

Re: placement: Commonwealth, postcolonial, and the politics of positioning

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Abstract

This essay explores the politics of positioning as it has shifted from the paradigms of “Commonwealth literature” to postcolonial studies, and asks if older mechanisms of placing literary and critical endeavours may be emerging refurbished in the present day. It recognizes the ways in which early enthusiasts of Commonwealth literature often tethered texts to firm nation-based foundations while also promoting a transcendentalist vision of literariness. This *modus operandi* gave way, I argue, to a much more agile and dimensional cognisance of the politics of positioning, for both literature and its critique, which hallmarks postcolonial studies in general. By briefly discussing the work of the writers Zadie Smith and Bernardine Evaristo, the essay calls for the sustaining of postcolonialism’s often sophisticated engagement with positionality at a moment when a less interrogative approach to matters of place, identity, literature, and critique may be circulating — so that the important wisdom of postcolonial studies is not overwritten by newly emergent approaches which seem familiar from old.

Keywords

authenticity, Commonwealth, identity, origins, positioning, postcolonial

Even in its heyday, “Commonwealth” was only ever a placeholder. In its inaugural issue nearly 60 years ago, the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*’s editorial statement admitted that this new venture’s title inevitably used “a piece of convenient shorthand” in gathering together new English-language writing, and was at pains to rule out “any concept of a single, culturally homogeneous body of writings to be thought of as ‘Commonwealth literature’” (1966: v). How texts were concretely placed, and the place

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to which they were assigned as works of literature, modulated across this contradiction. Critics and editors often sought to bear witness to the geocultural locatedness of these new exciting literatures hailing from (once-)colonized countries by using an “area studies” approach in speaking of (for example) Caribbean literature or African literature. At the same time, the strategic centripetal positioning of these literatures as productively conjoined — and not least due to their common use of English in a variety of forms — provided a bulky sense of worldwide literary endeavour that assisted in the establishment of the research and teaching of Commonwealth literature in an academic environment still very much beholden to the canon. For many keen to assert the quality and value of the new literatures, this meant gaming within the usual parameters of critique, as did William Walsh when he acknowledged “Commonwealth” as “a useful category of denotation grounded in history”, while also arguing that the best Commonwealth literature ultimately transcended history and geography by “significantly contribut[ing] to the canon of English literature” (1973: v).

As postcolonial literary studies subsequently pushed beyond these placeholding manoeuvres through its granulated attention to cultural difference rather than continental area and its commitment to new concepts not old canons, a sense of place changed productively. As I will rehearse in miniature, a proactive politics of positioning brought a much-needed sensitivity about both the ubiquity and mobility of these literatures and the work of critique. But things may be changing again. As I want to think about here very briefly, longstanding matters of the placing of postcolonial literature, and how we place ourselves as its readers (whoever we think we are), are taking another turn. At a moment when the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* is replacing its title partly to re-place and re-position itself amidst the wider domain of literary and cultural critique today, beyond its existing titular geopolitical disposition (which in actuality it has been breaching for some time), these matters of placeholding, replacing, and taking place seem apposite to ponder. If the study of Commonwealth literature dealt with the provenance of area unconvincingly, locking literatures into proper place even as it celebrated their transcendentalist literariness, is today’s cultural and critical milieu witnessing the ascendancy of a fresh yet familiar set of problems about positioning?

For the young Salman Rushdie, the placings required by Commonwealth literature were reason enough to dispense with it. Rushdie was keen to call time, famously, on Commonwealth literature as long ago as 1983, when, writing in the wake of the success of *Midnight’s Children* (1981), he claimed that Commonwealth literature did not exist, having participated at a conference devoted to the paradigm under which he and several fellow writers had been gathered. His frustration turned on its insistence that natal location was granted an inordinate significance for Commonwealth writers. Given Rushdie’s 1980s celebration of the gravity-defying feat of migrants whose capacity to “come unstuck” (1983: 86) was both exhilarating and treacherous, his antipathy towards the lauding of natal origins found ready traction:

One of the rules, one of the ideas on which the edifice rests, is that literature is an expression of nationality. What Commonwealth literature finds interesting in Patrick White is his Australianness; in Doris Lessing, her Africanness; in V. S. Naipaul his West Indianness, although I doubt that anyone would have the nerve to say so to his face. Books are almost

always praised for using motifs and symbols out of the author's own national tradition, or where their form echoes some traditional form, obviously pre-English, and when the influences at work upon the writer can be seen to be wholly internal to the culture from which he "springs". (1991: 66)

By presuming that a writer's natal environment is ingrained in their literary endeavours, Commonwealth literature enthusiasts risked trafficking in the "bogy of Authenticity", the "respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism [that] demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogeneous and unbroken tradition" (67). Fast-forward thirty years, and a new model of an old bogy appears to be returning to the ascendancy, although now Rushdie writes of it with more solemnity, spotlighting a state of affairs that has gone far beyond the frustrations of a Commonwealth literature conference or the academic niceties of disciplinary nomenclature:

[W]e live in an age in which we are urged to define ourselves more and more narrowly, to crush our own multidimensionality into the straight jacket of a one-dimensional national, ethnic, tribal or religious identity. This, I have come to think, may be the evil from which flow all the other evils of our time. (2021: 207)

Rushdie's remarks resonate in a critical environment in which the fetishizing of primal filiation appears to be animating a monocular vision of identity that obscures more sophisticated models of the singular plurality of human personhood. (And they have acquired a hideous additional irony in the light of the appalling attack he suffered at the Chautauqua Institution, New York, in August 2022, when the murderous motives of monomania almost cost him his life.) Indeed, both of his quotations which I have used, despite hailing from rather different moments, index the extent to which the desire to place a writer, a text, a person, a culture, a nation, appears indebted to the law of exalted origins which conceives (of) our place once and for all. And while there are major questions here which extend far beyond the horizons of textual analysis — the interrogation of "literal origins" (Homans, 2013: 114) is a major preoccupation of Critical Adoption Studies, for example — in the immediate context we might become concerned by the entrenchment of this kind of identity accounting as a means of securing legitimacy. If postcolonial scholarship of various kinds was often by default sceptical of authenticating cultural or critical endeavours as such in the years since Commonwealth literature lost its scholarly cachet, the resultant wisdom seems not always easy to sustain in current times, especially as a more uncritical understanding of a writer's (and reader's, and critic's, and teacher's) proper place seems to have returned.

Postcolonial literary studies in both its Marxist and culturalist modes did much to think beyond the localism of Commonwealth literature and the assumptions of authentic membership it upheld. In one direction, an important consciousness of the writer's, the intellectual's, and the critic's relation to their primary materials was famously placed as postcolonialism's core business by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's scrutiny of subalterneity, which questioned the intellectual as glibly speaking for the wretched of the earth and counselled a steadfast vigilance on the part of critics regarding their capacity to appropriate and erase the particulars of the colonized especially when advocating on

their behalf. For Spivak, the “substantive concern for the politics of the oppressed” in critical theory sustained the propensity to “hide a privileging of the intellectual and the ‘concrete’ subject of that oppression” (1993: 87) — a subject, especially when gendered as female, for whom representation usually functioned as a silencing mode of epistemic violence. In refusing to romanticize writers and intellectuals as faithfully representative of the oppressed, postcolonial studies often pursued a supple engagement with positioning in order to account better for the always-already compromised placeholding of cultural and critical work.

For example, in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), Neil Lazarus pursues a powerful and considered engagement with the work of the Martinique-born, France-educated Frantz Fanon, lionized as a seminal figure in the consolidation of postcolonial studies. In seeking to reorient Fanon away from his co-option by the “postcolonial prerogative” as a major theoretical rather than political figure, Lazarus does not merely champion Fanon’s advocacy of anti-colonial nationalism as a materially grounded mode of decolonization in the so-called Third World but attends to the fractures and fault-lines of his thinking. If Fanon called for intellectuals to be schooled by the people as part of their contribution to national consciousness, taking their place amidst a revolutionary collective (not displaced from them), Lazarus’s reading suggests that this was not something Fanon himself readily achieved. As well as “conflat[ing] decolonisation with revolution” and “tend[ing] to collapse class struggle and national liberation into one another, thus ignoring the specificities and irreducibles of each” (2011: 164), Fanon’s writing is subject to critique for its often cerebral mode: “Fanon’s formulations *are* consistently intellectualist in tone, often phrasing subaltern thought and practice in the elitist-idealist vocabulary of negation, abstract totalisation, and self-actualisation” (177). Leaving aside the extent to which one might support this view, it is important to recognize how carefully Lazarus positions Fanon in relation to the geopolitical and historical specifics in which he and his work were placed, discerning complex relations that inflect the positioning of his ideas — and orient Fanon’s place as an intellectual — *vis a vis* the moment of their emergence. These important relations do not negate Fanon’s affiliations to a specific place or politics, nor nullify his right to speak about decolonization in Algeria and Africa more widely. His work is not de-authenticated as a consequence of these twists and turns of positioning. Rather, it finds itself productively and illuminatingly critiqued, and by a distinguished critic whose writing is hallmarked by years of outstanding scholarly endeavour rather than hallowed by the exalted particulars of perceived identity recast as certifying credentials.

In other directions, the politics of positioning has also emerged as crucial to the business of postcolonial critique. The publication, in 2017, of Stuart Hall’s 1994 Du Bois Lectures at Harvard University, in *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, has afforded us the valuable opportunity to witness the timeliness of Hall’s committed and radical thinking at a moment when the circulation of these familiar vectors of identity’s accounting seems more robust than ever. His anti-essentializing thrust, which demands the defamiliarization of matters of nation and belonging as natural pre-discursive entities, insists that we take the measure of our dwelling always as the outcome of a politics of locatedness, one neither steady nor true for all times. As he put it powerfully in his classic essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1993), cultural identities were not

“an essence, but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin’” (1993: 395). Hall’s work on the syncretic, hybridizing consequences of diaspora is self-consciously indebted to his Jamaican childhood and his migrant experience of the travails of black Britain in the post-war decades, but he does not exceptionalize diaspora as an exclusive mode of being in the world. Indeed, as he argues in *The Fateful Triangle*, the extent to which diaspora dramatically exposes the prevailing polyform condition of all “cultures of ‘origin’” is part of its pedagogical value, and not least, as Hall insists, because we must learn to encase “origin” in quotation marks, “for who knows whether such cultures were in fact ‘the same’ at the beginning” (2017: 166). In Hall’s work, origins may be originary but are never fully original, wholly or purely autochthonic. Cultures of “origin” help formulate the material, cultural, and geopolitical conditions of one’s locatedness, for a period of time at least, and their impact may be seminal rather than slight; but they can only ever be an imperfect part of a wider array of cultural inventories to be reckoned with as both we, and the world, turn. This is a different way of understanding both the concept and impact of origins that decries their exaltation and resists the perception of identity as the permanent product of natal particulars. It matters where we are “from”, to be sure, but we can be “from” more than one context both synchronically and diachronically; and the initial natal contexts obtaining at the time of our nativity do not necessarily qualify as the most authenticating or explanatory of our singular plural self. In loosening the origin, and loosening us from origins normatively conceived, Hall does not smuggle in a romantic migrant transcendentalism; this is because the self is always positioned, bound by a politics of identity the performative requirements of which cannot be blithely ignored. While Lazarus’s work demands we pay attention to the possible contradictions which obtain to the material positioning of writers and intellectuals, ensuring that Fanon can never be glibly celebrated as an authentic(ated) advocate for the wretched of the earth, in a parallel manoeuvre, Hall fundamentally locates subjectivity as a worldly phenomenon while dismantling the mechanism of exalted origins used to set in natal terms the primary provenance of our being.

It is important to remember and sustain these critiques of monocular conceptions of positioning, and the exalted origins they advertise, because their recognition of the *politics* of identity is at risk of being obscured by refurbished notions of primary provenance. The requirement that the writer or critic should be rooted in proper grounds, must hold to exclusive positions, confronts the particulars of positioning with fresh forms of checkpointing. It is worth remembering that postcolonial studies has always retained the strategic ambition to be an accessible critical practice (it has always amused me that its opponents denigrate its apparently opaque critical vocabularies, as if the terms of Leavisite appreciation or cultural materialism were perfectly transparent). Robert J. C. Young’s user-friendly *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003) phrased things as such, but with important caveats, when describing postcolonialism as

a general name for these insurgent knowledges that come from the subaltern, the dispossessed, and seek to change the terms and values under which we all live. *You can learn it anywhere if you want to*. The only qualification you need to start is to make sure that you are looking at the world not from above, but from below. (2003: 20; emphasis added)

Young's postcolonialists are not bound by proscriptions of place, but brought into alignment by the politics of positionality and by a shared political and ethical orientation towards recognizing subalterneity, dispossession, and the view from below. The "bogy of Authenticity" has thankfully given way to an attention to the experiential horizon and materiality of oppression, while Young's emphasis on epistemological insurgency and the necessity for new values spotlights the postcolonial's political commitment to pursuing the unfinished business of decolonization in a neocolonial world order so that such oppression might be vanquished. That tricky business is everyone's. Young rightly insists that postcolonialism is an inclusive paradigm not constricted geopolitically, culturally, or intellectually — "You can learn it anywhere if you want to" — while the second-person address he uses makes no prior assumptions about the identity of the reader. While coloniality's production of subalterneity impacts specifically, involving distinctive and myriad constituencies of people, the ambitions of postcolonialism are not exclusively or primarily the business of those positioned as such. The political structures of inequality, locally and globally, which distribute power unequally and undeniably place us variously across a spectrum of privilege and precarity, require the efforts of all to overturn their agency while fully cognisant of the sanctions of positioning, so that other "terms and values" might obtain. It is not solely the responsibility of the disenfranchised to mount insurgency; or, as Zadie Smith recently put it, "[t]he time has long past when only one community's work would be required to cure what ails us" (2020: 70).

Young's invitation for all to get involved in the business of postcolonial critique is coming to appear increasingly risky these days. In beckoning privileged students and scholars in the Global North — those happily with the time and the means to learn something new — postcolonial studies carries the potential to displace and drown the voices of those much less privileged, often in the Global South, whose decolonial agency is inhibited by an academic industry born from the hard-fought political, cultural, and intellectual gains of the colonized. There emerge here some increasingly knotty concerns regarding (to rent George Lamming's phrase for a moment) the "occasion for speaking" (1960: 23) — of who really should be occupying the platform of critique, of who makes an appropriate (not appropriating) interlocutor when dealing with matters of subalterneity and dispossession, of one's participation in critical endeavours as itself a form of silencing, regardless of how committed one may be to decolonial work. Of course, Young is far too sophisticated a thinker to advocate any kind of naïve embrace of postcolonial critique unalike to the complex politics of positioning. Yet the entirely responsible demand that the academy's more fortunate thinkers consider the extent to which their critical endeavours are enabled by dominant domains is in danger of morphing into the reductive disqualifying of their legitimacy based upon clichés of placeholding. For such reasons, an agile politics of positioning is urgently required to confront misplaced pieties of profiling.

I have in mind here the use of exalted origins as a means of arbitration when it comes to matters of creative and critical discoursing, especially key placeholders of identity such as race. In her essay "Getting In and Out", Zadie Smith recalls visiting the Whitney Museum of American Art and viewing Dana Schutz's controversial painting of Emmett Till, *Open Casket* (2016), which had provoked protests — such as that issued by the British-born artist Hannah Black — because a white American artist had depicted a

highly emotive and significant moment in the history of America's murderous racism. There is definitely not sufficient time here to consider both painting and protest in any kind of depth, but I do want to spotlight Smith's articulation of her positioning as regards Schutz's painting and the ensuing controversy. In thinking through the logic of the protest, which turned on matters of racial provenance, Smith notes that had *she* been the painter of *Open Casket*, presumably nothing would have happened: "I am biracial. I have Afro-hair, my skin is brown, I am identified, by others and myself, as a black woman" (2018: 218). And so, according to the criteria of the protesters, she assumes that "Emmett Till, if I could paint, could be my subject, too" (219). However, Smith queries racial inclination as authenticating artistic provenance by thinking of her biogenetically conceived children, who, thanks to having a white father, "by the old racial logic of America [...] are 'quadroons'". What follows is an extraordinary cascade of rhetorical questions of which the following extract is only an approximation:

When exactly does black suffering cease to be [my children's] concern? Their grandmother — raised on a post-colonial island, in extreme poverty, and descended from slaves — knew black suffering intimately. But her grandchildren look white. Are they? If they are, shouldn't white people like my children concern themselves with the suffering of Emmett Till? Is making art a form of concern? Does it matter which form the concern takes? Could they be painters of occasional black subjects (Dana Schutz paints many different subjects)? (219)

With some purpose, Smith pressurizes race's illusion of logic by setting at odds myths of biogenetic racial origin with the complex politics of racial positioning. To her mind, the authenticating membership of race seems unable to adjudicate on the matter of striking appropriate relations with a domain of suffering which may or may not be counted as "heritage". Crucial, here, is the tone of curiosity struck by the paragraph's many rhetorical sentences. Smith keeps alive the necessity of opening a dialogue about such complexities through her use of the interrogative mode, ensuring that she does not replace one firm standpoint with another. At play is the extent to which origins should mediate "concern", whether or not those origins are counted in terms of racial ancestry or filial heritage. In wondering if "concern" might be sourced otherwise, from an ethical or political standpoint less normatively placed nor sanctioned by authenticities of race and heritage, Smith is *not* proposing that anything goes, but staging with extraordinary power just how unresolved remain these questions — maybe *should* remain — in a climate where a new identitarianism is potentially inhibiting an important and necessary debate about provenance, appropriation, representation, and "concern".

Smith's essay also brings to the fore the entanglement of a growing attention to the ongoing structural inequalities of institutions throughout the Global North (which still appear very white) with the matter and mystery of cultural creativity. At stake here is not only the famous burden of representation, the assumption that black artists should portray the matter of black lives, but also the wider visibility of black figures and black texts within the domains of publishing, book-reviewing, prize-winning, cultural critique, and teaching. On this point, a fascinating figure to consider is Bernardine Evaristo, who has dealt with such entanglements with a dexterity and poise which may be instructive. Evaristo's ownership of her place as a contemporary writer at large has proved important

in the wake of the enhanced visibility she gained by winning the Booker Prize (alongside Margaret Atwood) for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019). In *Manifesto* (2021), written in the wake of the novel's award, Evaristo generously thanks those postcolonial critics who championed her early work while acknowledging that "I never saw myself as postcolonial but British" (2021: 171). Her strategic insistence that she is a writer fully within a British frame forms an important element (to work with James Procter's influential line of thinking) of a "sedentary" (2003: 14) politics of territorialization, one that refuses the displacement of racially minoritized Britons due to their possible diaspora heritage. And while some might wish to position Evaristo biocentrically as a so-called mixed-race writer (the daughter of a white English mother and black Nigerian father), her self-identification — witnessed in her Booker Prize acceptance speech — as a *black* woman also indexes her determination both to participate in and advocate for the imagined community of black Britons in general and black women in particular as full constituents of a still-unequal demos.

In presenting herself as such, foregrounding as confluent not contradictory the positions of black, British, and woman, Evaristo has used her literary celebrity to advocate productively on behalf of a black literary culture still not fully acknowledged or known more generally, through a range of initiatives — even if some of the literary materials she has promoted might not concern themselves with the politics of racial inclusion, and even challenge the ways we might think of race as variously a biocentric fiction, a political positioning, an exalted origin, a component of decolonial critique, and so forth. For example, her curation of Penguin Books's recent *Black Britain: Writing Back* series has enabled the valuable spotlighting of a range of significant texts not always well-known more widely through their republication — such as Jacqueline Roy's *The Fat Lady Sings* (2000), Charlotte Williams's *Sugar and Slate* (2002), and Hannah Azieb Pool's *My Fathers' Daughter* (2005), the latter of which arguably scrambles notions of race and heritage in its powerful account of transracial adoption. As a public figure, Evaristo has worked effectively and proactively with "black" as a distinctive positioning in order to impact progressively on the democratizing of literary publishing to better reflect the variety and diversity of British writing. But in her novels, Evaristo often works hard not only to expose an understanding of "black" as at best a polyform placeholder riven by tensions and contradictions that put in doubt just how much different black subjects may share; she also questions if racial signifiers should remain or could ever be productive and meaningful terms of social explanation going forwards.

One of the key concerns of *Girl, Woman, Other* is the extent to which manifold and proliferating positionings of those designated as black women can ever be usefully circumscribed by the rubrics and rhetoric of identity, as well as the tensions and disagreements across those positioned as such. The novel regularly liquidates most received notions of transpersonal filiation not least by attending to the leaky boundaries of race and gender. While there might seem to be a contradiction between Evaristo's public mobilizing of "black" and her literary interrogation of its shortcomings, it is important to recognize the complex politics of positioning which place these two ambitions strategically in relation — which should remind us that political and aesthetic engagements with (in this instance) race bring different demands in distinct if hinged domains. While Evaristo publicly self-identifies as a black writer for important sociopolitical reasons, her

writings about blackness often engender a vital literary critique of the very vocabulary she uses as part of her public advocacy. These careful if counterpointed positionings do not undermine each other; rather, their confluence dimensionalizes how we might situate Evaristo with regard to the competing contexts and vectors of identity's sanctioning.

There is another related matter here, concerning writerly provenance, which returns us to the issues Zadie Smith raised in relation to *Open Casket*. In her novel *Mr Loverman* (2013), Evaristo writes stirringly of an intimate relationship between two elderly Antiguan-born male Londoners, and so raises issues of intersectional subjectivity as well as points to the closetings which obtain in black British life. To my knowledge, Evaristo is not a migrant, descended from the Caribbean, male, in a same-sex relationship, and so on, so the specifics of her imagined tale of love between men require her to shape a literary voice, as Maggie Gee pointed out in her review, "of a different gender, generation, and provenance" (2013: n.p.). This imagining of life beyond the horizon of writerly experience passed without remark, I would hazard, because the coincident placing of Evaristo and her fictional characters as black presumes a common racial inclination that serves to authenticate Evaristo as possessing the proper authority to imagine her characters' lives. (The same might be said of many of the narrators of *Girl, Woman, Other*, or of the heroine of *Soul Tourists* (2005), Jessie O'Donnell, a foundling from Leeds.) If so, one wonders if a cruder, less sophisticated model of legitimate placement is operating, one which fictionalizes commonalities of presumed experience through the assignment of an overarching rubric of identity — in this instance, a transcendentalist blackness that presumes a common wealth of accessible black experience for all those racialized as such, regardless of how they may be placed. If so, what gets lost, first, is a productive sensitivity to the politics of positioning, of the kind we witnessed in Lazarus's suggestive enquiry into the dimensionality of Fanon and his work. Lost, too, is the cognition of literary enquiry as an interrogative mode of understanding that provincializes both writer and reader as they reckon with the imagined lives of those beyond one's horizon of experience (that is, male, migrant, geriatric, gay) — trying to engage beyond, as Caryl Phillips once put it, "a narrow definition of yourself" (Goldman, 2009: 94).

It is against such narrow definitions of our personhood that Salman Rushdie has protested, both during the 1980s and today. "[W]e live in a censorious age", he recently claimed, "in which many people, especially young people, have come to feel that limitations need to be placed on freedom of expression. The idea that hurting people's feelings, offending people's sensibilities, is going too far now has wide credence" (2021: 255). Rushdie's somewhat crude caricature of the predicament of culture in the twenty-first century may be inflected by a septuagenarian's incomprehension of younger readers and critics; indeed, we might recall with irony his confident younger self's ungenerous exasperation with the critical paradigms of Commonwealth literature coined by seasoned scholars who worked steadfastly often in the face of institutional scepticism in order to have the new literatures in English taken seriously in the first place. But contrariwise, this does not mean that anything goes. Postcolonial studies has always been acutely aware of the politics of representation, of the harms of writing or speaking for (not of) the subaltern, of fashioning a new postcolonial exotic from naïve curiosity, of unthinkingly appropriating others' pain for creative, commercial, or critical gain. Rather, I wonder whether, in this current moment, we should recommit to remaining highly cognisant

of the politics of positioning that has so preoccupied postcolonial enquiry, in order to stay alive to both the problems and possibilities that emerge at that strange junction of encounter between a writer and their concerns, and between their text and its concerned reader — or critic — who is also multiply positioned. All positions combine blindness and insight, set limits but also act as points of departure beyond them; in contending with the politics of our positionings we may productively challenge the exalted origins and border-logics which desire the ubiety of identity to place us malevolently at odds. As Elleke Boehmer rightly counselled many years ago, we should neither assume that societies are completely closed off from each other, nor that we (again, whoever we think we are) can or should seek to translate cultural difference entirely into our own terms of reference. Rather, in adopting a responsibly curious approach to that beyond our immediate horizons “with diligent research and applied understanding”, entrenched thinking can be productively, creatively interrupted. This means persisting with a postcolonial understanding of literature and critique — one which does not regard cultural materials as padlocked against those placed beyond the threshold of their specificity (presuming we can all agree upon where that threshold obtains), nor which glibly assumes that opaque matters of social, racial, or cultural distinctiveness can be transcended “merely by a leap of imaginative empathy” (2005: 239) that shortcuts the specifics of position.

Are we still permitted to be such postcolonial readers? My worry is that something like the operating systems of placement that informed Commonwealth literature and so annoyed the young Rushdie have been upgraded to service some contemporary standpoints — however well-intentioned or politically laudable — concerning which subjects are the proper provenance of creative artists, who are the most appropriate readers to respond to them critically, and which criteria we exalt and calcify when seeking to certify and authenticate such provenance. At a moment when this journal is significantly replacing its nomenclature, this seems an apposite time to uphold a dimensional approach to weighty matters of literature, empire, and critique, one which sources intellectual endeavour partly in the wisdom, not the bogies, of past paradigms.

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