

Conference Report:

“Post-Empire Imaginaries? Anglophone Literature, History and the Demise of Empires”, 23rd Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of New Literatures in English (ASNEL/GNEL), Berne, 18-20 May 2012

Probably the most frequently mentioned fact about the 2012 ASNEL-Conference in Berne was that it was the first ASNEL-Conference to take place in Switzerland. As if to celebrate that, on 17 May, which was the day of arrival for most of the participants, Berne welcomed its guests with impressively clear weather that helped the participants to a magnificent view of the city and the picturesque mountain peaks.

What is obviously much more important, however, is that the organisers Professor Barbara Buchenau and Professor Virginia Richter provided the participants with an academic programme that promised much food for thought. They set out to “reconsider historicity as a central, and indispensable, aspect of postcolonial studies” (CfP), an aim that was to shape the various keynote lectures and panel discussions and which already featured in the opening address of ASNEL’s chairman Professor Mark Stein. Stein quoted Frederic Jameson’s famous imperative to “always historicise” before formulating a crucial question that foreshadowed some of the conference’s discussions: “And yet, how do I do so, if history is not my disciplinary background?” By focusing on the rather broad term of “empire”, the conference’s call for papers allowed for a large scope of research, enabling the study of different empires at different times. This wide thematic range of papers and keynotes did not at all result in fragmented discussions, as thematically open calls for papers sometimes do, but rather in a focus on analytical concepts and methodologies and an overall coherence of the discussions of individual papers.

The scholarly part of the conference started off with Professor Donna Landry’s (University of Kent) keynote lecture on “PostOttoman Rifts in Time: Postimperial, Postcolonial, Oppositional?”. Istanbul as an intermediate location between East and West was the starting point from which Landry analysed and theorised empire. Her focus on the Ottoman Empire also provided new perspectives on the British Empire and prepared the ground for an abstract analysis of empires and their constructions.

In the course of the conference this first keynote lecture was followed by two more, namely those by the medieval literature specialist Professor Alfred Hiatt (Queen Mary, University of London) and by the historian and anthropologist Professor Ann Laura Stoler (The New School for Social Research, New York) on Saturday and Sunday morning respectively. Hiatt’s lecture was entitled “Maps of Empires Past” and engaged with the historicity of space and the (re-)construction of empires via maps. Analysing Abraham Ortelius’s “*Romani Imperii Imago*” (1571) and the “*Ebstorf Mappa Mundi*” (ca. 1300) as well as Gulammohammed Sheikh’s modern reworking of the latter, the “*Mappamundi Suite*”, Hiatt argued

that these maps “articulate [...] complex commentaries on the afterlives of empires” (Hiatt).

In her final keynote “Concept Work: On Recrafting Post-Empire Histories”, Professor Stoler then took the discussion to a more abstract level. In a refreshingly self-critical manner she emphasised the immense importance of constantly questioning and refining one’s own concepts and categories for scholarly work in general and for the engagement with past empires in particular. Stoler closed by reconsidering the Aristotelian conception that history is concerned with what has been and poetry with what might be, calling for a combination of both for scholarly constructions and considerations of history.

The theoretical and methodological issues raised in these three highly stimulating keynote lectures inspired and influenced some of the discussions that followed the variety of presentations that could be heard throughout the conference. More than 55 papers by scholars from all over the world in panels such as “Comparative Views of Empire”, “Selling Empire”, “Historicising (Post-)Empire”, “Interpreting Empire” continued the discussions of empires, their constructions and aftermaths as well as the critical approaches towards these issues. The programme also included eight presentations of work-in-progress in two “Under Construction” sessions, which did not only feature research projects from literary and cultural studies but also from the field of creative writing. Additionally, eight posters presenting research projects were displayed throughout the conference and the PhD students and MA candidates could discuss their projects with the participants over coffee. The academic part of the programme was topped off with two round table discussions. The ASNEL-Debate “What’s in a Name?” prepared ASNEL’s annual general meeting in which a proposed change in the association’s name was to be discussed. It also linked the rather formal act of renaming ASNEL with the debate of terms and concepts that has been going on in the field and in a concentrated form throughout the conference. The panel debate “New Directions in the Study of Literature and Culture after the Demise of Empires” concluded the conference. Here the panel, consisting of the three keynote speakers as well as Professor Frank Schulze-Engler (Frankfurt) and Marijke Denger-Kähler (Berne), discussed the conference’s overarching issues such as the questions from which locations scholars approach their subjects, whether empire is past, how the prefix ‘post’ can be used and which role Europe plays in the analysis and discussion of past empires.

In addition to its highly productive academic side, the conference offered a number of cultural events. These included a spoken word event in the local cultural centre “PROGR”. After the participants had been served a delicious buffet, Pete Marsden entered the stage to award this year’s ASNEL Graduate Award to Regina Anna Petra Schulz (Cologne) as well as the complementary prizes to Christina Neumann (Augsburg) and Friederike Hahn (Münster). The ‘main event’ then featured four spoken word artists, Chirikure Chirikure (Zimbabwe), Meena Kandasamy (India), Lebogang Mashile (South Africa) and Jurczok 1001 (Switzerland), who presented their poetry in English, Shona and Swiss-German. The second cultural event was the “Brown Bag Reading”, where participants could enjoy

their lunch, while listening to the British-Montserratian author Yvvette Edwards reading from her novel *A Cupboard Full of Coats* and to the Nigerian poet Dike-Ogu Chukwumerije reading from his collection of poems *The Revolution has no Tribe*. An on-going 'cultural event' was the excellent catering throughout the conference. Participants were never short of coffee, tea and delicious home-made cakes to continue their discussions during the breaks. The conference dinner on Saturday night provided the participants both with excellent food and with a wonderful view of Berne and its *Oberland*.

Let me quote the call for papers again in an attempt to summarise the 23rd ASNEL-Conference in Berne: "By linking 'post-empire' to its 'imaginaries', we want to stress not only the historical and geographical variability, but the variety of creative and psychological engagements with the idea of empire." Having put this proposal into operation, the ASNEL-Conference 2012 took up some of the discussions of previous ASNEL-Conferences. It emphasised the importance of historicity as a category parallel to space as well as the importance of theoretical and methodological debate, which will certainly enhance upcoming discussions, for example, at next year's conference on the postcolonial metropolis in Chemnitz.

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