

“Postcolonial Justice“
Joint Conference of GNEL/ASNEL and GAST
Potsdam and Berlin, 29 May – 1 June 2014

This year’s conference of GNEL/ASNEL was a very special one. Firstly, this was because it was the first conference in which the annual conference of GNEL/ASNEL were joint together with the GAST, thus it became more interdisciplinary and it was filled with a great variety of topics and events. The second reason is that it was the 25th anniversary of the ASNEL/GNEL, and finally yet importantly, after 25 years of its existence, the association eventually changed its name to GAPS, an acronym that functions both in English as well as in German.

However, let us start at the beginning: On the first day, May 29 the conference was opened by the leaders of the Potsdam organising team, namely Anja Schwarze, Nicole Waller, Lars Eckstein and Dirk Wiemann und. They stressed that having a conference on postcolonial justice is the perfect match for the location of Potsdam/Berlin, since historical events like the slave trade actually happened there. Thus, everybody’s appetite was whetted for a joint conference which promised challenging and stimulating debates.

Subsequently, after the GAST greetings, Katja Sarkowsky, president of the GNEL/ASNEL association, greeted everyone and expressed how happy she was that so many young scholars as well as established researchers would be able to make a contribution to the conference. She was proud of having so many participants from all over the world, such as Indian scholars as well as South Africans, Canadians and Australians. She expressed her gratitude towards the keynote speakers, artists and filmmakers who would all constructively work on topics such as environmental justice, land rights or economic justice – just to name a few.

The opening ceremony was followed by the first keynote speaker Ratna Kapur who shared her thoughts about sexuality and gender in relation to human rights. Her examination started from current developments of Indian society such as the anti-rape protests in December 2012 and the Supreme’s Court decision to recriminalize gay sex. In that context she discussed how “precarious desires” in relation to postcolonial justice operate within the legal framework, namely that justice is only claimed from a structure that is already in place.

After the wonderful keynote lecture there was a wide range of various panels. With up to seven different panels at the same time, participants could choose from a wide variety of

subjects. Topics included – among many others – the politics of representation, biopolitics, and the politics of reconciliation. Another highlight that sweetened the first day of the postcolonial justice conference was the reading of a short story from and by the widely known Australian writer Gail Jones. With a following wine reception, the artist keynote of contemporary Australian Aboriginal artist Fiona Foley, and a subsequent plenary, the day was full of enlightening, inspiring and thought provoking events.

The second day was the day of the GNEL/ASNEL's annual general meeting. Besides many topical issues and many ongoing projects which needed to be discussed, such as the changing of the publisher, the most important decision to be made was the eventually successful renaming of the GNEL/ASNEL to GAPS, which was supported by the members of the association with an overwhelming majority.

After the intense AGM, the floor was opened for a poster session in which young scholars presented their work on their dissertation projects. By talking to the five presenters, I must say that the poster session is a very effective and fruitful forum. The presenters appreciated the constructive feedback and it helped them to find many new aspects for their research. Moreover, they gained further inspiration for their dissertation by talking to different experts in a supportive atmosphere. In that sense, I can highly recommend to every young scholar to present their ideas for a dissertation project in such a session.

This was followed by the keynote of Paul Gilroy who observed the race struggles in Great Britain which has taken place during the last four decades. He elaborated on the impact of the race riots of 1981, and that all institutions in Britain responded to these riots. However, Paul Gilroy also analysed the – from my view slightly ironic – tendencies that the people who were once protesting are now selling their attitudes and convictions. By conducting diversity training for the corporations, they now belong to the structure they wanted to fight in former times. Furthermore, Paul Gilroy also shared his thoughts on current and very topical developments such as the rise of Muslims as a pan-racial category that reminded him on the past struggles of racism in Britain.

This very enlightening contribution was followed by a plenary about postcolonial justice and the city in which – mostly but not exclusively – Berlin was used as a discussing space. Indeed, the discussion was a wonderful forum to put Germany's colonial past on the agenda, a history, which Germans tend to be not even aware of. The discussion was very vivid and brought up many different issues such as the renaming of the "Gröbenufer" in the district of Berlin-Kreuzberg which was the name of a Prussian officer who was involved in the German slave trade. The new name of the place is now "May-Ayim-Ufer" and it honours

the afro-German activist, and acknowledges the African heritage and activism of the capital city. The discussions were very vivid and lively and it was a joy to listen to all the different contributions. I overly enjoyed the talk of Nikita Dhawan who is a highly passionate speaker and who demonstrated how the master's tool can be used to dismantle the master. Moreover, ideas and thoughts were shared about how recent insurgencies of Nazi terrorism can also be seen in correlation with Germany's lack of acknowledgement of its colonial past. The second day of the conference ended with readings from Rajeev Balasubramanyam, Priya Basil and Helon Habila making a perfect conference day complete.

Besides another intense and fruitful day of panels on the third day of the conference, a roundtable discussion on American Studies as a Postcolonial Studies, and a wonderful keynote of Suvendrini Perera I appreciated the opportunity to watch the film documentary *Dhakiyarr vs the King*. In a sensitive and impressive manner, the film brought up the issue of an murder trail which caused a lot of controversies in Northern Territory between the Australian Aboriginals and the legal system established by the non-indigenous population, thus showing the conflicts which arise when different laws collide. After the screening of the documentary, everyone had a chance to talk to the director Tom Murray who was more than happy to answer every question which came up.

Nevertheless, the highlight of the third day of the conference was the celebration of the 25 years of ~~GNEL/ASNEL~~ GAPS and GAST. The occasion was celebrated on a warm sunny summer day outside the university and everyone toasted with sparkling wine to the work which has been accomplished during a quarter of a century. Frank Schulze-Engler presented a vivid and personal overview of the associations' contributions, above all, focusing on Anglophone Studies beyond the studies of Great Britain and the USA. The association has made an important move bringing scholarly works beyond eurocentricism, and supporting a transformation in research, namely from the view of national literature to a transnational dimension. That also has a political dimension because it is a matter of justice that all English literatures can be studied. During the celebration former presidents and vice-presidents of the association who are now retired, namely Liselotte Glage, Konrad Groß, Norbert Platz, Dieter Riemenschneider, Gerhard Stilz and Peter Stummer, received an honorary GASP membership in order to acknowledge their accomplishments. The second highlight of the day was the conference dinner at the *Braumanufaktur* in Potsdam. During the evening, everybody could enjoy a nice barbecue, sitting and chatting at a fireplace and on top, everybody was invited to dance to Balkan Swing music.

On the last day of the conference keynote speaker Ann Curthoys shared her insights about indigenous dispossession in Australia and how the settler history continues to affect contemporary Australia and Britain. After another round of panels, there was a closing discussion on postcolonial justice. During that discussion Polynesian artist Rosanna Raymond expressed her feelings that she was not entirely convinced of the whole frame of the conference in a way that she felt uneasy. Despite being really thankful of seeing Aboriginal participants at an international conference, she put forward some essential questions which – from my point of view – have to be faced by every scholar: “Who is benefitting from this research? How much of this talking will lead to action?” She still sees the process of decolonisation as in progress, so she argues that we cannot even use the term postcolonial – much less the term postcolonial justice. Thus, she reminded us as scholars that our research also has an ethical dimension.

The conferences ended with a big thank you to the organisers. The stage was filled with so many people who all made a contribution to make the conference a success. Katja Sarkowsky expressed her thanks on behalf of GAPS, and Geoff Rodoreda on behalf of GAST. After the farewell everybody left with more insights and anticipation of next year’s conference in Münster.

Tobias Schlosser