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Afterword: The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, postcolonial studies and the provinces

The history of the Journal of Commonwealth Literature that is mapped out in this anniversary issue gives an insight into the simultaneous history of postcolonial studies, of its fissures, developments and heterogeneity. This is especially timely given how the emerging fields of “world” and “global” literatures are forcing critics to think differently about how texts can be read within the context of globalization, and how material cultures are circulated and received beyond their country of origin.¹ These shifts are moving debates away from the vocabulary of “post” theory that has often diverted attention within postcolonial studies. At the same time, marking the fiftieth anniversary of JCL invites us to reconsider our understanding of how postcolonial literatures have been received and institutionalized within Britain, which is often regarded as a homogenous space in terms of the political, economic and cultural legacies of colonialism. Drawing on archival work undertaken at the Brotherton Library in Leeds, it is the aim of this Afterword to take up James Proctor’s assertion that Britain “has tended to remain a stable bland monolith, a singularly undifferentiated setting” in “accounts of black British culture” (2003: 1). Expanding upon Proctor’s appeal against viewing the erstwhile imperial centre as a “unified flatland” (2003: 1), it is possible to reflect on the dynamics of region and class within Britain that directly impacted the reception of Commonwealth and postcolonial literatures.²

In his 1986 “Leads from Leeds” article discussing the origins of JCL, the then co-editor Angus Calder maintained that it “was no accident” that attention to literature by writers from formerly-colonised nations emerged out of “the oppositional non-metropolitan ambience of mid-sixties Leeds”, where (as is discussed in these pages by Gail Low) the first conference on Commonwealth Literature was held in 1964. Calder goes on to state:

It could be that the effectual fuel, in Britain at least, of interest in Comlit has been an implicit, commonly tacit, dissent from the prevailing mores of Oxbridge literary criticism and the canons of the metropolis. To direct attention to artists from ex-“colonial” cultures of the “white” Commonwealth and (still more) to agitate, in effect, on behalf of Third World writers, involves an implicit challenge to prevailing metropolitan “standards”. (1986: 10)

It is an assertion that invites a consideration of the radical, internationalist milieu of regions outside the South-East of England during the immediate post-war decades. Over the last fifty years, JCL has moved to the University of East Anglia when John Thieme became editor before returning to Leeds and, more recently, moving to York with Claire Chambers and Susan Watkins taking over editorship duties. The original establishment of the journal in Leeds foregrounds how cultural and educational institutions in provincial cities drew attention to formerly-colonised writers in the 1960s. Such regions, moreover, provided fertile ground for non-metropolitan writers from a range of cultural and national backgrounds, from within and without Britain, to emerge side-by-side, removed as they were from an upper-class, metropolitan literary establishment.

The characterization of Leeds as offering a site where radical views could be explored, especially in relation to the Commonwealth, is supported by looking at the response to “Leads from Leeds” by Jon Silkin. Silkin was the founder of *Stand* magazine, a periodical that was originally established in London in 1952 but moved to Leeds when Silkin became Gregory Fellow in Poetry (it is now located in the School of English at the University of Leeds and is edited by Professor Jon Glover).³ In a 1987 letter to the editors of JCL following Calder’s piece, Silkin provocatively asks, “Would it now be statesman-like to consider admitting English writers to the Commonwealth?” (1987: n.p.). Referencing his

Jewish heritage and his status in Britain as the grandchild of Yiddish-speaking Lithuanian emigrants, he maintains that,

I am aware that English is the language I use but in which I do not entirely feel. It is as though there is no language that corresponds to my feelings, and that when I write I am translating from those feelings into a partly foreign language – English. If this is what it means to be of the Commonwealth, then I need no visa; I am already one of its citizens. (1987: n.p.)

Silkin's questioning of the national categories that precede admission into the category of Commonwealth Literature foregrounds the intertwined histories, as well as the networks of cultural exchange and movement, of the former "centre" of the Empire and its colonial peripheries. It is, in many ways, an appeal to concentrate not on the national background of particular writers but on what Raymond Williams defined as the shared "structure of feeling" (1961: 64) to name an emergent cultural disposition born of a particular historical period. Silkin's investment in literature and criticism that is not purely categorized in national or racial terms is evident in the pages of *Stand*, where radical, politically committed and inventive works of literature by writers from Britain, the Commonwealth and ex-colonial, independent nations could be found alongside each other. In the *Stand* of the 1950s and 1960s, for example, readers could discover writers who are now commonly only discussed within particular groups, such as the "Angry Young Men", the "Movement" and the "Windrush generation".

It is well documented that the social change brought about by the post-war consensus led to rebellion in the provinces by a number of angry young Grammar School-educated writers who opposed the dominance of a literary culture located in the South East.⁴ Yet, this

development has been regarded in isolation from the emerging aesthetics of postcolonial literature at mid-century: the predominant white, British writers of the 1950s and early 1960s are seen as neglecting issues of race in favour of contesting the inequities of class, while their non-white contemporaries have been read as challenging racial categories that framed British society but disregarding issues of class. What has not been widely acknowledged is the way in which the democratisation of British culture away from Oxbridge, due in part to the radical, left-wing milieu of cities in the north of England, also impacted upon young writers, intellectuals and students who had travelled to the imperial “motherland” from the former colonies. The familiar categories of Angry Young Men, Movement, Windrush and Commonwealth writers have allowed for an understanding of some of the shared perspectives of lower-middle- or working-class writers, on the one hand, and ex-colonial writers on the other. Yet, the categorisation of writers into specific movements can uphold notions of racial difference that separate cultural production down national or racial lines.

At the same time, the division of literary creativity in terms of race or class can prompt a silence on sexuality and gender. For example, the label of Angry Young Men (which was imposed from outside and widely disregarded by many to whom it was applied) marginalizes female writers of the period. In her seminal 1959 play *A Taste of Honey*, the Salford-born playwright Shelagh Delaney challenges British anxieties about homosexuality and inter-racial relationships. Set in a non-metropolitan Northern locale, the play concerns the young protagonist Jo, who reveals to her mother that she is pregnant by her black boyfriend Jimmie. Reviewing the play for *Encounter* in 1959, the writer Colin MacInnes (who also dealt with issues of race and sexuality in his ‘London novels’) praised *A Taste of Honey* as

the first English play I’ve seen in which a coloured man [Jimmie], and a queer boy [Jo’s best friend Geof], are presented as natural characters, factually, without

a nudge or shudder [...] and however tart and ludicrous, it gives a final overwhelming impression of good health – of a feeling for life that is positive, sensible, and generous. (1986: 205)

Delaney's play shares many of the social realist tropes of the Angries, rejecting the style of popular drawing-room comedies as being concerned only with 'safe, sheltered, cultured lives in charming surroundings – not life as the majority of ordinary people know it' (Delaney, 1987: xx). Delaney was especially critical of the plays of Terrance Rattigan, whose work also inspired Joe Orton's satirical alter-ego 'Aunt Edna', regarded as a typical Rattigan audience member and a self-proclaimed guardian of public morals (a caricatured invention that would come to be somewhat undermined in the 1970s by the real-life Mary Whitehouse). Despite such affinities with her 'Angry' contemporaries, and her preoccupation with the treatment of black citizens within mainstream British society, Delaney does not fit neatly into the expedient categories that order post-war literature and is thus often marginalized within literary criticism.⁵

It is possible to situate the emergence of Commonwealth and working-class literatures at a pivotal moment in British history, when established notions of national identity in Britain, commonly symbolised by markers of "Englishness", were becoming increasingly unstable. As Nick Bentley has persuasively argued:

[M]any of the factors that have produced contemporary re-assessments of English national identity were beginning to emerge during [the 1950s], such as the pluralisation of national identity in terms of ethnicity, the re-assessment of Englishness in relation to class, and the promotion of a multicultural model of the nation. (2007: 37)

Rather than assessing these changes in isolation of each other, they can instead be regarded as contributing to what Calder refers to as the dissent from the “canons of the metropolis” (1986: 10), and as an inter-connected challenge to post-war metropolitan cultural dominance.

A number of the Angry Young Men who came to prominence in the 1950s articulate their sense of dissatisfaction with their subordinate position within British society through an affirmation of their “provincial” backgrounds. In an interview with the University of Leeds magazine *Scope*, entitled “The Artist in the North”, Stan Barstow reflects on the rise of non-metropolitan novelists and playwrights stating, “It’s hoped that [...] the North will never again be regarded as no more than a breeding ground for red-nosed comics and cloth-capped characters in socio-political propaganda dramas” (c.1965: 12). Upholding this view, John Arden comments in the same interview series that,

To be born in the industrial West Riding in the late twenties or early thirties was to be born in a community that was already becoming obsolete and run-down [...]. The modern sense of taking a subordinate place in the pattern of life has created a kind of poetic ambiance to which young men of artistic inclinations have naturally responded. [...] The difference of language must necessarily affect writers and theatre people: and in so far as the Southern dialect of Chaucer became the modern Standard English, so the speakers of Northern English tended to feel left out and therefore self-assertive of their own speech. (c1965: 6-7)

It is an appeal to the “varieties of English, spoken and written” (1987: n.p.) throughout the Commonwealth to which Silkin would later commit in his response to Calder’s “Leads from Leeds” piece. This is not to suggest that working-class writers from the north of England can

be regarded as expressing a sense of postcoloniality equivalent to writers from formerly colonized nations. It does, however, emphasize the regional disparities and inequities that allowed for a compelling sense of affinity across and between works of literature commonly only ascribed to the Angries, Movement poets or Commonwealth writers.

The view of a clear split between postcoloniality and the Movement is further complicated by the 1983 work *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*, written by the Nigerian literary critics Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike. Since the 1960s there has been a long-standing connection between Nigeria and the North of England, sustained through the academic links between the University of Leeds and Ibadan University, where Geoffrey Hill and Tony Harrison worked as lecturers in English Literature. An unbound photocopy of a section of *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* is held at the Brotherton Library as part of material collected by Hill. In it Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike rebuke what they regard as “the obscurantism prevalent in Nigeria’s euromodernist poetry, the curious severance of this poetry from the African tradition, and its phoney and alienating version of syncretism whereby African elements are inducted into the service of a euromodernist sensibility” (1983: 37).

Opposing the “individualism” promoted by modernism, they support a surprising combination, namely the forging of French “negritude” philosophy with the “anglo-romantic sensibility” (1983: 39), which was taught in Nigeria using such texts as Robert Conquest’s *New Lines* – an anthology that consolidated a range of 1950s poets into the Movement. The poetry of the Movement, it is argued, “encourages a respectful and observant attitude towards the environment” and a “rediscovery of the very African setting from which the colonial education was weaning [Nigerian poets] away” (1983: 39). The rejection of modernism in favour of a renewed Romanticism that the Movement represents thus carries with it

the seeds of revolt against British culture imperialism [sic], seeds that were likely to sprout in the intensely nationalist environment of the late-1950s. A close and respectful regard for one's environment in a Nigerian national setting was far more likely than the alienated attitude to trigger off political consciousness in the poet. (1983: 39)

Rather than viewing the work of the Movement as insulated from the wider political and cultural shifts of the British Commonwealth, then, it is regarded here as providing the grounds for autonomy from what is seen to be a form of cultural neo-imperialism following independence.

To conclude this short reflection on the relevance of region and class in British responses to Commonwealth and postcolonial literatures, it is productive to return briefly to Calder's 1986 JCL piece. The interconnectedness and networks of exchange between the North of England and postcolonial Africa are alluded to in Calder's recollection of a 1968 trip to Nairobi. Finding himself in a University office next-door to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o – then James Ngũgĩ – Calder "began to appreciate that other writers from Africa had followed Wole Soyinka", who had relocated to Leeds to study English Literature in 1954. "A group of East Africans", Calder continues,

including besides Ngũgĩ, Peter Nazareth [...], Pio Zirimu and Van Zirimu, had felt the impact of a northern, proletarian city, and had discussed Marxist idealism in a left-wing University ambience. Ngũgĩ's leftward shift in *A Grain of Wheat* and thereafter was not unconnected with these exposures. (1986: 9)

Ngũgĩ affirms this influence in a 1966 interview with the Leeds student newspaper, the Union News, about his time as a University of Leeds MA student. Discussing his experience of activism in Leeds, he maintains that he had “always believed in the traditional view of the English Bobby” before witnessing police violence against “peaceful students demonstrating in the streets” (1966: 7). It is this atmosphere of revolutionary politics, however, that helped inspire his own anti-colonial politics, as he remarks at the interview’s conclusion:

I am glad I came to Leeds. There is a strong radical tradition here which of course helps every “colonial” student who comes to Leeds in a way that places like Oxford and Cambridge cannot do. I went to Oxford last term and some students I met there! Lord! They were worse than they were before coming to England. But invariably a “colonial” student who comes to Leeds goes back with a disturbed state of mind. (1966: 8)

Ngũgĩ’s oeuvre was thus inflected by the inter-cultural networks and creative exchanges that emerged out of the anti-racist, politically committed and internationalist politics of 1960s Leeds. Exploring the “radical tradition” of Leeds, which helped give rise to JCL in 1965, and examining the broader heterogeneity of British responses to the history of colonialism, forces us to re-think the relation between the regional, racial and national boundaries that are placed on literary creativity.

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¹ For a recent intervention into the theorization of 'world' and 'global' literatures see Deckard, S, Lawrence, N, Lazarus, N, Macdonald, G, Mukherjee, UP, Parry, B, and Shapiro, S (2015).

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³ For a brief history of Stand see <http://www.people.vcu.edu/~dlatane/stand-maga/history.html> (accessed June 5 2015).

⁴ See for example Taylor (1963) and Wilson (2007).

⁵ In 2014, the University of Salford celebrated the first 'Shelagh Delaney Day' on 25 November with a writing competition to mark Delaney's influential place within twentieth-century British drama.