
The title of this welcome collection of essays edited by Zabus and Nagy-Zekmi, *Perennial Empires*, is a salutary reminder that imperialism, far from having ended some time in the last century, is still with us. But what forms does this continuing imperialism take? The book’s subtitle suggests that imperial power operates in relation to several overlapping spheres: the postcolonial (and so, implicitly, the national), the transnational, and the aesthetic. Taking their cue from Hardt and Negri’s influential and provocative *Empire*, Zabus and Nagy-Zekmi have gathered essays that successfully aim to ‘trace the continuum of empire building in the twentieth and even the twenty-first century’ (3).

This collection is thus part of a number of recent critiques of the assumptions that have grounded postcolonial studies since its inception, assumptions that include or are governed by a suspicion of the nation-state and a corresponding celebration of transnational crossings and hybridities. Homi K. Bhabha’s early championing of migrancy as an almost metaphysical perspective begins to sound less convincing in the wake of less abstract, more materially (often spatially) grounded concerns. These later concerns, found in the work of scholars as varied as Ranajit Guha and Inderpal Grewal, Parama Roy and Dipesh Chakrabarty, demonstrate that the span of postcolonial studies has widened far beyond Edward Said’s groundbreaking identification, in 1978, of Europe’s ‘oriental’ imaginary.

At the same time (and perhaps in reaction), revisionist histories of European imperialism, such as those by Niall Ferguson, tell us that old assumptions – Europe as benefactor, humanism as normative, colonialism as historically necessary – refuse to die. Ironically, postcolonial scholars and neocolonialists alike frequently take as given western capitalism’s triumph (asserted most visibly by Francis Fukuyama and Thomas Friedman in geopolitical and economic terms), cultural universalism (enabled by social media), and individual agency (Foucault’s and Spivak’s cautions notwithstanding). Zabus and Nagy-Zekmi rightly observe, for example, that postcolonial critics, anti-imperial activists, and conservative commentators have all relied in one way or another on the nation-state as a point of reference. Even Fukuyama’s precipitate celebration of a post-Soviet, unipolar world bases its logic on the nation-state as a discrete entity. On the other hand, in order to oppose such views, provocateurs like Hardt and Negri fall into the trap of viewing the masses, or ‘multitude’, through what Zahi Zalloua, in his fine reading of their book (Chapter 7 in the collection), terms an ‘overly romantic and misguided’ lens that overlooks the ethical realities on the ground (127-8). Zalloua instead propounds ‘an ethics of difference’ favoured by Edouard Glissant and Jacques Derrida (146). Like Zalloua’s, the essays in this volume therefore attempt to re-conceptualise and complicate the still-common tendency to conceive of empire and nation in one-dimensional ways. The argument, as this volume makes clear, is not about choosing between a ‘“smooth” space of empire’ and the singular nation-state (135), but instead about the messy middle in which we recognise the strategic, dialogical need for both rootedness and migrancy.

The book has fourteen essays, designated as chapters, arranged into four parts: Post-War Representations of Empire, Experimental Nations Globalized, Half of Empire: The ‘Other’ America, and Queering Europe. As the section titles indicate, the fourteen contributors consider the many ways in which forms of power manifest themselves globally,

beginning with the post-World War I period, when Virginia Woolf famously identified 1910 as marking a shift in 'human character'. But authors like Woolf and her contemporaries (with a few exceptions, notably George Orwell) could not have imagined that imperial ambitions would be alive and well a century later. Although modern sensibilities changed in the wake of Freud and Einstein, Goldman and Eisenstein, the undercurrents of hegemonic forces, these essays show, did not diminish. Paradoxically, the ‘clones of former Leviathans’, as the editors put it, coexist along with street-level movements. Wall Street may be occupied, but its walls remain an emblem of what Mike Davis has called ‘the new sprawl of power’.

Following Zabus and Nagy-Zekmi’s succinct and useful introduction, Part I begins with Lucienne Loh’s exposition of what she calls W. G. Sebald’s ‘ironic nostalgia’ in *The Rings of Saturn* with regard to the demise of Britain’s empire. Jennifer Nesbitt similarly excises the legacy of imperialism in her reading of Barry Unsworth’s novel *Sugar and Rum* as a postmodern meditation on the politics of poetic license in a world still haunted by colonial injustice. Anca Vlasopolos’s analysis of recent novels by Peter Rushforth (e.g. *Kindergarten*) and Shirley Geok-Lin Lim (*Joss and Gold*) shows how their conscious engagement with nineteenth-century precursors, such as Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, are further refracted through their characters’ experiences of the Holocaust and terrorism. Rounding out the section is Andrea L. Yates’s surprising but thought-provoking juxtaposition of Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* with Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of the modern individual, both of whose works point to the need for a ‘dialogic’ view of the relationship between self and other. Implicitly echoing similar arguments by, among others, Emmanuel Lévinas and Martin Buber, Yates persuasively argues that these writers illuminate the ‘relationship to empire upon which identity is built’.

Part II moves us into the sphere of globalisation, beginning with Valérie K. Orlando’s focus on Maghrebian francophone writers who ‘challenge’ congenial notions of the postcolonial nation-state, imagining instead, as she terms it, a space of ‘experimental nations’. Martine Fernandes widens the francophone lens by spotlighting lesser-known works of Portuguese writers in France, such as Carlos Batista, who expose the country’s continuing ‘rhetoric of imperialism’ through their descriptions of immigrants’ convoluted experiences with assimilation. Zahi Zalloua’s reading of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* faults the book’s romanticised conception of migrancy and, in consequence, its inadequate attention to ‘the ethical dimension of difference’. Zalloua prefers Edouard Glissant’s more nuanced notion of ‘counterpoetics’ whereby the peripheries of empire (e.g. Creole literatures) are always in process, never fixed (much as in Yates’s discussion of the dialogic self). As such, Glissant avoids Hardt and Negri’s ‘essentializing’ of difference and, more importantly, the rhetoric of global commonality that ‘celebrates difference only in order to contain it’. Finally, Jean-François Vernay takes to task Australian writer Christopher Koch, once famous for novels set in Asia (e.g. *The Year of Living Dangerously*), for cleaving to ‘fantasies’ about Asia as a backdrop for European actors.

In opening Part III of the volume, Kristian Van Haesendonck underscores the reality that both race and empire continue to undergird Caribbean self-perceptions by riffing on Fanon’s vision of his island nation, Martinique, as emerging from colonialism’s ‘night’ into the ‘light’ of freedom. Van Haesendonck shows through his reading of the novel *Texaco*, by Fanon’s compatriot Patrick Chamoiseau, that precisely because the Caribbean today endures a ‘less repressive form of colonialism’ he calls ‘light colonialism’, the region and its writers are able to use their ‘ambiguous’ position to contest empire’s powerfully insistent
categorising. Asima F.X. Saad Maura, in her essay on Puerto Rican writers, similarly views the U.S. territory as existing between the two historical ‘crossroads’ of Spanish and American imperialism. Saad Maura sees novels by Luis López and René Marqués as expressing Puerto Ricans’ tangled, colonially-defined identities (what Salman Rushdie has called ‘partial selves’), particularly insofar as these writers re-imagine the island’s received history. Turning to Central America, Ana Patricia Rodriguez demonstrates that the great variety of recent works from the region together attest to the continued violent collusion of ‘local and global forces’, despite apparent ‘healing’ inaugurated by peace agreements in the 1990s. Given the ‘impunity’ (what Rukmini Nair in another context has called ‘indifference’) enjoyed by the perpetrators of violence, who profit from a ‘selective’ outlay of neoliberal capital, the region’s writers experiment with narrative ways of exposing this injustice.

The three essays in the volume’s final section consider how empires variously stigmatise and repress homosexual desire in order to safeguard their normative heterosexual self-perception, one that, as Patrick Robert Mullen reminds us in his opening essay, has been integral to the political ideology of the state. Mullen argues that the intimate relationship between Conrad’s repressed characters Nostromo and Decoud reveals imperialism’s ‘regulation of desire’, a regulation that Conrad’s novel (Nostromo) at once reflects and exposes. John C. Hawley presents readings of two recent novels set in Asia, Shyam Selvadurai’s Funny Boy (Sri Lanka) and Timothy Mo’s The Redundancy of Courage (East Timor), as evidence of a nascent corrective to the dominant trope of nationhood. The protagonists in both novels grapple with the challenge of weaving their queer selves into narratives that continue to service homophobia. Paul Allatson’s scrutiny of a Saddam Hussein bobblehead sold in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq reveals the ‘United States of Empire’s’ linkage of war, sexualised violence, and commodification. Thus, even the ‘purportedly homophilic’ television show Queer Eye is co-opted by the machinations of the imperial war machine. Together, the essays in Part IV, like those in the previous sections, underscore the editors’ point that ‘Leviathan has outlived the Hobbesian notion that tied its existence to the now obsolete nation-state.’

This last point, in fact, raises a possible oversight of this otherwise excellent volume. The authors here all agree that the eighteenth-century view of the modern nation-state, like the one envisioned earlier by Hobbes, is now entangled in a web of global trade and transnational capital that makes the older concept obsolete. This sustained, historically grounded attention to the continuing expansion of particular kinds of imperial power is a refreshing riposte to popular celebrations of globalisation. But I occasionally detected a semantic slippage of the terms ‘empire,’ ‘Leviathan,’ and ‘state’ that leads to an anachronistic reading of Hobbes and, more consequentially, threatens to expand the usage of ‘empire’ to almost unusable proportions. This stems in part from Hardt and Negri’s own (perhaps necessary) Deleuzian levels of abstraction. If forms of empire in fact permeate our world, can there then be a U.S.-dominated centre of gravity that is, as Allatson claims, impervious to activity beyond its planetary needs? This Foucauldian view posits an Orwellian leviathan – we are all ‘inside the whale’ – against what I see to be a less nihilistic concept, which is Rushdie’s reply that we are ‘outside the whale.’ The whale is still there, but some, at least, can find their way out – including the writers examined here. Other quibbles: How can stark ‘changes’ – Woolf’s 1910 change in ‘human character’ or the fall of the Berlin Wall – be continuous, as the editors avow? Such a formulation, echoed in many of the essays, attempts, unsurprisingly to me, to account for both historical continuity and historical break; it

simultaneously celebrates revolutionary change and laments reactionary stasis. I also was surprised not to see the term neocolonialism, which has earned a fair amount of scholarly attention on a slightly different register. These minor questions aside, *Perennial Empires* represents an important entry into the discussion surrounding our continuing engagement with the powerful ‘earthly empires’ that shape our world.

Alan Johnson