

Conference Reports



“Nationalism and the Postcolonial” GAPS Annual Conference (May 9-12, 2018, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany)

Conference Report

Annika Macpherson’s opening remarks highlighted the ambiguities of nationalism – a recurrent theme over the coming days – and the particular, uneasy relationship of postcolonial studies to nationalism: the postcolonial as a “hostage of nationalism,” in the words of Thomas King. Rainer Emig drew our attention to the gulf between the desires of many self-identified transnational postcolonial scholars for the era of nationalism to be over and the current resurgence of nationalisms around the world, calling for interdisciplinary scholarship across culture and politics to ask, who is included and excluded by these nationalisms? What manifestations do the new nationalisms produce?

The diversity of the keynote lectures gave a good indication of the topics which would dominate the conference. Bruce Berman’s talk on “Ethnic Nationalism and the Global Crises of Capitalist Modernity” emphasized the complexity of pre-colonial African societies, marked by extensive mobility and cultural interaction and often significantly stratified, as well as the modernity of African ethnicities in recent decades, grounded in the political economy of colonial and post-colonial states. While Berman followed Benedict Anderson in arguing that African ethnicities came into existence in print, he also pointed to numerous other influential factors shaping African ethnicities, including arguments over land tenure, whether land could be bought and sold, labour conditions, wages, differentiation of wealth and gender, especially when women began to participate in market economies and thus gained financial independence. These factors point to the importance of internal class divisions, so that – contra the traditional Marxist claim that Africans have tribe *or* class – analyses of African societies and African nationalism must understand African modernity as part of global experiences and Africans as being shaped by both ethnicity *and* class.

On the evening of the first day, Laura Chrisman spoke on “‘That place of bubbling trepidation’: Reflections on Nations and the Transnational Turn”. She argued that we are currently witnessing a new generation of African writers take up the intellectual self-interrogation of nationalism demanded by Fanon. These writers are often termed Afropolitans, but most are not hostile to national identity; they show a “compassionate curiosity” towards nationalism and offer nuanced reflections on, for example, the interlocking forces of gender, nationalism and race

in contemporary African societies or consider the uneven global effects of US imperialism on postcolonial countries. Chrisman then offered a close reading of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) to illustrate some of these points. Chrisman sees the novel, which traces Zimbabwe's loss of sovereignty over three generations, as offering a "qualified nationalism" that drives its critique of the neoliberal world order. The novel offers strong parallels with the work of Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah, especially *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). While for Achebe, colonialism succeeded due to a confluence of Western invasion and local tensions, for Bulawayo, it is crucial to understand the confluence of e.g. IMF and World Bank policies with Mugabe's implementation of those policies. Bulawayo's vision of the nation which might emerge from this devastated land has echoes of Fanon, but is firmly anchored in the *body* of the people, understood not as a myth of origin but "bluntly corporeal". Again echoing Fanon's claim in *The Wretched of the Earth* that "it is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness establishes itself and thrives", Bulawayo's vision of the nation can also encompass diasporic communities and partnerships between various Africans and African Americans in the text. Chrisman concluded by highlighting the narrative structure of the novel, in which vignette chapters create a fictional totality, suggesting that the gradually revealed connections between the various vignettes demand other models of reading – and in consequence create other models of nation – than the realist novels analysed by Benedict Anderson. Chrisman's keynote thus offered an inspiring model for literary scholars to generate nuanced readings of the complex interplay of nationalism, cosmopolitanism and diaspora in recent African and African diasporic fiction.

The second day began with Nikita Sud's keynote, "Indian Nationalisms as Encountering and Othering". Sud reminded us of the intertwined histories of India's two main nationalist traditions: the supposedly inclusive, secular 'Congress' nationalism which dominated after independence, which promised unity in diversity and focused on economic development, and the exclusive Hindutva nationalism of the RSS and BJP, instead focused on a form of Hindu revivalism which claims to recover traditions lost in the colonial encounter. In understanding contemporary Indian nationalisms, it is important first to acknowledge that despite its claims, Congress nationalism also had its marginalized others; they were and are excluded from this so-called inclusive nationalism and are now seeking alternatives. Secondly, we should aim to understand the affective charge offered by exclusive nationalisms and think about how a more inclusive nationalism can appeal to those attracted by the frisson of encountering and othering that exclusive nationalism generates.

These themes – theorizing nationalism, new literary visions of the nation, and Indian nationalisms – were taken up in numerous panels over the conference days. Frank Schulze-Engler's paper pointed to an alignment – certain to provoke discomfort for postcolonial scholars – between some radical right-wing groups, including the Identitarian movement, and some versions of postcolonial studies, such as between the critique of globalization in which a hard right thinker like Martin Lichtmesz embeds his call for racist nationalism in postcolonial claims and

calls for resistance to capitalist globalization. Rather than denying such an alignment, or closing our eyes to examples of authoritarian regimes bolstered by anti-colonial nationalism, Schulze-Engler argued that we should abandon any nostalgia for a supposed golden age when anti-colonial nationalisms were clearly 'good', and instead look to the history of anglophone literatures which have long combated claims of a "single identity" (Amartya Sen) or the "danger of a single story" (Adichie) with their visions of multiple identities and cultures.

In the first of two panels on nationalism in contemporary India, Sayan Dey and Shameer Ta offered case studies of the emergence and effects of nationalism on small communities. Dey's talk showed how the colonial history of Anglo-Indians as supposed "faithful spokespersons" for colonial rule and the numerous advantages they enjoyed over 'natives' continues to reverberate today. He suggested that the controversial term 'reverse racism' could be useful here to understand how Anglo-Indians are viewed as a social and cultural threat by a significant section of the population of Kolkata – and thus face significant discrimination in the school system and workplace – because they are not prepared to give up their accent, cuisine or dress in order to assimilate with the dominant culture, as Indian post-colonial nationalism generally demands, and because, in the eyes of many Indians, Anglo-Indians continue to observe the practices of the former colonizers. Shameer Ta's paper on "Print-capitalism and Colonial Governmentality: Constructing Community consciousness among Mappilas of Malabar" examined how, in line with Benedict Anderson's work, print capitalism and other technologies of the colonial state, including the census, generated a sense of community among the sometimes geographically separated Mappilas of Malabar, a Muslim community in Kerala, during the colonial era.

In the session on "Nationalism and Nostalgia", three papers examined the workings of nostalgia and its connection to colonialism in quite different types of literary texts. Manasi Gopalakrishnan spoke on "Nostalgia for the Empire? British Nationalism in the Spatial Representation of Colonial India in Contemporary Romantic Novels". Gopalakrishnan's project concerns contemporary romance novels being written in both English and German today, with striking similarities to the colonial romance novels of the nineteenth century, like Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* which imagined a place for British women in empire building. She aims to show how colonial agency plays out in these novels and to see how colonial territorial domination is justified. Ralf Haekel's paper, "Nationalism and the Photographic Gaze: Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief*" examined the interesting form that nostalgia takes in Cole's work, which critically reflects on the particular gaze of its protagonist – that of the native conditioned by colonial expectations and norms – and the ambiguous form of nationalism that is thereby created. Lukas Lammers then spoke on "Nationalism, Postcolonialism, and the Historical Novel National Nostalgia in Jane Gardam's *Old Filth* Trilogy". He argued that Gardam, dubbed the "laureate of [the British Empire's] demise" by Elizabeth Lowry in the *Times Literary Supplement*, offers a vision of a moderate empire, not perfect, but a part of British heritage, in which the withdrawal from empire is seen as a victory, a homecoming. The trilogy offers its readers a chance

to reflect on the loss of empire and the crimes of empire, but from a safe distance, insulated in particular from those crimes. Instead of revealing the traumas caused by colonization, the novels posit British colonists as the victims of empire, and it is this sense of victimhood that enables the trilogy's nostalgia for the last decades of the British Empire, demonstrating once again the apparent difficulty of curing Britain's 'post-imperial melancholia'.

Unfortunately I myself was sick on the last day and could not attend. The following comes from my colleague Florian Schybilski: "Men wanted women with some education to show they had embraced modernity" is one of the ways British-born and Nigerian-educated playwright Oladipo Agboluaje framed perspectives on female education in Nigeria in his talk on Saturday. Cancelling out the actual educated person, female education figures as a marker of supposed male (not female) modernity and social prestige. It features as a commodity, a special accessory worth the extra cost and upkeep in a wife. The story Agboluaje decided to tell with the help of the audience working as a chorus he prompted to finish his sentences, however, presents a wholly different, female, perspective on education. The story follows a young Nigerian girl whose aspirations are thwarted when, as the result of an altercation with her teacher, her parents decide to discontinue her education. The resolve that she, too, should have a proper education is so strong that she eventually takes refuge with her older sister and her brother-in-law who wholeheartedly support her decision. This provides a strong counterpoint to education as a property that makes women marriageable and that tolerance thereof makes husbands 'modern'. Quite to the contrary, education does not only feature as a *tool of* but also *reason for* emancipation – an emancipation that would be impossible to harness within the confines of domesticity or existence as a trophy.

Gigi Adair with Florian Schybilski (Potsdam)

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Nationalisms, while seemingly omnipresent, are varied, complex and specific. With the arguably renewed widespread rise of nationalisms becoming ever more apparent, they also prove to be persistent, which is why the decision to discuss the topic under the auspices of the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies in Mainz in 2018 was no doubt a timely one. As if to underline this, "Nationalism and the Postcolonial" attracted participants based on six continents.⁷ This makes perfect sense given the operating principle of colonialism but should be gratefully mentioned here nevertheless. The conference's geographic range was at least as impressive as that of its topics. Talks approached nationalisms from a range of

⁷ Please forgive me if I have overlooked anyone from Antarctica. I should add that I consider South America covered purely because Trinidad is much closer to Venezuela than to Tobago, as Arhea Marshall informed us.