

Liminality/Commonality

Patricia Cumper

LIMINALITY: occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.

I came across the concept of liminality before I considered myself a writer. Then, it was explained in anthropological terms: the state in which young people, for example, existed while they were being inducted into adulthood. Neither child nor adult, they occupied a liminal space of being both and neither. This was seen as an inherently dangerous and therefore powerful time. This concept of liminality contains its own beginning and end: boy to man, girl to woman.

A more poetic view was to see liminality as the zone between the sea and the land where it is both and neither, for eternity. The shore exists in a constantly shifting state, affected by the tides, winds, waves, human activity, the phases of the moon, yet remains true to its liminal self. It offers a route from one world to another, from land to sea, from dry to wet, from predictable to unpredictable. It is the place where sea vomits flotsam and jetsam, deposits the seaweed and other debris torn from the seabed by passing storms. It is the place where robust crabs and small fish breathe air and water, where barnacles colonise and sea cockroaches burrow. I grew up on an island: the sea was never more than half an hour away. This idea of liminality made perfect sense to me.

In just about every society, people who occupy liminal space are regarded with fear - sometimes in awe, sometimes with distrust - by those unable to accept the fluidity that space can grant. I think of the role of *hijra*

in India or the *leitris* of Tonga and their role in cementing social rituals by their very presence, the awe and admiration inspired by drag queens and the violent antipathy that their presence can also evoke. Although older women are seen in some societies as holders of collective wisdom, they are often characterised as dangerous witches, capable of shape shifting and evil, like the Old Higue and Soucouyant of Caribbean folk tradition. Could this be related to their liminal state of being female, but not childbearing?

This liminal state of being is, I believe, natural to the writer. To be in a relationship, family, society or nation, and yet to be able to stand outside and examine it is an important part of being a writer, of fulfilling the duty described in this quotation from Anaïs Nin: 'The role of a writer is not to say what we can all say, but what we are unable to say'.

Writing drama demands the clash of rights where both protagonist and antagonist believe what they are doing is their best choice in the circumstances. The playwright creates and gives voice to characters who are believable, so that the conflict between them is felt by the audience as real and authentic. This means being able to imagine and occupy the minds of a wide range of people, even those who hold views antithetical to the writer's personal beliefs. I remember being asked to judge a drama festival organised by a Christian young people's group. The short plays were entertaining, the drama intense, but they all had one flaw in common. The strong beliefs of these young writers had not allowed them to write believable antagonists. I don't think this was intentional. Giving breath and words to such characters would have so contradicted the writers' fundamental beliefs that they were unable to write anything but a foregone conclusion. They were standing on land and had no desire to swim and so had not ventured onto the shifting strand.

The writer may pay a price for occupying that liminal space. Of necessity, the writer becomes a *picoreur*, a magpie collecting all the shiny bits of

stories from the lives around them to line their own nests. These fragments will be examined, altered, used and reused in their writing. But to identify which ones are worth collecting means the writer, even in the midst of turbulent events, must recognise the power of what they are observing and the uses to which it can be put. That objectivity can take its toll, personally and within relationships.

To be part of a population designated as 'other' creates another kind of liminality. It is no coincidence that Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) writers are massively under-represented in UK poetry, fiction, life writing and drama for stage, television and film. Considering we are more than 12 per cent of the UK population and more than 40 per cent of London's population, nowhere is this percentage reflected in the work that is produced or published. If you believe, like I do, that the stories a nation tells itself are powerful agents in creating national identity, it is logical that the arena in which these stories are told would be hotly contested and closely guarded. A BAME writer may want to centre characters of different ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, class or disability and so may be relegated, for example in theatre, to fringe productions in small venues. There they are, by experience, trained to write for small casts, particular audiences, modest budgets. When the call for BAME work at large venues or aimed at mainstream audiences comes, as it regularly does, the 'othering' of the work and its creators takes its toll. Such writers are forever seen as 'developing'. This is not to say there are no signs of hope: every decade or two a couple of writers are let through: Michael Abbensetts and Mustapha Matura in the 1970s and 80s, Roy Williams and Kwame Kwei Armah in the 90s, Inua Ellams and Arinzé Kene in this decade. There are always exceptions. But I feel that the essential thrust of my argument holds. Stories by those who are British but stand outside the mainstream are liminal and arouse visceral responses in those who support, produce, and market the work. Often

such decision-makers are comforted by the presence in the work of familiar tropes: the sexually potent young Black man (preferably one who dies tragically in a gang-related murder), the strong Black matriarch who stoically mourns, or is a warm-hearted nurse, the clever, enigmatic East Asian, the Asian shopkeeper (first generation) or doctor (second generation), the superhuman disabled person. Writing that subverts these tropes has a difficult time making it through the gatekeepers to mainstream audiences, I have found. It is noteworthy that audiences are expected to wade through the often obscure dialogue of identity-affirming Shakespeare plays yet are not asked to pay the same attention to the dialects and accents that may be part of the more challenging writings by the writer labelled as 'other'.

Liminality has also been a core part of my own life experience. When I first began to write in Jamaica, churning out hundreds of episodes of radio drama, I was seen as too English, too punctual, too structured. Growing up as part of a close-knit family with one English and one Jamaican parent, I was spectator to, but not participant in, the post-independence years when Jamaica was creating its own cultural identity. It was only after graduation, when I fell into writing, that all the many experiences I had observed - from the Sunday afternoon baptisms in Milk River and the Pentecostal services where women dressed in white got into the spirit and talked in tongues, to the assumptions in the phrase 'If you white, you all right; If you brown, stick around; If you Black, stand back' that played out around me every day - came to the fore and were the subject of my work. I may have been too English to read my own lines of dialogue in Jamaican patois without reducing my cast to tears of laughter, but I knew when I put the words on the page those same actors would bring them to abundant life.

Returning to live in England 25 years ago, I was viewed in exactly the

opposite way. I was too Jamaican to be British. For six years, I led Talawa Theatre Company, the UK's largest Black-led theatre company. Within the first week of getting the job I was told that I was just another 'Brown Jamaican taking the job from a Black British person'. My Britishness, and even my identification as Black, were both in question.

There was, after all, the prevailing narrative of how Black Britishness was created. It had to do with the arrival of the SS Empire Windrush after the Second World War, the first of many ships bringing British citizens from the Caribbean to work in the Mother Country, ironically at the invitation of Enoch Powell. There followed racism – 'No Blacks, No dogs, No Irish' – and hard work in the NHS, on public transport and in factories, work that helped rebuild Britain after the decimation of the war. I did not fit that narrative. My grandparents had regularly travelled from Jamaica to the UK by ship during the 1920s and 30s, often to follow the West Indies cricket team on tour. My mother, her sister and brother studied in the UK just after the Second World War. As for many before them, Jamaica was their home but England was, for better or worse, a constituent part of that Jamaican identity, melded as it was with influences from West Africa, Asia, the Middle East and China.

Yet that very identity, of being from everywhere and nowhere, helped me to be comfortable in the liminal space I occupy as a writer in the UK. It would be overstepping the mark to say that it empowered me, but it certainly helped me define myself and my work.

COMMONALITY: the state of sharing features or attributes.

The obverse of liminality for me is commonality. Dispassionate observation is a writer's essential tool. But writing in such a way as to reach or move

an audience or reader depends on understanding what we hold in common and creating connection using this knowledge.

There are the commonalities of the craft itself. Many models seek to explain how to construct a good tale: the three-act structure, the five-act structure, the role of protagonist and antagonist, the classical unities, the sequence of catalyst/turning point/climax/resolution, the widening circles as the protagonist is caught up in a small and personal, larger societal, or epic national (or even galactic) struggle. Then there is the practical advice for television writers telling you how many gags per page and how many minutes into your screenplay the catalytic event should occur. Even responding to actors' constraints – who can play complex emotions and who needs to have their lines printed out and stuck to the nearest prop – can become part of your repertoire.

Then there are the commonalities of the human experience. We all recognise the basic motivations for human behaviour: love, hate, envy, jealousy, anger, loss, fear, pride, even occasionally altruism. More subtle perhaps are the more id-driven actions that remain beneath the surface of the story yet can drive it inexorably along. Because of my own personal and family history, my writing often explores the way in which mental illness can create separate, internally consistent realities for characters who are forced to occupy the same space. What may make these internal worlds interesting is the contrast with the commonalities of 'normality' that they contravene. When these worlds collide with each other, it creates drama.

Decades ago, reading *The Lord of the Rings* as an undergraduate over one summer, it was a pleasure to look at those around me as the new term began and see in them traits of the characters in the book: a Gollum or two, a few Treebeards, several hobbits, elves and riders of Rohan, even a cou-

ple of Orcs. No Uruk-hai, thank goodness. Recently, sitting in the Trafalgar Studios, I felt the unwillingness of a daughter to accept her mother's death in my gut during Natasha Gordon's play *Nine Night*. It is those moments of recognition, coupled with the catharsis of resolution, that make storytelling on the page or on stage so enticing. We see some aspect of ourselves within the pages, on the stage or on screen. When the story ends, there is resolution, partial or total. In that moment, as the world resets itself to a new normal, there is hope, celebration, contemplation or even despair but there is also the release that an ending brings.

More than writers from the mainstream, stories told by 'othered' writers must often lean heavily on commonalities to connect as preconceptions about difference can be difficult to overcome. The danger is that such writing can promote the use of archetypes and, more perniciously, the stereotyping of characters from marginal communities and groups. In my first years as Artistic Director of Talawa, I vowed that I would not put work on stage that included the death of a young Black man, so common had this trope become. Gender, sexuality, race, disability: it felt to me that these subjects were only safe to explore in limited ways with which audiences were familiar. As I have said before, there are exceptions. But I still feel that the general rule holds.

Even for third generation Black Britons, the writer's voice is still seen as marginal, the experiences they should talk about still narrowly prescribed. It is expected that the primary subject of their writing will be their 'otherness' and often, out of frustration at their marginalisation, it is. More than 20 years ago, I wrote a short piece for TV as part of a series by Lenny Henry's production company, produced by Paulette Randall. Recently, Lenny Henry again produced a series of short films by Black British writers – award-win-

ning short films – in response to the Windrush scandal. *Plus ça change?*

In sum, the natural tension between the liminal state of writers that allows the objective observation essential to good storytelling and the commonalities on which the writer draws to communicate with the reader or audience member is complicated for writers from minority communities. They sit between the mainstream and the margin and their experience, though often wider and richer, can be perceived by producers and publishers as alienating or irrelevant. Perhaps this is why progress towards a genuine representation of the society we live in, in the performances we see and the books we read, is still some way off. As a Black woman immigrant left-handed single mother of a certain age, I find myself perhaps more marginal than most. As a writer with years of experience who has been published and produced, I have wriggled close to swimming in the mainstream on occasion. There's that duality again. I look with pride to younger writers and hope that I have in some way helped clear the ground for them. They are confidently declaring that they are no longer marginal. They are part of the mainstream now. Hashtag Me Too.

Patricia Cumper

Patricia began writing for the theatre in the Caribbean, where she had a dozen plays produced, many of which won awards or writing competitions. They include *The Rapist* and *The Fallen Angel and the Devil's Concubine*. In the UK, Patricia has been commissioned by Talawa Theatre Company, Carib Theatre Company, the Royal Court and Blue Mountain Theatre.

She was artistic director and CEO of Talawa Theatre Company from 2006 to 2012 and produced George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* in the

Victoria & Albert Museum, and a touring production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the first all-Black production in the UK. She was made Member of the Order of the British Empire in 2013 for her work in Black British theatre.

Patricia founded and was co-artistic director of StrongBack Productions from 2013 to 2018, with work including her play on Jamaican soldiers in World War One, *Chigger Foot Boys* (2017). A collection of three plays under the title *Inner Yardie* was published by Peepal Tree Press in 2014. She contributed to *The Diverse Bard* (2016), and *New Daughters of Africa* (2019).

Patricia was a member of the team of writers on *Westway*, the BBC World Service drama serial, and wrote more than 70 episodes. Adaptations for radio include Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth*, Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (which won a silver Sony Award), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Marie Ndiaye's *Trois Femmes Puissantes* (nominated for the BBC Radio Contribution to Diversity award 2016). She adapted four of the six volumes of Maya Angelou's autobiographies broadcast in 2018 and 2019. Original radio plays include *Mr Trollope and the Labours of Hercules* (2016) and *Pardna* (2017).

She is currently working on *Red Dirt*, a play about the Windrush scandal, a musical adaptation of a Shakespeare play, and a screenplay about the Scottish Abolitionist movement.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

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