



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.



Arriving in Bayreuth in summer is a bucolic pleasure. The train ride from Nurnberg to the very North east of Bavaria leads you along lovely forested hills dotted with tiny old villages through the enchanting valley of the small Pegnitz River.

Bayreuth is a small city with only 72 000 inhabitants, yet unlike many other places in Germany it is still very much perceived as a major site of the Third Reich despite having been blooming over the centuries. Bayreuth seems the epitome of the difficult process of historical revision that post war Germany has been grappling with.

Before reunification in 1990, Bayreuth was situated in what was called the *Zonenrandgebiet* (border zone), near the border to East Germany. This status allowed this remote region to obtain economic subsidies and was also a reason to open the University of Bayreuth in 1972.

This provincial university would not be of any major global interest if its faculty of African studies were not among the top institutions of its kind in the world. The emphasis on African Studies came with a highly acclaimed post-graduate programme for African students and in 1981 the opening of the bustling Iwalewa House, with its aim to introduce a broader public to non-European art.

Since then artists-in-residence and curators have been invited from all over Africa and the Diaspora to spend some time in Bayreuth to work and reflect. Art shows have been focused on all traditional, modern and post-modern aspects of African art, and interdisciplinary art projects with artists from Europe have been initiated.

I was travelling to Bayreuth this June to attend the annual conference of the ALA (the African Literature Association) to meet literary scholars, cultural scientists, linguists and writers from all over the world to discuss the state of African literature and its future. This conference is held in Europe for the first time this year and will travel to Franschhoek in 2016.

I wondered what the 400 delegates and writers would think about the fact that of all places, they landed in the city in which Richard Wagner composed the 'soundtrack' for the latter Third Reich and which was also the chosen home of the infamous Houston Stewart Chamberlain, a notorious propagandist of racism and anti-Semitism. In the opening speech of the conference we learn that a street was named after the Englishman and only changed name as late as in 1989. Chamberlain, with his books like *The Arian World View* (1905), contributed enormously to paving the way for the racial fanaticism of the Nazis. none other than the infamous Adolf Hitler himself attended Chamberlain's funeral in 1927. Hitler loved Bayreuth: his appreciation for Wagnerian music and his close affiliation to the Wagner family and the Nazi appropriation of the Wagner Festival on the 'Green Hill' are still a sore point in Bayreuth's troubled history.

On the last day of this long and diverse conference, the writer Teju Cole said smilingly that Germany would completely overstimulate him. "This is an incredibly stimulating and discursive space. One cannot throw a stone without hitting a piece of history." What a wonderful ironic volte that is; Cole is referring to a famous quote of Lord Salisbury's, and therewith brings the debate about post colonialism and its impacts straight into this little Bavarian city with its overabundant kaleidoscope of historical and cultural achievements and transgressions.

Since 2013, Iwalewa House has been selecting one African writer and journalist to become the Bayreuth City Writer for the year. The City Writer lives in the city for two



Mark Gräfin



BayreuthLitfass



Iwalewa



Parkes Wagner

months and blogs and engages with the local people. The second City Writer is the Ugandan writer Moses Serubiri, who is investigating the city with his very own wonderfully bold, creative and shrewd observations. His reflections of his temporary home are not only shared in his blog but also published in the local newspaper, through which he also reaches a local audience.

During the conference there is a reading and discussion with Moses Serubiri and it is exciting to see that not only the delegates, but also locals flock to listen attentively to what he has to write and say about their city.

And it is the overstimulation Teju Cole talked about, that Serubiri is so much aware of. 'Wherever I go there is a vast history with all its contradictions. This place is a museum and what strikes most is that it happens as an intended "museum-fication".'

This museum-fication does not come unbiased, and one wonders if this is due to offering tourists what they are thought to expect in visiting Bayreuth: Wagner, Wagner and a bit of Romanticist writer Jean Paul. But maybe it is a completely careless look into the difficult history of a city that put only a small, almost invisible *Stolperstein* (stumbling block) where once a branch of the Nazi concentration camp of Flossenburg stood. Historical reappraisal looks somewhat different.

Moses Serubiri obviously visited the 'Mohrenapotheke' that still attracts customers with a sign of a 'moor'. It takes these encounters to sensitize people and Moses Serubiri does this very well.

One of the treasures of Bayreuth is its beautiful Baroque Opera House. A painting shows Margravine Wilhelmine's daughter next to a 'court moor', another invitation for the

City Writer to explore the contradictions and wrongdoings of history and their legacies today. He will write about it in the local newspaper.

It is exciting that many Bayreuth people and also some tourists engage in this dialogue. It is through the extraordinary work of the Africanists at university and the courageous creators of the Iwalewa House that Bayreuth is changing its attitude and is surely also changing its living museum into something more international and discursive. All the students, post graduates, artists and curators from Africa have long since been changing Bayreuth forever. Meanwhile one can be sure that most Bayreuthians know more about African arts and literature than many people in the big cities and so the world moves a bit closer together, on equal terms. This is a good reason to hold a conference on African literatures in this remote little city in Germany.

Next month I will talk about the topics and discussions of the conference and how mobile literature should revolutionise reading patterns and the availability of literature in future. **CF**

Cedric Nunn's photographic show *Unsettled – 100 Years of War* is being exhibited at the Iwalewa House in 2016. A German edition of a book of this important project *Unsettled – 100 Jahre weisse Landnahme und die Folgen* is published at AfrikAWunderhorn and was launched in Bayreuth on the 18th July 2015 together with Cedric Nunn at the Iwalewa House. Besides Cedric Nunn's photos the hardcover book contains texts by Neelika Jayawardane Manori, Zakes Mda, Charl Piere Naudé, Jeff Peires, Ulf Vierke and Indra Wussow. <http://www.iwalewa.uni-bayreuth.de>