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Your Local is Our Global: Contemporary British Fiction and the Curriculum

Reflections on the British Council international video conference on Contemporary British Fiction and the Curriculum, London, 19 March 2007

Community Based Forestry? Canadian Bridge Federation? Cerebral Blood Flow? A Google-search reveals that the acronym CBF has not yet gained common currency, but enter “Contemporary British Fiction” and a few outlines of academic courses appear, alongside the British Council website and a handful of books. One could be forgiven for thinking it may be an established term, as contemporary British fiction has surely always existed, but it is, both here and abroad, a fairly uncommon label for an academic course. It feels somehow uncertain and vague, but is it vague because it is unused, or is it rarely used because it is problematic to define? Actually, none of the terms in this apparently straightforward label is unarguable. The when-where-what of CBF is always up for discussion and constantly in need of re-consideration. Neither are the three terms independent; CBF is like a three-variable equation, the solution of which will depend on the specific values of the variables. At the British Council international video conference

on “Contemporary British Fiction and the Curriculum” there seemed to be considerable consensus on the F-variable, fiction, the possible discussion of which will therefore be bracketed off here and left for another time and place. However, the C and in particular the B variables came under some scrutiny. In fact, the four locations brought together by the marvels of satellite communication, Cairo, Karachi, London and Tunis, were not even sure if the term CBF was at all useful or even viable, ridden as it is with tensions which were brought to the fore by the very format of the forum in which they were discussed. The international setting, highlighted in a very particular way by the technology used, made it apparent that the term was, in fact, surrounded by a discomfort which influenced both its definition and the possibility as well as the desirability of its application.

I never realised that video conferencing was so tiring. The day-long conference at the British Council, despite several breaks as well as an off-line session, clocked up over four hours of video interaction. When we finished in the late afternoon my eyes blurred and my head was aching. However, as we all repaired to a smaller room for refreshments, the mood was positive and all participants seemed to have gained something out of the experience. Naturally, we were more relaxed at the end of the day, but as we discussed our impressions, it is palpable how the mode of interaction had changed: not only the decreased formality, but the flow, the naturalness, the comfort of the conversation. Both my weariness at the end of the day and the noticeable difference in interaction dynamics indicate that there is something very special going on with video conferencing. Video conferencing is almost always seen as a positive example of modern technology facilitating communication, whether it be because it increases efficiency and cuts costs, or because it brings people closer together, defying spatial and cultural distances. Yet

there is something profoundly defamiliarizing about it, in the old formalist sense of the word. It makes something so common and universal as face-to-face communication seem suddenly awkward and strange. Perhaps that was how the telephone appeared to the first callers, but video conferencing foregrounds the form, indeed the artifice, of communication in more subtle ways than just the novelty of its technology.

On the one hand, unlike the telephone, which makes no such pretences, video conferencing makes an ostensible attempt at re-creating the physical meeting. What the companies marketing the tools for video conferences strive for is “telepresence”—the illusion of being in the same room as the other participants. On the other, it mimics a medium which saturates our modern consciousness: the moving image. While a lack of non-verbal cues may seem the obvious impediment to communication over a distance, it is not the main problem here. Instead, it is the unfettered presence of these cues. That is, faced with the screen, such a familiar conduit of communication, we are used to a particular “visual hygiene”. Somewhat surprisingly, it seems that what our brains can do quite easily in a real-life meeting, namely filtering out inessential information, it struggles to do faced with a screen. The matter is complicated by the imperative of interaction. The awareness, made constant by the presence of one’s own image at the edge of the screen, of “being on TV” is undeniably disconcerting. Indeed, video conferencing defamiliarizes not only face-to-face communication, but the one-way communication of our most consumed medium, the latter both by its lack of story-board editing and by that most unusual of demands: we have to talk back to the screen.

Robert Eaglestone, Professor of Contemporary Literature and Thought at Royal Holloway University of London, chaired the conference, one of a number that he has run

with the British Council. He points out that video conferencing is rather like Olympic figure skating: to make it look natural and free-flowing you actually have to be very formal and structured. Paradoxically, of course, the more form—that is, editing—the more natural it all looks. Obviously, a major part of this problem is solved simply by familiarity with the technology and the presence of a good moderator. Zooming in on individual speakers cuts out a lot of distractions, while attention to off-screen cues by the chair makes sure useful information is not lost, dialogue is staggered correctly, and so on. With video conferencing it is hard not to underestimate the importance of segues. The moderator, with a crucial sense of timing, acts as the interface between the physical meeting and the screen. Indeed, Robert has had to devise some formal techniques to deal with the over-formality that the sense of being “filmed” brings out in people.

Interestingly, it becomes obvious that the format induces a strict hierarchy in the participating groups, with someone emerging as the designated speaker, whether appointed or not. As has been noted, there is a sort of Eurovision Song Contest air over proceedings, where the results of the deliberations by the group are reported back by one person. However, as Robert points out, one of the main points of the international video conferences at the British Council is to allow greater access to such forums to those in the academic hierarchy, like graduate students and junior academics, who may otherwise get scant opportunity to participate on an international level. The hierarchies within the groups are therefore counteracted by exercises such as introductory ice-breakers by graduate students, by dividing participants into smaller, changing, groups and so on.

However, some of the hierarchical structures inevitably persist, as does a sense of discomfort in the face of the video format. Indeed, the defamiliarizing effects of the

technology do inevitably have an impact on the contents discussed. At the conference, while we are virtually brought together by the technology, we are also practically kept apart: we are literally placed in boxes. The participating locations are physically framed, so at the same time as we appear on one screen, in one room, we are divided. In the Contemporary British Fiction conference this reaffirms our sense of location, crucial to the topic discussed. Everyone participating is, of course, still in *their place*, and delegates are speaking from their own home territory, something which becomes obvious in the ways the topic is approached. The fact that we inhabit two spaces at the same time during the video conference makes strange tensions emerge. On the one hand, our group in London is both expecting and expected to share some kind of insider knowledge on British fiction. On the other hand there is, in London, a sense of reticence at what is clearly perceived as too close for comfort to a “London broadcasting to the Empire” situation, and at the other locations, a sense of wanting to assert their choice to study or not to study Contemporary British Fiction. Indeed, the discussion revolves very much around the dichotomy of global and local, which the video conference technology in itself seems to suggest.

The term “contemporary” indicates that we are speaking about literature firmly in the “post-” if not in the “post-post”-era: certainly post-war, post-colonial and post-modern, as well as perhaps post-cold war, post-9/11 and even post-national. So while there are obvious problems with the term contemporary—how long ago did today’s contemporary begin: in the 80s, 90s or after the millennium? Should we have a rolling contemporary “calendar” of fifteen or twenty-five years?—one also has to consider that the variable chosen for the time frame in the CBF equation will affect the geographical

variable. Indeed, the closer in time to the present, the more diverse the British variable of the label seems to become. That the word British in this context, as in many others, has become something immediately connected with diversity and hybridity is certainly something to celebrate, but not necessarily something that is unproblematic. At the conference the statement “Your global is our local” soon cropped up, and met with general accord. However, while the statement seems an obvious truism, things are a little more complicated when it comes to CBF. Indeed, the fact that in Britain we can, and enthusiastically do, say “Our local is global” is in part what makes the field of CBF so difficult to define.

The crux of the problem, of course, lies in the choice. Who and how to choose the works to be read and taught? Certainly we would all assert the right to choose, yet we cannot but be aware of the fact that choices are being made, in effect, by the publishing industry and academia. There seems to be much anxiety about the negative impact of both the popularisation of literature by publishing, and the elitism of academic choice. On the other hand, maybe we are forgetting that such narrowing down of choices may be useful, if the criteria are relevant, sound, and, most importantly, transparent. Perhaps we can find the authenticity we are inevitably seeking, despite our pledge of allegiance to diversity, somewhere in the intersection between pop and high-brow. In fact, the discord between the two poles of popular and elitist is beneficial. It is when the two begin to collude that we have to begin to worry. To what extent this is happening at the moment is up for debate, but there is a notable bias in the choices of CBF. As Philip Tew, Professor of English (Post-1900 Literature) at Brunel University, noted in his introductory speech for the conference, the Granta *Best of Young British Novelists* publication and the Booker

Prize shortlist are enormously influential on the titles generally seen as CBF, both of which, perhaps in particular the latter, have included many commonwealth writers. Indeed, the fact that “British” fiction now includes works by authors that could as easily be described as Indian, Pakistani, African, Arab and so on, was exulted in by the conference participants in London. This, of course, is an indication of the current central position enjoyed by the postcolonial debate in British literary academia today. The aforementioned diversity and hybridity are seen as attributes of Contemporary British Fiction as a matter of course. However, some of the points brought to the discussion from the other participating locations are indicative of a new shift in “postcolonial” thought. I put the term in quotation marks here to indicate that this shift may well be occurring from without as well as from within the postcolonial context, and that the term itself may have to give.

Indeed, while the postcolonial approach to CBF was something which seemed to be reassuring to the participants in London, in the face of that seemingly ubiquitous post-imperial discomfort, the other locations expressed concerns. In fact, the elision in academia between the terms Contemporary British Fiction and Postcolonial Fiction was seen as a limitation to the choice of works, as was the commodification of the postcolonial in popular publishing. The latter problem is nothing new, of course, and has been discussed in the postcolonial field repeatedly, but it seems that while in academia we convince ourselves that we are “studying” instead of “gawping at,” the sense of being sold one’s own wares is still justified to a certain extent—*both* in popular and academic terms. To take the most obvious examples, why should Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* or Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* be taught as part of the Contemporary

British Fiction courses at universities in Nigeria and India? Why not as Contemporary Nigerian or Indian Literature? Could one not suggest, perhaps controversially, that the current idea of CBF is co-opting all these “postcolonial” literatures under the label of “British” and congratulating itself for it?

Delegates in Cairo indicated that postcolonial theory seemed more intimidating than helpful to students, and that, in fact, it was felt that the postcolonial stance was driving wedges between cultures with its insistence on diversity. Instead, a return to theorising the commonality of the human was called for, even while acknowledging the fact that this may be perceived as naïve in today’s academic climate. Participants in Karachi pointed out that such issues as hybridity often seemed more the concern of academia than individual writers, and were not felt to be the most useful approach to works studied. Indeed, Karachi suggested that works that would fall under the CBF umbrella would be far more usefully taught as part of other courses determined by thematics rather than location, a sentiment echoed several times during the conference. This does seem the pragmatic path to take in an increasingly post-national world, allowing both for diversity and the wished-for human commonality. Certainly such an approach would provide a solution for a string of problems voiced during the discussion of what to include on a CBF syllabus. While some were practical concerns such as the physical availability of works and support material, the main concern was, understandably, suitability—in the sense of both cultural appropriateness and interest.

While the first sense was most discussed, the latter was perhaps more important than was directly spoken. The discussion which emerged on the question of teaching fiction with culturally controversial themes was perhaps indicative. While there was

certainly some difficulty or at least a “moving out of comfort zones” in teaching such topics, it was generally felt that this was a positive thing. The consensus was that it was indeed one of the fortes of literature study that it provided a space for discussing such issues. The classroom, the fictional mode, indeed literariness itself provides a very useful safe arena. Although this safety was perhaps increased with distance in time, so that classics with difficult themes were easier to teach than contemporary works, it was striking that there was a real eagerness to find new material to teach, and the main issue, it seemed, was not the potential controversy of contemporary works, but whether they would be relevant and interesting for students. That is, while diversity and the celebration of difference is all well and good, if we are to enjoy reading and studying literature, there must be something in the works we choose that speaks to us. That something need not be culturally convergent, but it has to be relevant and interesting. Thus the discussion returned to the merit of such a term as CBF.

On the one hand there seemed to be a general inclination to reject the idea of CBF. Delegates in Cairo, Tunis and Karachi seemed to question the usefulness of such a “narrow” course in their context, while London, perhaps, saw the culmination of the diversity of Britishness in the very dissolution of CBF. On the other, however, as mentioned before, there was a very contradictory dynamic also in play around the virtual table. It became apparent that, in fact, despite any suspicions toward the CBF label, the English Department in Tunis was flourishing. Indeed, Contemporary British Fiction had a firm place in their English degree course, which aimed to teach English language, literature and culture. What they were looking for were texts that would be relevant to the study of English in particular. Here, it seems, resided the elephant in the ether. Had the

question been forthrightly asked as “So, we have chosen to study CBF—what texts should we read, do you think?” it seems to me London would have struggled to answer. Not because of the lack of knowledge or the lack of suitable material, but because that prevalent way of thinking, perhaps heightened by the very format of the conference, would make answering such a question uncomfortable. In the global forum of the international video conference it seemed that the *local* at hand, namely the British, was the most difficult to talk about. In fact, hardly any practical discussion took place about what CBF, should one wish to teach it, would actually consist of. There was a definite “Empire” shape to the (pink?) elephant, and its relative proximity was noticeably crucial.

Tunis with its different colonial background, seemed to have the fewest qualms about CBF (it would be interesting to find out what their discussions regarding Contemporary French Literature revolve around). Participants in Karachi, on the other hand, seemed to object the most to the label, although, as may have become obvious, much of the problem lay precisely in the postcolonial tendencies of CBF. Yet it was London, the metropolis itself, that insisted on the non-locality of CBF. And perhaps herein lies the problem. Britain still cannot see itself as just another country, just another culture to be studied—no, British fiction encompasses the world. Indeed, there was some bemusement if not consternation at finding oneself—in Karachi, Cairo and Tunis—the presumed *subject* of CBF, perhaps especially poignantly after 9/11. However, what needs to be teased out of this argument, again, is that what causes the problem here is not CBF as such, but the current definition of the B variable, the very diversity of which actually appears intimidating and divisive.

There was indeed much more of a sense of a search for the new classics in the other locations than in London. As mentioned, there was a distinct lack of actual proposals for new texts to be studied. It seems that in the wish to encompass the world with our literature and to embrace maximum diversity, the idea of the great work of literature has somehow been lost. In a climate where the non-definition, non-specificity of culture is prized, how can we allow ourselves to find the defining novel? Of course we do, however much we may protest, and end up with Sir Rushdie and all the cultural discomfort that brings.

We should, however, perhaps learn to embrace the very idea of CBF in all its awkwardness. Indeed, I would like to suggest that searching for the next British classic is no shameful thing to do. We all seemed to agree at the conference that a good work of literature is one which makes us reconsider our attitudes and positions, that this was the heart of teaching literature. As initially noted, the label of CBF cannot ever be finally defined, it always has to be reconsidered. Perhaps it is time to put the elephant to bed, to take a step back from the global and return to the local. While the local can still be celebrated as diverse and hybrid, maybe we should acknowledge its particularity. Indeed only when we do so can we return to seeing that common humanity: London is as *local* as Cairo, Tunis and Karachi. We need to step back and allow British to be considered as local and particular, not all-encompassing, for it to be usefully studied.

What I am suggesting is thus not so much a revision of the actual works that appear as CBF, but a revision of our attitude to them. It was notable that at the conference the authors of “diversity” (Rushdie, Roy, Ali, etc.) were mentioned precisely because of their diversity, and other authors (McEwan, Coe, Barker, and so on) barely got a mention,

apparently because of the perceived lack of this characteristic. Rather than tipping the scales the other way, I would argue that in order for Contemporary *British* Fiction to be a useful label, we need to acknowledge the specificity, the Britishness, in *all* authors chosen, whether culturally hybrid or not. As suggested in Tunis, CBF can then be a valuable resource for understanding culture and language, as well as doing what literature uniquely does: making us realise that someone somewhere else thinks and feels the same way as we do, despite all the cultural differences and diversity. That is, there is a sense that it is no longer enough for the metropolis to write or even be written by the other, but that it should finally let itself be *studied* by the other, not as metropolis but as an equal periphery.

Contemporary British Fiction can be a useful area of literary study, but only when we recognise it as one of many national fictions, all of which have an international and diverse side and all of which have a specific and national side. Writers like Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy can surely be seen equally, if not preferably, as Indian writers with a British heritage, rather than British writers with an Indian heritage—hybridity and diversity goes both ways! Perhaps, in our contemporary present we have moved on from the diverse and hybrid to the specific and the common. Indeed, this is perhaps what the format of the international video conference suggested to us surreptitiously. In the new global world we can all meet on equal terms, because we can all speak from our *own place*. While the discussion will allow for diversity and hybridisation, it also allows us to keep our specificity. In order to participate usefully in such a forum, however, we need to let go of the dream of possessing the global and enter the discussion as equally local.