in Development and Socialist Aid in the era of global competition between the political systems West and East" (<http://entwicklungsexperten.univie.ac.at/en/>) funded by the Austrian Science Funds (FWF).

**Margarete Grandner** studied history, English and American language and literature as well as economics at the University of Vienna, university teacher since 2001, visiting teacher at the Universities of Minnesota, Chicago, and Leiden, currently working at the Department of Development Studies of the University of Vienna.

**Hanna Hacker**, Ph.D., Vienna, is a sociologist and historian with research emphasis on cultural and postcolonial studies in a feminist and queer studies perspective. Most recently she held professorships at the Department of Contemporary History and at the Department of Development Studies, University of Vienna. She has widely published in the field of feminist theory and global inequalities, on social movements in Europe, and on sex/gender constructions in modern history. Her current research project deals with racism/anti-racism and Africa policy in "post-colonial" Austria in the 1960s.

**Martina Kopf** is Senior Lecturer in African Literatures at the Department of African Studies, University of Vienna, and Elise Richter Fellow with a research project on 'Concepts of Development in Postcolonial Kenyan Writing', funded by the Austrian Science Funds (FWF). Her areas of interest include development discourses in fiction and narrative; intercultural feminism; postcolonial cultural criticism; Africa in colonial writing of the first half of the 20th century; memories of violence and ethics of representation.

**Esther Mbithi**. Writer, editor, and translator, Dr. Esther Mbithi is a lecturer in the Literature Department, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, currently serving as the Chairperson. Specialising in language use, stylistics and literary presentation, Dr. Mbithi also has an interest in journalistic creative writing: [www.creativewritingEKM.com](http://www.creativewritingEKM.com)

**Ayşem Mert** is Associate Senior Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, where she explores the discourses of democracy, development and environment, particularly in transnational governance. Her research interests include fictive/non-fictive, official/unofficial narratives, eco-criticism, and the Anthropocene. She is the author of *Environmental Governance through Partnerships: A discourse theoretical study* (2015).

**Christiane Schlote** teaches drama and postcolonial literatures and cultures at the University of Basel. She is the author of *Bridging Cultures: Latino- und asiatisch-amerikanisches Theater in New York* (1997) and co-editor of *New Beginnings in Twentieth-Century Theatre and Drama* (with Peter Zenzinger, 2003), *Constructing Media Reality. The New Documentarism* (with Eckart Voigts-Virchow, 2008) and *Representations of War, Migration and Refugeehood: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (with Daniel Rellstab, 2015). Current research projects concern Anglophone literatures and human rights, in particular, literary and cultural representations of humanitarian aid, global working-class studies, petrofiction and British imperialism and the Edwardian era.