

# **Cultures of Resistance?: Theories and Practices of Transgression in the Caribbean and Its Diasporas**

## **Conference Report**

**Socare Junior Research Conference**

**January 22-24, 2015**

**Bielefeld, Center for Interdisciplinary Research**

**Organized by the Society for Caribbean Research (Socare) and the Center for Interamerican Studies (CIAS)**

(By Wiebke Beushausen)

From January 22 to 24, 2015, the third junior research conference of the Society for Caribbean Research was hosted at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) at Bielefeld University, in co-operation with and funded by the CIAS, the BMBF-project “The Americas as Space of Entanglements,” the International Postgraduate Forum Bielefeld (IPF), and the Westfälisch-Lippische Universitätsgesellschaft (WLUG). The organizing team of eight junior scholars, Wiebke Beushausen, Johannes Bohle, Miriam Brandel, Joseph Farquharson, Diana Fulger, Marius Littschwager, Annika McPherson, and Julia Roth, based at three different German Universities (Augsburg, Bielefeld, Heidelberg), invited international researchers and activists to discuss and present their work on the topic of “Cultures of Resistance?: Theories and Practices of Transgression.” The biannual format of the conference provides a regular opportunity for doctoral and postdoctoral candidates in Caribbean Studies and related fields to present their projects in an interdisciplinary environment and receive feedback from both junior and experienced scholars. The 2015 conference brought together participants from such diverse disciplines as social anthropology, literary studies, linguistics, cultural studies, history, and geography.

The overarching question was whether Caribbean subjects are ‘doomed’ to resist which was indicated with a question mark already in the conference title. Under scrutiny was the almost instantaneous association of the Caribbean with rebellion, protest, power, violence, or domination. The conference sought to question a general tendency to culturalize resistance as a concept at the expense of its historical becoming, (geo-)political implications, and the meaning of citizenship, often neglecting the acting (resisting) subjects in the Caribbean and the Americas. Along with these issues, the contributions and discussions made clear, what needs attention when considering oppression and strategies for empowerment are racialized, gendered, and class contexts, as well as those contexts that are determined by other social categories such as age, sexuality, and ability. Put forward was the claim for profound theorization and contextualization of resistance to further an understanding of how practices of transgression are conceptualized and realized by actors within local, (trans-)regional, (trans-)national and global contexts.

The highlights were two keynote lectures from the disciplines of literary studies and (Cuban) Critical Race Studies. GISELLE ANATOL (University of Kansas; introduction: Miriam Brandel), in “Blood is Money, Blood is Race, Blood is Sex: Using the Vampire to Challenge Sexual Norms in Caribbean Literature,” discussed the resisting potential in women’s writing of the African Caribbean diaspora, like Nalo Hopkinson’s and Edwidge Danticat’s, using the female vampire as trope for women’s empowerment and liberation from neo-/colonial, patriarchal oppression. She investigated

the different ways writers turn to the folkloric figure of the soucouyant, the skin-shedding, blood-sucking 'Old Hag,' to unsettle middle-class respectability, femininity, and propriety. ROBERTO ZUBANO (editor, literary scholar and independent researcher; introduction: Diana Fulger, Julia Roth), in his keynote address "El rojo y el negro: El capítulo olvidado del debate antiracista en el Caribe (Racismo versus Marxismo)," focused on what he termed the 'Black question' and 'neo-racism' in Cuba. He criticized the long silence on racism against the background of a 'color-blind' Soviet socialist model that persisted well into the 1990s. He furthermore examined how academic research, creative writing, and the arts have been disclosing the devaluation of Black subjectivity envisaging anti- and non-racist forms of cohabitation in the Cuban present moment.

Further in-depth analysis of the historical dimension and contemporary relevance of resistance and related practices in the Caribbean and the diaspora was provided in seven multi-disciplinary, multi-lingual panel sessions: "Politics and Theoretical Interventions" (chair: Joseph Farquharson); "Maroonage and Collective Memory" (chair: Annika McPherson); "Religion and Community" (chair: Martina Urioste-Buschmann); "Gender/Queer Resistance and Activism" (chair: Jochen Kemner); "Narratives of Resistance" (chair: Wiebke Beushausen). Two further panels were explicitly designed for junior researchers to present their dissertation projects and master's thesis apart from the conference topic (comment: Anja Bandau, Anne Brüske). Taking seriously that as concept, resistance often remained under-theorized risking a too abstract and/or de-contextualized application, the papers engaged in the diverse ways transgressive acts relate to the persistence of colonial structures, economic dependency, social inequality, and racial and gender hierarchies. The myriad dimensions of resistance were highlighted in the variety of topics the participants covered: resistance in and through literature and resisting incarcerated bodies (Ana Casado Fernández, Patrick Eser, Marius Littschwager); revolutionary heroes, maroonage, and anti-slavery (Sarah Gröning, Joseph Jordan, Isabell Lammel, Helen McKee); spirits of resistance, religion, activism, and students' protests (Ilja Labischinski, Claudia Rauhut, Alessandra Rosa); theoretical paradigms of resistance, subjectivity, and post- and decoloniality (Julia Borst, Marita Rainsborough); the un-/silencing of history, racism and nationalisms, indigeneity (Christina Schramm, Jannik Kohl); creolization and linguistic transgressions (Bettina Book, Hanna Merk, Paula Prescod); violence, childhood trauma, and morality (Gonçalo Cholant, Jiselle Providence).

In the concluding plenary discussion (moderation: Martina Urioste-Buschmann, Annika McPherson) some of the issues that were being addressed pertain to those theories and theorists that are generally engaged with alongside the necessity to think outside of the canon and common methodology. Addressed was also the relevance for international academia of Caribbean research conducted in Germany on the postgraduate level as well as the possibly productive friction that results from combining the respective perspectives to resist and overcome colonial epistemes. What remains for future research is the urgency of decolonial thinking, which was raised already explicitly in the Socare-workshop on "Decolonizing Gender" in 2013 (Hannover). To come up with new, alternative, creative ways and strategies to decolonize knowledge production in this forum will stay with us.

An edited volume with the tentative title *Culture(s) of Resistance? Theories and Practices of Transgression in the Caribbean and its Diasporas* will be published with Ashgate as part of the series InterAmerican Research: Contact, Communication, Conflict (planned for fall 2016).

The program of the conference can be downloaded here:

<http://caribbeanresearch.net/de/content/juniorresearch-workshop-22-24-januar-2015>

For the CfP including further information on the conference and venue, please see:

<http://caribbeanresearch.net/de/content/junior-research-workshops>