

*#RhodesMustFall and the Reform
of the Literature Curriculum*

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The #RhodesMustFall movement that preoccupied the public imagination at universities in South Africa foregrounded not only the legacy of British colonialism in South Africa and especially the Cape, but also the place of Imperial statues in former British colonies. The protests, which took place between 2015 and 2017 crystallized around the statue of Cecil Rhodes, which continued to loom large in one of Africa's foremost institutions, the University of Cape Town (UCT). The protests brought back not just memories, but also a lingering presence of the Empire through its architecture and, in this instance, its monuments, and with it a discursive culture or a colonial discourse that continues to pervade educational institutions such as the University of Cape Town. Cecil Rhodes statue worked like a semiotic system, with layered meanings. In its more basic form, it signified a celebration of a historical figure from a specific historical moment with its entire troubled legacy. It signified a specific understanding of the past whose traces could be seen in the present, while drawing attention to that connection between these two zones of history as if they were inseparable. However, there was also a much deeper meaning, more insidious than what we could readily glean from the surface symbol itself. The statue clearly signified a great deal more, and that is not to suggest that the literal signification was less significant. The point is that a closer and deeper reading of the statue revealed a complex network of spatial and ideological codes of signification, which pointed to what is clearly a system of a surreptitious authority and power that we can only feel and experience in our daily encounters. A closer look at the statue pointed to subtle layers of power at work – a stark reminder of an imperial authority that we cannot ignore. For example, its location at the university, the center of intellectual knowledge, but one whose history speaks to a historical network of imperial patronage and a production of an exclusionary discursive knowledge, was not lost on many, especially its Black students. With its towering figure and a sweeping imperial gaze over the city of Cape Town, one could not help but notice the

positioning of this imperial authority, the architect of British imperialism at the southern tip of Africa.

Monuments, Stephen Slemon has reminded us, are not just historical, they are monuments to history (Slemon 4). There is no doubt that the architects of Cecil Rhodes's statue intended it to be an important signpost in South Africa's imperial history. It was deliberately positioned "to construct the category of 'history' as the self-privileging inscription of the coloniser, but also to legitimate a particular concept of history" (4–5). Like most monuments, "it signified history as the record of major events, the inscriptions of great men upon the groundwork of time and space" (5). Cecil Rhodes was "a gift" to South Africa, cast in both bronze and stone, for posterity, but one that also signaled the banishment of colonized cultures. Thus, to inscribe Rhodes into history meant that the colonized history and cultures – their everyday practices – had to remain silenced. The point is that the semiotic system that the colonizer imposes through monuments such as that of Cecil Rhodes sets the terms of engagement and the ultimate limits of expression that the colonized are allowed to possess. And this has very little to do with the agency of the colonized or the lack thereof, it is just that the terms of speaking have already been predetermined by a discursive system that the colonized have been hailed into. As Slemon observes, "there is no gaze outside that of the coloniser, no angle of vision that opens to a future other than that which the statue, as a monument to History, inscribes – unless, of course, it is that of the viewers" (5–6).

What does it mean to say that there is no gaze outside that of the colonizer, unless it is that of the viewers? A response to this question requires an understanding of the limits of complicity by the colonized when they are drawn into a semiotic field triggered by a monument like that of Rhodes. It is to understand that this complicity is neither benign nor absolute in the sense of it being facile or totalizing. In the first instance, the viewers have to be part of the colonizer's gaze to understand it, and to participate in it actively. Secondly, it is their knowledge of Western modes of representation that enables them to grasp the hidden meanings of the statue, in the way that the students of UCT did. In other words, it takes an understanding of how the discourse of colonialism works to understand both its more obvious ideological enactment and its deeper signification processes.¹ I am suggesting here that those who have been hailed into the discourse of colonialism understand its violence most. As Foucault puts it, discourse is "a violence we do to things"; it is a "diffuse and hidden conglomerate of power"; and as a social formation, it works to constitute

“reality” not only for the objects it appears passively to represent but also for the subjects who form the coherent interpretive community upon which it depends (Young 48). According to Foucault then, discourse, and this would apply to colonial discourse too, designates those discursive practices that work to produce and naturalize the hierarchical power structures of the imperial enterprise. Hulme complicates this further by suggesting that discourse also serves, “to mobilise those power structures in the management of both colonial and neo-colonial cross-cultural relationships” (Hulme 2).

The nature of contestation by students at UCT revolved around what Foucault refers to as “violence we inflict on things.” Foucault’s reference to violence inflicted on “things” is instructive here, especially in the context of the Empire, where violence was not only directed at humans, but also the totality of the colonized environment. In Africa, it was violence directed at its total ecological system and a devious separation of the human from nature through a Cartesian logic. If Rhodes’s statue at the University of Cape Town was offensive to most students, it was because it represented what Rob Nixon, in a different context, refers to as “slow violence” – a systemic annihilation of colonized subjects and their spaces – their institutions and their systems of knowledge. It is not because they were incapable of a nuanced translation of this symbol of imperialism, or simply unable to grasp what Anne Coombes has characterized as supplementary meanings that monuments often bring to the fore with the passage of time – as they travel across history.² As one listened to the narratives of students, it became evident that the statue was a trigger, if not an eloquent reminder, of an institutional culture that several generations of Black students have endured in silence, with occasional outbursts, since 1994, when the university truly opened its doors to Black students. It was also a reminder of forms of subliminal racism that have continued to inform not just the neoliberal universities, but also the world of work – especially the corporate world – which this new generation of students, who had all along assumed that they had been hailed into a modern system that their parents could only dream about, would soon discover was a façade. Perhaps more importantly, it was a deliberate attempt to subvert those codes of recognition that had been normalized over the years in their institution and to establish the presence of cultural heterogeneity and difference as a push against a dominant discourse and epistemic unilateralism in knowledge production. It was the struggle to reclaim representational strategies and to create the conditions for their possibilities – for their realization.

Here are post-Uhuru or postapartheid youth, the born frees as we call them in South Africa, staging their pain and rage around a monument, but in a manner that even their liberators like Mandela could not bring themselves to do. What the monument uncovered for these students was painful traces of the colonial, apartheid, and a dreadful postcolonial moment, all rolled into one political nightmare – urgently in need of change. In a sense, the #Rhodes Must Fall movement pointed to a radical reconstruction of memory as a site upon which the intractable traces of the past are felt on people's bodies, in their landscapes, landmarks, and souvenirs. Indeed, it uncovered how it is felt in their everyday lives and routines, in their daily encounters and entanglement, in their lecture halls – a tough moral fabric of their social relations – whether at institutions of learning or at work. The movement redirected our attention to the urgent need to rethink our understanding of the force of memory, its official and unofficial forms, its moves between the personal and the social postcolonial transformations.

How else would we be able to explain this most improbable irony, that a hundred or so years ago Rhodes, in being buried in the Matopos hills in Zimbabwe, was “twinned” with Mzilikazi, the founder of the Ndebele kingdom that Rhodes's British South African Company conquered. Almost exactly a hundred years later, Rhodes is now “twinned” with Nelson Mandela, with the creation of the Mandela–Rhodes Foundation, a partnership between the Rhodes Trust and the Mandela Foundation. Reflecting on the irony, Paul Maylam remarks during Rhodes memorial lecture at Rhodes University in 2002:

Another Paradox? A coalition of two very different men – or perhaps a combination of Rhodes' financial might and Mandela's generosity of spirit. It is certainly a combination that would have delighted Rhodes because it gives legitimacy to his name and ensures its perpetuation at a time when his reputation is at a low. (146)

Daniel Herwitz, writing on “Monument, Ruin, and Redress in South African Heritage,” has suggested that controversies around heritage symbols, such as Rhodes's statue, “are often responses to a world of ruin” (232) – perhaps the pain and despair, poverty and squalor in the townships and squatter camps – often juxtaposed in close proximity to the townships – the gigantic malls of South Africa, that have become the new monuments of power and opulence. Herwitz is drawing attention here to the persistence of apartheid spatial arrangements – its ruins – in which squalor, depravation, and extreme poverty are placed in stark juxtaposition

to pululence. If Rhodes's statue was a marker of imperial power and capital, the gigantic malls that have come to define the face of South Africa are the new monuments – markers of a neoliberal market economy that serves as a trigger for resistance to old colonial monuments and all that they stand for in the new South Africa.

If I have lingered on the controversy around the #Rhodes Must Fall movement, it is because it allows us, as a layered semiotic figure of meaning, to understand the insidious nature of the imperial master code and how complicated the challenges to its authority are, and that they are likely to take multiple paths across history. It offers an important window into various institutional structures, political and cultural, that colonial discourse authorized, and I want to argue that one such important institution was the English syllabus within the British colonies. The debate around the Rhodes statue opens up a range of issues that are pertinent to our engagement with the English curriculum in South Africa. Like the Rhodes monument, the English Literature syllabus in South Africa has stood as a colossus – a cultural edifice that has been so central in shaping what canonical literature really is in the imagination of many, within and outside the academy. It was always the bedrock of imperial values and history – a purveyor of norms and values against which the colonized other had to be judged. The English Literature syllabus, more than any other discipline, was so central to the definition of what it meant to be or not to be an enlightened colonized subject, and this understanding would continue to hold sway within the academy for several years to come. To be a learned person, at least within the colony, one had to show not only a mastery of the English language, but also a mastery of the great English writers.³ Outside the English tradition, there was no literature, and there was no culture. What this implied was a persistent attempt to silence Indigenous narratives and voices, right into the independence period. The irony of course is that even as colonialism was having a huge impact on its idea of Englishness internally in England, as Simon Gikandi has demonstrated in *Maps of Englishness*, the variables within British colonies remained largely constant. On a recent anniversary of Shakespeare, the BBC reported that the English writer was more widely known among high-school children in India and South Africa as in the United Kingdom itself.⁴

One can therefore understand and sympathize with the passion of resentment that the statue of Rhodes unleashed among the students at the University of Cape Town. After all, what Rhodes figured at both a literal and an allegorical level found expression in what was taught in the lecture halls. Rhodes's gaze found its most eloquent performance in the

lecture rooms and in the discursive knowledge formations that continued to frame everyday meanings and relationships of students and their lecturers. Significantly, a close examination of the Literature syllabus at the University of Cape Town at the height of #Rhodes Must Fall in 2015 showed nothing close to what one would regard as a transformed curriculum, carrying, as it should, the weight of African literature. Up until 2018, the pace of change had been so slow that one could hardly claim that a student would graduate in the department of English with a sound grasp of African literature. For example, before 2018, African Literature and Language Studies I and II and English Literary Studies I and II, taught in the first and second years, were often paired, and students had to choose between African or English streams. Given the dominant history of the English-language syllabus at high school, in which the canonical texts were privileged, the African-language stream had very little chance of succeeding. Students understandably flocked to the English stream because that is what they had been exposed to.⁵

When change eventually came, it was neither a thoroughgoing study of African literature nor a centering of African literature at the heartbeat of its curriculum. It was cloaked behind some esoteric and some undifferentiated course titles that served to diffuse any situational and contextual approach that should enable a better understanding of a literary province or culture. Instead, one came across courses such as “Image, Voice, Word”; “Cultures of Empire, Resistance and Postcoloniality”; “Literature and the Work of Memory”; “Movements, Manifestos and Modernities.” Running through all these courses was an attempt to provide a world scope in terms of the texts studied, at times with authors and texts sitting so uneasily that one wondered what the motivation or the endgame was. I can understand the idea behind all these attempts to “deprovincialize” the curriculum and push for a comparative approach that is less driven by context of production, but more by theoretical considerations and conceptual approach. The danger with this approach is that it continues to center the West, since various modes of reading some of the issues signaled in the course titles are underpinned by Western notions of genre, and Western-derived critical-theoretical models, which are often deployed indiscriminately when talking about concepts such as memory, postcoloniality, and image, among others. Postcolonialism, a popular rubric in framing a number of literature courses here in South Africa, is not without its flaws, as critics such as Ato Quayson and McLeod have pointed out (Quayson; McLeod). It ends up, as McLeod writes, “[creating] a ghetto for literature from once-colonised countries within English departments and degree schemes” (249). The

courses become readings into ideas as opposed to a sustained grasp of texts and how these help us to voyage into specific contexts of production and how literature really works in Africa to colonize meaning – to offer us a window into those competing cultural and political facets of Africa. Instead of students having a sustained experience of African literature, the literature itself is driven underground, and a smattering of texts are eclectically thrown into courses that are largely thematically or conceptually driven. Take for example the University of Cape Town's senior undergraduate course titled "Movements, Manifestos and Modernities," which brings together Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like*, Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Maryse Conde's *Land of Many Colours and Nanna-Ya*, and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Although the course works through the broad rubric of what it calls "the history of literary and cultural studies," it is nevertheless difficult to understand what motivates the choice of these writers and texts, which are random and eclectic, even when one appreciates the political and cultural capital of these texts independent of each other.

To be fair, the English Department at the University of Cape Town, unlike many in the region, has moved away from a conservative structure, which ensured that African literature courses were ghettoized. Next door at the University of the Western Cape, allegedly leftist leaning and closely associated with the antiapartheid struggle, African literature only appears in a course called "Africa and the World" at second-year level. The English-language syllabus remains at the core of the courses taught from second year through to third year. At the center of its syllabus, it continues to retain courses such as "Romanticism and 19th Century Fiction"; "Renaissance Studies," which privileges the English and European Renaissance; "Post-Colonial Literature and Postmodern Fiction," the latter largely driven by theory and again with J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* as the only text from the continent of Africa taught in the course. With a few exceptions, a schizophrenic character runs through a number of courses taught in most of the English departments in South Africa that are seeking to disavow the colonial tradition, while continuing to cling to the core aspects of the same tradition. Of these, it is the Literary Studies in English at Rhodes University that offers one of the most radical departures from the English canon, and perhaps the most comprehensive study of what would pass as strong streams of African literature. The syllabus is evenly balanced, with courses on African and English traditions at undergraduate level and distinct courses at postgraduate level that focus on early modern to Romantic literature, world literature, and African literature. Thus,

throughout undergraduate and postgraduate levels, African literature remains one of the core streams that constitute literary studies at Rhodes University. With the exception of Fort Hare University, with courses organized around genre and regional and Black diasporic movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, most departments of English remain highly schizophrenic in their content and choice of texts. In their anxiety to placate the authorities and to signal a specific gesture toward curriculum diversity, they display contradictory literary poles without being mindful of coherence. A decolonized curriculum amounted to a facile tokenism, in which a syllabus gets sprinkled with Black or Brown writers, women writers, and gay writers – a deeply flawed nod at diversity, which at times lacked the intellectual principles that undergird a coherent and serious curriculum design.

The schizophrenic impulse behind curricula innovation could be explained in terms of the mixed constituencies that these departments continue to serve. On the one hand, we have a traditional cohort of students, who are predominantly White, but who also include a section of the Black elite for whom English without Shakespeare and the Great Tradition is incomplete – they push back at any attempts to bring about curriculum transformation. On the other hand, we have a cohort of Black students who are insisting on asserting a new identity through the literatures they read and are demanding change now. Both groups are not hegemonic and quite often are not certain about the nature of what ought to be retained in the old order and what needs to be introduced in the new order. The push-and-pull situation has proved to be counterproductive for genuine curriculum reform, as curriculum creators strive to please these competing constituencies. The end result is what can hardly be described as a decolonized English curriculum, but the result of competing interests ranging from the interests of those senior faculty who are not prepared to let go of their old practices, and a new but energetic cohort of scholars who are seeking change but remain at the mercy of the senior scholars who see transformation as a threat to their own careers. That they also minister to a divided constituency of students and parents, often split along racial and class lines, does not help the situation.

What the above scenario points to in relation to the movement of ideas is compelling: that, although it is important to register an awareness of the lingering presence of a colonial discourse, it is equally important to understand that the authority of the imperial culture could only find force within the limits of those shifting boundaries of accommodation and resistance that the Empire generated. It is in that sense that I seek to

argue that, important as the “Fallist” movement was in the imagination of many South Africans, and in spite of the ripples it caused within the continent and beyond, it was never the inaugural moment of the decolonial turn.⁶ We have to understand decoloniality as a process and perhaps a much more protracted one when it comes to curriculum change in a discipline such as English with so many competing interests. If one wants to see glimmers of change and challenges to the English Literature syllabus, then one has to look elsewhere – far from the mainstream sites of scholarship and the academy.

A number of important issues are worth flagging here in relation to my observation above. The struggle for a distinct voice within the broad terrain of culture and specifically with reference to the English Literature syllabus has a long history in South Africa as it does in the rest of the continent. These struggles took different routes, ranging from a basic reactivation of the traditional resource base, as Ato Quayson reminds us (*Strategic Transformations*) or simply in the preservation of oral forms. It also took the route of translating received stories and inventing new narratives that are different, even if sometimes mimicking those received templates linked to colonial tutelage, or simply insisting on writing in Indigenous languages, not English. What distinguished these initiatives was that common goal to restore agency to the colonized subjects in a cultural domain dominated by the English language and literature. My point is that the struggle to have control over what constitutes the content of literature in South Africa and the broader cultural terrain has captured the imagination of colonized subjects for decades, especially among the Black intelligentsia. The English dominance was always challenged from the margins of the academy even when it continued to hold sway in a number of English departments in South Africa.

One of the main challenges to the unassailed position of English language and literature in South African universities and high schools was a notable presence of African Languages departments in most universities, which offered not just basic language teaching of isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Sesotho, among others, but also taught literatures in these languages. And although most of these departments were underresourced and often ghettoized, with no substantive lecturer-track positions other than that of tutors, it was a tacit admission – even if grudgingly – that Indigenous cultural streams needed to be acknowledged in their own right. As a result, South Africa remains one of the very few countries on the continent of Africa where Indigenous languages have a long history of presence within the academy. So in its eagerness to perpetuate some form of “tribal

nativism,” the Apartheid regime, by encouraging the teaching of African languages literatures, ended up establishing a visible presence of cultural heterogeneity and difference against the backdrop of a dominant colonial discourse. It was an act of “nibbling” at resilient English dominance in South Africa, as Francis Nyamnjoh, would have it in a different context.

One of the ways in which African writers in general and a number of South African writers in particular engaged in this process of decolonizing English was through the act of translating canonical texts and Western classics. In *The Translator's Invisibility*, the critic Venuti decries the hegemony of the English language and Anglo-American cultural values and advocates a translation practice of foreignization, namely “resisting dominant values in the receiving cultures so as to signify the linguistic and cultural differences in the foreign text” (18). What Venuti is challenging here is the Anglo-American idea of translation as domestication, in which a foreign work is assimilated into the values and hierarchies of the receiving culture and made to read as if it were an “original” in the target language, effectively rendering the act of translation and the translator invisible. For Venuti, translation is a political act, and in translation practice, one has to see the potential to destabilize cultural hierarchies and interrogate cultural norms in the receiving culture.

Foundational South African writers such as Sol Plaatje, Oscar Dhlomo, and AC Jordan, among others, were adept at the kind of translation that Venuti describes here but often pushed a line that combined a strong reliance on European genres with a powerful and assertive attitude on issues of race and culture. They were also able to placate the authorities, whose power alone allowed them access to a voice in print, even as they asserted their differences from that power. Their texts were not simply working to resist and dismantle, mimic and assimilate Western modes of self-writing without any intervention or aesthetic agency, but rather they set out very deliberately, and regardless of whether they were writing in English or Indigenous African languages, to develop a new language. It was a new grammar of writing that was neither strictly Western nor traditional. It was something new in which a creative evocation of an Indigenous resource base played a part as much as received modes of self-inscription did. These writers were also deeply concerned with the project of translation, not simply of the African world to Europe, but equally a translation of the Western world and their classics. As I have argued elsewhere, “part of it was to demonstrate that the European classics they were keen to translate could travel and inhabit spaces that had been designated as the other, because the assumption was that the European classics could not be carried

and processed (that is, not assimilated) by receiving cultures and local languages” (Ogude, “Foundational Writers” 30). Significantly, in their endeavor to appropriate these texts into local contexts, they went for the Western canon, especially plays of Shakespeare such as *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, among others – subjecting them to the tyranny of local languages and idioms. These forms of translation that I outline here marked important moments of subversion and intrusive challenge to the supremacy of English-language culture.

A gradual “nibbling” at the resilience of English in South Africa also started from within English departments in South Africa among the leftist-leaning and feminist scholars who could not articulate their ideas with any form of coherence and ideological certainty without taking recourse to some form of African literature in their syllabus. This shift took different forms at different universities. In some, it found expression within an omnibus course going under the title of “World Literature” that drew its content from a cross section of continents and subcontinents, such as India, the Caribbean, and African American literatures, but without abandoning some of the core English texts. In others, it took a selective focus on some of the canonical writers in Africa, such as Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. As early as the late 1970s to the 1980s, one could come across a sprinkling of African literary texts, largely those from the leftist-leaning writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. When I arrived in the South African academy in 1991, Ngũgĩ’s texts such as *A Grain of Wheat* and some of his collection of essays such as *Decolonizing the Mind* were already present in the syllabus of many English departments.⁷ In a rare gesture of recognition, as early as 1989, one of the leading South African journals of literature, *English in Africa*, had dedicated a special issue to Ngũgĩ’s works. Of course, the White liberal left within the South African academy were much more comfortable with Ngũgĩ’s Marxist and class approach to issues than with, say, Chinua Achebe, whose works often drew attention to the lingering presence of Whiteness and race issues.⁸ This shift would grow into full-fledged courses in African literature in a number of English departments in South African universities. This acknowledgment was nevertheless undermined by the fact that African literature was never a core elective and was often paired with English courses such as Shakespeare and the Victorian Novels, much to the detriment of African literature courses that remained totally unknown to the students. For students, Black and White, who had never encountered African literature at high school, the introduction of African literature at university level was an anomaly, and, without deliberate coaxing, the courses never stood a chance of enlisting high numbers.

The students went for what they knew and what they had been told counted in the study of English over the years. As a result, the incremental introduction of African literature was stillborn right from the start, and it would never take off because there were no incentives for choosing it as a course. It continued to carry little to no premium within the academy and in the inherited intellectual horizons of the students. The usual rejoinder that “students, including African students, never liked African literature” has been used to sustain an exclusionary system that continued to privilege the English syllabus way into the third decade of South Africa’s democratic dispensation.

This discussion would be incomplete without the mention of one exceptional example in which a nibbling at the English curriculum would decidedly assume the form of centering African literature and related streams of Black diaspora literatures and local narratives drawn from its oral and popular cultural traditions. The African Literature department at the University of the Witwatersrand started as a division of the Comparative and African Literature Department. The South African writer and critic Es’kia Mphahlele in 1983 founded the division that soon grew into a fully established department just a few years after his return from exile. It now stands as one of the very few departments that is singularly focused on the teaching of African literature and other related streams that speak to those literatures produced by peoples of African descent in North America and the Caribbean. Significantly, the department emerged at one of the leading liberal institutions in South Africa – the University of the Witwatersrand – an institution that boasted a strong English department, but one that until recently hardly taught African literature except for a few texts by White South Africans such as Alan Paton, Olive Schreiner, and more recently, J. M. Coetzee. I recall that in 1988 when I applied to do my PhD at the department, the head of department politely informed me that they did not teach African literature and that they had referred my application to the African Literature Department, then headed by the founding professor, Es’kia Mphahlele.

I single out the African Literature department here for three reasons. First, for the creative and bold approach that it took in implementing a syllabus that was grounded in a rich staple of modern African literature. It covered novels, plays, and limited poetry, starting with foundational writers right through to contemporary writers. Secondly, it was unapologetic in seeking to provide a panoramic view of African literature, while at the same time drilling into regional trends and a rich mix of thematic clusters. It touched on topics such as “Gender and Writing in Africa,”

“Performing Power in Post-Independence Africa,” “Love in Africa,” “Memory, Violence and Representation in Africa,” and “Contemporary Trends in African Literature,” among others. It also focused on regions, especially on “Literatures of the Black Diaspora.” Finally, the department was one of the first to take full advantage of a cultural studies approach⁹ as an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counterdiscursive field that allowed for content that moved beyond the narrowly conceived disciplinary boundaries and their dominant ideologies. In the process, the department was able to extend the province of imagination and to encourage a deliberate engagement with other zones, adjacent to literature, such as popular music, media, and other oral sources akin to the Indigenous resource base. The department would argue for the need to study African literature in relation to its hinterlands and to pay attention to grassroots intellectual traditions, in a context where African literature continued to be annexed by international trends. The idea was to foreground unknown or hidden intellectual patterns in the broad area of African literature and cultures. The study of popular literature and cultures offered a challenge to postcolonial literary theory, in its multiple variants, which until recently was the prism through which scholars both here and abroad encountered the literature and intellectual history of the continent. Postcolonial theory, for example, tended to homogenize the literature of the continent or reduced it simply to one of the binary logics of opposition and resistance. Significantly, in privileging the imaginative capacity of literature and the creative arts broadly, the department also foregrounded the social and moral function of literature and related forms of cultural production, which Ato Quayson has termed “calibrations” to denote a kind of reading that draws links between the literary-aesthetic, social, cultural, and political domains (Quayson, *Calibrations*, xii). The true impact of the African Literature department at the University of the Witwatersrand has to be measured against its excellent tradition of mentorship at the postgraduate level. It has produced some of the finest scholars of African literature and cultures, who continue to be dispersed across a number of English departments here in South Africa and beyond, playing that role of challenging Englishness through some of the most striking subversive maneuvers and political interventions in the ongoing reconstitution of the English literature syllabus.

The lesson to be drawn from this continuing experiment at the African Literature department is not so much that Englishness was constantly being reconfigured. That the English syllabus was unstable and its boundaries of control shifting is now obvious. My point is that the colonized

cannot continue to be seen as victims of Englishness and imperial poetics as certain strands of #Rhodes Must Fall implied. Rather, through a constant struggle and as Simon Gikandi reminds us, “in inventing itself, the colonial space would also reinvent the structure and meaning of the core terms of Englishness” (*Maps* XVIII), including ways in which the English canon are read, even if we think these are not radical enough. It is a case of change in permanence, very similar to the readings of the Rhodes statue as a semiotic figure, whose meanings were contingent not simply on those ascribed to it by the colonizer, but also the colonized subject’s disruptive readings. The privileging of African literature is therefore a challenge to the very supremacy of English. The second lesson that we glean from the African literature experiment is that a certain amount of African literature content is needed to register its overlapping territories and rich diversity. It is not enough to use African literature texts as some *deus ex machina*, for a conceptually driven course, which fails to embed it in a curriculum as a serious subject in its own right. Third, it is not enough to teach African literature, important as content is, if method and theoretical protocols in themselves are not decolonized, because there is always the danger of sliding into a nativist approach that valorizes anything African and Black, while closing off other streams of literary and cultural knowledge. The flipside of this argument is of course the persistent trend to want to teach African literature but do so through the lenses of Northern theories as if these are neutral implements for cutting knowledge, and as if African literatures in themselves do not have the force of offering theoretical insights. A productive reading of African literature, especially if it has to offer a formidable challenge to Englishness, must see it as a site of reflection and praxis. I believe the one thing that the African Literature department at the University of the Witwatersrand has done so well over the years is to posit African literature as a site of reflection and struggle, and always in an ongoing tension with other cultural streams emanating from within and outside our borders. In conclusion, one has to agree that #Rhodes Must Fall, with all its fault lines,¹⁰ has been important in forcing the institutions of higher learning to take curriculum transformation in all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences seriously. The effects of challenging colonial discourse may be slow and painful along the way, but acts of formidable refusal like the one enacted by the #Rhodes Must Fall have been critical in destabilizing the canonical position of English literature here in South Africa and beyond.

Notes

1. For further discussions of the discourse of colonialism, see Hulme; Brown.
2. Annie E. Coombes in her book *History of Apartheid* discusses the shifting meanings attached to apartheid monuments, especially Voortrekker Monument. She argues that over time, “the Monument has in fact accrued significance, supplemental to and in some cases, of course, directly at odds with, its intended symbolic presence. I see this as not simply a symptom of the passing of time and the necessary sedimenting of meanings that accumulate as part of that process of historical change” (175). Similarly, one has to acknowledge how Cecil Rhodes had grown to become a symbol of benevolence and financial patronage directed at universities such as Oxford through his Trust. Later on, Rhodes would twin with Mandela in what is now dubbed the Rhodes–Mandela Scholarship.
3. See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 12. Ngũgĩ draws attention to how English was highly privileged in colonial education and generously rewarded. It was “the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became the main determinant of a child’s progress up the ladder of formal education.” It was so primed that failing English meant failing the entire set of exams even if you had passed other subjects.
4. My observation is based on a report by BBC survey on UK students’ awareness of Shakespeare on Shakespeare Day in the UK on April 23, 2019. The survey was also conducted among Indian and South African students, with the result that Shakespeare was more widely known among South African and Indian students than their UK counterparts.
5. Compared to University of Kwazulu Natal, another liberal university, University of Cape Town English Department had made relatively major interventions in their English syllabus. At the University of Kwazulu Natal, the English Department remained steeped in the mainstream English syllabus: The English Novel, Understanding Poetry, Romanticism, and so on, with only one major elective at Year Three with a course titled “African Experience in Drama and Performance,” with special focus on the continent’s drama.
6. See Mamdani for a history of decolonization on the continent.
7. See my engagement with this issue in “Location and History.”
8. I have in mind here Chinua Achebe’s foundational texts such as *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), texts that grapple with issues of race and racism in the colonial enterprise, while equally drawing compelling attention to the destruction of traditional authority by colonial statecraft. For more on the destruction of traditional authority, see Olaniyan 27.
9. It is difficult to tell when Stuart Hall’s pioneering work on cultural studies began to shape the debate in South Africa. What is clear is that in the early to mid-1990s, the debate on the place of cultural studies was already raging in South Africa. In September 1993, the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town convened a conference called “Appropriations: New Directions in African Cultural Studies?”. The conference led to

a publication of the proceedings titled *Transgressing Boundaries: New Directions in the Study of Culture in Africa* (Cooper and Steyn). Significantly, Isabel Hofmyr, who was the Chair and Head of the African Literature department at the time, was an important interlocutor in these debates and in the publication called on the scholars to look beyond southern Africa to the rest of the continent if they wanted to enrich cultural studies.

10. For a compelling discussion on some of the fault lines of #Rhodes Must Fall and their contexts of articulation, see Kasembeli. See also Ahmed.

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