



COMMONWEALTH OF LETTERS

**British Literary Culture
and the Emergence of
Postcolonial Aesthetics**

PETER J. KALLINEY

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Commonwealth of Letters

Peter J. Kalliney

Series Editors' Foreword

All of us, in our personal and professional lives, rely more than we care to admit on placeholders of some kind or another. Received ideas, after all, make it possible to advance without repeatedly reinventing the wheel. Most students of modernism, for instance, are probably pretty confident that F. R. Leavis was a reactionary whose emphasis on close reading eliminated politics from literary analysis, just as students of postcolonial literature are likely comfortable in the belief that politically engaged postcolonial writers were profoundly hostile to high modernism's doctrine of aesthetic autonomy. Sure, a lot of Caribbean poets might have been drawn to T. S. Eliot, but the attraction lay only in the modernity of his idiom, which in the hands of Kamau Brathwaite or Derek Walcott could be turned, having been rendered politically subversive through the alchemy of minority consciousness, against the metropolitan master.

And then a powerful revisionary account comes along to reveal the partiality (in every sense) of what we thought we knew. Such is Peter Kalliney's *Commonwealth of Letters*. Dominant narratives are rarely completely wrong or they wouldn't have taken hold in the first place; but if you think you understand what Leavis "means" to the history of literary study, you probably don't. Kalliney is more politic: without simply dismissing the partial understandings that have guided a great deal of scholarship, he draws on extensive archival work to offer a stunning new account of the role of racial competition and collaboration during the hinge period between metropolitan modernism and postcolonial literature.

The broader argument is this: professional networks established by interwar modernists in London welcomed and encouraged the efforts of colonial émigrés in the midcentury as a way to rejuvenate a literary culture increasingly stigmatized as

lifeless by metropolitan commentators in the post-World War II wake of modernism. This outward turn can be considered a dialectical companion to the inward turn toward Englishness described by Jed Esty in *A Shrinking Island*.

Émigré writers had their own reasons not only for collaborating with what remained of the London avant-garde but also for adopting some of the key tenets of metropolitan modernism: the desire to gain access to London's cultural institutions, such as the BBC, went hand in hand, Kalliney argues, with an investment in aesthetic autonomy. Indeed, in Kalliney's words, "black Atlantic writers were the twentieth century's most eloquent and committed defenders of aesthetic autonomy." Why? "Nonwhite, non-metropolitan writers were drawn to the conception that cultural institutions could be exempt from the systems of racial and political hierarchy operative elsewhere." Eliot's theory that a genuine work of art rises above the mundane biographical particularities of its creator thus held great appeal for colonial writers, "who hoped their art would transcend the kind of racial barriers that exasperated African American writers working in the U.S." Thus if London's midcentury modernists, like late imperial adventurers seeking vitality at the periphery of "civilization," sought an infusion of aesthetic energy from colonial émigrés, late colonial and early postcolonial intellectuals had at least as much to gain by adapting high modernist discourse to their own needs.

One can imagine a triumphalist version of this narrative in which modernism is shown to be more important and influential than disrespectful postmodernists and postcolonial critics have been willing to admit; but Kalliney's approach is admirably balanced in the way it restores a sense of the collaborative professional networks that placed late colonial and early postcolonial writers on an equal footing in 1950s London. Metropolitan snobbery, cultural imperialism, and racism, Kalliney acknowledges, were all important features of postwar British literary culture, but *Commonwealth of Letters* shifts the emphasis toward the strategic use colonial writers could make of the London literary scene and the equally strategic use the literary establishment could make of exciting new writers in its struggle to compete with New York and Paris for cultural capital (hence the nod to Pascale Casanova in Kalliney's title).

Sadly, this space of collaboration did not last. Kalliney argues that we should look at postwar literary culture in the Anglophone world—especially in London—as a brief moment when exchanges, collaborations, and partnerships were possible between the aging generation of modernist gatekeepers and a new generation of colonial and decolonizing writers and intellectuals. By the 1970s, the discourse of comparison by which white and black writers were judged against one another as writers, regardless of political differences, gave way to the more polarized scene we

know today, with modernists typically on one side, postcolonial writers and critics on the other. Kalliney provides a fresh way to grasp the fields together.

To return to Kalliney's surprising and entirely persuasive account of Leavis: we are reminded that even as Leavis rightly considered himself a dissident in relation to dominant forms of literary study, his insurgency aimed to make the English Department assert its rightful place at the heart of the University. Connecting Leavis's ambivalence with later efforts by Kamau Brathwaite and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to reform the literary curriculum, Kalliney points out that "this particular form of minority discourse—in which the misunderstood, uncompromising intellectual fashions himself as both scourge and savior of the university and the discipline—would be one of the major bequests from Leavis to postcolonial theory by way of the great tradition." The legacy of Leavis's ambivalence, one could say, was structural.

Commonwealth of Letters ranges widely over postwar Anglophone literature, offering bold revisionary accounts and incisive close readings of major work by Ngũgĩ, Brathwaite, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Nancy Cunard, Amos Tutuola, Jean Rhys, V. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Sam Selvon, and Wilson Harris. Drawing on the unpublished correspondence of many of these authors and providing a new institutional history of the emergence of postcolonial aesthetics, Kalliney challenges students of modernism and postcolonial studies to rethink longstanding assumptions that have shaped their fields, and perhaps to rediscover a collaborative ethos that can all too easily dissolve amid the competitive crosscurrents of our profession.

—Mark Wollaeger and Kevin J. H. Dettmar

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1. Modernist Networks and Late Colonial Intellectuals

During World War II, there must have been times when British radio audiences wondered if writers and intellectuals had annexed the BBC for their own obscure purposes. After the broadcaster's establishment in 1922, it quickly became the most important single patron of metropolitan writers. The war further consolidated its position as a major cultural institution. Intellectuals who did not enlist in the armed forces volunteered their services to wartime broadcasting, huddling around microphones, exchanging views on everything from medieval poetry to modern social problems. Euphemistic news bulletins occasionally interrupted the barrage, but before long JB Priestley or EM Forster would return to the airwaves to defend liberal democracy and the arts in equal measures.

Some of these broadcasts were political and patriotic, involving the dissemination of propaganda for domestic consumption. Cultural programming, however, maintained its privileged position at the BBC throughout the conflict. A confluence of accidents, official policies, personalities, and BBC traditions meant that cultural broadcasts tended to be thoroughly apolitical even as the conflict limped to an uncertain end. The organization's hierarchy, especially its first managing director, John Reith, believed that elite programming—broadcasts of classical music performances, literary reviews, poetry readings, radio plays, and personal essays, for example—could foster patriotic sentiment by supplying intellectually stimulating material and by avoiding simplistic propaganda. Reith was a devoted adherent of

Matthew Arnold, believing that high culture could consolidate national unity by refusing to concede anything to political exigency.

Cultural features were equally important for overseas programming, especially where the British Empire needed reinforcement. The BBC exported cultural programming to British Africa, India, and the West Indies in an effort to bolster loyalty to the empire among colonial listeners—again, not by broadcasting straightforward propaganda, but by advertising the humane spirit and cooperative cultural mission of the empire. Forster's and George Orwell's wartime programs for the Eastern Service were notable attempts to woo India's English-speaking elites during a period when British rule seemed increasingly tenuous.¹ With similar motives, TS Eliot read drafts of *Four Quartets* on the Eastern Service while refusing to share the material with metropolitan listeners.² Whether or not these programs succeeded in inspiring sympathy with the empire's long-term interests is another matter entirely: by most accounts, Forster and Orwell had credibility with Indian listeners because both were known as critics of imperialism. Orwell eventually resigned his post with the broadcaster, citing the strain of producing work for the supposedly impartial BBC while the British government continued to resist demands for Indian self-determination (West 57–59). The BBC's policy of using elite culture to mitigate political differences might have been a boon for highbrow artists such as Eliot, but the strategy was ineffective or even counterproductive in fulfilling its political mandate.

The BBC's patchwork efforts to tighten the cultural bonds between metropolitan and colonial spheres gradually developed into a system of regular programming in colonial regions. Orwell's poetry magazine, *Voice*, was recorded in London studios but transmitted to an Indian audience in 1942. Orwell invited the Jamaican poet Una Marson to share her verse on the program, and a few years later she modeled *Caribbean Voices* on the pattern of the Indian original. This photograph (Figure 1.1), featuring Marson seated in the center and Orwell hovering over her shoulder, was taken at a *Voice* recording session. *Caribbean Voices* continued weekly broadcasts long after the end of the war, and the format proved so successful that the BBC attempted similar ventures with their African programming. Aside from Marson and Orwell, the photograph captures several notable personalities working together: Eliot sits to her right; Mulk Raj Anand sits on her left; William Empson stands in the background, apparently listening to Marson and Eliot as they consult the script; on Eliot's right is MJ Tambimuttu, the influential editor of *Poetry London* from 1939 to 1949.³ Narayana Menon, a BBC music producer, later to become Director General of All India Radio, sits on the far right (Menon also published a book on WB Yeats in 1942, reviewed favorably by Orwell



Figure 1.1 BBC recording studio, 1942 (photo probably taken 1 Dec, from correspondence between Eliot and Orwell [see WJ West 231]). From left to right: (sitting) Venu Chitale, MJ Tambimuttu, TS Eliot, Una Marson, Mulk Raj Anand, Christopher Pemberton, Narayana Menon; (standing) George Orwell, Nancy Barratt, William Empson. Copyright © BBC, reproduced with permission.

in *Horizon* and by EM Forster on a BBC broadcast).⁴ Notable absentees include Forster and GV Desani, author of *All About H. Hatterr*, both of whom appeared regularly on the Indian section of the BBC's wartime Eastern Service. Stephen Spender joined Orwell's *Voice* occasionally before assuming a more regular slot on its Caribbean partner, while John Lehmann, another influential literary personality, acted briefly as an advisor for the Eastern Service and later as a major promoter of West Indian writing.

This photograph gives some sense of what modernist cultural institutions had been during the interwar period and what they would become after the war was finished. The recording studio gives the impression of an intimate, cloistered group of intellectuals disseminating their work to an invisible, anonymous public beyond. The image also encourages the contemporary viewer to speculate that some modernist networks, as intellectuals adapted them to survive the middle decades of the century, began to function as sites of exchange between metropolitan and colonial

writers. It is tempting to read the presence of Eliot, Empson, and Orwell as a sign of metropolitan patronage and beneficence. To be sure, there is much to support such an interpretation. Eliot, in his capacity as the leading spokesperson of transatlantic modernism, could be both generous and patronizing in his dealings with colonial writers, as Anand would imply in *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (1981).⁵ The mixture of participants also testifies that metropolitan literary institutions sometimes facilitated inter-colonial contact. Intellectuals from different regions and continents could meet and swap ideas in the context of metropolitan organizations.

There is ample evidence to indicate that metropolitan modernists sought out allies and supporters among late colonial and postcolonial intellectuals. These interactions went beyond metropolitan expressions of noblesse oblige toward colonial protégés. Modernist cultural institutions faced a number of difficulties as the triumphs of the 1920s gave way to the starker 1930s and beyond. In political terms, many wondered if modernist culture could rise to meet the challenges of fascism and global conflict; charges of elitism and political complacency leveled at modernists could be ignored or answered with less than complete confidence. After the war, possibilities were even more limited, in metropolitan Britain at least. Welfare-state austerity and the ideological dogmatism of the Cold War seemed an unpropitious climate for cultural renewal, while the imminent loss of empire loomed as an implicit confirmation of the prevailing mood. London's intellectuals overwhelmingly believed that crass US popular culture, supported by industrial and military heft, represented an additional threat to the elite arts in the postwar period. In aesthetic terms, young metropolitan writers of the 1950s—especially those associated with the Angry Young Men and the Movement—openly rejected modernism as effete and elitist. I argue that metropolitan modernists responded to these challenges in the middle decades of the century by actively recruiting late colonial and postcolonial intellectuals to serve as collaborators and conspirators. By inviting colonial intellectuals to help revive and reshape cultural institutions during the midcentury period, metropolitan modernists hoped to preserve the aesthetic temper of interwar literature while expanding its geographical reach. Many of the modernist networks that survived the war did so by opening new lines of aesthetic exchange between metropolitan and late colonial intellectuals.

Midcentury cultural institutions, including the BBC's literary programs, often served imperialist and anti-imperialist agendas at the same time. By design, at least, literary magazines such as *Voice*, *Caribbean Voices*, and *West African Voices* subscribed to the idea of a culturally integrated British Empire. The BBC was the most extensive and effective cultural network of the late colonial period. English-speaking elites in the colonies—thought by the BBC's hierarchy to be the most