

Editorial

Special Edition: Current Research in the Humanities

Emma O'Shaughnessy, with Professor Harry Garuba

The University of Cape Town's 2009 academic year ended with an interdisciplinary conference in the Humanities. *postamble* came eagerly on board as a part-funder, but also to seize the chance to co-ordinate a panel discussion for the postgraduate students present, around what it means, and the means to publishing. The panel was rich with Professors Gail Fincham and Carrol Clarkson (both with vast editorial and publishing experience), doctoral students and *postamble* representatives, Natasha Himmelman and Emma O'Shaughnessy, engaging in an energetic, hour long conversation. Students were exposed to publishing and editing protocols within academic literary circles, as well as to transitional nodes—such as this journal— which offer bridges between these often-distant circles and the relatively safe space of student scholarship. The proceedings went smoothly and the journal was able to generate a healthy discussion about its own presence as a reputable postgraduate publishing space.

The range of research presented at the conference was impressive. Before the conference, *postamble* advertised launching a special, extra edition in 2010, entitled— like the conference— Current Research in the Humanities. We were pleased to be able to make a strong selection from what we saw and heard. Thus, in this edition, you will find five essays of different forms: some dissertation chapters, some proposals, etc., all displaying exciting avenues of thought taken up by students in a variety of disciplines: from English Literature to Diversity Studies. These pieces have not been peer-reviewed, since many are in varying stages of development, and so what we have in this particular instance presents itself as a sounding board for those interested in having their work published, and for those who wish to engage with the excellent work of their peers as they plot their own route through their academic spheres.

The next edition of *postamble* will be ‘business as usual’ – for which a call for papers will be circulated shortly on HNET, this site, and as widely as possible within African Studies departments and centres around the globe.

Although this edition is an intermediate one in our publishing run of 2010, it has been instrumental in raising some important points about what it means to study and ‘write’ Africa. Since the organising theme of this journal is the study of Africa, we could only accept work and research that focused on or contributed to African issues – in some form. This elicited an interesting debate amongst the collective, and amongst the postgraduate students concerned – debates which mirror in very intricate ways current (heated) dialogues within the Humanities Faculty at UCT – about the sustainability of schools of thought, journals, and even centres or institutes within the university which claim Africa as their singular discursive field.

The Centre for African Studies, the school in which the journal resides, is a separate centre at the University of Cape Town, where students can enroll in a range of cross disciplinary courses, which draw upon a variety of disciplinary perspectives from literature to public culture, heritage studies to critical theory, etc., to craft a transdisciplinary optic for studying Africa.

What is occurring on an administrative level within the university is a questioning of the place of a distinct Centre for African Studies in a university which itself is considered by many to be ostensibly African. Indeed, UCT is situated in South Africa and as an institution is emplaced within the contextual landscape of politics, society and culture that is *already* African. In this regard, it is expected therefore that the study of Africa is already mainstreamed within the disciplines. What need then, one might ask, for a separate centre of study, when the immediate locus and profile of the university places it automatically within the discursive frame that occupies the Centre for African Studies in their research and teaching? For the editors at *postamble*, the debate emerged in another guise: could we really say to some of the Masters and Doctoral students

that we could not accept their work because they did not focus on Africa or African studies in their research? Surely, one could argue that the fact that these students are situated within Africa means that their research is automatically imbued with a particular African character and viewpoint, inscribed by a positionality that makes the work African by nature?

At the core of these questions lies the well-known debate around African letters that has concerned writers since the end of colonialism in Africa. And in that debate, we know that one could take either side and argue its case convincingly. The battle that the Centre for African Studies faces is partly an administrative one, concerned with the shape and size of academic departments and partly an epistemological one, concerned with the question of knowledge production on and about Africa. In *postamble's* opinion, to claim that the Centre and its concerns (including this journal) are somehow redundant at UCT is an error of a most short sighted nature. For, the inheritance and legacy of an institution such as our are always entangled with its past and here, these are undeniably colonial ones. And, what is Humanities scholarship for if not a means of drawing necessary attention to knowledges that have been marginalised by the very script of the western model of academic theory and practice? Certainly, it can be argued that in a far away land where 'Africa' is a separate entity entirely, a discrete school (or journal) of African Studies might seem more 'logical'.

However, this assumes that the study of Africa is only a study of a place and its people, and not the very ideologies that emerge from within that place itself which, in their origins, are often contested. This would also be assuming that western languages, world views, ideas and aesthetics have *not* dominated most ways of studying the world (including Africa from within Africa) for a very long time. As history has shown, this is very much not the case. And, as most of us know, it will still be some time before the world order shifts to share power and position with the subaltern. Therefore, the Centre for African studies at UCT exists as a means to counter the tendency within our own society to look west. It also exists as a space in which important African thinkers are seen to be part of

the vital nexus of people mapping out an ever expanding and diversifying planet. Should the Centre be dissolved or assimilated unthinking into a different department, what will be lost is a place of study that actively demands of its students that they challenge the status quo of their understanding of ideas, of their own country, and even of their own university. Thus, we apologise for having to exclude essays from students writing about someone else's politics, or some place else's history. We do not wish to appear exclusive or prescriptive, or fixed in our ways. We realise there is a fine line to tread here. However we are honest in saying that as a publication, we are endeavouring to keep Africa from being cast as merely a place, or as a residual component of study here in South Africa. *postamble*, like the Centre for African Studies, is dedicated to contributing to the production of knowledge from within Africa, based on the understanding that studying the ways knowledges are studied matters – just as much as the knowledges studied. In other words, until the world order ceases to cast Africa as 'other,' there will be a need for an African Studies Centre, even in Africa.

It is with this in mind that *postamble* supports the Centre for African Studies at UCT in its current and future efforts to scrutinise dominant epistemologies, to teach future generations how to follow suit, and to have identifiable walls and a distinguishable name to house these efforts. We invite you to engage in this debate, by writing on *postamble's* blog. The Centre for African Studies also hopes to host an international conference centred on these concerns, to enliven the dialogue further, in the near future. Look out for a posting in the upcoming months under the News section. And, with this in mind, we invite you to peruse this edition and its fine display of young academic (African) scholarship.