Article

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What's in a name? Circles of attention and critical sensibilities

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Abstract

This article reflects on the history of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* as it connects to my personal engagement with the naming and re-naming of the field of Commonwealth / postcolonial / Empire studies across my academic career and contrasting institutional orientations. It considers the ways in which we can shape our field by aligning our critical attention with particular modes of scholarly engagement and sociopolitical commitments.

Keywords

Caribbean, Commonwealth, criticism, feminism, literature, postcolonial

> "Surely there is something to be said for drawing a circle around our attention and remaining within that circle.
>
> But how large should this circle be?"
>
> Zadie Smith, "The Embassy of Cambodia"

This short essay reflects on the various narrowing and expanding circles of interest that have named and shaped the fields of literary critique with which I have engaged during my academic career as a — well, now there's the rub… . The fact that the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* was founded the year I was born (1966) has meant that my reflection on its achievements, its ageing, and now its chance for a reawakening has provoked a more personal reflection. I have chosen to approach its re-naming through this lens as my own intellectual journey has involved a number of negotiations around shifts and conflicts where naming has been important. While these negotiations have often been animated by institutional affiliations and judgements far above my own

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influence, I also recognize that I have been responsible for my own choices around course titles and job titles, as well as decisions regarding the venues in which I publish and the conferences at which I present. These decisions have often been based on the character of the academic attention I value and to some degree that has been indicated by particular names. While the higher stakes of making affiliations arguably create a particular pressure for literary critics working across a field of enquiry that was known sometimes concurrently in the 1990s and subsequently and increasingly contrastively as Commonwealth and/or postcolonial literatures, they also afford the advantage of being aware from the very start that your chosen field is not simply out there waiting for you to receive. Rather it presents itself as a zone of possibility, arguably to be debated more than to be decided. In my experience, it was sometimes terrifying and sometimes exhilarating to be part of the debates around naming and re-naming this field of study — as the terms Commonwealth, New Literatures in English, post-colonial and postcolonial all jostled for position — but most of all it was vital not to mistake the fray for the work.

My own decisions to focus on Anglophone Caribbean Literature and feminist criticism came from a journey through the muted hallways of Commonwealth Literature and the noisy labyrinth of postcolonial theory from which I discovered that naming and becoming a name were an entangled, competitive endeavour. I did not find my work in this shadowboxing, and the claims to disciplinary standing were not interesting to me beyond making starkly visible how maps can be drawn up regardless of the terrain. But I hope that reflecting on how the naming (and to some extent shaming) of Commonwealth literary study framed the circles of attention in which I have come to work will give some context to the power and the value of renaming.

When *JCL* was founded in 1966 it had a remarkably clear sense of its circle of attention. We know this from Professor A. Norman Jeffares's detailed account of building the groundwork of Commonwealth Literature as a discipline from his academic position at the University of Leeds, recounted in his 1968 Sir Thomas Holland Memorial Lecture, at the Royal Society:

> We began teaching Commonwealth literature to some of our graduate students in Leeds in 1958. We established a Visiting Fellowship in Commonwealth literature — with the initial aid of the British Council — and have brought each year a writer or a scholar from a Commonwealth country to Leeds to teach his literature […] And out of this activity came our plans to hold this first conference [at Leeds in 1964] […] We chose as the theme of the Conference *Commonwealth Literature. Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture* […] and in 1965 established the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, which is jointly published by the University of Leeds and Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. The then Commonwealth Relations Office made a grant to help the University to establish the Journal, which is published biannually. It has quickly made its mark; it provides an annual Bibliography of creative writing from all Commonwealth countries (except Great Britain, which is already adequately covered). Critical articles and reviews are also included, and the journal provides a long-needed forum for commentary, discussion and debate — on a comparative basis, with a comprehensive view. (Jeffares, 1968: 25–26).

Yet, despite this confident articulation of a new literary assembly from across the Commonwealth, in the assertions of an assured orchestrating yet anonymous "we", in the

centrifugal call of this endeavour toward the UK (albeit Leeds not London), in the founding proposition of a "Common Culture", and in the assumed gendering of the writer as male, Jeffares is already shaping a suspiciously familiar circle that, unwittingly of course, entirely undermines his claims to "a comprehensive view". Indeed, it is perhaps in his affirmation of the authoritative scope of t/his endeavour and in his confident sense of the value of these initiatives rooted in the UK and based on intellectual frameworks and vocabularies familiar to "English Literature" that Jeffares most tellingly betrays his patriarchal Eurocentrism and thereby his blind spots.

Almost all the critical energies that have emerged subsequently around the body of writings that Jeffares calls into being under the name "Commonwealth Literature" have demonstrated that his judgement over the criteria for naming this circle of attention may have been rather naïve. His conjecture that "it may be well not to boggle overmuch at a title which *is* workable and need not carry over-much political meaning" (1968: 19) suggests that his compass, bought, as he openly declares, with funds from the British Council and the Commonwealth Relations Office, and set to an angle where "English literature ideally should still remain the yardstick" (1968: 29), proved entirely inadequate to circumscribe the depth of the diversity of literary activities during this period or the dissent to it from within this circle. His call that there is nothing much in a name turned out to be quite mistaken.

Looking back at the attention focused within Jeffares's circle, as a Caribbeanist I am particularly struck by his account of the literary critical horizons made possible by congregating writers under the banner of Commonwealth Literature. His case for a mode of reading alert to "creative writers […] looking at other parts of the Commonwealth" and the basis of this relationality is especially constrained:

> V. S. Naipaul saw India in *An Area of Darkness* from a West Indian point of view and found India lacking; O. R. Dathorne's *The Scholar Man* gives us a West Indian view of Africa quite unlike that of another West Indian, the poet Derek Walcott, in his poem "A Far Cry from Africa". This is a reaching out beyond the country of origin: yet not into complete strangeness because of shared educational traditions; this process sharply illuminates one area from the point of view of another. (1968: 28)

In detailing these writers as "reaching out beyond the country of origin", Jeffares not only demonstrates the bizarre neutrality of the Commonwealth comparativist in operation but also fails entirely to address the complicated nature of the relationship between country and origin for Caribbean persons of both African and South Asian descent whose ancestors were brought to the region as unfree labour (enslaved or indentured). The Caribbean writers he invokes here are not simply looking across the Commonwealth with curiosity piqued by their encounters in Leeds or Brisbane facilitated by the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS). They are looking to ancestral homelands denied to them by British colonialism. They are reaching back to countries of origin from which they have been dispossessed. The circles of their attention are determined by the geographies of colonial violence and its material and affective legacies. These writers and their works may overlap with the circle drawn by the compass of Commonwealth Literature but in Jeffares's remarkable blindness to the

postcolonial critique within these works, he does not even mention the history of empire or the project of reckoning with the colonial past among the reasons for engaging with t/his field, nor can his circle attend to the burgeoning of national literatures and their role in imagining and instantiating rights-bearing national subjects.

This tension between competing circles of attention feels personal to me because when I began my university teaching career at the University of Leeds in 1993, I was still completing my PhD on early Jamaican women's poetry at the University of Warwick's Centre for Caribbean Studies. At Leeds, the foundational attachment to Commonwealth Literature was still strong. Although it was almost 30 years earlier that Leeds had hosted the first international UK conference on Commonwealth Literature in 1964, the pedagogical and institutional architecture to which I was inducted in 1993 had a clear and legible lineage to Jeffares's vision. The course I was asked to teach had already been designed with one week, or maybe two, reading literature from different Commonwealth countries or regions. As I remember, these included Australia, Canada, India, Africa, and the Caribbean. This reading tour was typical of a Commonwealth Literature programme and, as far as I know, had lived a stable, relatively healthy life for decades at Leeds. And yet, having been trained at a Centre for Caribbean Studies at Warwick, where the focus was on recognizing and interrogating the hugely complex and internally differentiated character of one multi-language region, and on bringing the different disciplinary perspectives of historical and political analysis alongside literary criticism to deepen that understanding, I genuinely struggled to perceive the meaningful objectives of the fictional congregation I was delivering to students. What productive conversations could I facilitate with such brief encounters? How could I avoid flattening out the specific in favour of "common" but somewhat superficial cultural thematics? And, above all, how could I configure vectors of discussion and literary appreciation that would not implicate us in the idea of the Commonwealth and return us to Englishness?

Such questions felt particularly intense because, in addition to my training in area studies, my thinking had been shaped by the maelstroms of postcolonial theory which were reaching their crescendo in the mid-1990s. This field was marked by high levels of critical antagonism and self-questioning, and I had absorbed it as my obligation to approach the structure I inherited critically and to worry away at how a term like Commonwealth Literature might have any descriptive or analytical value. The heady agonies of high theoretical texts by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha offered rich defamiliarization and powerful critiques of epistemic orders through which the inheritances of the colonial past had come to be normalized. It seemed to me then, and still now, that the idea, or maybe the ideal, of Commonwealth Literature was one of those inheritances. For many of us trained as postcolonial scholars and invested in exploring the cultural realities and consequences of Europe's history as a colonial power, it was rightly impossible to be inert to the way in which literary histories, print cultures, knowledge bases, ideas of expertise, and theoretical approaches all were (and remain) implicated in structures of power that too often perpetuate inequalities and untruths that favour the Global North. The relationships forged between ACLALS, Heinemann Educational Books, the BBC, and the University of Leeds echoed these asymmetries of resources and authorities even as they were championing the creation of a platform for study with more inclusive reach. Moreover, in its domestication of attention to the

relationships across literary works written in English, Commonwealth Literature was inherently a denial of the violence and erasure on which colonial languages and cultures were imposed. Postcolonial theory drew attention to the operations of colonial discourse and exposed the limits of Commonwealth Literature as a body of writings that was both circumscribed by the impact and legacies of the English Empire and all the same mainly disinterested in its political textures and imaginings. Yet the circle of attention drawn by postcolonial theorists was not to be mine either.

I was interested in the relationship between writing and people-making projects in the Anglophone Caribbean region, in how the reimagination of subjectivity and community outside and beyond the grammar of colonialism helps create the conditions for social transformation. It was an interest that compelled me to think a great deal about the possibilities and the constraints of drawing different circles of attention, about the multiple and overlapping nature of the circles needed to apprehend a region and peoples created by an unrivalled intensity of cultural encounter and exchange, about the solidarities and the tensions to be felt in bridging or isolating these different circles drawn by various expressions of belonging — ancestry, ethnicity, nation, region, political sensibility. It was an interest inspired by brilliant teachers and mentors — Michael Gilkes, David Dabydeen, and Kenneth Ramchand — and one that I pursued by reading the little magazines and pamphlets held at Warwick University library. I also became aware of an overlapping moment in the history of Commonwealth Literature and Anglophone Caribbean Literature that was critical to how the latter discipline shaped its circles of attention and that is also relevant here in terms of shifting attention to *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today.* It is a moment that clarified how my own sense of tension and of straining against a Commonwealth model as a new lecturer was already embedded in the tradition of criticism to which I had committed as a doctoral student.

While it would appear that the first two conferences of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, in Leeds and Brisbane respectively, were uncontentious and helped establish shared objectives and agendas for this emerging field, the third conference, hosted by the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies in 1971, took place in a moment characterized by deep cultural quarrels and political unrest in the Anglophone Caribbean region. Although the conference took place on the university campus, the most pressing circle of attention was drawn by intellectual and cultural commitments intersecting with grassroots political demands as students and working-class citizens joined in protests in 1968. With riots against the Jamaican Government's refusal to allow Walter Rodney, the Guyanese historian and radical who held a position at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies, back into the country, and protests in Trinidad's Woodford Square against the government's banning of Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael, a Trinidadian by birth, the context for the conference's central theme of "West Indian Literature" was demonstrably political. The stakes of debates around the role and relevance of the writer and of self-representation were running high.

Kamau Brathwaite was invited to give the keynote address at the conference and, speaking on "The Function of the Writer in Society", he took this opportunity to argue for academic recognition of the "Little Tradition" and the validation of submerged vernacular folk cultures. This was no surprise as his brilliant poetic trilogy, *Rights of Passage*

(1967), *Masks* (1968), and *Islands* (1969), as well as his dazzling cultural criticism including "Roots" (1963) and "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" (1967/8), had offered the most radical and determined articulation of cultural decolonization and African cultural restitution for the Caribbean. Yet, the choice of V. S. Naipaul as his respondent meant that cultural contestation was inevitable. As I have previously noted elsewhere, the exchange that followed Naipaul's paper is now something of a legend in the history of Caribbean criticism, and the various debates, snipes, and exchanges that the event staged involved, in one capacity or another, most of the "big" names of that time (Donnell, 2006). The critic Kenneth Ramchand accused Brathwaite of "folking up" the criticism during the conference itself but even his damning response seemed rather tepid compared to that of Eric Roach (also Trinidadian) who published his Eurocentric riposte in the *Trinidad Guardian*: "We have been given the European languages and forms of culture — culture in the traditional, aesthetic sense, meaning the best that has been thought, said and done […] Are we going to tie the drum of Africa to our tails and bay like mad dogs at the Nordic world to which our geography and history tie us?" (Roach, 1971; qtd in Breiner, 1993: 2). Accounts even include the absent Walcott who was apparently warned to stay away due to "CULTURAL GORILLAS" (Brathwaite, 1994: 322).

The ACLALS conference had afforded a Commonwealth-shaped platform, but the circle of attention was on an explicitly postcolonial struggle between critics with oppositional affiliations and as such it presented a critical juncture for battling out the terms of literary critical and politico-cultural engagement for the Anglophone Caribbean writer and critic. As the writer and theorist Sylvia Wynter noted, "the conflict and the clash that we have seen reflected here in this conference, [is] on different levels of awareness, between those who justify and defend the system; and those who challenge it" (Wynter, 1971: 102). Within Caribbean criticism this was the clash between the Great Tradition inherited from colonial institutions and, as Brathwaite called it, the Little Tradition, grown from folk traditions, Caribbean languages, and the politics of social commitment. Yet at an ACLALS conference, it was also inevitably a conflict between Commonwealth Literature and Literature, Critique, and Empire in its day. Caribbean critics were rejecting the centre–periphery structure of the Commonwealth as a benign and apolitical vehicle for cultural amelioration and appreciation. Sources of cultural authority and vectors of allegiance were being rearranged away from the networks of empire and new circles of interest being proposed. The remarkable history of Anglophone literature and criticism that has emerged since 1971 shows that it was the Little Tradition that carried the future promise of critical enquiry for the region.

Yet in 1993, as I took up my job at Leeds University, this fray of almost 20 years felt fresh. The two voices of these traditions were seeking to claim their truths in my teaching and research life and I could feel the friction. However, it was a critical study published in that same year that gave me a new and compelling circle of attention by addressing a significant gap within both the Great and the Little Tradition of Caribbean criticism that was central to my own critical concerns — the voices of women as writers and critics. Most significantly, this study proposed a new critical sensibility that was orientated towards entering the circle and listening, not circumscribing. Evelyn O'Callaghan's *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women* did not make a case for allegiance to an already defined circle of attention but

rather acted as an invitation to join a knowledge community in the making — one that was both open to its own contingency and committed to meeting the needs of students. O'Callaghan's mode of address highlighted critique as possibility and plurality: "Woman Version is a beginning" (1993: 15) and "a collective enterprise indeed!" (1993: 11). Here I found a critical register characterized by openness and the welcome of dialogue and of different views to come:

> I do not attempt to construct a single theoretical model for West Indian women's writing, but rather to suggest the need for plural and syncretic theoretical approaches which can take account of the multiplicity, complexity, the intersection of apparently conflicting orientations which we find in the writing; approaches which can combine heterogeneity *and* commonality while refusing to be ultimately formalized under any one ism. (1993: 15)

The absence of claiming territory and accruing authority is also revealed in how, throughout the book, O'Callaghan cites work by other women — both literary and critical — modelling critique as an inclusive and dynamic mode of exchange. The work is directly concerned with what students and the future of literary study need from the present and it speaks to the excitement and necessity of knowledge production as social justice. For me, these orientations towards the future, towards students, and towards social justice remain vital, and it may be useful to refresh our commitments in an era when our teaching and research lives are often separate/d by institutional imperatives and debates about identity can overwhelm issues of injustice.

What was striking to me in 1993 and remains a touchstone now, is the nurturing of a particular critical sensibility over the shaping of a commanding interpretative gesture. In the circle I found at the intersection of Caribbean and feminist criticism, and in which I subsequently chose to remain, the attention remains on the obligation to listen, to question, and to connect ideas to actions in knowledge institutions and the wider world.

As the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* relaunches as *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today*, I am mindful that naming matters and that stepping back from the specifying of a field and towards the nominating of a focus for enquiry indicates a recognition of the ongoing nature of this obligation. 2023 marks the 75th anniversary of *HMT Windrush*, the 70th anniversary of the British invasion of then British Guiana, and the 40th anniversary of Operation Urgent Fury, the US invasion of Grenada. In the long shadow of empire and in the horrific blast of intensified incursions that mark our today, there is much work to be done that *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* can begin to beckon under its name.

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