Where is the Post-Colonial London of London Magazine?

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Abstract
Recalling her 1950s primary school teacher, her 'Queen Mary dresses tautly upheld by a Britannia bosom' as she directed Empire Day celebrations every June, Angela Carter delighted in being able to observe by 1971 that her teacher's 'chickens' had 'come home to roost'. By then, she recorded, you could buy: Greek cheese; yams; Indian mirror cloth, dried fish; black-eyed peas; West African printed cotton sold in twelve-yard lengths, sufficient to make a robe; olives in all sizes and colours; every kind of Pakistani sweetmeat; reggae records; hi-life records; canned bamboo shoots; goat; and once I went through the market and did not see a single banana which was neither green or black.
Where is the Post-Colonial London of London Magazine?

Recalling her 1950s primary school teacher, her ‘Queen Mary dresses tautly upheld by a Britannia bosom’ as she directed Empire Day celebrations every June, Angela Carter delighted in being able to observe by 1971 that her teacher’s ‘chickens’ had ‘come home to roost’. By then, she recorded, you could buy:

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‘Can all this possibly be urban decay? It seems like a new lease of life’.

Carter’s comments about Balham, South London were made in London Magazine in March 1971 as part of a series Alan Ross commissioned on the theme of ‘Living in London’. The series of articles ran from 1967 to 1974 and was made up of sixteen contributions. It is historically valuable not just because it includes little known pieces by writers as diverse as Angela Carter, Shiva Naipaul, Roy Fuller and Jonathan Raban, but because of its appearance at the end of a decade of profound national anxiety over immigration to Britain which resulted in three restrictive immigration measures, the Commonwealth Immigration Bill (1962), Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1968 (incorporating the White Paper of 1965), and the Immigration Act of 1971.

‘Changing London’, as one ‘Living in London’ contributor described it, was a preoccupation of the time. In this essay, representations of ‘changing London’ in the ‘Living in London’ series are explored as a part of a broader analysis of London Magazine’s relation to its site of production.

The magazine’s connection to London is clearly inscribed in its title and its location. When Alan Ross took over from John Lehmann as editor in 1961 the magazine was based in a street famed for its importance to the London book trade, Charing Cross Road, and today the offices can be found in a glorified and much mythologized garden shed at the rear of 30 Thurloe Place in South Kensington. The magazine has, as founding editor John Lehmann once stated, ‘a basic London character’, and its very name
references earlier incarnations of the magazine, the most famous being the early nineteenth-century journal published specifically as a London-based counterpart to the critical authority of the successful *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Lehmann's naming of the original 'Coming to London' series which was published between 1955 and 1957, as well as Ross's commissioning of articles under headings like 'Living in London' (1967-1974) or 'Living Out of London' (1976-1983), illustrate how in the late twentieth century London has continued to act in the magazine as a marker against which other regional identities are measured.\(^5\)

However, as if to offset its southern English metropolitan bias, both editors also commissioned occasional 'Letters' from writers living outside of the United Kingdom. For example, S. Gopal's 'Letter from New Delhi' appeared in June 1954, Jack Cope's 'Letter from South Africa' in February 1969, and, (not all contributions being from Commonwealth countries) Fernanda Henriques's 'Letter from Brazil' in January 1969.\(^6\) Despite its name, *London Magazine's* actual relation to place is more ambiguous than it first seems. When other recipients of the Arts Council of Great Britain were being devolved to regional bodies in 1990, for instance, Ross's journal remained a national client of the Arts Council because the Council's then Director of Literature, Alastair Niven, recognized the magazine as being national in terms of audience and international in scope.\(^7\) The magazine has been in receipt of an annual subsidy since 1966. It should be added that its audience is also international; the subscription list for February 1996 indicates a degree of worldwide readership chiefly at institutional level, although English, and moreover London addresses, predominate amid the addresses of individual subscribers. Chronologically speaking, the magazine's international connections also have a long lineage. By association they can be dated back to the founding manifesto of John Lehmann's magazine *New Writing* (Spring, 1936), which, in its guise as *Penguin New Writing* formed the model for Alan Ross's redesign of *London Magazine* when he became its editor in 1961. In *New Writing's 'Manifesto'* Lehmann stated, 'NEW WRITING also hopes to represent the work of writers from colonial and foreign countries'.\(^8\) Ross's manifesto pledges were less explicit in 1961 than Lehmann's in 1936 but Ross nevertheless took up T.S. Eliot's challenge to *London Magazine* to be 'truly international'.\(^9\) Further, his comments in a letter to Alastair Niven at the Arts Council in December 1989 reaffirmed that Commonwealth interests ('post-colonial' is not a phrase common to *London Magazine*) continued to be an important part of the magazine's remit.\(^10\)

Arguably, Alan Ross is one of several English publishers whose encouragement of emerging writers from the Commonwealth in the sixties contributed to the opening up of the post-colonial canon to the general reading public (Howard Sergeant of *Outposts* is another editor worth mentioning here, just as Alan Hill deserves note for his establishment in 1962 of the Heinemann African Writers Series\(^11\)). Certainly, Ross's
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influence on the individual careers of some post-colonial authors has been significant. For example, Christopher Hope, the South African poet and novelist, praised Ross for providing an international platform for his poetry in the seventies, as well as for helping to secure book deals for his fiction with more commercial London publishers.\(^{12}\) In the seventies the main focus of Hope’s writing in *London Magazine* was South Africa though he was then living in voluntary exile in London. Perhaps local and international identities in the magazine are not so easily separated. The case of another white South African poet, Douglas Livingstone, is also interesting. Livingstone never visited England, let alone London, but his personal and professional investment in *London Magazine* and its editor, with whom he corresponded from 1961 until his death in 1996, indicates that the magazine’s international reputation has been closely bound to its very ‘Londonness’. Livingstone contributed to South African literary magazines like *Staffrider* and *Contrast* but his letters to Ross suggest the poet positioned his London editor as the arbiter of the quality of his work. An alienated, controversial and solitary figure in a country whose cultural life was long traumatized by apartheid restrictions, Livingstone’s letters to Alan Ross explain that *London Magazine*’s catholic and international scope alleviated some of his own profound sense of isolation. That it did so with complexity relates to his own position as a white, English-speaking South African poet, as well as to the ways in which a part of *London Magazine*’s authority stems from its representation, albeit ambiguously, of a capital which was also the former centre of the British Empire. Perhaps one of the reasons that *London Magazine* has rarely had to theorize its relation to place is precisely because it is ‘securely positioned within [an] absolutely central, powerful and known territory’.\(^{13}\)

The attitudes of the Londoners in ‘Living in London’ cannot simply be taken as those of either the magazine or the editor, but the sequence of articles does add another stratum to the complexities so far explicated of the magazine’s relation to place. It is an ambivalence that owes as much to the editor (who, born in India in 1922, is a colonial-born Englishman yet caught between ‘Anglo’ and ‘Indian’ identities) as to the changing times of the magazine’s production. Within the competing voices of the ‘Living in London’ exists a tension between an imagined city since past, and contemporary London. This might well be explained as the traversing of colonial and post-colonial London identities, which is arguably in line with the magazine’s own tendency to move between nostalgia and a celebration of the present. The experience of some ‘Living in London’ contributors, like Shiva Naipaul, the Trinidadian Indian writer, or Michael Feld, the London-born Jewish writer, fits into neither nostalgia nor celebration. That each fails to write or imagine themselves successfully in place in London either past or present, is a reminder that despite John Darwin’s labelling of the seventies as the ‘first post-imperial decade’, the place of the racialized other in the nation’s capital was then, and continues to be, severely
Several contributors, migrants to or in the city like Jonathan Raban, Shiva Naipaul, or Alasdair Clayre, make the point that the actual experience of London fails the London of the imagination, the ‘Big City’ Naipaul had ‘always dreamt of’. For others, ‘changing London’ is the root of its failure. Peter Vansittart, William Sansom and Patrice Chaplin, for example, wax nostalgic for a disappeared London which, in their choice of symbols (pubs and oak trees figure), might be read as a lament for a certain kind of fading Englishness. Sansom’s beautifully crafted description of his life in leafy St John’s Wood is one such example. His account is preoccupied with privacy and seclusion, describing his house and its location as an ‘enclave’, within a ‘high-walled garden’ (p. 53), in a ‘floral, arboreal Victorian retreat’ (p. 58). It ends at the ‘horrid border as far as Jermyn Street’ (p. 55) which is crossed only under duress. The fact that retreat is set against ‘changing London’ for this writer in his sixties born before the start of the First World War is openly expressed. ‘We live here’, Sansom says, ‘as a compromise between London proper, which we now mostly dislike, and the country, which we fear. London is changing too much for people of our uncertain age, it glares and stinks and roars’ (p. 52). St John’s Wood, then, offers sanctuary. Intrusion is met jauntily with mock battle-cries:

Turquoise-tinged starlings descend like a herd of miniature kiwis: one clap and they’re off – but that means dropping the literary pen which rolls off onto a rose-bed revealing a hitherto unseen sucker; out with the secateurs. Meanwhile the jasmin and clematis seem to grow at a rapacious inch a minute. Out with the secateurs. (p. 53)

When ‘the council’s echelon of Caribbean street-cleaners’ enter the scene the reader is reminded that at this point in London’s history, it was immigration that roused the greatest anxiety about change. Some of the tensions in this historical moment emerge in the account of London life by a younger writer, Patrice Chaplin who, having lived in both Spain and France, finds herself now living along a particularly run-down stretch of Finchley Road. Chaplin’s piece is, like Angela Carter’s, firmly located in the present, but for her the present largely repels. She too indicates London’s changing demography through a list of available commodities, notably Indian, West African and Malaysian food, but rather than Carter’s delight Chaplin is disappointed: ‘I look at the abundance of exotic and apathetic restaurants and long for one that serves English food, cooked well, with a log fire’. Chaplin slips here into myths of (implicitly white) Englishness and her yearning for retreat arguably echoes Sansom’s.

Amid such narratives of loss, regret and retreat, which, in the examples given above, reproduce a neo-colonial nostalgia for a past London, only Angela Carter offers a glimpse that something new might come of ‘changing London’, in the sense that Michael Gorra has used the phrase
'post-colonial' to acknowledge that it recognizes 'a space has been cleared into which something new may come'.18 'Too fat' to be the Rose Queen (p. 51) in her school's Empire Day celebrations, the passing of such 'pantomimes' of English imperialism in the fifties (the decade of the first major wave of West Indian and Asian migration to Britain) was a relief to Carter:

The entire pantomime, a perfect example of frozen ritual, never varied in a single detail from year to year, but the headmistress retired in the early 'fifties, before it became camp, Firbankian, or actively offensive, and this fiesta of the ludicrous fortunately lapsed. (p. 51).

For all Carter's optimism, the accounts of other contributors assert that the actual experience of migrating to London from the former colonies was not always cause for celebration. Even Peter Porter, an Australian who moved to London in the fifties and has since been content to be included among 'British poets', faced abuse from Radio Four listeners after his Antipodean-accented broadcasts on 'British literature'.19 Shiva Naipaul relates his experience of the 'the sub-world of "racial prejudice"' in the boarding house culture of Earl's Court in 'Living in London - XII' published in 1973.20 Unlike Porter, Naipaul's experience denies him the possibility of a London identity:

In London, the vestigal Trinidadian 'roots' I had arrived with underwent a gradual petrification. But the city, while exacting its price, did not confer a new identity: I do not consider myself a Londoner. (p. 61)

The result was 'a nomadism which has persisted into the present and which shows no signs of abating' (p. 60). If the Trinidadian migrant's experience of being 'swallowed by the city' (p. 62) resulted in a failure to belong, Michael Feld's essay alerts the reader that identity-struggles articulated in 'Living in London' were not new conflicts but rather impacted with ongoing contests for place and identity in the city. London-born, Feld's account of growing up Jewish in Stoke Newington is comparable to Naipaul's in terms of how constructions of race can render ambivalent the writer's relation to place. For instance, his piece hovers between insider and outsider identities: 'It's all right for my wife coming from Israel but you got a lot of Jews in Israel. I wonder what she'd have been like if she came from near Ridley Road where Ozzie Mosley, Bart, and all the other old nazis tried their comeback after the war'.21 Feld's essay shares with another contributor, Paul Bailey, the experience of class migration, and with Naipaul the racialized other's difficulty of grafting self to place, but it also raises questions over the limitations of the term 'post-colonial London' which might be said to exclude certain identities just as did descriptions of colonial London. To simply subsume Feld's experience as a Jewish Londoner within the discourse of post-coloniality would be to
gloss over the differences in experience of London’s long established Jewish communities, when compared to Irish, West Indian, African and Asian communities, all of whom have experienced British colonialism in more direct historical ways.

‘Living in London’ offers no unified impression of London life in the late sixties and early seventies. In many ways the heterogeneity of the periodical form, typified in a magazine as eclectic as Ross’s, resists attempts to reduce its competing voices and meanings to single readings. In November 1970, for instance, William Sansom’s ‘Living in London’ piece is offset by Nirad Chaudhuri’s contribution about living in England, ‘Indian England’; and in the same issue appear American, Canadian and Greek writers, as well as a number of British contributors. The community of influence (meaning the editors, regular contributors and editorial advisers) have tended to be English, white and male, as reflected in ‘Living in London’ contributions by Sansom, Fuller or Ewart, but this has always been balanced by the presence of younger, more direct writers, as found in ‘Living in London’ contributions by Carter, Bailey, Feld or Naipaul.

Taken individually, out of context of either the magazine or the historical moment, the portraits might simply be appealing vignettes of the lives of a number of writers and artists located for some time in London: certainly they ought not simply to be read as a mirror of either London Magazine or London life in the late sixties and early seventies. Yet, whilst race and immigration are not their subject per se, the ways in which these issues recur across the accounts suggests that they are riven with national and local anxieties concurrent with the time of their production. The series’ profile represents a limited section of London’s community at the time, whose experience can be seen as posed between London past (Sansom and Chaplin) and present (Naipaul and Carter): the old and the new here reflecting the magazine’s wider profile. London Magazine has contributed to the emergence of post-colonial writing in English, publishing Derek Walcott and Christopher Hope in the sixties and seventies, and Upamanyu Chatterjee and Romesh Gunesekera in the eighties and nineties, but it also looks back and at times threatens to face the colonial past and not the post-colonial present. One result of this, ten years after the publication of ‘Living in London’, was a series of cuts in the magazine’s state funding as if it no longer represented the image of a ‘changing England’ favoured by the Arts Council.

One of the chief principles behind The Glory in the Garden, a policy paper published by the Arts Council of Great Britain on 30 March 1984, was to address the discrepancies of funding between London and the regions. Following The Glory in the Garden with action plans as regards ethnic-minority and disabled arts in 1985/6, it soon became clear that the Council was beginning to address the need to better fund a variety of communities previously marginalized in the arena of arts funding.
1985/86, the first year of implementation of *The Glory in the Garden*, *London Magazine*’s grant fell from £37,300 to £34,000. In the same year the magazine lost an influential friend in the form of Charles Osborne, formerly the Arts Council’s Literature Director, who left as a result of *The Glory in the Garden*. Osborne assisted John Lehmann on *London Magazine* in the late fifties and became Assistant Editor when Ross took over before joining the Arts Council in the mid-sixties. Although earlier correspondence between Alan Ross and the Arts Council suggests that relations between the magazine and the Council were not without their problems previously, it is tempting to associate the loss of its funding in 1985/86 at least in part with the staff and policy changes prompted by *The Glory in the Garden*. This being the case, was the metropolitan magazine penalized in the redress of bias towards London funding, despite the fact that a later Literature Director, Alastair Niven, would assure Ross that *London Magazine* was perceived as a national, not a London, client? Perhaps the magazine’s ‘Londonness’ was not the problem *per se*, but subsequent funding decisions seem to suggest the magazine was not seen to be representing its location in quite the ways the Council now expected of its funding recipients. The magazine enjoyed relative funding stability from 1985/86 until 1988/89, when its subsidy was cut from £34,000 to £30,000, then in 1989/90 to £25,030. That the cut in 1989/90 was closely bound with the Council’s recent interest in the representation and control of multi-cultural arts is a possibility. It was a year in which *Wasafiri*, a London-based magazine more explicitly committed to ‘Caribbean, African, Asian and Associated Literatures in English’, for example, received its first subsidy, just £2,000, under the list ‘Projects – Ethnic Minority Development’.

Crucially, it was also a year in which members of the Advisory Panel on Literature allegedly took issue with an article by Michael Kelly selected for the magazine by Alan Ross. Kelly’s article included photographs of a friend, the Directress of a Senegal dance group, in various states of undress. Nudity has long been a part of the magazine’s content, but, whatever the relationship between photographer and subject, Kelly’s article appears to have caused particular offence not least because the staging of the black woman as a sexual object under the white man’s gaze has familiar imperial overtones. Thus, in the 1980s when the Arts Council initiative was shifting towards shaping a national multicultural identity, the magazine’s relevance was seriously challenged. Despite this, today the magazine remains one of the Arts Council’s most valued literary magazines, receiving £23,691 in the year ending 31 March 1997, and Alan Ross continues to select post-colonial writing in English with the same exacting standards as he began when he first became editor in 1961.

In *London Magazine* the strong post-colonial element exists in tension with the kind of neo-colonial tropes suggested by the nostalgic elements in ‘Living in London’ or indeed by the imperial overtones of Michael Kelly’s
article. This slippage between post-colonial and neo-colonial disturbs any simple mapping of post-colonial London on the magazine's pages, and is further complicated by the fact that London Magazine readers today are conscious that the magazine's closure, when Ross chooses to halt his forty years of editorship, must be near. The shadow of this final closure might be said to further stress the magazine's tendency to nostalgia, to look back in memoir pieces and other acts of remembrance that have become, to some degree, the magazine's stock-in-trade. To overly stress this aspect, though, is to risk losing sight of its long history of publishing new writers, local and international. The truth lies somewhere in-between. The eclectic London Magazine formula corresponds more closely to Angela Carter's Balham marketplace, with its cross-cultural commodities, than Sansom's elderly retreat into the seclusion of St John's Wood. However, as I have tried to illustrate, in the course of its publication history the content of London Magazine has equivocated ambivalently between these two positions. At times this has signalled an ongoing struggle between the post-colonial and the neo-colonial, as glimpsed in the alternative Londons represented in 'Living in London'. Which London is more real, the nostalgic or the celebratory, is ultimately a choice for the reader. What 'Living in London' points towards, and what London Magazine gives limited room to, is the number of different Londons that exist in the contrasting lives of its contributors.

NOTES


5. 'Living Out of London' contained nineteen contributions and was initially published under the title 'Living in the Country', but, after contributions by James Stern and Norman Nicholson in 1976, the general title was altered to 'Living Out of London' under which all other essays were published in the magazine.


8. [John Lehmann], 'Manifesto', New Writing, 1, Spring 1936 (London: John