

NEW TERRITORIES IN CRITICAL WHITENESS STUDIES POSTGRADUATE CONFERENCE



L-R: Back row: Richard Tavernier, University of Leeds; Barbara Samaluk, Queen Mary, University of London; Noémi Michel, University of Geneva. Front row: Shona Hunter, Madeline-Sophie (Maddy) Abbas, Say Burgin, all University of Leeds; Jennifer Dulek, University of Illinois; Dieuwertje Dyi Huijg, University of Manchester.

18-20 AUGUST UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

BY MADELINE-SOPHIE ABBAS AND SAY BURGIN

As part of its efforts to foster future research leaders within the field of critical whiteness studies, the White Spaces Research Network, led by Dr Shona Hunter (University of Leeds), has launched a postgraduate arm. The postgraduate network is semi-autonomous to the broader White Spaces network and is run by and for postgraduate students. It aims to create a graduate community grounded in an understanding of the specific pressures, constraints, and opportunities facing postgraduates working in the area. Central to the network is its promotion of international collaboration between members to advance this evolving field into new territories through the use of innovative technologies to share information and develop research partnerships.

The postgraduate network held its inaugural 'New Territories in Critical Whiteness Studies Postgraduate Conference' over 18-20 August at the University of Leeds, with financial support from the SPA (small grant), the Economic History Society, the Leeds Humanities Research Institute, the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), and both the School of History

and School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds. 'New Territories' provided an opportunity for postgraduate students engaged in the field to present their research and develop the direction of the new postgraduate arm.

More than 20 postgraduate delegates from six different countries attended the conference, including participants from the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, the UK, the United States, and Canada. In addition, the conference's keynote speaker, Dr Cath Ellis (University of Huddersfield) added to the conference's international scope through insightful contributions on her native Australia. The participation by a number of European delegates from outside of the UK was an especially exciting feature considering the lack of attention that critical whiteness studies has paid to this part of the globe.

A range of disciplines

Research presented by conference delegates confirms that postgraduate students today are pushing critical whiteness studies into new territories. Contributors presented research from a range of disciplines – music, sociology, history, political science, English literature, education and beyond. Participation also represented the full spectrum of postgraduate academic experience, with MA students presenting research alongside doctoral students that had either just begun or were in the final stages of their research. Delegates presented 15 different papers under five

conference themes - the racialisation of English spaces, challenges to national identities, white anti-racist projects and problems, white privilege, and methodological challenges in critical whiteness studies.

Taking a cue from the larger White Spaces network and its inaugural conference in 2009, the 'New Territories' conference included an opportunity for 'Dialogue and Debate'. This session provided an open space to think through various debates and discussions that had arisen throughout the conference and how these issues/challenges/debates might be carried into the postgraduate network. During this session, delegates in one group concentrated on the question 'What is whiteness?' They discussed why this concept proved to be so slippery for scholars and the different ways in which it was understood and utilised by conference delegates and other critical whiteness scholars. Participants in another group focused on the connections and disconnections between critical whiteness studies in the academy and collective struggles for racial justice taking place outside of academia. A number of delegates from both groups expressed concern over the lack of impact of the field outside of the academy, and they considered how the postgraduate network might position itself in order to more directly engage with anti-racism efforts and practitioners. As with the 2009 'White Spaces' conference, this session provided an important moment for deeper and more candid reflection on recurring challenges within the field.

Career development

Reflecting the postgraduate network's aim to assist the career development of postgraduates, the conference provided two strong training components. Dr Ellis's address, 'Teaching and Unlearning: Critical 'Race' Pedagogy and Online Learning Environments', asked delegates to reflect on their current and future teaching roles. Dr Ellis argued that on-line learning environments prove useful in the instruction of critical race theory and that they may offer less embodied ways in which to discuss race issues that may enable more candid, reflective thinking that distils some of the emotional burdens that can accompany classroom discussions. As a non-traditional teaching format, Dr Ellis argued that e-learning can be a "catalyst for change" since it encourages teachers to re-think their teaching practices and may be a move towards destabilising normative approaches to teaching critical race studies.

Tamsine O'Riordan, senior commissioning editor for Zed Publishers, talked on a very different subject but one pertinent to all postgraduates – the challenges of academic publishing. In terms of opportunities for future collaborations, the demand of publishing for academics against a somewhat bleak outlook of available opportunities presents some concerns to all early career academics. Tamsine nonetheless provided invaluable advice for postgraduates trying to get a foot into publishing including: know your publisher and audience, network for edited collections, contact publishers with your book idea before giving up your life to write it and, finally, should you be lucky enough to secure a contract don't make an enemy of your publisher! These points provided us with some ammunition for the difficult road ahead.

Building the Network

The central goal of the conference was to map out future directions of the postgraduate arm. As a research group within the WUN, this organisation has provided a great deal of assistance in creating sustainable mechanisms by which the White Spaces

network can promote and develop international collaborations. To move the postgraduate arm forward, Kirsty Mattinson (Leeds WUN representative), and Louise Heery, (WUN general manager), introduced WUN-supported options and opportunities, including different technologies that support innovation in research and education globally through interdisciplinary collaboration, exchange and e-learning. Kirsty and Louise highlighted a couple of innovative collaborations developed by postgraduates through WUN, including a postcolonial studies e-journal, a virtual seminar series and an on-line information sharing system. These initiatives were presented as vehicles through which the network might sustain itself and extend its reach.

Following WUN's presentation, delegates ended the conference with an in-depth discussion on the postgraduate arm's future and the best mechanisms and resources at our disposal to achieve this aim. Participants decided on four different development strands:

- E-mail list: as our on-going communication tool for resource and information sharing on events and funding.
- Blog: with the aim of providing a platform for bringing critical whiteness issues to a wider audience - both academic and non-academic - through thought-pieces, responses to current events, and interactive comments. The blog will provide opportunities for peer review on articles and an outlet for ideas, as well as a collaborative enterprise that can respond to issues and debates in the field in a dynamic and thought-provoking way.
- Virtual seminar series: to facilitate ongoing empirical, methodological, and theoretical discussions as well as 'masterclasses' within critical whiteness studies that can be accessed by participants internationally.
- Future conference: planned for 2012 to serve as a benchmark for reflecting on the work achieved by the postgraduate arm and how it has developed, and deciding on new

directions for the network and its contribution to the field of critical whiteness studies.

The discussion surrounding how to proceed with the network's development raised many questions pertinent to most research endeavours. One key question was how to present the identity of the network. Here, interestingly, was the crux of the debate of whiteness itself - how should the network locate itself within the debates of whiteness? How should issues of power and hierarchy be negotiated when establishing and maintaining a network? How should the network promote social change? And, in this role, what is the network's relation to the 'real world'? All of these debates, which have their parallels in the field itself, were raised by delegates. Since no right or wrong approach could easily be found, these debates will continue to provide food for thought on the future of the network and serve to demonstrate the vibrant and complex nature of the field.

In response, the network provides a dynamic, challenging, and critical space in which to debate these issues and open up dialogue within the field of critical whiteness studies and beyond. The conference provided a space to explore the diversity of perspectives, both ideologically and geographically, and the personal engagement that all our delegates brought to the task of researching whiteness and white ethnicities. The network aims to build on this engagement and to reflect the debates, challenges, and developments in critical whiteness studies, and with the collaborative efforts of all delegates, it proposes to be an exciting and ongoing enterprise. Dr Ellis summed it up well in her exiting remark that the future of critical whiteness studies is in "great hands". We hope that the network will be a testament to Dr Ellis's affirmation.

The network is now live at <http://www.wun.ac.uk/research/white-spaces-network>. Anyone interested in becoming involved in the postgraduate arm of the network should contact Say Burgin (hy08snb@leeds.ac.uk) or Maddy Abbas (ss08msna@leeds.ac.uk).

Large Grants Scheme

The SPA is pleased to announce the launch of its Large Grants Scheme - designed to help fund one-off conference events dealing with research, policy & practice and/or learning & teaching in a way that is of benefit to the social policy community and SPA members. During 2011, we will prioritise applications that demonstrate clear policy maker/practitioner links. The maximum award for an individual event is £3000. The scheme will open on 1st January 2011.

Small Grants Scheme

The SPA invites applications for its Standard and Postgraduate Small Grants Schemes, designed to help fund seminars and workshops dealing with research and/or learning & teaching in

a way that is of benefit to the social policy community and SPA members. The focus should be on activities that will benefit a group or network rather than individuals. Applications for awards to support events with an international focus and/or to facilitate attendance from overseas, are particularly encouraged.

Funds will be made available in two rounds of applications over the year. Round one runs from 1st January to 30th June and round two from 1st July to 31st December. Applications are welcomed at any point within each award period, and funds are allocated on a first-come first-served basis. Each award offers a maximum of £500.

Full terms and conditions for both schemes, as well as information on how to apply, are available on the SPA website. For enquiries contact the SPA Grants Officer: **Majella Kilkey** M.M.Kilkey@hull.ac.uk

