

Tribute to Prof. Michael Wessels

FOR MICHAEL

Taken from Professor Hermann Wittenberg's tribute at the memorial service held 14/5/2018.

Many of us will remember the time when Michael joined our department mid-2015. It was the first week of term, and we had organised a departmental conference to share our writing and scholarship, and also to help introduce Michael to the department so that he could get to know his new colleagues and the research context he was getting into. You will remember



him from the conference: listening intently and carefully to each of our presentations, always afterwards asking questions, being interested in what everyone had to say, wanting to know more, and making links to other book and other fields of knowledge. In short, from the start, Michael was a highly engaged colleague.

This is also how I remember him when I first met him at a conference some three years earlier, in Grahamstown. I admired his wide knowledge, and his easy, open manner in which interacted with people, and we soon became friends. We talked about our different universities. UKZN was at that time in the special circle of hell, also known as the institutional merger and transformation plan, and Michael, newly appointed to academia, clearly did not have an easy time in such a toxic and negative environment. I spoke about UWC and the English department in glowing terms, and talked about an engaged university which took teaching seriously as well as research

excellence -- and that we were all working together here as a team, as academics, administrators and managers. I must have painted a vision of an academic nirvana, for Michael's eyes glistened, and I think this was the moment when the seed was planted that he would one day join us, here at UWC, in this city surrounded by the wild oceans, and the great mountains of the Cape. I must say that I've always appreciated it that Michael never reproached me misrepresenting the much harder reality of teaching here, especially when after taking up the responsibility of chairing the department, he had to deal with considerable bureaucracy. He would just sometimes mildly shake his head, and make remarks about the paperwork, and the many forms he had to sign.

Another memory from the early days: Michael's books. It's perhaps telling that Michael's books arrived here before he did. When we started making practical arrangements about his arrival, Michael asked about space for books in his office. I let him know about the standard government issued glass-fronted bookcase, but it turned out that Michael needed space for more books, a lot more. So we decided to get a cabinet maker in to put in proper shelving, and Shirley very quickly arranged quotes and raised an order number for the job. When the time arrived, Winny kindly agreed to manage the logistics. I think it was on a Friday or even Saturday, when the big removal truck arrived, and box after box was hauled up to the third floor. There seemed to be more books than furniture on that removal truck. On Monday, when I was in the office again, there was some consternation and even some dismay about the volume of boxes. Why would he need so many books? But the books were Michael's identify, and who he was as a scholar. Many of us have memories of being in his office, seeing an interesting volume of the shelf, and finding ourselves talking about the book and then wandered on to talking about other things.

So the way Michael engaged with us at that first conference, and the library of books that he set up in his office, were signifiers of who he was: a serious scholar. Yes, he had an easy-going, warm and disarming personality, but he also gained the respect of his colleagues through his formidable scholarship: both wide-ranging, and eclectic, and always grounded in his deep knowledge of the English literary canon.

But let me say a few words about his scholarship. He was not just rooted in the canon, but as we know, Michael was also a traveller who traversed many countries, crossed many boundaries -- and likewise in his scholarly interests. He was always interested in the new, and doing something different than traditional English literary studies (which he loved) but also transcended in significant and ground-breaking ways. He did excellent postcolonial research, but he was not really just a postcolonial scholar. He was interested in Indian, Japanese, and African literature, but his approach would not easily be captured by the now fashionable term World Literature. He compared literary texts from various languages and cultures, but he was not just a comparativist. What I think drew Michael to a wide variety of literary texts outside the traditional canon, was - like his travels - a curiosity about different worlds, cultures, states of consciousness and being. The metaphors he read in these texts were like fissures in the surfaces of language that allowed him to glimpse different, strange worlds and encounter new ways of imagining them.

This is, I think, what drew him to the study of the San archive, an archive that his not dead and buried in a university library, but written in the rocks of the mountains of Southern Africa, and still alive in the stories of the people that live in the Drakensberg and the Karoo today. Michael was drawn to these other worlds, imaginative worlds that existed outside of the colonial scripts, worlds which were both entangled with colonialism and the English language that came with it, but also maintained a vital and sometimes enigmatic autonomy that preceded coercive cultural influence. Michael immersed himself in San story-telling, treating it not as history nor as an anthropological record, but took the archive seriously as stories, as imaginative, creative engagements with the world -- in other words as literature.

Perhaps if one can find one line that threads itself through his scholarship, it is the idea of Indigeneity. What is Indigeneity? It is not the cultural rubble left in the wake of colonial violence, nor is it an ossified traditionalism surviving in our contemporary world. Rather, as Michael would have seen it, it refers to the complex and fluid ways in which indigenous people negotiate the cultural scripts of modernity, rewriting them in their own terms and asserting their own histories. The idea of indigeneity underpinned his San research, but it

also connected him to a wider world, establishing networks of scholarship with colleagues as far away New Zealand, Canada, Germany and India. This engagement was also visible in ACLALS, a conference he shaped and chaired so admirably. It is also visible in the impact he had on Wendy Woodward's recent *Animal Studies* book, in which he published the lead chapter, and whose title and cover design reflects the imprint of his ideas.

Michael threw himself into his academic career here at UWC with enormous energy and commitment, as reflected in his publications, by raising big research grants, leading inter-national teams of scholars – and even, somewhat reluctantly, administration.

Linzi: you will know that this made more and more demands on his time, but I think he also revelled in his work, these many hours in which he worked so hard and built a formidable academic reputation. He came into his own here at UWC, and we would like to thank you, Linzi, and also Yao and Akira for sharing him so generously with us for these remarkable years.