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2 **That's Maybe Where I Come from but That's Not How I Read** Diaspora, Location and Reading Identities

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The historical neglect of readers within the field of postcolonial studies has produced what C. L. Innes suggests is a reductive and presumptuous idea of “the reader”: “most critical analyses of postcolonial writing implicitly or explicitly presume that the reader is either a member of the writer’s nation, as in Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) . . . or, more frequently, a generalized cosmopolitan Westerner”; even in those accounts that do exist “there is little differentiation between different kinds of Western reader” (2007, 200). Much of the haziness around readers here hinges upon commonsense assumptions about the *location* of reading, whether it is conceived in terms of national affiliation or in more generalised, global and diasporic terms of cosmopolitan consumption in “the” West. In what follows we explore some of the findings of a recent project that attempted to firm up current conceptions of readership by investigating how readers in a series of geographically dispersed locations made sense of the same, or similar works of fiction associated with postcolonial or diaspora writing.¹ These works included canonical classics such as *Things Fall Apart* (1958), as well as proto-canonical contemporary works such as *White Teeth* (2001), experimental writers like Junot Diaz and more mainstream realist novelists like Andrea Levy and Monica Ali, poetry and short fiction, as well as novels, and prescribed works as well as books selected by the individual groups themselves. By recording and transcribing a series of isolated book group readings of these texts in Africa (Lagos, Kano, Nigeria; Tetuan, Morocco), India (New Delhi), Canada (Kingston), the Caribbean (Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago; Kingston, Jamaica) and across the UK (from Cornwall to Glasgow), this project asked how (if at all) the reception of the same book differs according to the place in which it is read.

Drawing upon this data elsewhere, we have argued that “the vocabularies of *dislocation* wielded by professional readers (reviewers, publishers, academics, critics) to describe . . . diasporic cultural production tend to conceal the precise provenance of those vocabularies within a select series of metropolitan *locations*” (Procter 2010, 261). We have also proposed that there is a “social order” *within* reading groups, whose encounter with books is

always “a socially situated, localized activity, contingent upon the context in which it is produced” (Benwell 2009, 300). However, if one of our concerns has been to provide a more manifold, situated understanding of the kind of undifferentiated postcolonial audiences identified by Innes, the project has also taught us to be increasingly suspicious around assumptions of the whereabouts of reading.

In what follows we will see there are good reasons to hesitate before prescribing *where* difference might be identified or delineated in relation to regional, transnational and global audiences. For example, we remain unconvinced that the location of readers can be accessed in any direct or transparent manner. Reader location never ultimately anchors meaning-making and therefore cannot operate as a guarantee of what Hans Robert Jauss, in a different context, refers to as a “horizon of expectations” (1982). In short, we doubt whether reading, a notoriously elusive act, can be *mapped* in a manner that is ultimately or empirically exhaustive: any attempt to generalise from the micro (an individual reader’s response) to the macro (talk about the locale/ethnicity/national identity of participants) involves speculative leaps (Benwell, Procter and Robinson 2008). At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that location continues to matter to our readers, who continually allude to place, or ritually situate themselves in spatial terms of intimacy or unfamiliarity with particular fictional narratives.

Reading, Location and Identity in Reading Group Conversation

In what follows, we do not assume that a particular *kind* of response is representative of a location, even if it appears to have a consistency or homogeneity that might seem to attach it to a particular place. In a comparative analysis such as this, it may appear that the most compelling conclusions orbit around clear and culturally determined readings that offer a point of contrast between groups, such that, for instance, reading groups in Nigeria have a special “insight” into the cultural details of Ibo society that is unlikely to be shared by readers elsewhere, and thus engenders different patterns of interpretation and evaluation of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. However, our findings suggest that location is more helpfully understood as the ongoing production of book group talk, rather than a fixed place that prescribes that talk (see Benwell 2009 and Procter 2009), seeking to analyse in broadly ethnomethodological terms² how groups understand themselves as readers in both the social situation of the group and the larger geographical location. In this context we also share Ramaswami Harindranath’s concerns about treating global audiences as “ethnically self-contained groups” (Harindranath 2005, 6), and John Frow’s view that, where reading formations are concerned, there is “a danger of positing imaginary social unities as the explanatory basis of cultural texts” (Frow 1995, 13).

One of the observations that arose more or less consistently from the book group recordings was the way in which readers grounded *themselves* in their “local” contexts in ways that supported, legitimised or justified their interpretations or evaluations of the texts. In a series of transcripts in which fictional texts chosen for their proximity to the culture and location of the groups were discussed, we observed how a repeated trope of belonging or proximity seemed to index a relationship of representational veracity between reader experience and the fictional worlds of books.³ For example, in a discussion about Junot Diaz’s *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) (a novel narrating the inter-generational ambitions, histories and curse of a “ghetto nerd” (11) in New Jersey, Rutgers University and the Dominican Republic), one member of the Port of Spain group works up her right to evaluate the text by identifying herself in both spatial and political terms as “a diaspora person”: “well no I’m just speaking as a diaspora person and reading this no I can see where he’s coming from”. This speaker alludes to both literal and metaphorical senses of place here, by her use of the phrase “where he’s coming from”, which seems to yoke location to meaning or intention. At the same time, the “just” seems to modulate this identification, perhaps as a way of naturalising its significance. Meanwhile, in the same book group, readers of Andrea Levy’s bestselling Windrush fiction *Small Island* (2004), set across the UK, Jamaica and India, acknowledge the experience of those who have spent some time in England: “but Ellen you were saying it sort of reminded you of your experiences in London?” In the Kano group’s discussion of Jackie Kay’s *The Adoption Papers* (1991), *distance* is explicitly invoked (“being somewhere else”) as a hurdle to understanding or as a lack of qualification to evaluate Kay’s poetry of adoption in Glasgow across boundaries of ethnicity and geography:

S3 she went and wrote about Scotland a lot about stuff that concerned herself that we might not really be [able to

S5 [being somewhere else we might not be able we are not well informed=

S6 =of the context

Similarly, in Kingston, Ontario, a reader makes explicit the connection between spatial belonging, distance and the process of identification in the reading of Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* (2005), a novel of the interlocking lives of twenty-somethings “born in the city from people born elsewhere” (20):

S* you know there may have been something about the Toronto aspect of it that made it more familiar to me than the books that took place in London

The discussion of Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by the Port of Spain group reveals an affiliation to the text's aesthetics and values which is explicitly premised by one member on spatial metaphors: "*I'm there I'm there* you know I feel I feel the whole you know I'm into the rhythm of the language" (our emphasis). The ability of the text to *transport* its readers in acts of translocal identifications is related in this particular book group's discussion to an ongoing debate that posits the novel as "Caribbean", and as connecting to *them*, across the region from its Dominican Republic and US topographical foundations. Their comments range from the barbed ("it was a mildly interesting primer on Dominican history") to the positive ("... but this was the first book [from the project's list] that said okay I can see us in it I mean can see um I can see our experience in it"). Furthermore, one reader notes that despite the profile of Junot Diaz, this Caribbeanness is a trope internal to the novel:

in the US I mean it's like oh he's a Dominican American writer or like a young American writer with immigrant roots but he kept emphasizing he keeps using the words Caribbean and Antillean and island over and over again I thought it was really interesting that he was laying claim to that.

Later in the transcript, an exchange occurs between readers which debates the plausibility of Oscar. Described by the novel's narrator as "a fat sci-fi reading nerd" (19), two group members defend a reading of him as "authentic" by a rhetorical merging of fiction and the readers' own lives and autobiographies:

S* so do you think that Oscar's character is not believable? I *know* Oscar I I know Oscar *

S* I was about to say I I've been thinking of someone I went to school who could have been Oscar

In a similar rhetorical move, the same group bestows or withholds authenticity from the Jamaican characters Gilbert and Hortense in Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004) (narrating the tensions between a British and a Jamaican couple living through war and immigration in the mid-century) by noting they have "met a lot of Gilberts"; and conversely that "the way Hortense speaks is not plausible". These comments assume social and spatial identities that are readily understandable both in terms of a lived reality and in terms of the form of literary realism. We could say that the Caribbean operates as a shared field of *situated* knowledge that can be drawn upon by shorthand comments about masculine identity (we know what a "Gilbert" is), or about language use (we know what is implausible speech for Hortense). But we should also note how insistently varied, localised and deictic are the ways in which comments about social and spatial identity operate here. The Caribbean is clearly significant in

the discussion, but it is not the only way that location and located identity get discussed here. For example, in the discussion of *Oscar Wao* (in formulations of noun and adjective), Caribbean and Dominican Republic are mentioned 34 times, Trinidad 28, America (including references to hyphenated Polish-, black-, and African-) 27, Diaspora 23, Latin America 9, Guyana 6, Grenada 4, West Indies 4, Iraq 3, Jamaica 3, England, India, South America and Cuba 2, not to mention appeals of “our society” and “our experience” that assume but do not explain the boundaries of identification.

Elizabeth Long's ethnographic study of women's book clubs has commented in detail upon the relationship between acts of reading and lived or personal experience (2003). Her study focuses particularly on the interface between a reader's own personal experience and a book's value as a realist text through a process of “self-recognition” (153) and also the quasi-therapeutic function of book group discussions in working through issues raised by novels that are embedded in their own lives: “participants speak of a process that couple reflection about literature with self-reflection in the company of others who bring similar reflectiveness, but different selves, into the process” (111). However, self-recognition is not only an act in and of itself, but also a form of social action and identity *work* in interaction: the invocation of location is used to accomplish the act of “being a reader” with all the moral rights and responsibilities that attend this identity.⁴ To be a reader on this account is to engage in the discursive production of value judgements about texts. One of these responsibilities is implicitly that of producing justified and well-founded evaluations of a text—its veracity, its artistry, the sympathy of its characters, the pleasures or aversions it provokes and the plausibility of its plotting. Thus invocations of location are frequently deployed in order to give explicit credence to judgements about a text and in this way constitute and support the “moral order” of the book group. We can see this moral order being accomplished particularly at points of *disagreement* or *contestation* where readers challenge or support a text's right to be deemed “representative” of a particular location and cultural experience.

In New Delhi there is an explicit disagreement about the anti-hero of Hari Kunzru's novel *Transmission* (2004), who moves from New Delhi to California to take up a job in Silicon Valley. For one reader he is “every Indian”: “I mean we can see that he . . . every Indian they can see their own character in Arjun Mehta's and their ambitions”, but there is also concern about whether the book stereotypes the “Indian” experience (“this land of beggars and snake charmers”) for a Western readership. In both statements the speakers appeal to a common appreciation of the national character by the use of “we” pronouns, the construction of a point of generic experience premised on nationality (“every Indian”), the use of proximal deixis (“this land”) and the economical stock image of an orientalist India that triggers a shared scepticism among a local community of readers. Later a reader describes the representation of India as “shabby”:

but when you look at the entire setting that he's an Indian and . . . in America so I'm not very happy about the setting you know cause again it's like an Indian coming off looking quite sorry, so for *that* that was one part and furthermore like there were two passages in which the reference to actual places in India was again quite often shabby

But this negative judgement is swiftly countered by the invocation, by another speaker, of autobiographical identification with Kunzru's description of Janpath, one of New Delhi's main roads. He asserts that "it summarised my six months of experience of living in like a dusty crowded y'know . . .". Similarly, when one member complains that the hyper-realism of the novel which portrays the seedier side of Indian life compromises an "Asian" identity, this is countered by the slightly mocking suggestion that a globally appealing "Clark Gable Indian" would be the first speaker's preferred alternative:

- S4 you wish he would have been a Clark Gable Indian uh?
 Grp [laughing]
 S1 *no* no I'm just saying this was again another novel in which Asians do not do good that's all I'm saying

This contestation of the veracity of group identity also arises in our Scottish groups in relation to the orthographic representation of Glaswegian speech. In Glasgow (extract 1) and Edinburgh (extract 2) there is disagreement about the "authentic[ity]" of the Glaswegian script used to narrate Suhayl Saadi's 'Extra Time in Paradise', a short story of an encounter between Aamir Donovan Khan, a Celtic football apprentice, and a mysterious "auld man sittin oan the Manager's bench". Both reading groups ask whether the rendering of Glaswegian "jars"—a choice of word which is suggestive of physical dislocation from a familiar and stable position:

- (1)
 S1 there's some things that you think that's not the way I think that was spelled and that actually jar- it's one . . . it jars so you can't . . .
 S4 but there isn't there isn't a recognised spelling I mean Margaret's right it jars because I mean I've never heard anybody saying "war are ye frae?"
 (2)
 S7 (waving the transcript of the story) what sort of people speak like that?
 S1 sorry?
 S7 (waving papers again) what sort of people speak like that?
 S1 it didn't jar with me too much I have to say when I was reading it

By occupying a located identity in these discussions, readers are able to damn or defend an author's attempts to represent a location, a national

character or linguistic experience faithfully, and in this way silently maintain the notion that there *are* such truthful benchmarks for a writer to set his or her art against.

In an overwhelmingly negative assessment of *Small Island*, the Port of Spain group refers to its representation of the Caribbean as focalised by an “other’s” view:

I think we all articulated it in various ways was it really was not *us* it was somebody else’s perception of us

And another reader from the same group notes:

It’s a bit sad—we’ve all said it here—that this is all material we’ve seen, we’ve heard, but this is what will be discussed in book groups all over the world as the West Indian experience, and for us it’s maybe forty years too late. And it seems to me there’s a gap between what’s actually happening in the Caribbean and what’s getting out to the world

The speaker here takes the floor for about three minutes—a marker of the consequence of the topic—voicing an asserted collective concern about the present and future representations of the Caribbean in literature and that a single book might represent West Indian experience as singular. In this way, readers monitor the boundaries of their own locations vis à vis the wider context of literary markets in order to assert and position themselves within a global order of reading.⁵ We might wonder if the voiced concern overstates the hegemonic presence of *Small Island* in a book-reading world, but given the novel’s high profile, it is worth considering two reviews featured on Levy’s official website:

Andrea Levy has written one of those rare fictions that tells you things you didn’t know but feel you should have known (*Sunday Herald*, Scotland)

Andrea Levy gives us a new urgent take on our past (*Vogue*, UK)

Both the Port of Spain reading group member and the reviewers recognise belatedness and gap-filling as important in relation to *Small Island*. But for the reader in Port of Spain the belatedness of *Small Island* refers to its status within a Caribbean tradition of writing about emigration that began at least “forty years” ago (Lamming 1954; Selvon 1956). To be late in this instance is to be clichéd and unoriginal, and *Small Island*’s popularity might be seen to reveal starkly the gap between an informed and uninformed readership of Caribbean literature. For the *Sunday Herald* and *Vogue* reviewers, it is the belatedness of their own knowledge that is being addressed. *Small Island* fills in the gaps: about West Indian emigration to Britain, the nature of the British Empire and

the global nature of the Second World War. Marketing the novel as recovering a hidden history, Levy's website plays on assumptions about her general readership's UK identity and understanding of "our [unknown] past". It is a mass-market strategy that has no space to contemplate how this past of Empire and migration is already registered in Caribbean writing and history, and for the Port of Spain group, the novel's success seems to simultaneously register a failure to see "what's actually happening in the Caribbean".

All the foregoing examples focus primarily on explicit mentions of location and an assumption that location in some ways stands in productive relation to reception. But listening to these group discussions we find that there is no simple correlation between place and interpretation. As the reading group members explore their reading practices, the possibilities of *reading identities* emerge. We believe it is possible to explore how practices of reading reveal neglected forms of identity work—about how to be a reader—and to consider how these converge with or diverge from other kinds of identity formations that our group members appeal to and refuse at their meetings.

In the next section we explore further this concept of a more autonomous "reading identity" that, while not mappable or subsumed by sociological categories such as gender, ethnicity or nationality, nonetheless continues to interact in relevant ways with notions of "location".

Reading Practices and Reading Identities

Our readings of these transcripts in terms of "location" have so far attempted to illuminate the acts that are accomplished by invoking belonging and space, including identity work (e.g., "being a loyal member of a national community"), accounting for literary judgements (both positive and negative) and consolidating the social order of the book group. Locatedness (of reader and text) is valued among reading groups, and when we focus further on reading practices (such as how to choose a book to read), we see more ways of conceiving the relationship between location and interpretation:

I read [*White Teeth*] on a plane I actually I found it was good plane reading because it wasn't too taxing (laughter) you know I always sit I find it hard to read on planes cause you're you know you're trapped in a small space. (Port of Spain)

Here the physical *difficulties* of the "small space" of the plane are offset by a preference for a novel that is defined by an *easiness* to read. Matching a book to the location of its reception is one commonsense way that books circulate. We need only to turn to the UK print media's annual attention to "summer reading" to see this: "*Anna Karenina* on the beach, *The Corrections* in Patagonia, *Death in Venice* overlooking the Lido" (e.g., Hooker 2011). In these pairings the possibility of what Pascale Casanova titles "the world republic

of letters”—a shared world of writers and readers lived and understood as a global reality—holds out, at least potentially, against the negative connotations that exposes in her model of literary inequalities, and the circulation of dominant literatures (2004).

The possibility of translocated reading is reformulated in a further discussion:

S1 who speaks to you as a writer? who has something to say to you as a writer?

S2 from this part of the world? right now?

S1 from any **from anywhere**

(Trinidad and Tobago, our emphasis)

Here authors being able to engage in conversation with their readers is negotiated first from within a perceived set of geographical boundaries and then corrected to mean the possibility of global literary communication. Readers of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in two different groups in Kano go further, to speak of the universality of texts as well as of readers' freedom to read across borders:

(Group 1)

S2 I think one of the reasons why it's so successful like a lot of people will relate is the fact you know of the conflict that goes on between tradition and modernity I think that's something that is common to everyone no matter where you come from

(Group 2)

S7 I am also going to add that I think probably one of the this Achebe's bringing out aspects of human nature is probably one of the reasons why everyone you know world over is able to identify with this book because whether you're Nigerian you're Ibo you're Jamaican you know white black whatever colour

S5 it's universal (Nigeria, our emphasis)

While questions of authenticity and universality are necessarily fraught within the realms of literary representation, it is striking to note a shift in reception here from the critique of universalism that Achebe articulates in 'Colonialist Criticism' (1988).

Where Achebe feared for a "narrow" world of letters that must render African novels American in order to value them (52), these three readers in the Kano group formulate a different non-Eurocentric meaning for "universal", one imagining a readerly network that connects "Nigerian" to "Ibo" to "Jamaican" to "white" to "black" to "whatever colour". In their exchange, *Things Fall Apart* is a text that is consecrated internationally. And this ongoing process of debating the meaning of literary universality turns on their

understanding of the multiplicity of sites of reception, as well as a sense that practices of reading might be shared across borders: in this instance that readers share an interest in exploring “human nature” and conflicts between tradition and modernity. This does not necessarily amount to a rejection of “located reading”, nor however does it necessarily imply the same readings across the globe. It might be more accurate to see these invocations of universality as hopeful that some consensus about readerly interest in a text can be registered across different places.

At one point in the discussion about *Small Island*, a reader from the Trinidad reading group questions our project’s interest in Caribbean reading groups. He begins by saying:

I find it interesting that we’ve been asked to do these to review these these books it’s obvious that someone is thinking are they hitting the mark?

He ironically articulates the supposed identities of the group as they might be construed by the UK-based academics: “the purpose of this exercise is to determine what we

home colonials think of writing you know that’s meant to be post-colonial” noting that this idea is “off-putting”. Another speaker goes on to note that the reading list “was constructed” and the books “assigned” to them, reinforcing the idea that to argue that books such as *Small Island* represent some kind of authentic, located Caribbean experience is a particular kind of theoretical and imposed construct and an argument in which he is not invested.

This first reader goes on to describe the project’s interest in Caribbean readers as “patronising”, saying about his Caribbean identity: “That may be very well where I come from but that’s not how I read”. This explicit prioritisation of reading practices is intriguing if, like us, you are not sure that these practices are straightforward indices of other kinds of identities, or explained by these other kinds of identities. This latter kind of analysis powers Elizabeth Long’s research in *Book Clubs*, in which the power of reading is viewed as part of a process of self-recognition and social change. Long, of course, is interested in how readers report the impact of reading groups on their reading habits (110), but as her subtitle suggests, a concern for “the uses of reading in everyday life” is necessarily searching for the myriad social meanings of reading. What this means for her analysis is that her concerns often quickly move on from discussing what it might mean to be a reader to a discussion of how being a member of a book group has particular social meanings, how ideally it offers its members “a potentially transformative way of being in the world” (113). Central to Long’s thesis is that “the ‘doing’ of culture appears more integrally implicated in the ‘doing’ of gender, class, race, and social development in general than theorists generally assume” (17) What this resistant Port of Spain reader suggests is that how we read should not be important only for (or reducible to) its ability to help describe

or transform other sorts of identity: in asserting his practice (“how I read”) he encourages us to consider him as a reader, rather than as anything else. If this sense of the “doing” of culture-through-reading seems to allow a return to the dominant reception model of the “solitary reader” (a model that Long works against in her study (2–17)), it is in order to see this model in a new context, and to track what we perhaps need to relearn: that the doing of reading can be understood as a distinctive set of practices that are carried out individually, collectively and discursively.

The reader’s task, argues Alberto Manguel, is “to take whatever book seems appealing, strip it of its colour-coded covers and place it among those volumes which chance and experience have put upon her bedside shelf” (1996 [1997], 235). This model of how to build a personal library outlines some of the norms of reading—in contexts that are both external (the “colour-coded covers” of the publisher and author) and internal (“chance and experience”)—that a reader might confront. In this respect a bedside shelf presents the basis for an identity, a micro-located reading identity, and this appeal to other forms of location might be one contextualisation of the reader’s assertion that knowing he is from the Caribbean will not tell you about “how I read”. A refusal to adopt a Caribbean reading identity flies in the face of a cultural-nationalist and postcolonial logic which argues postcolonial locations require a literature, and a readership, of their own. This reader wants to reject “postcolonial” and “post-postcolonial literature” as his own literature, and himself as its ideal reader. He says, “If you want to get my opinion on literature full stop, I’m there.” He rejects the idea that interpretation is determined by a spatial identity, but location still has a key operation in his formulation of the value of his reading practices. His willingness to be “there” for the discussion of “literature full stop” suggests that even as he asserts his autonomy as an individual reader he is also pointing to an interpretive (even real) space in which his practice will be respected.

Listening to reading groups, we have noted how the privileging of certain kinds of readers through their spatial and social identities prevents us from seeing clearly the multiple ways that location informs reading identities. Manguel argues:

setting aside a group of books or a genre for a specific group of readers (whether Greek novels or the pink-covered novels of my childhood) not only creates an enclosed literary space which those readers are encouraged to explore; it also, quite often, makes that space off limits for others”. (1996 [1997], 228)

This formulation of how reading can take place “within walls” can be extended by considering the complexities of the group reading discussions. In the Kano group the readers challenge themselves to understand why

Acchebe's novel seems to resist being enclosed "within walls". Worries about how literary spaces become enclosed animate the Port of Spain reading group. The enclosures the Port of Spain group anticipates relate not only to their enclosure as Caribbean readers reading Caribbean texts, but as we've seen other readers' enclosure within an overly narrow literary space that defines the Caribbean and Caribbean literature. In the case of *Small Island* some worry that the novel will define the emigrant "Windrush" generation outside the Caribbean; some worry that it will displace older work by Caribbean writers such as Selvon and Lamming; some worry that it promotes what they call "writing by box-checking"; some mobilise their knowledge of Caribbean texts to defend and attack Levy's novel.

Thinking about how readers resist or work within the walls of an "enclosed literary space" provides a useful way to contextualise how we make sense of location in relation to reading identities. One reader in the Port of Spain group says in response "having just read *Small Island* I personally would be interested to hear what Jamaican readers make of this". This view is then hedged and qualified, perhaps suggestive of his awareness of the difficulty and ambiguous appeal of these assumptions about "legitimate" identity positions that accompany acts of reading: "because I think that they I mean quite apart from sure any reader anywhere in the world will have something interesting and valid to say about this and I you know I completely agree with you but there's also because of the subject matter I think that there's a particular interest in hearing what someone who supposedly comes from the world that's been described here what they think of it you know what what insights they can give to it". The request need not be motivated by a turn to Jamaican readers for an authentic reader response (although there may be an implied criticism of our apparent interest in "Caribbean" responses by a reading group from Trinidad reading a novel by a British writer of Jamaican parentage). This request for located readers might instead be seen as part of an attempt to come to some provisional reckoning of the complexity of location and, we would add, the complexity of the practices of reading. To account for the enduring appeal of locating readers, readings and reception, we must allow for contestation about, just as much as confirmation of, the meaning and value of "the literary space" of books and their readerships.

Notes

1. 'Devolving Diasporas' was an AHRC-funded project running between 2007 and 2010: <http://www.devolvingdiasporas.com/>. "Devolving" here registers the project's interest in moving beyond certain commonsense locations of meaning, including the "text" itself as the taken-for-granted centre of meaning, or the metropolitan centre as a privileged site of consumption that eclipses other sites of meaning-making. The reception data considered here is taken from a larger corpus of transcribed digital audio-visual recordings of 30 book groups, and

amounting to 3,400 pages of transcription. Involving public libraries, the British Council, mass read events and home-based book groups, our readers met monthly, typically for a period of six months. To respect the privacy of the book group members, we have anonymised all names.

2. Ethnomethodology is the study of the ways in which people display their understandings of the world around them to others, negotiating those understandings with one another and in this way producing social order.
3. The New Delhi, India group read Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004); the Kano, Nigeria groups read

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