

## Commonwealth Literature Studies

### *Writers versus Critics*

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IN 1989, A TRIO OF SCHOLARS teaching Commonwealth literature edited a book entitled *A Shaping of Connections: Commonwealth Literature Studies – Then and Now*.<sup>1</sup> It was a tribute to A.N. Jeffares, under whose impulse the field emerged as an academic discipline. In 1964 he founded the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies at the University of Leeds and organized its first conference, setting a pattern, then unusual in arts departments, by bringing together writers and critics. Among the writers were Chinua Achebe, R.K. Narayan, and George Lamming. Though Jeffares has since been criticized for his liberal-humanist, critical approach, he was using his authority as an internationally known critic to draw attention to writers whose genius and originality he was among the first to recognize. For, at the time, Commonwealth literature really did not exist, either in English departments or for a wider readership, and when it did it was often appreciated only for its exoticism, as Derek Walcott complained in his Nobel lecture. Another significant book is *From Commonwealth to Postcolonial*, edited by the late Anna Rutherford,<sup>2</sup> who did as much as Jeffares to promote Commonwealth studies and the work of as yet unknown writers. She was also quick to perceive new directions in literary criticism. Other terms, apart from 'Commonwealth' or 'postcolonial', have since appeared: new literatures in English, intercultural, transcultural, transnational studies, and, even now, cosmo theory and global oecumene. Each terminology claims its specific methodological approach, illustrating a recurring dissatisfaction with, and doubt about, critical practices.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Shaping of Connections: Commonwealth Literature Studies – Then and Now*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen & Anna Rutherford (Sydney & Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> *From Commonwealth to Postcolonial*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Sydney & Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1992).

I think that, with the exceptions of the Universities of Leeds, Canterbury, and possibly Exeter, Commonwealth literature courses were taught earlier in European universities than in Britain, especially in Denmark, Spain, Germany, Sweden, and Belgium. Most, including French universities, have kept the term 'Commonwealth', although many objections to it are often discussed. One reason is that Commonwealth studies are part of the English department and, with its clear historical and political connotations, 'Commonwealth' is a convenient term to distinguish the literatures in English, other than British and American. The Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies never questioned this name. The more inclusive 'postcolonial' bypasses the diversity that 'Commonwealth' brings to mind, and also covers the field in other languages.

Nevertheless, one can understand some of Salman Rushdie's objections in his essay "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist," actually written after attending a conference on Commonwealth literature in Sweden.<sup>3</sup> He objects to a categorization of literature that traps the writer in a cultural ghetto. And although covering a spectrum of diverse identities, the label 'black British' is also the object of protest by Fred D'Aguiar in his essay "Against Black British Literature," which opens with a formulation like Rushdie's: "There is no black British literature." He, too, argues that such homogenizing labels serve to "enclose and prejudice the real and imaginary scope of [...] creativity. [...] The creative imagination knows no boundaries."<sup>4</sup> In a review of the proceedings of the 1964 Leeds conference, V.S. Naipaul wrote:

The problems of Commonwealth writing are really no more than the problems of writing. And the problems of reading and comprehension are no more than reading the literature of any strange society.<sup>5</sup>

The writer's main objection is to the nationalism which they see as a distinctive feature of Commonwealth studies. Admittedly, the question of national identity has been a hackneyed subject in countless books and essays. T.S. Eliot's comment to Ford Madox Ford that "you cannot have a nationality worth speaking of unless you have a national literature"<sup>6</sup> was shared by some writers, but

<sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie, "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist" (1987), in Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Penguin/Granta, 1991): 61-70.

<sup>4</sup> Fred D'Aguiar, "Against Black British Literature," in *Tibisiri*, ed. Maggie Butcher (Mundelstrup & Sydney: Dangaroo, 1989): 106.

<sup>5</sup> V.S. Naipaul, review of *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*, ed. John Press (London: Heinemann, 1965), in *New Statesman* (24 September 1965): 452.

<sup>6</sup> T.S. Eliot to Ford Madox Ford (11 October 1923), in *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 2: 1923-1925, ed. Valerie Eliot & Hugh Haughton (London: Faber & Faber, 2009): 251.

mostly by critics in the former colonies. This sentiment still motivates a sometimes obsessive search for identity. Yet, one must keep in mind that, after independence, asserting one's cultural difference seemed legitimate and necessary, as it had been in the new European nation-states in the nineteenth century. But it also led to another widely debated theme: namely, nationalism versus or coexistent with internationalism: notwithstanding national aspirations, the complex entanglement of the two trends sustains a continuous creative tension.

With the shift from Commonwealth to postcolonial, above all to postcolonial theory, which became a separate discipline in many universities, the writers' criticism became trenchant. Referring to the predominantly French origin of theory, Derek Walcott expressed scathing contempt for what he called the "dead fish of French intellectualism."<sup>7</sup> Wole Soyinka mainly criticized the anti-essentialist logic of postcolonial critics. At a conference in Cambridge in November 2000, on the power of the word, he criticized what he called "the fundamentalists of language" and the "inquisitorial fervour" of political correctness.<sup>8</sup> Wilson Harris declared in an interview:

Although you have all these fashionable theories around, they are not altering anything. In fact I don't know that these theorists read novels at all. They have their theories which are sacrosanct, they read each other, but I don't know whether they look at what is changing in the language of fiction. They are imposing on fiction a dimension of dominance which springs from Conquistadorial regimes, and after all Europe has its roots in conquest.<sup>9</sup>

Harris saw this as part of a wider problem when he said in another interview:

I find that there is something gravely lacking in the humanities. There is a tendency to have one's field and to frame up that field in a proper way. Thus one begins, in a way, to perpetrate at the most sophisticated level a form of self-righteous degradation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Walcott, "Caligula's Horse," *Kunapipi* 11.1 (1989): 141.

<sup>8</sup> Wole Soyinka & Assia Djebar, "Eighth Dialogue: Powers that Be and Words that Will," in *The Power of the Word/La puissance du verbe: The Cambridge Colloquia*, ed. T.J. Cribb (Cross/Cultures 83; Amsterdam & New York, 2006): 142.

<sup>9</sup> Kerry Johnson, "Wilson Harris, interviewed by Kerry Johnson (Cedar Falls, Iowa: 5 June 1994)," *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 1.1 (1997): 94.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Riach, "Wilson Harris interviewed by Alan Riach," in *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks by Wilson Harris*, ed. Alan Riach & Mark Williams (Liège: L3: Language and Literature, 1992): 37–38.



By this he means the one-sidedness of protest and resistance as opposed to a cross-culturalism I shall come back to. He has also explained that, while the postcolonial position may be able to probe the roots of history differently, the prefix 'post' always suggests that there is a gnosis coming out of what came before. Of course, Michel Foucault's notion of discursive practices, allied to deconstruction – whose beginnings in 1966 coincided with the advent and growth of postcolonial criticism – and the conviction that all discourses are ideological constructs, proved to be ideal instruments for pulling apart the pretensions of metropolitan cultural imperialism and for denouncing its partialistic motives. But it also led to excessive positions which contributed to the marginalization of the literary text. For example, in *Literary Theory* Terry Eagleton writes:

It is most useful to see 'literature' as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called 'discursive practices and [...] if anything is to be an object of study it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes, rather obscurely, labelled 'literature'."

Eagleton had obviously changed his mind by the time he gave his inaugural lecture as Wharton Professor at Oxford in 1992, when he declared that literature, now in his eyes a remedy for the cultural crisis, was the fundamental universal language of humanity. The postulate underlying theoretical arguments influenced by Foucault is that language creates reality and in doing so contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of social power. Homi Bhabha, whose positive contribution to theory I certainly wouldn't question, claims that the theorists and the activists both practise forms of discourse, and he says that "history is *happening* within the pages of theory."<sup>12</sup> The view that the "event of theory," as he calls it, is an historical occurrence is very close to Paul de Man's earlier assertions that "things happen in the world and they always happen in linguistic terms," and even that "death [becomes] a displaced name for a linguistic predicament."<sup>13</sup> I doubt that the real victims of history subscribe to this view. Moreover, there seems to be a contradiction between the importance theorists grant to history, notably in resistance theory/theories, and its reduction to a narrative construct, thus making no distinction between the reality of

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<sup>11</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983): 205.

<sup>12</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 25 (emphasis in original).

<sup>13</sup> The two statements are taken from Paul de Man's *The Resistance to Theory*, foreword by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986): 101, 81. quoted in a letter by Stanley Corngold to *The Times Literary Supplement* (26 August–1 September 1988): 931.

history and historiography. I think that the relation between language and reality is a two-way process. There is no denying that language can and often does create realities, if one thinks, for instance, of the influence of Hitler's speeches in the construction of Nazi Germany, or of the present-day impact of the media on behaviour. By contrast, black consciousness in South Africa under apartheid proved a positive stimulus to action. Conversely, reality can also give rise to new forms of expression, as in Wilson Harris's creation of a new fictional language which fuses the experience of victimized or ignored peoples with its fictionalization into what he calls a "text of reality" or "text of being."<sup>14</sup> His protean metaphors show the capacity of language to modify simultaneously the substance of experience and one's perception of it, thus laying the foundation of its transformative relation to reality. He differs in this, both from the poststructuralists, for whom reality is discourse, and from the Leavisite unmediated reality that Homi Bhabha criticizes in his essay on the New Criticism, since for Leavis both language and reality in the fiction of the Great Tradition are unquestionably enemies.

Coming back to the writers' objections to both the Commonwealth and postcolonial terminology: they resent an incorrigible tendency among academics to categorize and make value-judgments which, according to their own theories, are necessarily temporary manifestations of taste and of evolving cultural context. Commonwealth and postcolonial criticism has helped to bring some writers into the limelight. But there is also a marked contrast between the failure of postcolonial studies to address an audience other than academics, despite their increasing interdisciplinarity and attention to the socio-cultural. This is possibly because these strictly intellectual approaches seldom take into account the complexities of the human psyche that affect both public and private life and are the privileged subject of the imaginary. As opposed to this, writers from the Commonwealth have met with undeniable success among the public at large. Whatever one may think of the Booker Prize and the vested economic interests behind it, it was awarded to more writers from the Commonwealth beyond the UK than to British novelists since its creation in 1969. Also, quite a few of the British novels thus ennobled dealt with the consequences of the loss of Empire.

To answer, then, admittedly subjectively, the question 'Has Commonwealth literature had its day?' my answer is 'No, if one really means literature itself and not the successive orthodox critical approaches to it'. Useful though it is, terminology should not be our major concern. What matters is the way in which

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<sup>14</sup> Wilson Harris, "The Fabric of the Imagination," *Third World Quarterly* 12.1 (January 1990): 180.



literature may shape our approach to the world we live in, and possibly its future. In this respect, Commonwealth literature was a revelation for many of us. In the decades after the Second World War, Europeans, including the British, had enough to come to terms with, in their own recent history. But the perceptions conveyed through literature – and its appeal to sensibility and emotion – of other genocides, other social or communal fragmentations, other trials, and the oppressions of colonialism in whatever form, awakened in teachers and students a consciousness of, and commitment to, the meaning of other literatures in English. In addition to other aesthetic forms, and the resources of the English language they were discovering, this was originally the prime mover of Commonwealth studies. In the late 1960s and early 1970s this concern for meaning and value contributed significantly to the recognition of Commonwealth literature, usually turned as it was towards the future at a time when Western literatures were beginning to deny meaning or lament its loss in much postmodernist fiction. And I think that this is one of the major differences between the two.

Since their inception, Commonwealth and postcolonial studies have developed in countless directions. The present emphasis is on globalization and the concurring and continuing allegiance to regional cultures, which is not that different from the nationalism–internationalism nexus. I will only emphasize a few significant features in literature itself which reflects major aspects of modernity in their interpretation of our globalized world. Whatever its disastrous effects on the victims of the international economy and its doubtful impact on culture, globalization – frequently seen as a form of neo-colonialism – is an ambivalent phenomenon. For its “coat of uniformity,” as Wilson Harris would call it, partly destroys the wealth of local cultures and their authenticity, alleged or real. But it also possesses a universal dimension. I must qualify words like ‘universality’ and ‘essentialism’, since they are now so politically incorrect, albeit often misunderstood. ‘Universalism’ undoubtedly once expressed the West’s hegemonizing conviction that its own values were, or should be, the distinct features of all mankind. You can still hear in France today that French is the vehicle of universal values because it was the language of the principles of 1789: the language of rebellion against injustice, intolerance, and oppression. Not many writers would subscribe to that view. In a talk he gave, in France as it happens, Wilson Harris objected to the threat of force which the dominant Western culture exercises with increasing severity around the globe. I shall come presently to this conception of universality, but I first wish to underline the fact that Commonwealth studies were, and still are, on different levels, the *avant-garde* of a new metaphysical cross-culturalism and of a plurality which is

at once a consequence and an agent of internationalism, but also the offspring of the increasing heterogeneity in individual countries. Edward Said argued that all cultures are impure and hybrid. Wilson Harris insists that texts of different origins nourish the human imagination and that "Commonwealth literature cannot be seen merely as an outsider. The Commonwealth imagination, so called, bears on Europe."<sup>15</sup>

Though he objects to the term 'Commonwealth', Rushdie himself says basically the same thing when he writes that English literature benefits from the arrival of the new literatures in Britain, and the presence of writers without Anglo-Saxon attitudes. In *The Satanic Verses*, which explores the experience of immigrants to Britain, he shows that clear-cut identities are no longer possible. But the novel that, it seems to me, conceives of hybridity most positively as a social, political, and aesthetic ideology is *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The narrator, who is one impersonation of the Moor of the title, was born of a mixture of races and religions. The numerous allusions in the novel to the migrations to India, in different periods, of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and their intermarriages simply make nonsense of so-called Indo-purity and nationalism. Moraes, or Moor, traces the career of the painter of his mother Aurora. Her evolution as an artist is a self reflexive journey into the nature of reality and of art, which applies to her painting, to his writing, and, at a further remove, to Rushdie's own. The Moor himself is on a quest for the authentic core of his life: "in writing this, I must peel off history [...]. It is time for a sort of ending, for the truth about myself to struggle out."<sup>16</sup> What he calls the truth and the real meaning of events comes out through his mother Aurora's art, which he is encouraged to develop by another painter, who tells her: "Forget those damnfool realists! The real is always hidden – isn't it? – inside a miraculously burning bush!" (174). Her major works are "The Moor Paintings," of which one particular face sets off her conception of art:

Around and about the figure of the Moor in his hybrid fortress she wove her vision, which in fact was a vision of *weaving*, or more accurately interweaving. In a way these [...] pictures [...] were an attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation; [...] Aurora Zogoiby was seeking to paint a golden age. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains [...] and the Sultan himself was represented less and less naturalistically, appearing more and more often as a masked, particoloured harlequin [...]; or, as his old skin dropped from him chrysalis-fashion, standing revealed as a glorious butterfly,

<sup>15</sup> University of Dijon, November 1981.

<sup>16</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995): 136. Further page references are in the main text.



whose wings were a miraculous composite of all the colours in the world.  
(227)

This optimistic vision of a harmoniously diverse humanity is marred by subsequent events. What remains when Moor's history has been peeled off is his essential humanity, while his vision of the Alhambra at the end of the novel epitomizes the pluralist philosophy that informs his whole narrative, but is so difficult to put into practice:

*there it stands, the glory of the Moors, their triumphant masterpiece and their last redoubt. The Alhambra, Europe's red fort, sister to Delhi's and Agra's – the palace of interlocking forms and secret wisdom, of pleasure-courts and water-gardens, that monument to a lost possibility that nevertheless has gone on standing, long after its conquerors have fallen; like a testament to lost but sweetest love, to the love that endures beyond defeat, beyond annihilation, beyond despair; to the defeated love that is greater than what defeats it, to that most profound of our needs, to our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self.* (433)

The need for self-definition which has long been a major feature of Commonwealth literature has not spared Britain after the dissolution of the Empire, large-scale immigration from Commonwealth countries, and the revived national consciousness in Wales and Scotland. It seems to have created a crisis of identity debated in books like Andrew Marr's *The Day Britain Died* and Tom Nairn's *After Britain*. Other commentators, however, particularly Simon Gikandi in *Maps of Englishness*, trace the crisis of English identity much further back and postulate that Englishness was itself a product of the colonial culture that it seemed to have created elsewhere. As a cultural and literary phenomenon, it was produced in the ambivalent space that separated, but also co-joined, the metropolis and colony. A similar approach to Englishness is illustrated in an anthology edited by Caryl Phillips entitled *Extravagant Strangers*, which takes as its initial reference Daniel Defoe's satirical poem "The True-Born Englishman." Phillips claims that Britain's vision of herself as culturally and ethnically homogeneous is a myth, and that, "for at least 200 years" English literature has "been shaped and influenced by outsiders."<sup>17</sup> This is a statement that needs to be qualified in the light of the nineteenth-century novel, in which, when the colonies impinge at all on the narrative, it is usually as places that bring profit or punishment. While acknowledging that there is a vested interest

<sup>17</sup> Caryl Phillips, "Preface," *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging*, ed. Phillips (London: Faber & Faber, 1997): viii.



in the novel form of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Wilson Harris traces much further back than Phillips the origins of the cross-cultural novel:

Indisputably the novel form has exercised considerable dominance around the globe within the expansion of European empire. But such an expansion involves many cultures and it began long before the eighteenth century [...]; its contours and horizons may be traced much farther back than the eighteenth century through the inception of the Middle Passage into ancient Rome, Macedonia, Persia, ancient Greece and India. [...] Such an expansion may need [...] to be reconsidered for different clues it offers us about alternative fictions and latent cross-cultural ties between diverse ages, past and present, that bear on imaginative truth.<sup>18</sup>

This view of the origins of the novel is implemented in his fiction by his frequent adaptation, though always with a modified meaning, of Homeric myth and later European myth. The latent cross-cultural ties he alludes to take the form of parallel fictionalizations of pre-Colombian and European myth such as *Faust*.

Now, in spite of the persistence of a specifically English tradition, still mostly realistic in British fiction, Britain is now the scene of an extraordinary diversity of talents originating directly or remotely in the Commonwealth. Some even see this now plural country as a new empire within Britain, while Commonwealth literature has been branded, like the Commonwealth itself, as a diplomatic Dodo, representing a cultural hangover from the Empire. I don't think that writers bother about such questions while engaged in their creative activity. They are guided by their imagination and their experience, rather than by what critics expect of them. In this respect, I find that the work of Caribbean writers in Britain is representative of a now largely universal condition. The history of the Caribbean has to a large extent shaped their art, and that history of fragmentation, displacement, exile, exploitation, and violence is one that few countries, except those in the privileged West, have escaped since the Second World War. Such trials are recreated with differing intensity by novelists who are generally concerned with the multifariously human rather than with a narrowly national, cultural or religious identity. The characters' personal experience has direct relevance to the nature of the contemporary world and our perception of it. I have in mind novels like Lawrence Scott's *Witchbroom*, which traces the development of heterogeneous communities after the conquest of

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson Harris, "Quetzalcoatl and the Smoking Mirror: Reflections on Originality and Tradition" (1994), in *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. Andrew Bundy (London: Routledge, 1999): 180–81.

the new world. Though dealing specifically with the horrors of slavery, Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding The Ghosts* represents a society that was building up the policies of late capitalism by privileging so called 'efficient management' and 'profit making' at the expense of human life. Similarly, David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* shocks the reader into an awareness of the degrading enslavement, not of Africans alone, but of a whole nation subjugated by its greed for money. The real harlot of the title is clearly mercantile England: human beings are only worth their material value, and everyone is a slave to, and attempts to possess, someone else. One suspects that Dabydeen extends the analogy to humanity as a whole.

Among the fiction of younger writers I would also pinpoint Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*, which is mostly set in a Europe hostile to what it regards as the outsiders in its midst – if there is a theme that is relevant to the present social configuration anywhere in the West, then this is it. This complex novel of dispossession, displacement, and merciless persecution offers a striking interpretation of the anguish experienced by men and women from the inception of modernity in the Renaissance to its culmination in the Second World War and its aftermath. It conveys the sense of insecurity in belonging, yet not belonging, but also the glimpse of hope in a possible conjunction of traditions.

These young writers have on various occasions acknowledged their indebtedness to Wilson Harris' pioneering vision of a genuine reciprocity between cultures. They also sustain his sense of the moral responsibility of the artist, his continuing commitment to both history and the contemporary world, and his view of a plurality informed by a common human reality. In a talk he gave in Liège in 1988, Harris analysed with prophetic insight the mechanisms of behaviour that condition present-day politics:

The dread of the terrible things happening in the world, the sense of menace to our security, incurs an investment in a fortress psychology [...] that preserves us, we believe, from contamination not only by violence but by apparently alien ideas, apparently alien cultures, or impure reality.<sup>19</sup>

He also refers to the lack of real distinction between political parties left or right, and to the punitive logic that is still today part and parcel of the tautology of art. All through his fiction and essays, Harris has sought to remedy what he called a fortress psychology or ideology through the art of wholeness, whose core resides, in his words, "in a paradoxical openness to diverse probabilities,

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<sup>19</sup> Wilson Harris, "Creative and Re-Creative Balance Between Diverse Cultures" (1990), in *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks by Wilson Harris*, ed. Alan Riach & Mark Williams (Liège: L3: Language and Literature, 1992): 103–15.



diverse cultures, and to a density of roots in nature and spirit."<sup>20</sup> His notions of universality and cross-culturalism originate in those roots. The distinctive feature of his writing is the connection between the cultural, the political (although this is often ignored), and the imaginary. But most important is his emphasis on the psychological motivations that determine the behaviour of individuals, societies, and even nations. To give a brief example: in a Cambridge University guest lecture,<sup>21</sup> he comments on the narrator's suggestion, in his novel *Carnival*, that the law of the frame weaves together the passion of sorrow and the passion of inexplicable violence. And, further, the re-creative balance between cultures binds us to look at the emotional texture of our age. The ways in which our society has been conditioned by its passions, its joys, its greed, by a whole texture of emotions, the way in which that conditioning has happened when there is compliance with violence, when we imprison ourselves in limiting frames of vision that allows us to see nothing apart from the adversarial patterns which those frames construct and perpetuate. In *Carnival*, a character reflects that society sometimes encourages fashionable accounts of political violence that become the stuff of new heroic example, especially when such accounts may be emblazoned to resemble innocence or gentleness or courage. To the devastating evils he denounces, Harris's answer lies in a recognition of plurality at all levels, from man's ontological make up – what he calls "strangers in the self,"<sup>22</sup> pluralist societies – to a creator who is never an idealized absolute, but androgynous and multi-dimensional. Creation itself is a heterogeneous enterprise which emphasizes the need for an imaginative change of perspective and a Copernican revolution of sentiment, both inspired by a philosophy which grew out of his perception of the reality of peoples eclipsed and silenced by conquest and absolute regimes. But in Harris's fiction the so-called void and historylessness of the subjugated people in the Americas are apparent only, for he suggests that no portion of human experience is lost. The victims of imperialism, the psychological legacies, the present-day deprived, whom the powerful choose not to see, all are part of what he calls an apparent non-existent ground of being which nevertheless possesses a regenerative force. This is the source of Harris's notion of a never totally graspable universal unconscious, itself a composite reality of which the various cultures of the world

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<sup>20</sup> Harris, "Oedipus and the Middle Passage" (1989), in *Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English*, ed. Geoffrey Davis & Hena Maes-Jelinek (Cross/Cultures 1; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1990): 9–21.

<sup>21</sup> Caryl Phillips, "Preface," *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging*, ed. Phillips (London: Faber & Faber, 1997): viii.

<sup>22</sup> Charles H. Rowell, "Interview with Wilson Harris," *Callaloo* 18.1 (Winter 1995): 198.

are diverse expressions, even on an archetypal level. Hence, the deep roots of his cross-culturalism are alive on an even deeper level.

One strikingly original illustration of the possible re-creative balance between cultures is to be found in his novel *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (1977), and the significance he draws from his perception of the Commonwealth Institute in London as a metaphor for a possible metamorphosis of a dying Empire into a newborn Commonwealth. Da Silva da Silva is a painter who prepares for an exhibition canvases he painted seven years before. And he detects in them, only then, an opportunity for creativity that had previously escaped him. One series of paintings represents the Commonwealth Institute. As he revisions or paints his way from one deck to another, he circumnavigates the globe imaginatively and notices a "genie of forces"<sup>23</sup> in the very economic/political uniform, apparently changeless yet soluble. He outlines a sketch of the Commonwealth Institute in which the world's disparities come together. He draws a line or a thread representing the institutional uniformity underlying universal "*non-tone*" or never-to-be-painted beauty and compassion.

As a conclusion, I will quote two passages suggesting how the Commonwealth as an aggregate of nations might offer the possibility of an imaginative leap into the future:

The line of *institutional tone*, however exotic and variegated remains uniform and apparently changeless. This wing of the tent implies mass and variegation built into uniform cloak that runs through three decks, three suns, the Pacific sun, the African sun, the Caribbean sun.

The line of *non-tone* on the other hand is susceptible to apparent colourlessness or irreducible flame, insoluble objectivity. This wing implies the violated bodies of history and the beauty of freedom in order to generate out of zero conditions (unbearable hell and unattainable beauty or heaven) the "middle-ground regenerated eyes" of mysteriously solid compassion as original vision available to human imagination in every age.<sup>24</sup>

and

Yet it is possible that the tent of "commonwealth" runs deeper than institutional pigmentation or uniform light and that a mutation has commenced within the expectations of cultures that is not yet self-evident (may take a long time to become self-evident) but which already possesses the force to "reassemble an inner body of time with a capacity to unravel its

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<sup>23</sup>Wilson Harris, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness and Genesis of the Clowns* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977): 69.

<sup>24</sup>Wilson Harris, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*, 69–70 (ragged right in original).



cloak" and to subsist on global resources through a new emphasis on profound simplicity and unravelling complexity of tone and non-tone.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*, 70 (ragged right in original).

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