

Conference Report

“Post-Empire Imaginaries? Anglophone Literatures, History and the Demise of Empires”, Berne, May 18-20, 2012

The 2012 GNEL/ASNEL conference, *‘Post-Empire Imaginaries? Anglophone Literature, History and the Demise of Empires,’* was my first ASNEL conference, and prior to attending it I have to admit that I did not know what to expect. As an Australian PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, I was intrigued by the idea of a German-speaking association for the study of postcolonial literatures in English, although, as the ASNEL Debate ‘What’s in a Name?’ so adequately emphasised, ASNEL, or GAPS as it will be known in future, is all this and more. I first heard about ASNEL while I was a visiting student in the United Kingdom in 2010/2011, and I found the thought of examining postcolonial literatures in English from a non-Anglophone perspective, at a conference that was nevertheless in English, intriguing to say the least.

I was not disappointed. Significantly set, for the first time, in Switzerland, the conference encapsulated an impressive diversity of themes, concerns, and regions. Participants originated from throughout Europe, Africa, America and the Asia-Pacific, and many could pinpoint more than one geographical location they called

home. The presentations and posters themselves reflected this multiplicity, and covered such diverse topics as slavery in popular culture, representations of the Roman Empire and Australian interpretations of Shakespeare's plays.

While my own undergraduate background is in English Literature, I am currently completing my PhD in Sociology at the University of Sydney, and it was gratifying to see the interdisciplinary nature of research at the conference. Although there was some concern during the re-naming debate regarding ASNEL's ability to attract scholars from beyond the confines of literary studies, it was evident that, while I may have been the only 'sociologist' present, there were speakers engaging in other disciplines, such as history, cultural studies and performance studies.

A key strength of this conference in particular was its interrogation of the tensions within the centres of Empires, and its willingness to engage with more than one type of Empire. The British Empire was of course a dominant theme throughout the conference, and there were insightful talks on the anxieties surrounding the end of Empire in diverse texts such as Rosemary Sutcliffe's *The Eagle of the Ninth* and the James Bond film franchise. However there was also a focus on other Empires, such as the tensions surrounding the construction of femininity and difference in contemporary depictions of Akbar's Mughal Empire. Similarly, Professor Donna Landry, one of the keynote speakers, raised the concept of cosmopolitanism regarding the Ottoman Empire, suggesting that the notion of 'Empire' as a counter-model to the Ethno-Nationalist state is not one that can easily be dispensed with. The conference also asked key questions regarding how Empires are re-imagined and remembered today, particularly within the metropolitan centres and in the works of contemporary popular academics such as the controversial Niall Ferguson. It was also notable for a significant and insightful focus on provincialising Europe and examining its local development in a Post-Empire condition.

The ASNEL final panel debate, 'New Directions in the Study of Literature and Culture after the Demise of Empires', wove together the themes of the conference and highlighted some central points that had been elucidated over the duration of the event. Professor Frank Schulze-Engler noted the significance of bringing Europe back into the discussion of the Post-Empire, and suggested that transregionalism could be used to find new vocabularies beyond the postcolonial. Donna Landry also described literature as pushing the margins of what is possible and opening up alternative ways of thinking. The final keynote speaker, Professor Ann Laura Stoler, also gave a riveting and inspirational lecture, stressing the importance of attending to the occluded histories of colonialism and its instances which are misrecognised, excised and foreclosed. The literary, Stoler argued, is one of the most charged sites of the political, and it is our role, as scholars of the post/colonial and post/Empire, to synthesise a study of the past and a vision of what could be.

Particular thanks must go to Virginia Richter, Barbara Buchenau and the rest of the organising committee for arranging such a successful conference. The conference also benefited from the sleek facilities of the University of Bern, and the

wonderful and helpful volunteers. A special mention must be reserved for the catering volunteers who tirelessly provided us with home-baked cakes throughout the conference. I must also personally thank the Mittelbauvereinigung, University of Bern, for generously providing my accommodation for the duration of the conference.

Finally, a particular highlight of the conference was the dinner, set in the picturesque Rosengarten Restaurant. While we certainly had to work for our meal by trekking up a steep, cobbled path to reach the restaurant, we were immediately rewarded for our efforts with a stunning view of the city of Bern. The image of the church steeples and clock towers in the hazy, long spring twilight is not one that I will easily forget.

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