



Programme Point Sud 2018

Narratives of Achievement in African and Afroeuropean Contexts

31st October-3rd November 2018, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Report

stias STELLENBOSCH INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY
STELLENBOSSE INSTITUUT VIR GEVORDERDE NAVORSING



DFG

Narratives of Achievement in African and Afro-European Contexts

Conveners

Dr. Eva Ulrike Pirker, Anglophone Literatures, Düsseldorf University, Germany

Dr. Mandisa Mbali, Social Anthropology/History, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Dr. Katja Hericks, Sociology, University of Potsdam, Germany

Themes and Objectives

The aim of our workshop has been to initiate collaborative research and begin to explore concepts of achievement and merit in African and Afro-European contexts. Achievement-orientation is a powerful global discourse that impacts on all aspects of social and individual life. Between the 1940s and the 1970s, the ‘achievement principle’ was researched and theorised to some extent, but framed as a Western phenomenon by the scientific discourse – due to a limited, hegemonically structured view of achievement in a setting of then industrialised nations (cf. Parsons; McClelland, Marcuse). Recently, achievement orientation has begun to attract research once more. Again, this research remains largely limited to the global North, although meritocratic principles manifest themselves across the globe in multiple ways. Achievement-orientation is an omnipresent feature of African societies. A better understanding of the ways in which achievement and merit are defined, negotiated, represented and embedded, and of the connotations they carry in African contexts, among African social groups and strata, has been one important aspect of our collaborative investigations. These, however, have also aimed at reframing global ideas of achievement and provide a corrective to the Western/Eurocentric framework. How achievement is envisioned, narrated, scripted in African and Afro-European cultural representations, in institutional and organisational contexts has been one of our leading questions. Our workshop, designed to initiate exchange and collaboration on achievement concepts across disciplines, has sought to bring together young and experienced scholars from Africa and Europe and probe into the field by assembling approaches to, and case studies on, a wide range of ‘meritocratic’ narratives and scripts. It has aimed at showing, and has shown, that notions of the ‘global periphery’ have a greatly underestimated impact on global ideas and social realities.

Methodology and Results

A particular challenge of our enterprise was its radical multidisciplinaryity, including papers based in literary and cultural studies, sociology and history and social anthropology. From the beginning the multidisciplinaryity of the workshop was already reflected in the organisers’ disciplinary affiliations. For us, it was a crucial aim to bring these different disciplines into a fruitful dialogue that would raise new questions and provide new approaches for the vital ongoing debates about our theme within each of those disciplines.

Already in the stage of writing the proposal for the Point Sud Programme, we knew that we wanted to bring people together from different generations (career-wise), different geographical/cultural situations (diverse African spaces, African diasporic spaces and Europeans) and place them out of their typical work context and disciplinary framework in order to provide disruptive thinking. For this enterprise the Point Sud framework proved to be ideal.

In order to implement a genuinely transdisciplinary approach successfully, in-depth communication prior to the event was crucial. Apart from skyping, the use of cloud/dropbox devices to work on preparatory documents, a team meeting prior to the conference proved to

have been essential. During that team meeting, we set down the organizational principles for the programme and the conceptual frames that would result in in-depth discussions. We grouped the abstracts into three sections:

1. Narratives of Formation, Narratives of Achievement
2. Universal Agendas – Particular Practices
3. The Politics of Scientification

Instead of having discussions immediately after each contribution, we opened a space for interaction and ‘bilateral’ dialogues prior to the plenary discussions. We specifically made use of the coffee and lunch breaks for these informal ‘bilateral’ discussions and asked the speakers to summarize – after the break – the questions and feedback they had received during the informal discussion. This allowed the speakers to reflect on their own research from a range of perspectives and enabled the entire group to have genuine and in-depth plenary discussions. The typical questions of clarification that normally arise after a paper were thus relegated to the informal discussions and allowed us more time and space for the crucial questions during our plenary rounds.

Beyond using the lunch and coffee breaks in a meaningful way in the context of our programme, we also used the additional excursions and dinners in our programme to spark new thinking about both our conference theme and the South African environment in which our conference was set – where the legacy of apartheid remains inscribed in public, convivial and scholarly spaces: We took out participants to Boschendal, a cooperative, organic wine farm that has faced its socially unjust history proactively (in both its museum and overall management). During dinner, we were given information about that history and had the opportunity to walk around the grounds. A very different site was another conference dinner choice at Bo-Kaap Kombuis, run by a Cape Malay local historian who gave our group in-depth information about the area’s Cape Malay history. Important aspects of the subject of Narratives of Achievements in Afro-European contexts became visible on location in Bo-Kaap, a neighbourhood with a rich history regarding the presence of Cape Malay residents, and a contested space in times of Apartheid and contemporary neoliberal gentrification. While Boschendal provides a good example of the renegotiation of the social and political organisation of property and of the reproduction of class stratification as a legacy of apartheid, Bo-Kaap highlights popular struggles around the right to the city and its spaces.

A further space that is problematic in its ‘exclusivity’ is the museum of art, a space of designated as one of ‘high culture’. We therefore saw the opportunity of the newly opened Museum of Contemporary African Art (MOCAA) in the context of our conference topic. Apart from providing us with a different – or in fact multiple different – glances at the topic of achievement through different artistic forms and manifestations (including, in particular, a visit to the special exhibition “All things being equal” and “Five bobh: Painting at the end of an era” in particular), it engaged us in a debate about art, and in particular African art in a highly competitive global art context. Within the works that we had chosen for a special tour, the topic of achievement was centrally addressed. Mandisa Mbali had prepared the visit and guided tour by the curator Tandazani Dhlakhama prior to the conference.

It was important for us to take our participants to a different higher educational space and we therefore organised one panel at the University of Cape Town. UCT is known for its vibrant, evolving discussions around access, diversity and transformation. We therefore invited the academic public to participate in the panel. Unfortunately, one of the participants, a Nigerian national, who would have delivered his paper in UCT, could not attend due to problems of obtaining a visa. We therefore decided to frame Charlotte Williams’s paper as a keynote.

Visiting, and in fact inhabiting diverse sites of knowledge, debate and discussion helped us to foster a productive environment for critical thinking and exchange within, and beyond, our group.

From our participants we received extremely positive feedback on the methodology of the setting the event up and on the constructive working atmosphere of the symposium itself that allowed productive, rigorous discussions. Apart from bringing the different contributions to the conference into a dialogue content-wise, the meeting's methodology actually resulted in us breaking new grounds in terms of initiating a sustainable transdisciplinary exchange about meritocratic narratives and scripts. Such an exchange across disciplinary and geographic spaces one is vitally needed in relation to this topic that permeates and affects societies globally.

Sustainability of the Event

The most important and immediate outcome of the workshop is the joint publication of the proceedings in the form of short papers:

- Pirker, Eva Ulrike, Mandisa Mbali and Katja Hericks. *Forward, Onward, Upward: Narratives of Achievement in African and African-European Contexts*. Düsseldorf University and University Library Publication Services.

We have secured additional contributions by international researchers who have learned about our workshop after it has been carried out. We are thus continuing the process of building a sustainable research network in the field. All individual contributions will be searchable via a permanent DOI and will be available as open access publications. The contributions will also be available as a collection that provides an introduction and information about the contributors.

Individual publications:

- Hericks, Katja. "Der Rationalitätsmythos." In: Hasse, Raimund/ Krüger, Anne, Neo-Institutionalismus – Kritik und Weiterentwicklung eines sozialwissenschaftlichen Paradigmas. transcript-Verlag, 2019.
- Pirker, Eva Ulrike. [Review Essay]. "Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67.1 (2019): 100-104.
- Other publications both by participants and the organisers are in progress and will be published in international journals.

Network Building:

- Collaboration: Dr. Mandisa Mbali "African Voices in Global Health", Doctoral Workshop (Veit Arlt, Universität Basel, Zentrum für Afrikastudien facilitated through Florian Elliker); guest lecturer and coorganiser
- Guest Lecture Dr. Mandisa Mbali, University of Düsseldorf, 13 June 2019, African Bodies in the Diaspora: Gender-based trauma and 'home' in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*
- Eva Ulrike Pirker: Coorganisation of a special panel on Afrofuturism at the Afro-European Studies Conference 2019 (Lisbon): including workshop participant Cezara Nicola (Bucharest)

- Collaboration/teaching/exchange: planning of a student exchange between Düsseldorf (BA Transcultural Studies) and University of Cape Town.

We plan further activities (publications, research and teaching formats) in the field.

Participants

1. Prof. Manuela Boatcă, Sociology/Global Studies, University of Freiburg, Germany
2. Dr. Florian Elliker, Sociology, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland
3. Mina Godarzani-Bakhtiari, PhD-candidate, Sociology, University of Potsdam, Germany
4. PD Dr. Sissy Helff, Literature/Cultural Studies, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany
5. Dr. Katja Hericks, Sociology, University of Potsdam, Germany
6. Lena Kraus, PhD-candidate, Literature/Cultural Studies, Education, University of Freiburg, Germany
7. Dr. Jo Littler, Cultural Studies/Sociology, City University, London, UK
8. Dr. Ruby Magosvongwe, Comparative Literature, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe
9. Dr. Mandisa Mbali, History, Cultural Anthropology, University of Cape Town, South Africa
10. Cezara Nicola, PhD-candidate, Literature, Cultural Studies/Art History, University of Bucharest, Romania
11. Dr. Vanessa Noble, History, University of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa
12. Dr. Joseph Oduro-Frimpong, Cultural Studies, Ashesi University, Accra, Ghana
13. Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang, PhD-candidate, Literature, Ashesi University Accra, Ghana
14. Dr. Eva Ulrike Pirker, Literature/Cultural Studies, University of Duesseldorf, Germany
15. Dr. Suzanne Scafe, Literature, London Southbank University, London, UK
16. Dr. Tina Steiner, Anglophone and Comparative Literature, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa
17. Prof. Steve Tonah, Sociology, University of Ghana Legon, Accra, Ghana
18. Dr. Mpho Tshivhase, Philosophy, University of Pretoria, South Africa
19. Prof. Charlotte Williams, Social Work and Human Services, RMIT University of Melbourne, Australia
20. Prof. emer. Theresa Wobbe, Sociology, University of Potsdam, Germany