

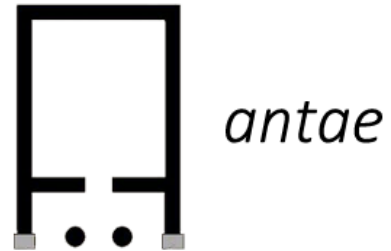
The Humanities on Migration — Conference Review

Aaron Aquilina

antae, Vol. 2, No. 1. (Mar., 2015), 68–72

Proposed Creative Commons Copyright Notices

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:



- a. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.
- b. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work (See [The Effect of Open Access](#)).

antae is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing is also accepted.

The Humanities on Migration — Conference Review

Aaron Aquilina

University of Malta

On the 28th of February, 2015, the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta held a half-day conference entitled ‘The Humanities on Migration’, where issues around the idea of the migrant were addressed through seven presentations and, in conclusion, through a general discussion on the topics and concerns raised by the speakers. This conference was free of charge and open to the general public.

A hearty welcome was given to a not inconsiderable audience by Professor Dominic Fenech, the dean of the Faculty, who spoke of how the humanities can collectively approach such issues with multitudinous perspectives, giving migration the soul and depth that so often lacks in discussions of it. ‘The Humanities’, Prof. Fenech says, ‘are as relevant as we succeed in making them. And we do.’ The twenty-minute presentations, in fact, were all delivered by academics who each hailed from different departments, encompassing the Departments of Classics and Archaeology, Italian, International Relations, Geography, Maltese, German, Sociology, and English, and which all showcased fresh and contemporary perspectives on the topic.

Accompanying Prof. Fenech in his welcome was Mr Jon P. Hoisaeter, the Head of the U.N.H.C.R. office in Malta. Mr Hoisaeter spoke of his certainty of the validity of the Humanities’ contribution, which raises vastly different points to what one frequently hears from lawyers, politicians or NGOs. He also observed how not since the Second World War have around fifty million people been on the move, and, although countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Sudan or Kenya bear the brunt of displacement, the Central Mediterranean and Malta are also greatly affected. While there is no lack of media coverage of the issue as it is in Malta, where a lot is being said by many different people, many people still hold overly-simplistic or polarised arguments of for or against, whereas opinions and analyses, according to Mr Hoisaeter, should be based on studies and facts. Hence, here the humanities can and should rightfully step in to ask questions, promote humane outlooks on the basis of education, and provide a well-informed exchange about migration and asylum-seekers—who is the migrant, and what is migration? What is Malta’s past experience of “outsiders” settling in? What are the opportunities for this country, in the short-, mid-, and long-term?

The first presentation, entitled ‘It Happened Then... It Happens Now: Migration and the Mediterranean’, delivered by Dr Timmy Gambin from the Department of Classics and Archaeology, addressed migration as an instinctual and inherent drive within humans, where the possibility of plotting the migration of modern humans up to 80,000 years ago reveals that migration has always been a part of our lives. While Mesopotamia, for example, dissolved

the need for hunter-gatherer societies to migrate with their herds—through offering lush land for some of the first farming and agricultural communities—push and pull factors (for instance, availability of fertile land, proximity to natural resources, and economic benefits in favour of climate change, floods, droughts, economic collapse, war and population growth) have always remained steadfast aspects of repeated relocation across borders. Dr Gambin also commented on the migration of language, beliefs, and culture, which actually benefitted hosting cities rather than annihilated them, and on how archaeological, historical, and ethnographical bodies of evidence can reveal current discussions to be generally myopic. This latter point was elaborated on by Professor Joseph M. Brincat from the Department of Italian, with his paper ‘Migration and Language: How Valletta Reshaped Maltese’. Prof. Brincat spoke of how social contact necessarily implicates language contact, at times scaled up to full-haul language shift. In Valletta, however, where a huge number of people suddenly occupied a previously uninhabited hill, a sifted local koiné appeared which gradually did away with regional varieties and where the large number of permanently settled foreigners learnt the language of the locals, most notably through marriage (indeed, a highly significant 32% of the marriages between 1627 and 1650 in Valletta and the surrounding three cities were between Maltese locals and foreigners).

The third paper, ‘Immigration News in Receiving Countries: The Case of Malta’, presented by Dr Carmen Sammut from the Department of International Relations, tackled the current media situation which reveals migration to be among the Maltese people’s greatest concerns. Dr Sammut maintained that the local media acts as critical narrative framing, especially when policies regarding this issue are not made very clear. Researching media professionals themselves, she asked whether journalists aspire to be critical public intellectuals, or whether the interests of political parties precede professional ideals. The ownership of migration by the media matters significantly, such as when it comes to allowing populist, and racist, discourse to be broadcast; RTK and other Catholic sub-organisations, for example, were noted to be the most frequently politically correct, never allowing the term “illegal immigrant(s)” to be aired or printed. Dr Sammut expounded the journalist’s dilemma as having to continuously assess their roles in terms of whether they should respect migrants from a human-rights perspective (as is generally the case with Maltese English language print media), or whether they should address national interest and security by asking whether citizens are safe, in all aspects of the word (as generally found in Maltese language print media). Dr Sammut noted how the news is audience-driven—the reading public and viewers are fast-becoming consumers rather than citizens—and thus, she contends, it is the followers who regulate media messages rather than the administrative powers. On a final note, Dr Sammut intriguingly notes how, while Maltese journalists do generally acknowledge their responsibilities and filter out harmful hate speech, it nonetheless remains the same situation of “us” writing about “them”, whereas the inverse is totally absent from our media.

But who is this “them”? Professor John A. Schembri and Professor Maria Attard, both from the Department of Geography, asked precisely this question. Their paper ‘Immigration to Malta: Geo-demographic Aspects’ examined the demographic characteristics and geographic distribution of the number of foreigners holding a residential permit. Prof. Schembri and Prof.

Attard outlined several factors that pull migrants to Malta, such as employment, favourable tax obligations, education, health policies, general quality of life, and even the weather. Such aspects have significantly increased the number of residing migrants; in 1985, there were 340,620 Maltese to the 4,798 foreign citizens, while in 2011, there were 395,971 Maltese to 20,084. While around 7,000 come from Africa (mostly from Somalia or Eritrea), the majority of residing migrants come from Europe (vastly outnumbering the others are those from Britain, though significant numbers hail from Italy, Germany and Bulgaria). By exposing the situation of the migrant at a micro-level, Prof. Schembri and Prof. Attard offered the audience a framing device within the spatial and demographic fora.

Dr Adrian Grima, from the Department of Maltese, looked at Maltese migrants in literature, specifically those in Juann Mamo's 1930-1 serialised novel *Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* (*Grandma Venut's Children in America*) in a paper entitled 'L-Art Miksija bid-Dollari' ('The Ground Strewn with Dollar Bills'). Although Mamo was often considered either too irreverent or simply unimportant, and consequently left out of several anthologies and literary studies, Dr Grima acknowledges the novel's serious questions about the stand that the general Maltese population takes in the face of complex political and social situations. Similarly, in 'Challenging Borders through the Migrant Novel', Professor Stella Borg Barthet from the Department of English looked at several recent migrant novels—*A Distant Shore* by Caryl Phillips, *Uomini Liberi* by Maria Giovanna Mirano, Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, among others—to observe how boundaries, economies, and the divide between first and third world countries, no matter how rigorously maintained by the state, can collapse under literature's presentation of the human being as 'neighbour'. One may find, as Prof. Borg Barthet notes, that justification of migration is readily found in these and other novels, which realistically debate the validity of the choices made by the characters while still prioritising people's inalienable need for dignity and freedom.

Dr Kathrin Schödel and Ms Katrin Dautel, from the Department of German, co-presented their paper 'Talking about "the Migrant": A Short Analysis of German and French Language Use', together with the Department of Sociology's Dr Elise Billiard. Together, they looked at past and contemporary terms used to refer to the migrant, along with the terms' subliminally problematic and generalising connotations. They looked at German and French media's almost exclusive focus on migrants' cultural identity, where cultural differences heralded social inequality; evidenced, for example, by the classist euphemisms carried by term "*Gastarbeiter*" ("guest worker"), or "*die Migranten*" ("the migrants") which blurs the individual into an indistinct crowd of Others, or the water imagery present in everyday language when talking of floods or streams of migrants, and the full boats and ships which carry them. Dr Schödel, Ms Dautel, and Dr Billiard then went on to critique the concept of political correctness, which could at first glance seem to be the solution to the above linguistic inadequacies. Political correctness, according to the three speakers, is insufficient in bringing about social change, since negative connotations are subsequently transferred to these new terms, and since, very often, the choice of words in the media under the guise of political correctness is used to cover up racist denigrations. Furthermore, and perhaps most worryingly, political correctness can sometimes downplay or even mask social injustice.

At the end, after a closing presentation by Mr Raphael Vassallo, there was time for a general discussion between the audience and speakers. While there were a few journalists in the audience who raised some interesting points, along with a few other contributions made by current students and alumni in addition to what had been already presented, there was not much discussion to be had. It would, perhaps, have been better to stagger the questions after each successive paper, enabling the audience to feel more involved throughout and allowing for relevant questions without the need for the audience's recollection of the point in question. Unfortunately, time seemed to be an issue as one got the sense that each presentation would have been more rewarding had more time been dedicated to it, and, as such, hardly any speaker got the chance (within the presentation itself) to reflect on and discuss the implications of their research on the contemporary situation in Malta. Consequently, several of the presentations ended up with a pervasive feeling of detachment and, while they did indeed provide the audience with necessary insights and a grounding in historical, economical, and demographical fact, it was unfortunately very often the case that such facts seemed nothing more than an end in themselves, rather than being reified as a foundation so as to allow the audience to look at migration compositely on the basis of said facts. This was also, possibly, due to the fact that the presenters did not interact with each other's papers. This happened only once, when Dr Schödel critiqued Dr Timmy Gambin's essentialist view of migration as instinctual, and his deterministic view of push and pull factors, as potentially giving one the idea that the migrant is nothing more than an egocentric hoarder frantically looking for resources. This singular instance shed light on the vast potential of a conference such as this, where different departments meet on one issue to birth a more complex, and coherently interdisciplinary, academically-informed opinion.