

Report on the Popular Education Network (PEN) Conference,

June 26-29 2018, Cape Town and Goedgedacht Trust, Riebeeck Kasteel



PEN 2018

PEN 2018 was the first meeting outside Europe, and the first in the Global South. The conference working group and organizing committee, made up of colleagues from the University of the Western Cape, University of Cape Town broadened the scope of participating academics and activists and included NGOs engaged in popular education, and new emerging popular educators.

Unlike in Latin American countries, popular education is not well known in most African universities. ‘Recruitment’ for PEN 18 worked through

- an extensive literature search as a basis for establishing new links with colleagues;
- connecting with organisations that actively promote and use popular education
- contacting the various international adult education institutes / associations, in particular, the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE).
- announcing and promoting PEN through the website and social media

Participants at PEN18 came from 15 countries, including Ghana, Zambia, Uganda and Kenya. The Latin American and Caribbean popular education network, CEAAL, selected a representative, Viviana Cruz-McDougall, who addressed the conference in the opening plenary session.

PEN18 took place at two sites:

- (i) Community House, Salt River Rd, Salt River
(26 June 2018)

Community House is an historic site of living heritage. Since the mid 1980s, it has been known as a site of activism. The building itself houses NGO’s and trade unions as well as a labour and community history museum.



The ‘Open Day’ at Community House was made up of two parallel processes: a ‘market’ that featured stalls from various NGOs that show-cased their work and provided information, materials and products, and a programme of popular education, inside the hall, that offered valuable insight into a variety of popular education programmes in South Africa, and elsewhere. Popular education recognises that learning and education does not happen through cognitive processes alone; the programme thus included vibrant rhythm and dance sessions, song, visuals, in addition to presentations. There were 120 registered participants, coming from a wide spectrum of civil society organisations and Higher Education Institutions.

(ii) Goedgedacht Trust, off Riebeeksrivier, Malmesbury District. (27-29 June 2018) This site was carefully chosen for its conviviality but also because the meeting would benefit the non-profit purposes of the integrated environmental and youth development programmes of the Goedgedacht Trust.

PEN 18 had invited contributions to eight key themes within the broader focus on ‘Engaging (with) power’. From abstracts received, 36 presentations or workshops were selected. Over 2 days (two half days and one full day) there was a wide spread of different sessions:

- 5 plenaries
- 3 parallel workshops
- 5 parallel sessions with 29 paper presentations



Moments during PEN 2018

Wednesday

The conference began with 2 very informative films that explained the history behind and rationale for Goedgedacht Trust, thus situating PEN within a particular geographical, social, economic and environmental site. A warm-up session included a game of ‘Bingo’ and a process focused on the theme of the conference: popular education and power.

Viviana Cruz-McDougall gave the first plenary address on ‘*Popular Education and the present post-hurricane context in Puerto Rico: because a different world is possible.*’ The reality of climate change was brought very close to all – including questions of race, class, gender, as extreme weather events affect all irrespective of who they are, when the entire infrastructure of a country is destroyed. The second plenary at night was entitled ‘*Creative dissent, community radio and social movement learning: a collaborative meaning-making panel on the Yihi Katseme.*’ The session included a film documenting the performance of a play made by Yihi Katseme salt workers, followed by brief presentations and discussion.

Thursday

An early morning Tai Chi session facilitated by Michel Friedman and Nosipho Twala emphasised the importance of learning / educating with head, heart and hands / feet! The day’s programme was very full with parallel workshops and paper sessions, interspersed with plenary sessions focused on *workers’ education*, and *Decolonising knowledge; learning in resistance to resource dispossession*. In all sessions the link between different political / financial interests

and agendas was clear and included a critique of capitalism. The evening was a social event where different groups of participants contributed to the collective entertainment.



Friday

Another full morning of parallel sessions ending with a plenary *review session*. Ian Martin, as one of the founders of PEN, had been asked to offer some comparative thoughts on PEN over the years of its existence. Finally, Viviana and Rosaluz Molina from Puerto Rico warned that we should all be vigilant ‘to avoid becoming colonizers ourselves’. They suggested that the struggles in Latin America are similar to those in South Africa and pointed out that CEAAL and PEN had much in common, and therefore there were great possibilities to work together, in future.

The notion of disruption, central to PEN, is in itself at stake. Debates around ‘what knowledge?’ and inclusive processes of knowledge production have moved out of the academy. While PEN in the past ‘stretched’ the academy’, engagement with knowledge and movements have now been formatted into ‘internships’ and ‘community experience’. As organisations and community groupings improve their capacity to make convincing arguments and articulate their practice theoretically we need to ask: where and what is the role of academics?

Popular education involves learning in order to act on social, economic, political, environmental world. Developing a critical analysis of the world and the ideas and powers that move it is crucially important – and popular educators are deeply committed to initiate and support this process of what Freire called ‘conscientisation’. PEN18 stimulated much thinking about interrelated injustices across the world; the location of the meeting on a farm in South Africa brought issues of inequality very close to participants.

We hope many of the emerging scholar-activists who attended will continue to support / be supported by PEN. PEN 18 attempted to implement some ideas such as offering free ‘solidarity accommodation’ in Cape Town, for people from outside. Provisionally, the next PEN will be in Maynooth, Ireland – but maybe the time has come to move further South, and creatively to imagine how to engage in multi-lingual ways.

We thank the NIHSS for their financial support. We also acknowledge gratefully their ongoing support for the research into ‘Traditions of popular education’.

Links

[Full Report PEN 2018](#)

[PEN 2018 Programme](#)

[Abstracts](#)

Gallery of pictures (under construction)