

Conference Report: Post-Empire Imaginaries? Anglophone Literature, History and the Demise of Empire

May, 2012. Berne, Switzerland. Around 150 attendees, from 20 different countries, 68 presentations. 3 Keynote lectures, over 20 panels (of various designations), 8 posters presentations. 4 poet performances, 3 student awards. Chocolate, cake, coffee, tea. Sustenance enough for scholars and students of post-colonial inclinations.

The Association for the Study of New English Literatures (ASNEL, or GNEL in its German acronymic existence) was taken for the first time beyond the borders of Germany: Prof. Dr. Barbara Buchenau and Prof. Dr. Virginia Richter invited members, friends and interested scholars to the picturesque location of Berne, Switzerland.¹ The theme of the conference bespoke a journey into history but also into the present: The question mark featured so prominently in the title of the conference quickly proved to be apt, stimulating debates that sought to critique and unfold that other prominent aspect of the title, empire (featured twice: as Post-Empire and Demise of Empire).

Scholarly conversations, I have to say, rather than debates. The fourteen 'regular' panels addressed Empire in a number of forms, as "History and the Wonder of Empire", "Selling Empire", "Interpreting Empire" and "Figures of (Post-)Empire"; critiques of terminology formed the focus of others, as panels on "Cosmopolitanism, Diaspora, Displacement" and "Liquid Modernity? Constructions of Space and Time" attest; "The Sounds of Empire", "Creatures at the Margins" and "Sites of Struggle: Political Inscriptions of Empire" foregrounded approaches that draw on various disciplines to critique notions of Empire. The by now established inclusion of 'Under Construction' panels provided a platform for the discussion of emerging projects, primarily but by no means exclusively presented by PhD candidates, attesting to ongoing engagements with Empire and its aftermath at numerous institutions throughout the German-speaking world and beyond. The importance ASNEL places on emerging scholars was underlined at the evening event, where three M.A. or equivalent theses were awarded with prizes: Regina Anna Petra Schulz is to be commended for her by all accounts outstanding thesis which won the ASNEL Graduate Award 2012, as are Christina Neumann and Friederika Hahn for their complimentary prizes.

¹ The last conference of this type (studies on what was then called Commonwealth Literatures or New English Literatures by academics in Germany, Austria and Switzerland) to be held outside German boundaries was in the 1980s, i.e. before GNEL/ASNEL came into existence.

The keynote lectures, as well as one or two broadly conceived ‘panel debates’, were scheduled such that touchstones for conversation were established—in the q&a sessions following, in references in other papers, and often continuing into the breaks for continuation in smaller groups. Donna Landry, Alfred Hiatt and Ann Stoler’s contributions in the form of keynote lectures provided initial scholarly nourishment for each of the three days. Landry’s contribution sparked dialogues on the spatialised understanding of Empire in post-colonial studies by drawing attention to the Ottoman Empire—an empire with margin and centre on the same soil—as well as the temporal dynamics of empire and a probing of ideas of melancholia with the Turkish conception of *kuzum*. Hiatt turned to cartographic practices, placing the *mappa mundi* at the centre of his lecture, and in doing so, demonstrated how we might think through practices of representation, reading visual texts and forms of ‘painting back’. Stoler, finally, spoke of and to the archive, elucidating questions we might ask of the smudges at the edges of paper, of students and ourselves, suggesting rather elegantly that ruins are not what is left, but what we are left *with*.

At the other end of the scholarly day, the conference brought its members together in several different formats to discuss the ongoing ‘name debate’ and concomitant issues of studies of Anglophone literatures and cultures: A plenary panel addressing the ‘Name Debate’ was scheduled on the first day, followed on the second day by a panel entitled “Academic Post-Empire Imaginaries” which drew attention to the discipline both in research and in the classroom. These issues also were central to discussion in the AGM, scheduled before the conference dinner on the second day. Whether the GNEL/ASNEL might be known as GAPS (Gesellschaft für anglophone postkoloniale Studien) in the future will, in the end, depend on decisions made at AGMs over the next two years: Chemnitz and Potsdam.

The first day was followed by the award ceremony mentioned above and a delectable tasting of poetry performed by Chirikure Chirikure, Jurczok 1001, Meena Kandasamy and Lebogang Mashile in the evening. The juxtaposition of Chirikure Chirikure’s smattering of Shona amongst his English poems with Juczok 1001’s Schwizerdütsch performance highlighted how ‘close to home’ many of the concerns of language, literature, identity, empire and history can be. Must be. I feel the inclusion of literary works – indeed of performed poetry – brings a sense of vitality to the academic work done at GNEL conferences, and this year was no different.

The final plenary panel “New Directions in the Study of Literature and Culture after the Demise of Empires” was scheduled just before we left on our various ways: The overall impression I took away with me from this panel as well as the conference as a whole

was one that stressed “New Directions” rather than dwelling on the issues of “Demise”. The conversations had, and those imagined between the unique constellations of panels visited and papers heard, were invigorating. A smorgasbord—not simply sustenance.

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