

## **Summer School on “Narratives of Origin and Founding Myths” Pretoria, 9–14 April 2018**

### **Summary**

#### *Institutional setting*

As part of the ongoing cooperation between the MA programme “Studies in European Culture” at the University of Konstanz and the MA programme “African-European Relations” at the University of Pretoria, the Summer School in Pretoria built on a seminar held on the same topic a year ago at the University of Konstanz. Both seminars were organised and led by Prof. Albrecht Koschorke (University of Konstanz), Prof. Stephan Mühr (University of Pretoria) and Prof. Benda Hofmeyr (University of Pretoria). The participants included 10 students (which included doctoral students) from the University of Konstanz and 11 students and doctoral candidates from the University of Pretoria. Travel expenses were borne by the International Office of the University of Konstanz and the Erasmus+ programme, and the costs of room and board and a field trip for the students from the University of Konstanz were covered by the University of Pretoria.

#### *Programme*

The first day began with a brief recap of last year’s Summer School. Albrecht Koschorke gave an introductory talk on the foundations of narrative theory, and the students from the University of Konstanz summarised the texts discussed the previous year, which included European founding myths (the Book of Genesis, Livy, Rousseau, Wilhelm Tell). Anthropologist Fraser McNeill (University of Pretoria) then presented a lecture on “Myths of the Venda”, and Stephan Mühr led a discussion on the theses of Patrick Harries on tribalism and the “invention” of the Tsonga, a discussion which opened up the possibility of comparing European and (South) African origin myths in terms of structural analogies and the deployment of common motifs. Questions focused on in the discussions were the social and political roles that origin myths aim to fill, which concepts of collective identity they address and mobilise, and which claims about authority, ownership and political representation these myths bolster.

The theoretical frame provided by the first day’s discussions was extended and concretised by undertaking a field trip on the second day. To explore the question of the politics of memory, the group visited two completely different – almost oppositional – South African memorial sites: the Voortrekker Monument and the Freedom Park near Pretoria. Discussions with the curators and guides at these sites (and the previous day’s theoretical deliberations) made clear the urgency of addressing the problem of competing interpretations of history in contemporary South African discourse.

The third day focused on discussing philosophical and literary texts by G.W.F. Hegel, Joseph Conrad, Chinua Achebe and Achille Mbembe. Albrecht Koschorke led this discussion, and

students from the University of Pretoria made presentations. Here the principal focus was on the analysis of the European colonial imaginary of Africa (e.g. Africa as a site of childhood/innocence/the unconscious, and Africa as a continent outside of history) as well as on the question of how literary and philosophical texts dynamised and mobilised the stereotypes identified.

On the fourth day, presenters investigated the epistemological and scientific elements of the topic. The historian of science and author Christa Kuljian gave a lecture titled “The Myth of Race and the Search for Human Origins” in which she detailed how anthropological research into the origins of humankind was formed by social (often racist) assumptions. Thereafter, Jeanie Blackbeard (University of Pretoria) presented a paper on media representations of the discovery of “Homo naledi” near Johannesburg in 2015.

The fifth and sixth day honed in on “Africanism” (led by Benda Hofmeyr) in the broader philosophical context of the relationship between identity and history. Building on Nietzsche’s observations about the meaning of history for life, the students from the University of Pretoria made two presentations intended to spark discussion. These presentations interrogated recent attempts to socially and politically configure a “new invention” of Africa, for example, Ali Mazrui’s *The Re-invention of Africa*, Thabo Mbeki’s *I am an African* and the BBC series *The Africans*. The school closed with a final discussion summarising the events, talks and seminars of the previous days.

### *Conclusion*

The Summer School in Pretoria was a success in many respects. To begin with, the discussions that had taken place at the previous year’s school could be continued and deepened. Both groups of students emphasised the ways in which their understanding of European and African origin myths was deepened by the comparative approach and, in particular, by the “outside” perspective that each group provided when exploring the respective texts, from which the students said they benefitted immensely. The exchange of views provided many new ideas and directions for future studies and research that could be pursued at both universities. It is expected that the interests stimulated at the Summer School will be expanded and deepened at an interpersonal level, for instance, through the study exchange programme between the universities of Konstanz and Pretoria. At the same time, the institutional relationships between the two universities were strengthened: the Summer School encouraged professors and coordinators of both MA programmes to discuss further cooperation. Moreover, the Summer School programme attracted the interest of both students and lecturers from the University of Pretoria, who indicated that they would like to participate in the future.