

“Post-Empire Imaginaries?” – 23rd Annual GNEL/ASNEL Conference, University of Bern, 18-20 May 2012

The 23rd annual conference of GNEL/ASNEL, the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English, from May 18-20 proved once more to be the main venue for postcolonial studies of a broad disciplinary and interdisciplinary variety in the German-speaking academic community. For the first time in the history of the association, the conference was held in Switzerland, at the University of Bern. The truly impressive organization by the conveners Virginia Richter (Chair of Modern English Literature) and Barbara Buchenau (Professor of Postcolonial Literary and Cultural Studies) and their team, headed by Daniella Gáti and Marijke Denger-Kähler, made the meeting a full success. With 146 participants from 20 different countries and 68 presentations including three keynote lectures, 55 papers, posters as well as panel discussions, the sessions offered a wide range of angles from which to consider the conference theme “Post-Empire Imaginaries? Anglophone Literature, History and the Demise of Empires.” As noted by ASNEL President Mark Stein (Chair of English, Postcolonial and Media Studies at Westfälische Wilhelms-University Münster) in the welcome address, not often has the term literature actually been placed in ASNEL conference titles. Together with the programmatic focus on empires in the plural, this was seen as indicative of the widening set of disciplinary contexts and the multidisciplinary methodologies that have become necessary to unpack the complexities of the cultural, academic and critical work being done in the name of Anglophone Literature(s). The question mark in the title in many ways structured the event and ran through several strands of debate within and across the keynote lectures and the ensuing discussions.

When Donna Landry (Director of Research at the School of English, University of Kent at Canterbury) opened the comparative trajectory by way of “PostOttoman Rifts in Time: Postimperial, Postcolonial, Oppositional?,” she also set the tone for the ‘question mode’ regarding the ‘postimperial’ which continued to run through many of the subsequent presentations. The “Ottomanised point of view” shifted the angle from London, Paris or New York to Istanbul. By example of the Evliya Çelebi Way Project and its historical re-enactment promoting cultural reconnections, the keynote emphasized the need for a comparative approach to imperialisms and for a mutual interrogation of the ‘postimperial’ and the ‘postcolonial’ in oppositional scholarly agendas trying to untangle the paradoxical yearning for both Empire and its demise.

Alfred Hiatt (Reader in Medieval Literature and Culture, Queen Mary, University of London) gave the second day’s keynote lecture on “Maps of Empires

Past.” Hiatt used the conjunction of the terms ‘post-empire’ and ‘imaginaries’ to show how maps that emerge in vastly different context historicize spatial representations of empire and how they comment on the ‘afterlives’ of empires through both visual and verbal means. A contemporary reworking of a medieval map demonstrated how religious references and narratives become pluralized and reinterpret the world image conveyed therein. Thus, multiple temporalities emerged as a second aspect of inquiries into the ‘postimperial’, emphasizing future trajectories rather than suggesting historical closure.

The third day’s keynote lecture by Laura Ann Stoler (Willy Brandt Distinguished University Professor of Anthropology and Historical Studies at The New School for Social Research, New York) addressed “Concept Work: On Recrafting Post-Empire Histories,” the conference’s third major trajectory. The conceptual vocabulary and interpretive categories used to trace “the occluded genealogies of imperial effects,” Stoler suggested, reveal the necessity of methodological renovations for the study of colonial histories in order to “capture the uneven, recursive qualities of the visions and practices that imperial formations have animated” and that pervade the present’s “logos and pathos of empire.” Her emphasis on the disabling of linkages in histories of empire as inherent in colonial practices and ways of knowing outlined urgent historiographic and conceptual tasks.

The 14 panels with participants from 16 countries in many ways mirrored the comparative, temporal and conceptual trajectories of the keynote lectures. Panel titles included “Comparative Views of Empires” and “Postcolonial Cultural Studies” as well as “Historicising (Post-)Empire” or “Liquid Modernity: Constructions of Space and Time.” They were complemented by five Teachers’ Workshops on different regional and methodological aspects of postcolonial literatures and cultures in the EFL classroom, as well as two “Under Construction” panels in which junior scholars presented their work in progress in poster format.

Within the panels, seemingly familiar themes such as cosmopolitanism, diaspora and displacement entered into productive dialogue with new comparative frames of reference, e.g. through an Oceanic rather than Caribbean take on modernity. By example of the blind spots in theorizing empire regarding the lease or purchase of imperial territories, it became clear once more that theories as explanatory accounts are in need of constant revision and elaboration. The affective dimension of colonial and imperial desire in conjunction with marketing was elaborated through an analysis of American travel ads. That the historical trajectory of ‘post-empires’ can even refer back to ‘pre-Adamitical’ imaginaries was noted by way of an eighteenth century text, whereas the function of late eighteenth-century visual representations of the demise of empires was compared to that of nineteenth-

century cultural experiences of vanishing empires in panoramas. Considering how twentieth-century West African authors represent transitions in sovereignty surely complicates dialogues on how empire is historicized, as do poetic interventions from the Pacific Islands, literary multilingualism within the UK and an analysis of the role of music as expressive of nostalgia in 'postcolonial' writing. Yet, it was precisely through such juxtapositions that the question mode regarding 'post-empire' was productively maintained throughout the conference.

The conference was framed by a Spoken Word Event featuring Chirikure Chirikure, Meena Kandasamy, Lebogang Mashile and Jurczok 1001. This event was co-organized by *artlink* (the office for cultural cooperation and Swiss centre of competence for arts and culture from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe). It was preceded by a ceremony during which the ASNEL Graduate Award 2012 was conferred to Regina Anna Petra Schulz (University of Cologne) for her graduate thesis on "Performances in the US-Mexican-American Borderlands" – yet another indication of the widened scope of the areas and fields of inquiry covered. A Brown Bag Lunch Reading continued the ASNEL tradition of conversations with authors. Yvette Edwards read from her 2011 debut novel *A Cupboard Full of Coats* and Dikeogu Egwuatu Chukwumerije shared poems from his collection *The Revolution Has no Tribe* (2008), which features not only poetry, but also artwork, pictures and descriptive as well as educational essays on African history, places and people. Both cultural events resonated with the audience and served as reminders to continually engage in – and probably increase again – the dialogue with writers.

Another feature of ASNEL, its self-reflexive critical and organizational practice, found further room during a panel addressing "Academic Post-Empire Imaginaries" as well as a Panel Debate on "New Directions in the Study of Literature and Culture after the Demise of Empires." The intense and highly productive debate on interdisciplinary and methodological shifts within and across the diverse fields of Anglophone literary, cultural and media practices in some ways ran through the conference as a subtext. It also echoed the conceptual challenges that were addressed in many contributions.

In 2013, the GNEL/ASNEL Annual Conference will be held at Chemnitz University of Technology from May 9-11 under the auspices of convener Cecile Sandten (Professor of English Literature) and her team. The bracketing within the theme "Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis" promises to be as productive as the question mark has proven to be for "Post-Empire Imaginaries?"

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