POSTCOLONIALISM ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

DECOLONISATIONS OF LITERATURE

CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AFRICA AND BRAZIL AFTER 1945

STEFAN HELGESSON

Postcolonialism across the Disciplines

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Decolonisations of Literature

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Introduction: The Worlding of 'Literature' in an Era of Decolonisation

> Literature confirms and negates, proposes and denounces, assists and resists, enabling us to confront our problems dialectically. […] [I]t is not an innocuous experience […]
>
> Antonio Candido, 'The Right to Literature'[1]

> African, let your mind soar. There are millions of paths your likes have never travelled before. Challenge all masters. And beat them. Why not? You are *not* underlings.
>
> Taban Lo Liyong, *The Last Word*[2]

At a conference in Nairobi in 1971, the Ugandan writer Okot p'Bitek opened his presentation by applauding the recent institutional transformation in Nairobi from a department of English to a department of literature. This was nothing less than a 'literary revolution' in which 'African literature took its rightful place at the centre'.[3] Despite this celebratory mood, however, p'Bitek had chosen to call his paper 'The Crisis in the Teaching of Literature in East African Universities'. The local victory in Nairobi prompted, he found, a number of further questions:

1 My translation. Antonio Candido, 'O direito à literatura', *Vários escritos*, 5th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2011), 177, 178: 'A literatura confirma e nega, propõe e denuncia, apoia e combate, fornecendo a possibilidade de vivermos dialeticamente os problemas. […] ela não é uma experiência inofensiva'.

2 Taban Lo Liyong, *The Last Word: Cultural Synthesism* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969), 123.

3 Okot p'Bitek, 'The Crisis in the Teaching of Literature in East African Universities', in *Writers in East Africa*, ed. Andrew Gurr and Angus Calder (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1974), 122.

> If the revolutionists seriously regarded literature to be an important aspect of university education, what were their main objections to the English-based syllabus, and how did they plan to correct its faults by introducing an Africanised syllabus? […] How does one 'teach' or 'study' oral literature? […] What materials should constitute the syllabus? How does one cope with the important problem of translation?[4]

The crisis of which p'Bitek spoke had numerous ramifications, which he addressed in a normative spirit. Universities must not 'indulge in irrelevant research and teaching'; 'faults' in teaching must be corrected.[5] But to its pedagogical and institutional aspects must be added that this was also in the profoundest sense a *conceptual* crisis, as several of his other pieces from the period reveal. The very meaning of 'literature' needed, in his view, to be reconsidered in the postcolonial East African context. In an essay with the Sartrean title 'What is Literature?', published in 1972 in the Nairobi journal *Busara*, he would argue that the Western definition of literature 'excludes the literary activities of the vast majority of mankind, both in terms of history and geography' – hence his own consistent attempts to bring oral forms and traditions to bear on critical discourse.[6]

In their identification of literature as a conceptual problem in an era of decolonisation, p'Bitek's remarks lead us straight to the core concern of the present book. But so does the tell-tale ambivalence of his own use of the term. His rejection of a Western definition of literature is, after all, predicated on his equally strong desire to promote literature pedagogically and culturally. It is the *exclusion* of 'literary activities' in Africa from critical discourse on literature that p'Bitek sees as the problem, not the ambition to teach and evaluate literature. One needs of course to consider that p'Bitek belonged to the generation of East African writers and critics who had been trained in the British system. An Oxford graduate himself, he would begin teaching in the 1960s at Makerere in Kampala, an institution that, famously, had steeped p'Bitek's younger colleague Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in the Cambridge critic F.R. Leavis's understanding of literature as a bearer of cultural and ethical values. p'Bitek's basic orientation towards the concept of literature had in other words its own distinct history that also shaped his critique of the concept. Citing another Cambridge scholar, M.I. Finley, he spoke of the critical appreciation of tradition as the 'mark of civilised man'.[7] This p'Bitek approved of, with the proviso that it is 'the African traditions that civilised man in Africa should seek to understand and criticise'.[8]

But p'Bitek's proximity to values articulated in the British field of scholarship must not be thought of as exceptional. On the contrary, his negotiation with

4 p'Bitek, 'Crisis', 124–5.
5 p'Bitek, 'Crisis', 122.
6 Okot p'Bitek, 'What is Literature?', *Busara* 4, no. 1 (1972): 23.
7 p'Bitek, 'Crisis', 126.
8 p'Bitek, 'Crisis', 126.

– rather than negation of – the precepts of literary pedagogy and criticism provides something of a template for the extended discussions in the main chapters of this book with their focus on critical practice in four regions, on two continents, in the post-1945 decades. In non-anglophone contexts such as Brazil or Senegal the coordinates of the conversation were significantly different – F.R. Leavis was certainly not being read there – yet the a priori positioning of literature and tradition as central values at about this time was often remarkably similar. At the very moment that colonial values were being challenged, a recurring concern among critics in the global South was, in other words, to *secure* literature as a value on behalf of a strengthened local autonomy – the latter being the key concern of decolonisation. To do so, however, required a deliberate labour of what (following Reinhart Koselleck) I call 'resemanticisation'. It is the procedures, paradoxes and productive tensions of this endeavour, undertaken in the throes of multiple historical crises, that is the main topic of this book.

Besides being a pragmatic choice – I am engaging with what the limits of my competence allow – my selection of case studies from South Africa, Brazil, Senegal and Kenya has a clear theoretical rationale. My investigation, to be as explicit as possible, situates itself at the disciplinary intersection of world literature, global South studies and current debates on decolonisation. It responds in this way to increasingly frequent calls for 'theory from the South' in general, and more specifically for acknowledging literary-critical discourses originating outside the West on their own terms as contributions to the shared global pool of theoretical conceptions of literature.[9] The latter is addressed by David Damrosch in his most recent book, *Comparing the Literatures*, but the debate has its own genealogy in the world literature field.[10] In 2010, Revathi Krishnaswamy lamented the dearth of 'world literary knowledges' in the North American version of world literary studies, resulting in 'world lit without world lit crit'.[11] This was reiterated by Thomas O. Beebee in 2017, whose diagnosis was that little had happened since Krishnaswamy's call. He suggested therefore that 'literary theory should understand itself in the same expansive and cosmopolitan ways that world literature does'.[12] In yet another rehearsal of this argument in 2020, Chen Bar-Itzhak observed that although the world literary turn has extended the range of works studied, which now may hail from 'geographic and cultural zones as broad and far apart as Egypt, Serbia, Vietnam, Kenya, and Azerbaijan', the 'intellectual

9 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving toward Africa* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2012).

10 David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 122–64.

11 Revathi Krishnaswamy, 'Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization', *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 4 (2010): 400.

12 Thomas O. Beebee, 'What the World Thinks about Literature', in *Futures of Comparative Literature*, ed. Ursula Heise (New York: Routledge), 67.

traditions through which they are studied and read' remain hegemonically Euro-American.[13] A problem with these diagnoses is that they give a skewed account of what *has* been done to address the situation. None of them mention, for example, the two substantial volumes *Notions of Literature across Times and Cultures* and *Literary Genres: An Intercultural Approach*, which appeared in 2006 and offer the 'world lit crit' Krishnaswamy asked for in the first place by engaging theoretical and metadiscursive aspects of literary cultures in Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Arabic, Persian and African contexts.[14] By ignoring academic research produced outside of North America (in this instance, Sweden), these polemical interventions ironically reproduce the symbolic violence of the 'world republic of theory' – to use Bar-Itzhak's felicitous term – which they themselves wish to remedy.[15] This does not, however, invalidate their point but strengthens it yet further.

If my investigation diverges slightly from these calls for a world lit crit, this is mainly for two reasons. First, as already implied, the primary aim of the critics I engage with here is not really to produce an entirely separate, 'non-Western' body of theory. Their labour of decolonisation occurs instead in a complex dialogue with what we too easily pigeonhole as 'Western' thinking, as though this were a fixed category. Second, the concept of 'world literature' does not figure prominently in their work, if at all. What these critics and scholars share is instead an intellectual commitment to textual production from their respective locations. This also means that they are – or *were* – peripherally positioned in relation to dominant centres of knowledge production in the North. In notable instances (such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Isabel Hofmeyr or Roberto Schwarz) some have later become centrally placed and/or frequently referenced in the anglosphere. Léopold Sédar Senghor's trajectory is an exception here as in so many other respects, carrying as he did the burden of outward representativity from the 1940s onwards, but becoming *more* marginal in later decades. Regardless, as I will be demonstrating, all of the material under discussion bears the mark of the *problem* of world literature, to allude to Franco Moretti's famous formulation.[16] The 'problem' here is, however, not the methodological challenge of amassing vast amounts of literary-historical knowledge from across the globe, as in Moretti's discussion, but rather the *worlding of literature as a concept*, which occurs through the dynamic but by no means frictionless interaction between cosmopolitan orientations and vernacular commitments. To speak of such

13 Chen Bar-Itzhak, 'Intellectual Captivity: Literary Theory, World Literature, and the Ethics of Interpretation', *Journal of World Literature* 5, no. 1 (2020): 83.

14 Anders Pettersson (ed.), *Notions of Literature across Times and Cultures*, vol. 1 of *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006); Gunilla Lindberg-Wada (ed.), *Literary Genres: An Intercultural Approach*, vol. 2 of *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006).

15 Bar-Itzhak, 'Intellectual Captivity', 86.

16 Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 55.

'worlding' presupposes a macro-historical perspective that sometimes – not always – is far removed from the more immediate concerns of these critics, but here we see the specific value of bringing these discrete intellectual histories together. By reading what often were parallel developments within a comparative framework, my case studies contribute to our joint understanding of the continuing emergence of 'literature' as a globally shared and contested concept.

For obvious and problematic historical reasons, then, Western 'literary knowledge' is a constitutive element of the critical discourses under study here. To use a more incisive vocabulary, one can say that these discourses are entangled with the 'Eurochronology' of literature, even as they engage other literary temporalities.[17] The lesson to be drawn from this, however, is not just to accept business as usual nor to reiterate the opposition between the West and 'the Rest' (which I find to be a repellent term), but rather to rethink the problem of literature from the angle of conceptual history. Contrary to the static projection of 'a' Western concept that is imposed from the outside onto colonised spaces, my fundamental argument in this book is that the meaning of 'literature' is constantly made and remade, and that intellectuals of the global South are strategically positioned agents in this process. As Rosinka Chaudhuri points out in her critique of the habitual Foucauldian identification of Herbert Macaulay as the formative influence on literary instruction in India, 'if we focus on British ideological intention alone then we ignore the field of operation and Indian agency in the matter completely', a remark that easily can be extended to the contexts I am engaging with here.[18] With its exceptionally influential post-enlightenment European pedigree, literature's entanglement with colonial rule is of course beyond question. But even as we reject the claims of imperialist pedagogy to pass off a specifically European (mostly French and/or British) cultural heritage as normatively 'universal', it is, I argue, more productive and historically accurate to think of literature as a mode of universality under construction than to reiterate the West–Rest dichotomy that was the problem to begin with. Indeed, as Christopher Hill observes (with reference to how the concepts 'civilisation' and 'society' were mobilised in Japan) the quality of universality emerges *only* when concepts are used and appropriated 'outside their point of origin'.[19] It should therefore be possible to study the active appropriation and universalisation of concepts as they move through the world by way of 'multiple mediations', resulting in a process of abstraction that

17 Christopher Prendergast, 'The World Republic of Letters', in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), 6.

18 Rosinka Chaudhuri, 'Macaulay's Magic Hat: The Colonial Education System and the Canon of World Literature', in *Handbook of Anglophone World Literatures*, ed. Stefan Helgesson et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 43.

19 Christopher L. Hill, 'Conceptual Universalization in the Transnational Nineteenth Century', in *Global Intellectual History*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 148.

attenuates the 'connection to their originators and to the European historical examples from which they were derived'.[20] This view relieves one of the anxious binaries that easily pervade postcolonial studies and world literature studies alike. 'Literature' is *not* simply a transcultural given, *nor* is it merely European or Western property. It is instead in process, and particularly so when it enters different historical spaces. The degree to which the universality of literature becomes a stake in struggles over cultural authority and autonomy depends of course entirely on historical factors, notably the level of enforced or voluntary interaction between cultures and societies.

The issues I am raising here are not in any way new. Several decades of postcolonial and – more recently – decolonial debates have been addressing not just literature but the cultural responses more generally to Western imperialism in South Asia, Africa and Latin America. It can be claimed, however, that this surge in academic interest in the 'non-West' – counting, say, from Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 – has itself been largely conditional on the continued hegemony of the Western academy, in particular the anglophone centres of knowledge production in the UK and North America. In the guise of 'postcolonial theory' this resulted, according to Simon Gikandi, in a 'radical gap between its central conceptual claims, often focused on issues of cultural hybridity and difference, and its objects of analysis or reference, including the histories, texts and social worlds of former European colonies'.[21] Or, as he put it more bluntly in a *PMLA* roundtable a few years earlier: 'the absence from most of our reflections of scholars who work in the global South […] has made postcolonial theory (like all theory) a provincial American concern hiding behind the mask of universalism'.[22] This is where my methodology differs: by mostly bracketing contemporary theory discourse from the academic North in favour of a near-sighted engagement with the historical texts, my intention is to treat my chosen critics as agents of their own discourse. The scholarship and criticism I engage with here has a clear sense of location, often so specific that it can make more sense to relate it to the urban settings of Johannesburg, São Paulo, Dakar or Nairobi, than to its corresponding national setting. I am in this respect working from the ground up, paying heed to the local histories Gikandi found missing in postcolonialism.

Having said so, much has happened in the decade since Gikandi issued his diagnosis. Intellectuals based in the global South (such as Achille Mbembe or Arundhati Roy) enjoy an unprecedented global prominence today; the Latin American mode of decoloniality (which I discuss in the concluding chapter) has become increasingly influential; South–South connections and exchanges

20 Hill, 'Conceptual Universalization', 135.

21 Simon Gikandi, 'Theory after Postcolonial Theory', in *Theory after 'Theory'*, ed. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 2011), 163.

22 Patricia Yeager, 'Editor's Column: The End of Postcolonial Theory? A Roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel', *PMLA* 122, no. 3 (2007): 649.

are at the forefront of research agendas in the humanities, and, not least, East Asia's strength as an academic centre continues to grow. Structural inequalities in knowledge production remain in place, but discursively – under the surprisingly fashionable banner of 'decolonisation' – and to an increasing extent institutionally, it seems we are experiencing a perspectival shift in terms of how theoretical knowledge in the humanities and social sciences is articulated, and by whom.

If I phrase this cautiously, this is not only because I personally experienced the first breakthrough for postcolonial studies in the 1990s but, more importantly, because of what my historical material has taught me. Put simply, epistemic decolonisation is an old story that tends to repeat itself with variations. It moves in non-linear fashion with many false starts as well as unanticipated continuities. Above all, although it would be misleading to claim that rhetorical gestures always come cheap, such gestures are by no means sufficient to achieve enduring institutional change. For that, perseverance, collective labour and a vivid alertness to contradiction as the condition of possibility for transformative thinking are needed. Hence my remarks on Okot p'Bitek's ambivalent positioning vis-à-vis literature. If what we might call his critical endorsement of literature is seen as an instructive example, 'decolonisation' can neither be thought of in terms of a neat excision of the 'colonial' that would somehow produce a pristine non-colonial mode of knowledge, nor can decolonisation be thought of as a single, unitary project.

It is worth dwelling on this last point. In so far as my choice to focus on 'decolonisation' has been prompted by current debates that have revived the term (see also the Conclusion), it does so by insisting on the plurality of the term, or process, rather. My working definition of decolonisation is minimal: it is the collective striving for autonomy in contexts marked by histories of colonisation. This is all that is needed for my investigations to proceed – a tighter and more detailed formulation would, at this stage, be premature. By considering 'decolonisations' (in the plural) in a global South context, one intention with this book is therefore to demonstrate the variable nature of conceptual decolonisation. Not only does each national or regional context grapple with its own preconditions, but even more importantly, what counts as decolonisation in one period from the perspective of a particular community might be viewed very differently later. An extreme but illustrative example, which I only mention briefly in Chapter 1, is Afrikaans and its literature. Recognised by none other than Mahmood Mamdani as 'the most successful decolonising initiative on the African continent' – which accords with a common Afrikaner understanding of the rise of the language in the twentieth century – it is equally true that Afrikaans itself became an oppressive instrument of the internal colonialism known as apartheid.[23] To

23 Mahmood Mamdani, 'Decolonising Universities', in *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Jonathan D. Jansen (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 24.

consider Afrikaans and its literature as a decolonial phenomenon is, in other words, not necessarily incorrect, but also requires a sharp understanding of how that decoloniality was inverted and co-opted to serve the ends of racial oppression. As Lesley Le Grange perceptively observes, 'what has been decolonised has the potential to produce colonising effects and vice versa'.[24] The case of Afrikaans is indeed exceptional, but it teaches us to be alert also to more subtle historical shifts and reversals, as when the progressive São Paulo critics de facto, if not by design, perpetuated the marginalisation of Afro-Brazilian writers. But this can also work the other way around: the decolonial impetus of earlier achievements may all too easily be dismissed by later generations. The reversals of what at one point challenged a colonial episteme but later becomes the challenged authoritative position itself often depend on a misrecognition by the new contenders of the enabling condition of their own speaking position. As the South African scholar Graham Chapman puts it, 'to decolonise is more complex and challenging than [what] currently constitutes the discourse of decolonisation'.[25] Hence the crucial importance of thinking 'decolonisation' not as a singular or fully achieved project, but as a task that changes with time.

Comparative Temporalities of Literature

Questions my chapters respond to are, for instance: What struggles have been fought over literature in the 'global South'? How has the concept of literature organised fields of enquiry in contexts of political decolonisation? What is the relation between literature, locality and value? My answers take shape in two ways. One is by tracing institutional histories; another is by close reading texts of criticism – the latter being my predominant approach. Underlying both of these methods is the assumption that institutional change will tend to come slowly, but that this slowness is the mark of an *accumulated* temporality, different from the immediacy demanded by what Louise Bethlehem, in a South African context, once called the 'rhetoric of urgency'.[26] I take my cue here from Pierre Bourdieu who, when discussing the events of May 1968 in France, observed that what occurs at a 'critical moment' is not produced by that critical moment, but needs to be considered as the combined outcome of discrete, accumulated structural tensions and the successive

24 Lesley Le Grange, 'The Curriculum Case for Decolonisation', in *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Jonathan D. Jansen (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 31.

25 Graham Chapman, '"To Decolonise": Where to, the Humanities?', *Current Writing* 31, no. 1 (2019): 53.

26 Louise Bethlehem, '"A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger": The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture under Apartheid', *Poetics Today* 22, no. 2 (2001): 365–89.

(or abrupt) changes that they bring about.[27] Similarly, Bourdieu's student Pascale Casanova theorised the world of republic of letters in terms of a deep temporality, whereby symbolic resources accumulated across centuries give shape to contemporary world literary relations. 'Age', Casanova stipulated, 'is one of the chief aspects of literary capital: the older the literature, the more substantial a country's patrimony, the more numerous the canonical texts that constitute its literary pantheon'.[28] This capital is then cared for and distributed by various literary institutions 'whose legitimacy is measured according to the age and authority of the recognition that they decree'.[29] But age is not impervious to manipulation – tradition, after all, is invented, and Shakespeare can become US American because he was still active when the Jacobeans were colonising Virginia, or indeed Latin American because the figures of Prospero and Caliban can be read as an allegory of colonisation. Although such creative appropriation occurs within tight limits (which is why age becomes a source of anxiety and envy), it helps us to grasp how the world republic of letters can and does change after all. Casanova's own focus on the 'incessant struggle and competition over the very nature of literature itself – an endless succession of literary manifestos, movements, assaults, and revolutions', leads her to favour 'rebels' such as Faulkner and Beckett as transformative heroes.[30] Moreover, my 'introverted' approach to the local practices of critics and scholars in the global South leads me to de-emphasise external recognition and instead consider how authoritative conceptions of literature are constructed locally. Casanova's conception of the world republic's temporality is nonetheless important to my own thinking, not least because – as we shall see – its significance to the formation of local fields was identified and theorised already in the 1950s by the Brazilian critic Antonio Candido, if not in exactly the same terms.

Historically, it should be noted that one of the most dramatic re-settings of the clock of literature occurred through what Casanova has called the 'Herder effect', by which she referred to the consequences of the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder's reappraisal of cultural diversity. 'By granting each country and each people the right to an existence and a dignity equal in principle to those of others', as Casanova put it, 'and by locating the source of artistic fertility in the "soul" of peoples, Herder shattered all the hierarchies'.[31] This instituted a 'genuinely revolutionary' strategy for accumulating literary capital by redefining legitimacy in terms of inward authenticity rather than adherence to classical authority. As John K. Noyes has shown, we are today, two centuries later, still living with the

27 Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 209–12.
28 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 14.
29 Casanova, *World Republic*, 15.
30 Casanova, *World Republic*, 12.
31 Casanova, *World Republic*, 76–7.

after-effects of this radical reconfiguration of cultural value. Noyes even suggests that one might trace a genealogy all the way from Herder 'through Goethe, Hegel and Marx to the Frankfurt School and the post-structuralist reaction to French Marxian theory; through Romantic psychology to Freud and the psychoanalytic dimension of post-structuralism; from the experiments of the German Romantics to the rediscovery by Nietzsche and Derrida of how writing strategies structure truth'[32] – and from there to latter-day postcolonial theory. It is of course not the case that Herder, specifically, is widely read today. On the contrary, his unwieldy and idiosyncratic philosophy is frequently and misleadingly reduced to an ethno-nationalistic caricature. But it is undeniably so that the problems of cultural integrity and difference in a globalising world that he was early to identify, including the resulting antinomy between particularity and universality, are fundamental to the entire problematic of postcolonialism and decoloniality.[33] Indeed, the decolonisations of literature investigated in this book are impossible to consider separately from a long-term 'Herder effect'. This is not so because any of my examples fit the simplified language–nation–territory model that is often associated with Herder. On the contrary, they all diverge from it in significant ways. But the Herderian mode of accumulating literary capital by way of local tradition remains, consistently, one of the strategies of affirmation with which these critics must contend, be it critically or enthusiastically.

It is in this context crucial to reiterate that the emergence of an international literary space and the emergence of national and/or vernacular literatures by way of the Herder effect are generally not separate lines of development, but two aspects of one and the same historical process. In my case studies, whenever 'literature' (or a related term) is invoked, this is linked to a longer, transnational history that makes the turn to the local or marginalised meaningful to begin with. There is in this sense always a comparative dimension to the concept. More than that: it *depends* on comparativity, Herder's insistence on the *incomparability* of singular cultures and languages notwithstanding. No matter how linguistically specific its field reference may be, the concept of 'literature' cannot operate immanently in a one-to-one relationship with its empirical textual instantiations. Conversely, however, it also cannot function without a substantive semantic content – a corpus and tradition of texts, to speak plainly. This is what produces the drama of its conceptual worlding, in so far as it is the comparative abstraction of literature that makes it translatable across spaces and culture, but its textual substantiation that makes it relevant and legitimate in determinate contexts.

In the North American world literature debates, the comparative aspect of literature has resulted in some pessimistic conclusions. Prominently,

32 John K. Noyes, *Herder: Aesthetics against Imperialism* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2015), 302.

33 John K. Noyes, 'Herder, Postcolonial Theory and the Antinomy of Universal Reason', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (2014): 107–22.

Aamir Mufti has derived contemporary approaches to world literature from the eighteenth-century formation of Orientalism by William Jones and his followers, but also in relation to Herder. In his critical elaboration of Casanova's model, Mufti argues that it is in this moment that 'non-Western textual traditions made their first wholescale entry *as literature*, sacred and secular, into the international literary space that had emerged in early modern times in Europe as a structure of rivalries between the emerging vernacular traditions'.[34] When reading a distinct set of archives, including early Orientalism, anglophone South Asian literature and the works of Erich Auerbach, Mufti proceeds to claim that what has been naturalised as 'diversity' is really an epochal, globally encompassing re-ordering of cultural traditions (including cosmopolitan ones, such as the Indo-Persian ecumene) according to the twin logic of ethno-nationalist indigenisation and the eventual consolidation in our day of 'English' as the central mediator of literature as well as knowledge.

Mufti's book – together with related work by Baidik Bhattacharya and Siraj Ahmed – is a crucial contribution to the consolidation world literature as a theoretically cogent field of enquiry.[35] With their interest in genealogies and institutional histories, these scholars avoid naturalising literature as a transparent concept and emphasise instead its complicity with imperialism and colonialism. Having said so, there are in Mufti's argument several unresolved tensions that lead my own investigation in another direction. One problem that seems almost unavoidable is the gap between claims and evidence, or between claims and method. What we find in *Forget English!* is a constant telescoping of the particular into the unreservedly general. If his archives are limited to Calcutta Orientalism, post-enlightenment European philosophy and literary texts linked to South and West Asia, Mufti's claims regarding the Orientalist episteme's 'massive realignment of the gears of knowledge and culture' are nonetheless universal.[36] We are to take this insertion of humanity's diverse verbal cultures onto the 'plane of equivalence' of literature as an all-pervasive paradigmatic shift whose colonial logic then reproduces itself even in ostensibly anti-colonial contexts. His broader concern, therefore, is 'with the ways in which contemporary critical thinking *unwittingly replicates* logics of a longer provenance in the colonial and postcolonial eras'.[37] And yet, on the other hand, Mufti inserts frequent disclaimers that the consolidation of the episteme is never settled:

34 Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 58.

35 Baidik Bhattacharya, 'On Comparatism in the Colony: Archives, Methods, and the Project of *Weltliteratur*,' *Critical Inquiry* 42 (2016): 677–711; Siraj Ahmed, *Archaeology of Babel: The Colonial Foundation of the Humanities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

36 Mufti, *Forget English!*, 119.

37 Mufti, *Forget English!*, 248.

> As my analysis of the Orientalizing process in India […] has attempted to show, this is an ongoing and open-ended process, a determinate logic of the late-capitalist world, so that the critique of Orientalism (and world literature) too is best understood as open-ended and ongoing, rather than engaged in and accomplished once and for all.[38]

The question, of course, is how this can remain open-ended if its underlying logic is so persistently and unwittingly replicated. Mufti never resolves this divergent emphasis on (synchronic) structure and (diachronic) process, which leads to the Orientalist conception of literature being presented as historically constituted and miraculously untouched by history at one and the same time.

This incapacity to account for change and differentiation remains a problem in Mufti's – but also Bhattacharya's and Ahmed's – Foucault- and Said-derived framework. To draw once again on Chaudhuri's discussion, it is a mode of critique that tends to ignore 'the forging of a powerful creativity often out of English/European literary and cultural materials', a remark that can be applied to the African and Brazilian contexts dealt with here.[39] This inflexibility is the main reason for my own turn to Reinhart Koselleck's notion of historical semantics, which allows us to consider 'literature' not as an iron cage but as a semantically layered concept that will always *fail* fully to function as a proper 'plane of equivalence', explicit or implicit intentions to the contrary notwithstanding. This failure is historical in the strongest sense, and derives from the condition that 'history is never identical with its linguistic registration'. As Koselleck explains:

> Signifier and signified coincide in the concept insofar as the diversity of historical reality and historical experience enter a word such that they can receive their meaning only in this one word, or can be grasped only by this word. *A word presents potentialities for meaning; a concept unites within itself a plenitude of meaning. Hence, a concept can possess clarity, but must be ambiguous*.[40]

This means that a concept will, throughout its life-span, encompass 'persisting, overlapping, discarded, and new meanings'.[41] It is by cultivating an attentiveness to such semantic layeredness that a reading of 'historical singularity' and 'structural iterability' becomes possible to combine.[42] One might postulate that precisely because of the extremities of historical experience, this conceptual instability is particularly critical in societies shaped by colonisation, racialisation and cultural domination. Hence, the instability should not be taken lightly, as a carnivalesque free-for-all, but rather as an indication of the epistemological challenge at hand. In David Scott's phrasing, which builds on

38 Mufti, *Forget English!*, 145.
39 Chaudhuri, 'Macaulay's Magic Hat', 41.
40 Koselleck, *Futures*, 84, emphasis added.
41 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 164, 83.
42 Koselleck, *Futures*, 164.

Koselleck, we should in other words consider the 'problem space' in which literature is invoked or, better, towards which the question of literature directs our attention.[43] Shaped as it is by the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation', the problem space is fundamentally temporal (the spatial metaphor notwithstanding), allowing us heuristically to delineate why certain meanings of literature were of critical importance at one moment but not at another. Generally speaking, in the period in focus in this book, colonial power was 'conceived in the image of an obstruction, often a morally distorting obstruction' that sought to 'dispossess the colonized, to exclude them from access to power, and to psychologically dehumanize them'.[44] Such a description requires numerous qualifications, especially with regard to 1950s Brazil where colonialism was above all understood as a formative *historical* legacy, but also in relation to South Africa, where apartheid was an idiosyncratic mode of state-engineered racial domination and not simply a continuation of older colonial rule. Even so, Scott's account of a previous teleological assumption remains pertinent. We are dealing here with a period (roughly until the 1980s, when it ran out of steam), in which literature was inscribed in a horizon of hope and fulfilment. The problem space could be highly conflictual, but difficulties in achieving autonomy notwithstanding, the expectation (as in p'Bitek's case) was that it *would* be achieved and that literature could play a substantial role in making this happen. Then again, as my chapter on Senghor shows, the horizon of expectation in the 1960s could just as well be overshadowed by an almost crippling sense of technological determinism governed by Western powers – which made literature less utopian and more of a last line of defence of human dignity. The criticism I read in this book requires in other words an acute attentiveness to multiple timelines, even in the context of a given period.

Literature Today

To speak of the problem space historically requires of course a reflection on the problem space of our present. My choice to investigate literature as a concept-historical problem is very likely symptomatic of my own time and academic positioning. If various observers are to be believed, we are after all currently witnessing the unravelling of literary culture. Sarah Brouillette has bluntly stated that literature 'is by any measure a residual mode of cultural expression'.[45] Similarly, Even-Zohar, Feijó and Monegal have recently claimed

43 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.
44 Scott, *Conscripts*, 118.
45 Sarah Brouillette, 'World Literature and Market Dynamics', in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, ed. Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (New York: Routledge, 2016), 98. Brouillette's perspective is further developed in (among other publications) *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

that 'literature has lost its hegemonic role as a provider of models and resources for making sense of human experience'.[46] It must be noted that these late observers do not lament the state of affairs so much as unsentimentally assess the loss and stake out new directions for the academic study of literature. For Brouillette, the real problem is that 'participation in the literary economy is a mark of privilege', which means that literature – despite its residual nature – should be subjected to an over-arching materialist critique of the capitalist division of labour.[47] For Even-Zohar et al., what they define as 'nonpractical texts' continue to serve instrumental purposes such as empowerment, the promotion of knowledge about unfamiliar societies or provision of content for audio-visual media. The disciplinary consequence of this changed state of affairs, in which they primarily see literature as a historical phenomenon, might be to subordinate the study of literary texts to the broader goal of studying human behaviour and 'the creation of resources that make life possible not only for human beings but for a wide variety of animals'.[48] This, to put it mildly, amounts to a drastic reconfiguration – not to say effacement – of the specific competences that have accumulated within literary studies across the decades.

A more restricted and perhaps also more convincing version of this general academic demotion of 'literature' is Ashleigh Harris's argument about the questionable sustainability of the novel as a literary form in contemporary Africa. Despite the international successes of writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole, their novels participate in an economic and representational logic of 'de-realization' whereby 'African everyday life becomes "raw material" for largely non-African audiences'.[49] The 'literary novel' is in her estimation still a 'dominant form', particularly in the academic circuit, but it is fatally disconnected from the economic and experiential realities of African societies.[50] If, as Harris says, Africa remains a small continent in the world of letters, this could lead to the conclusion that Africa doesn't really *need* the world of letters (as represented by the novel) but rather another conception of form, audience and representation than what is currently on offer in literary studies.[51] At best, this can direct attention towards the 'street literature' of contemporary Africa, which presents a 'thick archival stream' of the African present.[52] Harris is working here, of course, in the

46 Itamar Even-Zohar, Elias J. Torres Feijó and Antonio Monegal, 'The End of Literature; or What Purposes Does It Continue to Serve?', *Poetics Today* 40, no. 1 (2019): 13.
47 Brouillette, 'World Literature', 98.
48 Even-Zohar et al., 26.
49 Ashleigh Harris, *Afropolitanism and the Novel: De-Realizing Africa* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 6.
50 Harris, *Afropolitanism*, 16.
51 Harris, *Afropolitanism*, 2.
52 Harris, *Afropolitanism*, 20.

important lineage pioneered by scholars such as Karin Barber and Stephanie Newell, who were early to identify both the 'popular' and 'print culture' as rich but previously ignored categories of study in African contexts. Barber's 1987 article 'Popular Arts in Africa', her 1997 volume *Readings in African Popular Culture* and Newell's book *Ghanaian Popular Fiction* established this line of enquiry, which today is particularly strong in African studies.[53] On one reading, this emerged from a dissatisfaction with the category of the literary – certainly with its claims to authority and its weak capacity to account for the diversity of cultural production in African societies. In that sense, it apparently prefigured present-day Western disavowals of literature.

We should note, however, that Harris's argument differs in substance and tone from Even-Zohar et al.'s. Instead of the latter's detached take on literature as a form of disciplinary raw material (to re-use that term) that may or may not be of value for academic processing, Harris remains *engaged* in her topic, arguing against the standard privileging of the 'literary novel' to arrive at a denser, more grounded and, indeed, more authentic conception of contemporary African literature. In that respect, her project has strong affinities with several of the global South histories of critical practice traced in this book. In each of the cases cited above, however, we encounter versions of what can be read as the mounting crisis of literature in the 2020s – which could also be viewed as an effect of a more thoroughgoing transformation of reading in our contemporary world.[54]

It is not the case that reading is about to disappear – on the contrary. Global literacy levels today are higher than ever before in human history and have risen dramatically, both relatively and in absolute numbers, over the last half century. According to one estimate, the global literacy rate rose from 42 per cent in 1960 to 86 per cent in 2015.[55] The very meaning of 'reading' in the age of digital, multimodal media has, however, mutated far beyond what print media once enabled. 'The static, linear modality of written text (including the book)', to quote Mangen and van der Weel, 'is now supplemented by an increasing complexity of multimodal, dynamic, and interactive representations'.[56] In a

53 Karin Barber, 'Popular Arts in Africa', *African Studies Review* 30, no. 3 (1987): 1–78; Karin Barber (ed.), *Readings in African Popular Culture* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997); Stephanie Newell, *Ghanaian Popular Fiction: Thrilling Discoveries in Conjugal Life and Other Tales* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000). For more contemporary work see, for example, Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome (eds), *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

54 And I could add to the list a much-debated book published in Sweden with the title 'The End of Literature': Sven Anders Johansson, *Litteraturens slut* (Göteborg: Glänta, 2021). This is, however, a melancholic, Adornian *defence* of aesthetic experience.

55 See: https://ourworldindata.org/literacy.

56 Anne Mangen and Adriaan van der Weel, 'The Evolution of Reading in the Age of Digitisation: An Integrative Framework for Reading Research', *Literacy* 50, no. 3 (2016): 116.

related vein, Yves Citton has argued that we are witnessing the emergence of a new 'ecology of attention' in which media users, whose privilege it is to control the scarce resource of attention, are drilled to shift between different types of attention at a faster rate than ever before.[57] In brief, semiotic habits have on a global scale transformed dramatically in recent years, with consequences that dwarf even the impact of television in the twentieth century. This, I believe, is an essential precondition for arguments such as Even-Zohar's or Harris's. In the latter case, it could also be argued that Africa's entry into the digital age – at least judged by the number of mobile phone owners and social media users – has been a happier one than its earlier, colonial encounter with slow-moving, costly print media, which has consequences for the status of traditionally print-bound literary forms.[58]

I nonetheless want to suggest that many present-day commentators' rather detached view of literature reveals, especially in the Even-Zohar article, two things: an increasing sense of alienation within the humanities themselves towards the legacy of literary cultures and, at the same time, an unshaken confidence in the continued demand for academic research relating to textual production of one kind or another. Literature has an older history than institutionalised literary studies, but now the shoe seems to be on the other foot, with literary scholars surprisingly eager to discard the dead weight of literature – arguably because the global growth industry of tertiary education has other priorities such as cognition or climate change. Then again, to speak of the decline of 'literature' on such a general level begs the question: on what grounds can we discuss literature without tying it to a specific social, historical, linguistic or epistemological context? Is 'literature' even a meaningful term at all without a set of social institutions to sustain it? This chicken-and-egg conundrum returns us to the problem of speaking both with and against the concept that p'Bitek was grappling with under the sign of crisis. And it does not just apply to the critics discussed in this book. If I indulge for a moment in the tradition of my own training, some would say that literature has been in crisis ever since Plato banished the poets, those seductive copyists of inferior copies, from his ideal republic. Closer to our period, there is a modern lineage of mostly melancholic proponents of what they have considered to be the true but threatened values of literature: Herder and his defence of authentic 'poetry' (*Dichtung*) as opposed to the

57 Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016). Other contributions to this debate include: Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010); Naomi S. Baron, *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); David Ulin, *The Lost Art of Reading: Books and Resistance in a Troubled Time* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2018).

58 This seems to be one possible conclusion to draw, for example, from Shola Adenekan's *African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing from Nigeria and Kenya* (Oxford: James Currey, 2021).

artificiality of (French) 'literature'; Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869; Nietzsche's salvaging in 1872 of a lost Dionysian ethos in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (*The Birth of Tragedy*); F.R. Leavis's championing of 'minority culture' against 'mass civilisation' in the 1930s; Harold Bloom rallying to the defence of the Western canon in the 1990s.[59] Differences aside, these mostly conservative interventions have all been *critical* in the sense that they offered alternative takes on literature in view of what they perceived as the degraded cultural condition of their own times marked by trivialisation, ossification or dilution. Not unlike certain varieties of anti-colonial critique, they have always also projected a fuller, more satisfying state of affairs backwards in time. 'For Matthew Arnold it was in some ways less difficult', Leavis wrote in 1930.[60] But for Matthew Arnold the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of an older culture, causing 'ignorant armies to clash by night' – to quote from his poem 'Dover Beach' – was very likely *not* experienced as any less difficult.[61]

The point here is not that nothing ever changes, but rather *that it changes all the time*. The global South critics discussed in this book are also, in a number of ways, grappling with loss. As the South African scholar Tim Couzens put it in the 1970s, '[e]veryday we are losing a little of our literary history and everyday we are failing to educate our audience a little more', a situation that for him had everything to do with *salvaging* a literary legacy – only not as this had been defined by the colonial arbiters of literature.[62] To reiterate, then, we must avoid two pitfalls: to think of 'literature' as a fixed category and to regard it as a proprietary Western construction. Instead, the chapters of this book show that it functions as a focal point for historically produced, contending meanings. Such an understanding of literature as a polysemous, multitemporal concept can be both revealing and liberating: revealing in the sense that it exposes the limitations of any specific instance of critical discourse, but liberating in so far as it releases us from the conceptual bind that the contemporary withering critique of literature gets stuck in.

Another strand in the contemporary debates corroborates this more dynamic view. In response to the changing meaning and status of literature, there have also emerged important reappraisals of this supposedly residual phenomenon. Derek Attridge's work on singularity, literary experience and

59 Stefan Greif, 'Herder's Aesthetics and Poetics', in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 141–63; Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (Hamburg: Severus Verlag, 2016); F.R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: The Minority Press, 1930); Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

60 Leavis, *Mass Civilisation*, 3.

61 Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 9th ed., vol. 2, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2013), 765.

62 Tim Couzens, 'Sebokeng, Doories and Bra Jiggs: Research in South African Literature', in *New South African Writing* (Hillbrow: Lorton, 1977), 30.

the event has offered crucial reformulations of literature as a value for our age. Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler's focus on literature as 'craft' does something similar, albeit from more of an Adornian than a Derridean vantage point.[63] Elleke Boehmer's *Postcolonial Poetics* mounts a comparable defence, within a self-proclaimed postcolonial context, of the aesthetic, and not exclusively political, valency of literature.

In a recent essay entitled 'Literary Experience and the Value of Criticism', Attridge sums up his own key argument by defining 'literary experience' as 'the practice of literary composition, on the one hand, and the reception of literary works (whether read, performed, or rehearsed in memory), on the other'.[64] Texts can be read or heard for many reasons, most of them practical, but to read them *as literature*, he contends, means to invite an experience – an event – whereby the boundaries of self and other are momentarily blurred and reconfigured. Using more of a cognitive vocabulary, and attentive to the extreme diversity of audiences, Boehmer develops a related argument when she speaks of literature as 'a score for reading'.[65] The reader works 'mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically' with the text, 'opening their imagination to the meanings the poem sparks; activating and intensifying the possibilities it releases; sometimes even enacting in their mind its expressive motions'.[66]

I am sympathetic towards such claims on behalf of literature in our contemporary world and tend to adopt related perspectives in my own teaching practices. But the sense of rightness and satisfaction they inspire in me is of course itself historically conditioned. To say that Attridge and Boehmer 'define' literature is therefore neither right nor wrong. They certainly provide a working definition of literature that I can live by, but the methodology of this book teaches us that this is only one way to slice the pie. Thus understood, literature can't be imagined without a historical accumulation of critical practices, nor outside of a specific rhetorical situation. What can be said with some certainty is that recent defences of literature as an irreducible value emerge not just in response to the structural crisis of literature referred to above, but also to dramatic disciplinary shifts over the last four or five decades. This is made clear in Joseph North's *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*, a book whose focus on criticism makes

63 Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler, 'Field, Material, Technique: On Renewing Postcolonial Literary Criticism', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49, no. 3 (2014): 279–97; Ben Etherington, 'What Is Materialism's Material? Thoughts toward (actually against) a Materialism for "World Literature"', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 5 (2012): 539–51.

64 Derek Attridge, 'Literary Experience and the Value of Criticism', in *The Values of Literary Studies: Critical Institutions, Scholarly Agendas*, ed. Rónán McDonald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 251.

65 Elleke Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-Century Critical Readings* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 9.

66 Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics*, 9.

it particularly relevant to my discussion. Although rigorously limited to the anglophone field in North America and the UK, North's historical précis convincingly describes a momentous shift, by way of the theory wars, away from 'criticism' to 'scholarship' in the 1970s and 1980s. This, he claims, has almost exclusively favoured a form of specialised, contextualist historicism as the legitimate form of literary study. (With 'legitimacy' being defined as the type of research that leads to jobs on the academic market.) The provocation in his account is that this shift, conventionally seen as a victory for a broadly defined academic left, has in actual fact divested literary studies of its radical potential. The historical logic behind this, he claims, is the neo-liberalisation of the political economy, whereby the critical tradition of the humanities has been overwhelmed by the economic imperative to specialise and capture niche markets. Hence, the currently dominant mode of 'historicist/contextualist scholarship […] has in its most salient aspects constituted a depoliticizing retreat to cultural analysis'.[67] This is why North counter-intuitively privileges I.A. Richards as the hero of his story: it was with *Practical Criticism*, he claims, that literary criticism came into its own as a *discipline* that aimed to intervene in society – to change culture, not merely to describe it.

North's argument puts the spotlight on an equivocation in my account thus far, which has fudged the difference between 'scholars' and 'critics'. One reason is that the distinction is not always relevant to my discussion. Antonio Candido was, by any account, a formidable *critic* whose pronouncements on literary works had deep repercussions in the Brazilian public sphere. But it would be ludicrous to deny that he was also a scholar, dedicated to the painstaking work of excavating and synthesising knowledge from the archives. More importantly, we can see that the stories I tell in my chapters move between the positions of criticism and scholarship, and that this, in itself, indicates the multiple forms that the decolonisation of literature can assume. If the colonial predicament – and this is something that all four contexts have in common – can be described as one where some version of 'European' cultural values carry authority to the exclusion or suppression of alternative values, then the task of these critics has typically been to shape discourses and practices that renegotiate value. A question with less than obvious answers for these critics has, however, been how to locate and accrue other values, *while remaining within the limits of recognisably literary discourse*. To grasp these tendencies, I speak therefore in terms of 'strong' and 'weak' conceptions of literature. Such wording is deliberately approximate, but can be used to describe the different strategies used in the conceptual worlding of literature. A 'strong' conception, I suggest, normally puts a premium on the connection between a limited corpus of works – a canon of one kind or another – and the concerns of the social collectivity. It is exclusive and sets out to defend the value and relevance of this limited corpus. Whether it is limited by language, genre, national boundaries or racial belonging is, however, not

67 Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 18.

possible to determine in advance. A 'weak' conception, by contrast, is inclusive and not only opens the category of literature to previously neglected texts or text types but also, more importantly, de-emphasises the importance of works in favour of what the study of texts potentially offers for new modes of cultural and historical analysis. 'Strong' and 'weak' is not the vocabulary used by the critics I read in this book, and I must emphasise that I am not making a normative distinction between the two terms: 'strong' is not synonymous with 'good', or 'weak' with 'bad', or vice versa. To take two examples from the theory canon, Theodor Adorno devises a particularly strong conception of literature, whereas a consequence of Bourdieu's methodology is to weaken it (although it is fair to describe *The Rules of Art* as a *study* of how a strong concept is constructed). Moreover, world literature as a field of study would be inconceivable without some expansive weakening of the concept. But here again one can observe different tendencies among world literary scholars with Pheng Cheah, for example, attempting to construct a revised strong conception, and Alexander Beecroft advocating a weak conception.[68] What the distinction does, therefore, is to help us identify two tendencies in the decolonisation of literature. These can be contradictory but above all complementary: in none of the cases studied does the weakening of the concept entirely dissolve it. As I show in Chapter 3, one of Léopold Senghor's neglected achievements was to expand, quite drastically, the literary horizon of French-language criticism. In this regard he cultivated a weak conception of literature out of necessity: remaining with the strong conception in the French language at the time would have imprisoned him in the French canon. And yet, when writing about African poetry, he appealed to the strong conception by incorporating the poetry in his own aesthetic philosophy, the stakes of which were nothing less than the embodied experience of being. In Chapter 1, we see that the South African scene was divided: if Hofmeyr and Couzens tended towards the weak conception in the interests of incorporating new archives in the study of literature, Es'kia Mphahlele was – as many of his East African colleagues – more committed to the strong conception. The latter, unsurprisingly, turns out to be characteristic of what I will be calling 'writer-critics'. The single most consistent and thoroughly elaborated strong conception of literature I engage with in this book is, however, represented by the São Paulo critics in Chapter 2. Their impressive achievements notwithstanding, we will see that even this mode of literary decolonisation produced counter-productive blind spots. Ultimately, the distinction I am making between strong and weak conceptions relates to the status of *works* of literature. Is it the works and our reading of the works that matter? Or is it the achievement of the scholar in producing new constellations of knowledge out of whatever textual material that is at hand that matters? My chapters offer a range of possible answers to those questions.

68 Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature* (London: Verso, 2015).

The Four Cases and the Global South

My sources consist mostly of published criticism and scholarship; I have also conducted a few interviews, but these have above all helped me to navigate the historical material. In terms of method, my approach is mainly interpretive and focused on the work of some few individuals. Hypothetically, data mining much larger swathes of texts from these locations in the period could yield instructive results with regard to the shifting uses of the word 'literature', but this would have presupposed other kinds of questions than the ones that have interested me. Given its attunement with critical practice itself, the interpretive approach has instead presented itself as the means by which I can *respond* to my material. My instincts as reader are ideographic rather than nomothetic, by which I mean that I nurture a scepticism towards blanket claims and one-size-fits-all explanations, preferring instead the more tortuous path of reading for the particulars.

My choice to look specifically at published criticism rather than literary texts is both pragmatic and strategic. It can be argued that the literary critical impetus of prominent figures such as Es'kia Mphahlele or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is just as evident in their own literary practice – their fictional work – as in anything they have written in a more academic or essayistic mode. Hence the moniker 'writer-critics', which indicates a particular role shaped by the uneven transnational institutional conditions under which they laboured. Even so, it is the genre of criticism and the attendant role of the 'critic' that interests me here and that arguably has remained understudied. A book of this kind also requires a focus that would be jeopardised in case all genres of writing were taken into consideration. This is the pragmatic reason. The strategic point is that a focus on criticism brings the institutional dimension of literature into view, disallowing what I think of as more naive conceptions of literature giving us unmediated access to authentic voices or situations. Common sense will have it that literature precedes criticism, which is true to the extent that critics are not normally the producers of the texts they study. I am, however, arguing that literature also needs criticism to be constituted *as* literature and not merely remain – to use one of Antonio Candido's terms discussed in Chapter 2 – evidence of 'literary manifestations'. The socio-historical conditions enabling the role of the critic are complex indeed and thoroughly entangled with the colonial division of the world. These conditions are not, in themselves, the main topic of this book. In focus, rather, is what critics say and argue once that role has become available in the crucible of modernity.

The selection of South Africa, Brazil, Senegal and Kenya within an overarching global South framework is of course susceptible to any number of critical rejoinders. Why the absence of South Asian material? How can I ignore the influence of Nigerian writers and critics on the formation of African literature? Shouldn't Caribbean literature have been included? (Not to mention the vast number of intellectual archives that remain closed to me for reasons of language.) But pointing to the lack of coverage in a positivist spirit

is to get hold of the wrong end of the stick. As Franco Moretti once wrote, 'Reading "more" is always a good thing, but not the solution.'[69] Instead, the question to ask is what my selection of cases achieves, and what it might have done better. Other trails can be followed in these archives, but my ambition has been to identify moments, locations and individuals that made an impact at the time, in their given settings. This also means that to specialists in the respective fields, much of the source material will be familiar – it is the constellation of material that is new.

Let me first concede that there is a personal dimension to my selection. As a Swedish scholar based in Stockholm, I am an outsider to all four of these intellectual spaces, although in relation to South Africa I am perhaps better described as an 'insider–outsider'. My formation as an academic has been bound up with my exchanges with the literary and scholarly field in South Africa ever since 1990, the chronological endpoint for Chapter 1. Martin Trump's volume *Rendering Things Visible*, which I picked up in Johannesburg in 1990 (at the ripe old age of 24), was my first thorough introduction to the intellectual field in South Africa.[70] In that respect, my study emerges from a long-standing relationship with the country and a desire to understand more of the underlying assumptions and conflicts that shape the South African field also today.

Brazil belongs to a later phase in my work, but functions here as a contrast to and a point of comparison with South Africa. As former settler colonies and major industrialised economies of the global South marked by abyssal racialised inequalities, the resonances as well as the tremendous differences between the literary cultures of the two countries never fail to fascinate me. Here we can also discern the deliberate linguistic politics of my selection: although I remain limited to 'European' languages, the juxtaposition of English, Portuguese and French in this study is a modest attempt to break out of the vast prison of the anglosphere.

The choices of Senegal and Kenya, finally, relate to the formation of African literature – surprisingly distinct from South African literature – as a 'particular body of imaginative discourse', to use Abiola Irele's phrase, but they serve also as contrasts to each other.[71] Indeed, my rather unfashionable interest in Senghor stems from an intuition that his anglophone reception has been skewed, leading to a truncated conception of how the discourse(s) of African literary criticism have emerged. The narrative of the Nairobi revolution that p'Bitek referred to has instead come to be the dominant, more heroic version of this emergence – at least in contemporary anglophone discourses.

69 Moretti, 'Conjectures', 55.

70 Martin Trump (ed.), *Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture* (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1990).

71 Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

There is also a contrasting logic to the pairings of the four locations. If post-1945 Johannesburg and São Paulo present us with relatively staid and differentiated institutional contexts (dominated by white critics), the situations in Dakar and Nairobi were more precarious and restricted, as far as the task of teaching, reading and nurturing literature was concerned. Importantly, it is also in Dakar and Nairobi that African critics – self-identified as 'black' – led developments from the 1950s onwards. This had particularly far-reaching implications for the conception of literature, a task that Senghor, for all the problems embedded in his approach, was early to take on. As we shall see, it is by way of Senghor we also can discern limitations in the São Paulo model. In the case of Nairobi, it was rather the high international profile of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's interventions as a writer-critic that piqued my curiosity to dig deeper into the local dynamics of those pivotal years in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Beyond my personal trajectory and interests, however, the selection of case studies can and should also be positioned squarely in relation to current academic debates. As already mentioned, the choice to gather them under the rubric of 'decolonisation' relates both to the post-1945 period as an era of political decolonisation and to the current academic focus on 'decolonisation' as a rallying call for modes of epistemological critique. With Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o as the main exception, however, the actual words 'decolonisation' or 'decolonise' were sparingly invoked by the critics in question; in South Africa during apartheid it was almost never used as a descriptor. This is one reason why I use 'decolonisation' as a more general indication of what is at stake throughout these four contexts, without attempting a sharp definition. As for the label 'global South', this comes with definitional problems that even one of its proponents, Russell West-Pavlov, concedes, yet it is the most adequate category that connects the four locations. The post-1945 period precedes the coining of the term – 'global South' supplants 'Third World' only after 1989 – but it still makes more sense to use the current label: it is, one might say, the extreme *combination* of 'First World' and 'Third World' characteristics that make South Africa and Brazil exemplary global South locations. In comparison to the 'Third World' and entrenched postcolonial modes of analysis, which tend to favour a binary of coloniser and colonised, the global South also opens the door to lateral, 'cross-empire or cross-post-imperial relations', a perspective prefigured, as we will see, by Senghor's engagement with the Arabic cultural heritage.[72] The epistemological reorientation encapsulated by the term 'global South' thereby responds, as West-Pavlov argues by way of Scott, to the 'collapse of previous temporalities and teleologies', a view that dovetails neatly with my own analytical emphasis on multiple and folded temporalities.[73]

72 Russell West-Pavlov, 'Toward the Global South: Concept or Chimera, Paradigm or Panacea?', in *The Global South and Literature*, ed. Russell West-Pavlov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 8.

73 West-Pavlov, 'Global South', 13.

In addition, Joseph Slaughter and Kerry Bystrom's coinage of the 'Global South Atlantic' is of high relevance to my constellation of African and Brazilian material in a global South context. Contrary to their endeavour to 'trace pathways, networks, transactions, and systems of interchange and imagination that have historically defined the South Atlantic', however, my juxtaposition of the São Paulo critics with their African counterparts reveals above all a history of disconnection and mutual ignorance.[74] Léopold Senghor is in this period one of the few mediators between these discursive spaces across the ocean, and then only on his one visit to Brazil in 1964. Even in those dark days when the apartheid government cultivated diplomatic ties with the right-wing dictatorships of South America, there were precious few counter-cultural contacts between South Africa and Brazil. (Mozambique and Angola are a different matter, but they don't form part of the story in this book.)[75] This lack of direct links between the critical and institutional spaces on both sides of the Atlantic may, however, actually strengthen my chosen global South comparative framework. If nothing else, it signals that similarities in the cultural predicament of critics are not due to mutual 'influence', but rather to structural conditions that relate to world-historical processes.

Finally, I should underline that the 'post-1945 period' is, inevitably, a flexible temporal indicator. My discussions of Senghor and Candido lead me as far back as the 1930s, and I end my account of Ngũgĩ with some of his more recent work, but the chapters have their centre of gravity in the post-war decades of decolonisation from the 1950s through to the 1970s. The more relevant temporal limitation is perhaps the period's endpoint: I have set out to study critical practice that *precedes* the breakthrough for postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies in the academic North in the 1980s and 1990s to provide an alternative to the disciplinary narrative that rapidly became established and whose central contributions have become a tradition in their own right: Edward Said's *Orientalism*; Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'; Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back*; Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory*; Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*; Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*; and so on.[76] As I focus on practice that precedes *this*

74 Joseph R. Slaughter and Kerry Bystrom, 'The Sea of International Politics: Fluidity, Solvency, and Drift in the Global South Atlantic', in *The Global South Atlantic*, ed. Joseph R. Slaughter and Kerry Bystrom (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 4.

75 I refer to one of my previous books for more on the Luso-African-Brazilian literary connections in this period: Stefan Helgesson, *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature: Modernists, Realists, and the Inequality of Print Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

76 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978); Gayatri Spivak's essay was first written in 1988, but its final iteration can be found in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 198–311; Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge,

disciplinary emergence, let me add that the critics discussed here were all active in national spaces belonging (or conscripted) to the Western side of the Cold War conflict. Significant work has emerged in recent years that re-examines the history of Third World intellectuals and writers from that angle. Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint* offers a particularly ambitious reconsideration of the emergence of African literature under the auspices of the two contending 'aesthetic world systems' of the Cold War, but a long list of scholars could be mentioned here, including Sarah Brouillette, Bystrom and Duncan Yoon.[77] Popescu's point that the study of African literature was 'born in the crucible of the Cold War' is well taken, and the intellectual climate in Brazil in the 1960s was likewise marked by that overarching geopolitical conflict.[78] Further examples of the Cold War impact can be added: the apartheid government pursued aggressively anti-communist policies and waged proxy wars against Cuba and regional liberation movements at the very moment that the most innovative scholars in South Africa turned to Marxism; many of the most successful literary initiatives on the African continent in the 1960s – including several of the conferences I mention in Chapters 3 and 4 – were funded covertly by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); in the 1970s Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o became increasingly involved in writers' networks monitored by Soviet and/or Chinese interests. This is, however, the topic of another book (actually, of Popescu's book). Given my largely interpretive methodology, together with my intention to grant the question of literature a measure of integrity and not absorb it immediately into powerful political narratives, this particular macro-historical context is not my main focus but offers more of a backdrop to my discussions. As with the polyvalence of the concept of 'literature' more generally, I am attempting to approach the political dimension of literature in the form of a question rather than a foregone conclusion.

What has been peculiarly absent from most of the academic conversations I have touched upon so far (world literature, the global South, the Cold War) is a consideration of gender. In respect of the material I investigate here, this arguably mirrors the gender gap and gender blindness of the post-1945 period. This has two implications for my own study. One is best understood as *feminist* and relates to the demographics of critical practitioners. To state the situation as openly as possible: the fields of criticism I am studying here

1989); Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2000).

77 Brouillette, *UNESCO*; Kerry Bystrom, 'The Cold War and the (Global) South Atlantic', in *The Global South and Literature*, ed. Russell West-Pavlov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 69–82; Duncan Yoon, '"Our Forces Have Redoubled": World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers Bureau', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2015): 233–52.

78 Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 4.

were extremely male dominated in the 1950s through to the 1970s. There are a few prominent female practitioners in my account, such as Isabel Hofmeyr, Lilyan Kesteloot or the Nardal sisters in 1930s Paris, but they constitute a small minority and labour in the 1960s (in Kesteloot's case) and even the 1970s (in Hofmeyr's) under conditions that treat literary criticism as a male prerogative by default. As for *writers*, South Africa presents us with an important exception, given the strong female lineage in the earlier construction of the English South African canon: Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Nadine Gordimer. But this does not affect the general tendency towards a patriarchal bias. The other, more important aspect, relates to the absence of *gender as such* as a concern in the material I have studied. This silence indicates, in hindsight, the limitations of these critics' conceptions of literature, but also the subsequent importance of the feminist and gender breakthrough in the humanities. It is this silence that motivates gender critique, but it would not be until the late 1970s and 1980s that gender enters the critical agenda in Brazil and South Africa, and later than that in Kenya and Senegal.[79] The shift is illustrated by the difference between the first and second versions of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's essay 'Literature and Society', published in 1981 and 1997, respectively (but based on a lecture originally delivered in Nairobi in 1973). Where Ngũgĩ in the first version states that '[l]iterature results from conscious acts of men in society' and that a writer comes from 'a particular class and race and nation', this has in the revised version become 'conscious acts of men and women' and 'a particular class, gender, race and nation'.[80] The earlier omission must be recognised as a historical failure (akin to failures by other critics to acknowledge 'race' as a slippery factor in the literary system), but the comfort of hindsight spends itself quickly. More significantly, the omission illustrates yet again the importance of considering 'decolonisation' as a moving target and not to confuse too easily one's own ideological desire with that of one's historical interlocutors. Another book remains to be written on how the emergence of gender-oriented, and later queer, modes of reading in the global South have added yet another chapter to the long story of literature's worlding.

79 Some crucial early interventions contributing to establishing feminist and gender perspectives in these contexts are: Maryvonne Lapouge and Clelia Pisa (eds), *Brasileiras: voix, écrits du Brasil* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1977); Susan Gardner (ed.), *Publisher/Writer/Reader: The Sociology of South African Literature* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1986); Cherry Clayton (ed.), *Women and Writing in South Africa: A Critical Anthology* (Marshalltown: Heinemann, 1989).

80 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1981), 5, 6; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics: A Re-Engagement with Issues of Literature and Society*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 4.

CHAPTER ONE

Literature, Locality and Value in Apartheid South Africa

The first South African academic journal devoted specifically to English and English-language literature, *English Studies in Africa* (ESiA), was founded in 1958. Although it would eventually be joined by a range of other journals, its pioneering institutional role in South Africa can hardly be overstated. Considering the global state of higher education at the time, in 1958 still heavily concentrated to Europe and North America with a scattering of institutions on other continents, the decision to launch ESiA in Johannesburg was one of several minor declarations of independence at the time. In this instance, it meant that Johannesburg – or Wits University, to be precise – would no longer be just a recipient but also a producer and disseminator of specialised disciplinary knowledge about English literature.[1] The pathos informing this push for epistemic independence is made clear in a 1960 article in the journal (presumably written pre-Sharpeville) by H.K. Girling. Stating the problem first, he laments that

> [w]e cannot support a single literary magazine in English but we import periodicals by the shipload. Each South African writer has had to accept the

1 The argument here concerns English and not Afrikaans. It should be noted that *Theoria*, an academic journal with a more general humanities and philosophy profile, had started publishing in Pietermaritzburg already in 1947 and included the occasional literary article. Beyond the academic world, a number of literary journals had emerged and (sooner or later) quietly disappeared, ever since Thomas Pringle's short-lived *South African Journal* in 1826. In relation to this chapter's focus, the 1930s and 1940s are a particularly interesting and forgotten period, as Corinne Sandwith shows in her *World of Letters: Reading Communities and Cultural Debates in Early Apartheid South Africa* (Scottsville: UKZN Press, 2014). For a thorough study of academic literary journals, see Derek Barker, *English Academic Literary Discourse in South Africa 1958–2004: A Review of 11 Academic Journals* (Trier: University of Trier, 2007).

> indifference of his countrymen and to look for recognition and reward to Europe and America, where authors who carved peepholes through which European and American readers might view the shaggy African scene were welcome additions to publishers' lists. The more ambitious task of revealing Africa to those who live in Africa, our writers for long had to forego.[2]

Anticipating Graham Huggan's analysis four decades later of the 'postcolonial exotic' in Western publishing, or indeed Eileen Julien's claim about the 'extroverted' African novel, Girling's account nevertheless waxes optimistic towards the end about the localisation of literary concerns:[3]

> In the last ten years, since the publication of [Alan Paton's novel] *Cry, the Beloved Country*, writers in English in South Africa have come to maturity. Their confidence may be expressed in a phrase: they are Africans, not Europeans. In the course of time, we other South Africans will cease to regard ourselves as European provincials, and will commit ourselves to Africa, the land we have chosen.[4]

His high estimation of Paton's 1948 novel was perhaps debatable even in 1960, and the 'we' is revealed here to be distinctly *white* African identity, yet within this socially distinct horizon of expectation Girling's essay indicates how ESiA contributed towards building localised epistemic authority and, more specifically, to sanctioning an academic focus on literature produced in South Africa.

But in the eyes of whom, one may well ask. Why would such authority itself require authorisation? Why did attention to South African literature *need* sanctioning? Looking back, it can seem hard to fathom that this was a problem at all. Yet, as late as 1969, Guy Butler claimed that '[i]n all South African universities, there is not one academic devoted to the study of South African writing in English'.[5] And according to Derek Barker's survey of the discipline's local academic journals from 1958 to 2004, it was not until 1996 that works by South African writers were in focus in more than half the published articles.[6] As this chapter will confirm, the establishment of a local field of literary criticism and scholarship in South Africa was a drawn-out affair. But 'drawn-out' should not be read as though it eventually *settled*. Not only does South Africa's fraught history disallow comforting teleologies, but literary criticism itself is

2 H.K. Girling, 'Provincial and Continental: Writers in South Africa', *English Studies in Africa* 3, no. 2 (1960): 113.

3 Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (Oxon: Routledge, 2001); Eileen Julien, 'The Extroverted African Novel', in *The Novel: Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 667–700.

4 Girling, 'Provincial and Continental', 118.

5 Butler's comments were published in Guy Butler, 'The Purpose of the Conference', *English Studies in Africa* 13, no. 1 (1970): 16.

6 Barker, *English Academic Literary Discourse*, 59.

a contingent and non-linear affair, where different modes of enquiry co-exist and contend with one another. Non-linearity does not, however, preclude other forms of continuity or connection: in its moments of renewal, criticism is strangely dependent on what it rejects. Institutional inertia serves both as its obstacle and condition of possibility. By this I mean that without the institution of English literature as a vehicle of authority, calls for disciplinary change during the apartheid era would have carried little weight. Authority feeds on authority, so to speak. Similarly, we may observe that the heavy hand of the repressive state *produced* dissent among critics and academics, even as inertia, obviously, also worked *against* change, causing a constant push and pull between belatedness and anticipation, between claims that South African literature arrived 'too late' in relation to political and theoretical developments, and that it had 'not yet' arrived.[7] Rather than linear or teleological, then, one should think of this process as cumulative, or indeed *folded*, as a towel or a linen sheet, allowing for earlier positions or approaches suddenly to become proximate to later concerns.[8] This metaphor of temporality's foldedness will recur throughout this book as a way of describing the often baffling vectors of 'literature' in the post-1945 decades.

If we think of ESiA as one of several enabling conditions for this institutional dialectic in South Africa, it follows that it does not speak with just one voice. Across an extremely wide array of topics, methods and positions the journal provides one – certainly not the only – document of the diversity, the turns and sometimes the discontents of the discipline. In this way, ESiA serves as an index of the consolidation of South African literary studies whereby a specific quality of literature – locality – eventually became so valorised as to be self-evident. If we remain for a moment with the academic journal format, the subsequent emergence of *UNISA English Studies* (1963–1995 – resurrected as *Scrutiny2* in 1996), *UCT Studies in English* (1970–1986), *English in Africa* (1974), *Critical Arts* (1980), *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap* (1985) and *Current Writing* (1989), to name just a few of the most important journals, consistently added to this local epistemic turn, although the *content* was often not concerned with local literature.

It must be recognised from the outset that the local turn presents us with numerous contradictions, not least of which is locality's transnational constitution. Put differently: the uneven North–South relationship (particularly between Britain and South Africa) is what comes *first* in this story. English, both as a spoken language and as an academic discipline, arrived in South

7 Nick Visser, 'The Critical Situation and the Situation of Criticism', *Critical Arts* 3, no. 2 (1984): 2–8; Derek Barker and Leon de Kock, 'How South African Literature Got Squeezed Out, Then Slipped In: English Academic Literary Discourse 1946–1996', *English Studies in Africa* 51, no. 1 (2008): 19–46.

8 See also Russell West-Pavlov's thoughts on 'folding' in 'Reading African Complexities Today: Generic Folding in Gaile Parkin's *Baking Cakes in Kigali*', *Research in African Literatures* 46, no. 1 (2015): 142–59.

Africa as an imperial imposition. Valuing local South African literature came later as a dialectical reversal of literary-critical precepts adopted from the North, but as we shall see, this reversal was itself inspired by the academic North and directed at assumptions made by other *local* agents. Prime movers behind the disciplinary shift towards South African literature, not least in the swing decade of the 1970s, had been formed by their studies in the UK, France or the USA – but also, as in the case of Es'kia Mphahlele, by their experiences of other parts of Africa, or, as with Guy Butler, by war-time experiences of Europe.

Moreover, it must be remembered that 'South African literature' had previously been an Afrikaans-centred concern. The ideal of *suid-afrikaanse letterkunde* as a national category emerges, historically, first in the context of Afrikaans literature's *taalbewegings*, or language movements, from the late nineteenth century onwards, in tandem with the emergence of Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana and Sotho print cultures in the same period.[9] But the Afrikaans establishment moved along a trajectory all of its own in the twentieth century, seeing itself as a resistant, national alternative to the imperial language of English – although 'national' in this instance was really an ethnic and white minority position, later co-opted by the National Party's apartheid policy. The early years of Afrikaans literature and criticism followed a quasi-Herderian people–language–territory paradigm, with growing institutional support from universities and schools. In terms of locality, then, Afrikaans literature could define itself as South African by default, an option not available to English-language literature. Intriguingly, this also meant that Afrikaans writers, especially from the generation of the Dertigers (generation of the 1930s) onwards, could be confidently cosmopolitan without compromising their assumed South Africanness. N.P. van Wyk Louw, a dominant figure in Afrikaans letters from the 1930s until his death in 1970, trailblazed this cosmopolitan turn that could further be exemplified by, for instance, Uys Krige, Breyten Breytenbach and André Brink.[10] Today, in the 2020s, the largest share of book publication in South Africa is in Afrikaans, although the language has a weaker institutional position at universities than English.[11] Afrikaans lies unfortunately beyond the scope of this chapter, but its example as an anomalous *African* literary language offers a compelling point of comparison that confirms the non-linear nature of decolonisation.

9 The vernacular turn in all these languages can be understood in Sheldon Pollock's and Alexander Beecroft's terms as a print-bound 'literarisation', leading to 'the development of aesthetic resources of a given language'. Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature* (London: Verso, 2015), 150.

10 Gerrit Olivier, 'The Dertigers and the *Plaasroman*: Two Brief Perspectives on Afrikaans Literature', in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge and David Attwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 310.

11 My claim here builds on statistics on the South African book market presented by Ashleigh Harris at an online seminar on 7 May 2021.

What follows, then, is a selective account of specifically *anglophone* South African literary criticism in relation to literary and academic elsewheres. I present it at a time when the study of South African literature has gone resolutely global. Today, one may find academics positioned in, say, Oxford, Berlin, Philadelphia, Madison, Oslo, Adelaide or Stockholm earnestly committed to the integrity of the local in South African literature. The ironies of the globalised humanities are not my topic, but they certainly motivate not just this chapter but my argument as a whole. The post-1945 period allows us in this way to discern the historically unique contours of our contemporary moment.

My main argument, then, is that the local turn in South African literary criticism occurred through the construction of *alternative literary pasts* that, at the same time, could be read in terms of a *synchronisation* of the discipline with other tempos, be they political, local, cosmopolitan, academic (career-driven) or theoretical. The past – in anticipation of a different future – has been a central stake in decolonisations of literature in South Africa, first by constructing a white canon that corresponded with inherited Northern conceptions of literature (see Girling above), and later by partially redefining literature along Africanist lines to enable the building of an alternative archive of black writing. Marxist revisionism in the 1970s was a third influential way of re-narrativising the past in ways that opened towards class-defined experiences and expressive forms among the black population. Throughout these developments, harsh debates notwithstanding, 'South Africa' would remain a given frame of reference.

To demonstrate this, the chapter proceeds in three steps. First, I provide a counter-chronological reading of what I call the 'rhetoric of rupture' in English literary studies in South Africa from 1990 back to the 1950s, a period that covers most of the apartheid era, although my reading gravitates mostly around Johannesburg-based criticism. Reading counter-clockwise in this way means that we move from more to less familiar (or forgotten) position-takings. What we will find is that there never is just one exclusive definition of literature, nor of South African literature, in circulation, but rather a field of activity organised around a contested, polysemic concept – which means that 'discarded' meanings can be revived (as when 'literature', in a partial revival of the scholarship paradigm, becomes equated with textual production in general). In the second section, this leads me to focus on the 1970s as a hinge decade for the decolonisation of South African literature, first by considering the sociological conditions fostering dissent among younger white academics at the time. I then engage more closely with work by Stephen Gray, Es'kia Mphahlele and, above all, Tim Couzens, three central players in the turn towards the institutional consecration of black South African and African literature, yet with different methodological points of departure. This is where the hard work of institution-building comes to the fore. Finally, as a coda, I discuss these South African renegotiations of literature as a globally resonant outcome of a dynamic between cosmopolitan and vernacular scales

of value – a dynamic that could also be described as a productive friction between (academic) social space and the physical space of South Africa.

The Rhetoric of Rupture

In 1990, the auspicious year of Nelson Mandela's release and the brief euphoric realignment of South African horizons of expectation, there were some terse exchanges on the pages of *Pretexts*, a journal that had recently been launched by the arts faculty at the University of Cape Town. David Attwell, then a lecturer at the University of the Western Cape, sparked the debate with a critical account of the 1990 History Workshop at Wits University, Johannesburg. His article, pointedly entitled 'Political Supervision', suggested that the workshop had failed in its ambition to cultivate a dialogue across the disciplines of history, literature and cultural studies. The main dividing line, in Attwell's understanding, went between advocates of 'anti-formalism' and scholars oriented towards poststructuralist modes of analysis, particularly discourse analysis. 'Anti-formalism' covered a wide range of positions; Attwell linked it to the emergence of revisionist historiography in South Africa from the late 1960s onwards and a corresponding turn towards social history also in literary studies. (Note that 'revisionist' is a positive term here, denoting a break with the assumptions of liberal scholarship.) Acknowledging the crucial contribution of revisionism to reconfiguring the humanities in South Africa, he claimed that it had now ossified into a doctrinaire position, producing 'shared reflexes' in response to the urgency of the local situation: 'With social and moral foundations in the struggle with liberalism, a feature of their reductionism is that they inhabit a time-warp in which later developments in critical theory, from structuralism on, are valued from the position of earlier polemics.'[12] Attwell's identification of a time-warp produced by the lingering effect of earlier local 'polemics' was clearly an attempt to register an experienced shift in time. This shift, in his view, was not produced by local developments alone, but rather by the dynamic between (local) political and (more general) academic developments. In that way, Attwell framed the debate as a matter of critical *synchronisation* between South Africa and a point of external comparison, in this instance 'later developments in critical theory'. His point of comparison was, strictly speaking, not geographical but disciplinary, belonging to the social space of the critic rather than the physical space of the earth. Yet, in practice, as Attwell's theory-driven work at the time demonstrated, it was locatable to authoritative institutions of knowledge production in Europe and North America. The implication of his argument was that the temporality of institutional literary studies in South Africa needed, for the sake of its legitimacy, to *coincide* with the time of theoretical

12 David Attwell, 'Political Supervision: The Case of the 1990 Wits History Workshop', *Pretexts* 2, no. 1 (1990): 81.

and academic practices in the global North. But instead of producing updated analyses of discourses and institutions in South Africa, Attwell complained, the anti-formalists seemed content to reproduce the political stance shaped through earlier struggles, misrecognising this as an adequate response to a rapidly changing social and political landscape. This was a view, moreover, for which Attwell found support in Albie Sachs's much-debated critique at the time of 'solidarity criticism', a mode of reading that in Attwell's phrasing 'marshals artists towards political correctness'.[13]

In their responses, Kelwyn Sole and Isabel Hofmeyr, two scholars who felt targeted by Attwell, begged to differ. Neither of them recognised his description of the workshop; both accused him of evading political responsibility. In Sole's view, Attwell's charge that the materialists were out of touch with current intellectual trends ignored the possibility that 'they might have kept up and still disagree'.[14] Moreover, Attwell's 'anti-formalist' was a straw man: '[i]nsofar as there might have been a tendency in the 1970s to blur a dislike of the liberal over-emphasis of formal issues into a belief that all analysis of formal issues must be liberal, it died years ago'.[15] But by the same token, the analysis of form needed to retain its connection with radical politics. Ultimately, Sole contended,

> [i]t is bizarre for [Attwell] to suggest that our *literary* work should be separated out and should only attend to the politics of the university, or the politics of the text and its discourses, at the end of two decades when literary and cultural figures have played such a significant role in wider struggles for hegemony and continued critical thinking within the ranks of anti-apartheid forces.[16]

Here, the imperative of synchronisation returns. But Sole presents it as a matter of *synchrony with local developments*. What he calls the politics of the

13 Attwell, 'Supervision', 81. As an aside, it should be mentioned that Albie Sachs, at the time a high-profile African National Congress (ANC) activist and subsequently constitutional judge in the post-1994 democratic South Africa, had first presented his paper 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom' internally in the ANC as a discussion paper. When it was published, coincidentally on the very day of the unbanning by F.W. de Klerk of the liberation movements in February 1990, it sparked a prolonged debate. The gist of his argument was essentially that the earlier push by the ANC and others to use culture as a 'weapon of struggle' no longer served its purpose. Faced with the exhilarating prospect of a new country 'struggling to give birth to itself', he was concerned that the perpetuation of a 'shallow and forced relationship' between art and politics would be harmful precisely to the 'cultural imagination' needed to bring the new into being. See Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds), *Spring Is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom* (Cape Town: Buchu Books, 1990), 19.

14 Kelwyn Sole, 'Real Toads in Imaginary Gardens: A Response to David Attwell', *Pretexts* 2, no. 1 (1990): 88.

15 Sole, 'Real Toads', 88.

16 Sole, 'Real Toads', 89.

university and of texts should not be set apart from the ongoing transformation of society. In this instance, temporal priority is granted to the two decades of intensifying resistance against apartheid. Here, local political legitimacy has priority over academic legitimacy in what Bar-Itzhak, with a nod to Pascale Casanova, has called the 'world republic of theory'.[17]

Hofmeyr's response, by contrast, took a more methodological tack. The theme of the workshop, 'Structure and Experience in the Making of Apartheid', was meant 'not only to cater for social historians but also for those of a more structuralist persuasion'.[18] Yet Hofmeyr expressed disappointment at the lack of self-interrogation among the literary scholars whose work 'remains narrow, textual, and rooted in the canon of local literature'.[19] Attwell's programmatic wish for a literary scholarship that examined the historical and social conditions of discourse was to the point – the problem was that literary scholars failed to take up the challenge, confining themselves to established notions of the literary. 'I, for one', Hofmeyr maintained,

> believe that the debates of the last twenty years in South African scholarship were about making the discipline wider. They were about questioning canons and broadening *the understanding of what was properly seen as literary*. In practice, however, very little of this has happened and the jurisdiction of literary studies has remained quite stunningly circumscribed.[20]

She advocated therefore a change of perspective: historians shouldn't start working like literary scholars; instead, literary scholars should make use of their methodologies in order to 'culturalize' and 'literalize' areas 'traditionally claimed by history and politics'.[21]

This intensely local debate occurred at a pointed moment in the compressed post-1945 history of struggles fought over the meaning and purpose of literature in South Africa. Of course, such a periodisation can and should be questioned by pointing to the much longer history of literature – distinct from its critical inscription – in South Africa, relating either to 'South Africa' or the 'Cape Colony' as imagined entities. But this rejoinder immediately begs the question: how do we even become aware of the existence of a historical textual corpus, let alone recognise it as literature? To the extent that this chapter asks how literary production in South Africa became a legitimate object of knowledge in the post-1945 decades, this question cannot be separated from the construction of literature as an epistemological category to begin with. From that angle, the truth-claims about South African literature over which Attwell, Hofmeyr and Sole fought in 1990 are of necessity entangled with the history of the concept of literature as a means of organising textual, cultural

17 Bar-Itzhak, 'Intellectual Captivity', 82.
18 Isabel Hofmeyr, 'History Workshop Positions', *Pretexts* 2, no. 2 (1990): 63.
19 Hofmeyr, 'History Workshop Positions', 63.
20 Hofmeyr, 'History Workshop Positions', 65, emphasis added.
21 Hofmeyr, 'History Workshop Positions', 70.

and historical knowledge in South Africa. As I am arguing throughout this book, the shifting semantics of literature becomes acutely visible in critical *practice* rather than exclusively theoretical statements. The concept meanders, splits and merges precisely through encounters with previously unknown corpora of material, alternative theoretical perspectives, contending personalities or, ultimately, the heavy (sometimes exhilarating) pressures on temporal experience exerted by political transformation.

The *Pretexts* debate, then, alerts us not just to a methodological disagreement, but also to the conceptual instability of literature on the cusp of South Africa's precarious transition to democracy. The social and historical preconditions for this instability are to some extent obvious: the waning power of liberal-minded, English-speaking whites, the mounting crises of apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s, and a generational shift among critics. These conditions resulted in a rhetorical tradition of sharp contestation that continues in the contemporary phase of decolonisation in South Africa. The rhetorical interventions have indeed accompanied a successive series of changes, but rather than confirm the familiar narrative of rupture, the story in the first half of this chapter has more to do with the long duration of the rhetoric of rupture itself. Hence my focus on the multitemporality and polysemy of the concept of literature *within* or – to shift the metaphor – *beneath* the sequence of ruptures. In the *Pretexts* exchanges, the contestants either wanted to *broaden* (Hofmeyr) or *strengthen* (Attwell) the literary domain in response to academic and historical conjunctures – and in neither case was 'literature' simply a given. The iterations of literature's semantic content have not been endless in number, however, but tend – throughout the apartheid period – to return, variously, to the following concerns: language, aesthetics (or form), history, locality, class and race. Indeed, it is equally important to point out the extreme limitations that governed all varieties of the anglophone discussion in South Africa, not least as far as linguistic competence and regional outlook is concerned. Africa beyond South Africa rarely entered the conversation during this period (when it did, mainly by way of the English language), Afrikaans was seldom invoked, and African languages within South Africa were almost never mentioned. However, in this contingent process of constituting literature as an object and/or a mode of knowledge, the minimal consensus that made the field discernible as a field concerned precisely 'literature' and its cognates (writing, poetry, fiction, texts) rather than 'English'.

My choice of 1990 as an outer limit for this account is not arbitrary: marking the local consolidation of 'theory' in its poststructuralist guise (as can be exemplified by the 1990 volume *Rendering Things Visible*), it is an endpoint of sorts for one extended episode in the reconfiguration of literary study in South Africa.[22] But if Attwell's discourse-oriented focus on J.M. Coetzee's

22 Barker and De Kock, 'How South African Literature Got Squeezed Out'; Trump, *Rendering Things Visible*.

'situational metafictions' (in a study published in 1993) entailed a forceful rearticulation of the national-political dimensions of form, the relationship between literature, locality and value had been repeatedly renegotiated over the course of four decades.[23] A handful of individuals were instrumental in this reorientation in the 1970s and 1980s, among them Tim Couzens, Mike Kirkwood, Stephen Gray, Nick Visser, Kelwyn Sole, Es'kia Mphahlele and Isabel Hofmeyr. In an earlier period, Guy Butler, R.G. Howarth and H.K. Girling played comparable roles as agents of change. But even as I revisit some of their arguments, the more important question needs to be kept in mind, namely how the repeated semantic recalibration of 'literature' occurs through attempts at synchronising or juxtaposing discrete social and physical spaces.

It might seem that I am taking the importance of university-based critics for granted. It would be better to say that the role of South African universities in shaping the literary debate has been crucial, if not always dominant.[24] This point is confirmed inversely by Corinne Sandwith in her study of South African little magazines in the 1930s and 1940s, where she feels compelled to underline that 'literary criticism and cultural debate were *not* solely the enterprise of academics'.[25] However, Sandwith's divergent account is also important to keep in mind: it will become clear that the academic field has, at critical moments, invited and accommodated voices from related fields – notably writers themselves. The racial politics of such accommodation is complex and not always salutary, yet these inclusions (at conferences, in academic journals) also point to a traffic between the academic and literary fields in the apartheid era, prompted partly by a perceived need to gather the forces in a hostile public political atmosphere. An added historical point is that the freedom of manoeuvre in the South African public sphere narrowed down considerably after the post-Sharpeville wave of repression. With the Publication and Entertainments Act of 1963, which effectively gagged an

23 David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993).

24 Academic literary studies in South Africa emerged in mainly two linguistically defined disciplinary settings: 'English' and 'Afrikaans en Nederlands'. I am unable, as noted earlier, to deal with Afrikaans here. Suffice it to say, however, that if Afrikaans from its inception defined itself in 'national' terms, albeit on a racially exclusive creole understanding, English arrived as an imperial enterprise in the nineteenth century. Its early academic iterations first in Cape Town and Rhodes, and subsequently in Witwatersrand and Natal, were essentially a matter of transferring, as loyally as possible, whatever content the discipline had in the main universities in Great Britain in the early to mid-twentieth century. The process whereby local literature became regarded as a legitimate object of study – or, better, whereby the meaning of 'literature' became infused with a local and national dimension – is erratic, although there is much evidence that points to the 1950s as a hinge decade. It is also towards the 1950s that the present discussion is moving.

25 Sandwith, *World of Letters*, 4, emphasis added.

entire generation of South African writers, the almost whites-only liberal universities became one of few arenas in which intellectual enquiry could be sustained, at least until the emergence of Black Consciousness as an alternative intellectual-political formation in the few 'black' universities that had been established by the apartheid government.[26]

A New Theory of Literature

But let us pick up our backward thread and move to 1979. Here we begin to see what prompted the *Pretexts* debate in 1990. In her influential article 'The State of South African Literary Criticism', Hofmeyr provided a first articulation of her complaint ten years later of the narrow academic approach to literature:

> After decades of disparagement from conservative and thoroughly colonial literature departments, South African literary studies are slowly beginning to gain momentum. […] Yet despite this slowly accelerating interest, the results of the critical enquiry are often singularly lacklustre. Instead of a dynamic critical approach, as one would expect from a 'new' discipline, we face a critical malaise. Article after article conspicuously fails to elucidate any meaningful aspect of South African literature, past and present. Writers continuously resort to tired and hackneyed formulations that should by all rational standards have been obsolete years ago. Together the corpus of much contemporary South African literary criticism reads like a sorry battology. Tim Couzens puts the point bluntly: 'South African literary criticism is in a state of original ignorance'. The results, he says, are tragic: 'Everyday we are losing a little of our literary history and everyday we are failing to educate our audience a little more.'[27]

This all-out attack on the old order would become something of a rite of passage for young literary academics in the 1980s, as later interventions by Michael Green, Michael Vaughan, Nick Visser and Rory Ryan show.[28] 'We had

26 Churches were another, as the Spro-cas initiative in the early 1970s shows. As for the literary sphere, even if we consider important literary magazines such as *The Classic*, *The New African*, *Purple Renoster*, *Izwi*, eventually *Staffrider*, and others, in the 1960s and 1970s, the general observation concerning universities still holds. In relation to what today is known as HBUs (historically black universities), there is another, more strictly political story to be told there about their role in the emergence of Black Consciousness. See Daniel Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968–1977* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010). For more on the establishment of black universities, see Jonathan Hyslop, *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South African 1940–1990* (Scottsville: University of Natal Press, 1999).

27 Isabel Hofmeyr, 'The State of South African Literary Criticism', *English in Africa* 6, no. 2 (1979): 39.

28 Michael Green, 'The Manifesto and the Fifth Column', *Critical Arts* 3, no. 2 (1984): 9–19; Michael Vaughan, 'A Critique of the Dominant Ideas in Departments of

a sense that the stakes were high', as Duncan Brown writes of this period: 'no less than opposition to injustice and the defeat of racism. Each issue of the *Southern African Review of Books*, and the book pages of the *Weekly Mail* or *Vrye Weekblad* were eagerly awaited and devoured.'[29] Typically, the revolutionary fervour within the discipline was directed at what Hofmeyr called 'our peculiar brand of prac. crit.'[30] The prominence of practical criticism, and F.R. Leavis in particular, as a key target for the new radicals needs to be noted. If, as Joseph North has demonstrated, practical criticism was invented by I.A. Richards as a proto-materialist intervention in aesthetic education, it became *known* primarily through F.R. Leavis, whose more conservative approach cast a long shadow on English studies in South Africa.[31] Firmly entrenched in South African universities by the 1940s, practical criticism tended to oust the 'scholarship' paradigm of literary history. Instead, the Leavisite approach apparently offered an ahistorical template of literary 'greatness' to which admission was extremely limited – hence the temerity (as we soon shall see) of early attempts to address South African literature as a critical concern. A problem here was of course the *reception* of Leavisite criticism as ahistorical. If one reads Leavis's *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, for example, it is obvious that he is speaking to and within a very specific historical and cultural moment in Britain.[32] Indeed, his cultural elitism – sustained over the years in the journal *Scrutiny* – is motivated by an intense desire to intervene in the present moment by invoking the authority of a distinct cultural heritage. It is only rhetorically that Leavis is a universalist – his practice is parochially British and time-bound (which need not in itself be grounds for dismissal). If, on an explicit level, it projected literary quality as timeless, its canon was based on a particular *English* conception and ordering of the literary past. It is this double bind of being interpellated both by 'literature' in some transcendent sense and by a radically different non-British space of experience that caused trouble for so many South African critics. Hofmeyr did not, however, acknowledge this double bind. Instead, she saw the construction of a local white canon as a hegemonic perpetuation of practical criticism:

> The kick-off date is about 1830 with Thomas Pringle, followed by a silence of fifty years. Next comes Olive Schreiner, then another leap to the 1920s with Millin, Plomer, van der Post and Campbell. Next in this peculiar

English in the English-Speaking Universities of South Africa', *Critical Arts* 3, no. 2 (1984): 35–51; Visser, 'The Critical Situation'; Rory Ryan, 'Literary-Intellectual Behavior in South Africa', *boundary 2* 15, no. 3 (1988): 283–304.

29 Duncan Brown, 'Reimagining the "Literary" in South African Literary Studies', *English in Africa* 45, no. 3 (2016): 145.

30 Hofmeyr, 'Criticism', 39.

31 North, *Literary Criticism*.

32 F.R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: The Minority Press, 1930).

> pageant is Bosman, who acts as a transitional figure into the 50s and 60s with Paton, Cope, Jacobson and Gordimer. The project is then presumably suitably rounded off by reference to a few contemporary writers.[33]

With this canon as a foil for her argument, she could then offer an alternative. In her view, the normative narrative not only avoided engagement with oral literature, working-class literature, literature in languages other than English and so on but it failed, above all, to reflect on the more fundamental question: What *is* literature? Challenging the status quo was therefore not just a practical but a theoretical matter:

> The history of South African literature is not a tale of the literary endeavour of a small fraction of its people. It should include the modes and discourses of all South Africans, be that discourse oral, be it in newspapers, archives, magazines and pamphlets. The few critics who have looked for literature in these places have come up with profoundly impressive results, as in the work of Stephen Gray and Tim Couzens. Consequently, we need *a theory of literature* that includes the cultural products and practices of all classes.[34]

For Hofmeyr, there was no question whatsoever whether *South African* literature deserved to be studied. The success of this basic assumption is so complete that it is barely visible: the value of studying local literary production is taken for granted. In terms of theory, however, Hofmeyr was in no way restricted to the local context. Here, apparently, the persuasiveness of theoretical references from 'elsewhere' is just as self-evident as the recourse to locality. Hofmeyr's argument found support both in Marxism and structuralism, deriving important points from Raymond Williams and Lucien Goldmann. In contrast to the western European context of these latter critics, she does, however, point out that South Africa found itself in 'a situation where the State functions through coercion rather than consensus, where ideological control is at a discount, [and] art is never tolerated as it is under the "normal" capitalist state, where it is controlled through strategies of "repressive tolerance".'[35] Given that '[t]he ultimate source of the literary text', as Hofmeyr argued by way of Francis Mulhern (the Marxist historian of Leavis's *Scrutiny*), 'is not the I of the author, but the "we" of the social class whose world vision it embodies', acknowledging the peculiarities of South African society – conceived here as a complex unity of contradictory forces – would then necessarily issue in an alternative conception also of literature.[36]

It is her valorisation of locality, performed with recourse to the authority of the academic North, that then leads Hofmeyr to advocate the construction of an alternative literary past. As with Attwell's time-warp, she invokes a narrative of disciplinary progress: '[w]riters continuously resort to […] formulations that

33 Hofmeyr, 'Criticism', 39.
34 Hofmeyr, 'Criticism', 44, emphasis added.
35 Hofmeyr, 'Criticism', 45.
36 Hofmeyr, 'Criticism', 44.

should […] have been obsolete years ago'.[37] Her understanding of progress, however, attached itself to a past that was being 'lost'. Using Koselleck's categories, one could say that she located the discipline's potential to respond to a changing horizon of expectation in its capacity to shape *a different shared space of experience*. By showing in this way that temporality can be thought of in the plural, history became inscribed in the urgent struggle for an anticipated future that seemed far more distant in 1979 than in 1990.

But what were the implications of this rerouting of time – the dismissal of one historical narrative (the white canon) in favour of another (still to be discovered) – for the semantics of literature? Although presented as an accusatory polemic, Hofmeyr's article revolves around this more philosophical question. Her call for a new *theory* of literature grounded in South African conditions – rather than just a plea for the importance of South African literature – was quite unusual at this time. Although the September 1978 issue of *Unisa English Studies* had published the proceedings of a modern criticism symposium, where many 'current' – that is, European and North American – theories were introduced in South Africa for the first time, not one of the essays on structuralism, hermeneutics, phenomenology or Marxism mentioned South African literature *at all*.[38] Hofmeyr's gambit in 1979 was therefore highly significant: neither deferring exclusively to the world republic of theory, nor reframing the debate in sheer political terms, the force of her argument derived from its weaving together of the theoretical, social and local aspects of literature. This was a two-way street, since it also meant that she tied the institutional study of literature to the commitment to political change. In that regard, not unlike the *Pretexts* piece discussed above, her diagnosis of disciplinary 'obsolescence' was tied more to local than to cosmopolitan time, more to the urgency of South Africa's protracted crisis than to the time of intellectual developments in the North: it was, hence, a matter of synchronising the conception of literature with the movement towards progressive change in South Africa. South African literary studies needed a theory of literature that was *adequate* to its historical circumstances. The notion of 'social space', as distinct from physical space, might help to square this local commitment with the theoretical cosmopolitanism that is equally evident in the article.[39] Social space should in this regard also be understood as a configuration of *time*, of certain experiences and horizons that generate the impetus for change among institutional agents. Hofmeyr's academic space at Wits University was at this time predominantly white and could not coincide with the physically proximate space of segregated black

37 Hofmeyr, 'Criticism', 39

38 Although by extension it can be seen as heralding the 'introduction of contemporary theory, the full impact of which would see its fruition in the mid to late 1980s'. Barker and De Kock, 'How South African Literature Got Squeezed Out', 14.

39 Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Bourdieu and Social Space: Mobilities, Trajectories, Emplacements* (New York: Berghahn, 2020).

populations in Soweto, for example.[40] The separation of these worlds was enforced by apartheid, but political developments from Black Consciousness to the Soweto uprising in 1976 impinge themselves upon the slower rhythms of literary criticism. Conversely, as discussed above, by invoking the potential of literary studies to retrieve a history at risk of being lost, Hofmeyr stakes a claim for the discipline's impact on the shaping of social time.

This activist view of the discipline had a local history of its own, the parameters of which become clear through Hofmeyr's use of a vocabulary of class rather than race. The serious challenge posed by Black Consciousness in the 1970s, which dismissed white resistance as irrelevant, had pushed oppositional white intellectuals towards Marxism as an alternative to the compromised position of white liberalism. In Shireen Ally's account of sociology in South Africa, 'Marxism offered a re-positioning of race in the explanatory equation of apartheid in ways that constructed an intellectual and political role for this group of white, English-speaking intellectuals.'[41] This should not, however, be taken as the only trajectory in academic literary studies at the time. As Barker and De Kock have shown, multiple developments were afoot in in the 1970s. An annual conference for university English teachers, Association of University English Teachers in South Africa (AUETSA), was instituted in 1977, and the above-mentioned 'Modern Criticism Symposium' took place in 1978.[42] Hofmeyr's paper was first presented at the 1979 AUETSA conference but received with scepticism, which in effect confirms her own contrarian position. As the liberal-minded Colin Gardner put it in a measured understatement in his report, '[m]ost of the participants at the Conference seemed not to agree with many of Ms Hofmeyr's emphases',[43] presumably because she conflated the still precarious position of South African literature in the discipline with the perpetuation of an older Leavisite criticism. As Barker suggests, 'the "tradition-builders" Hofmeyr refers to were undertaking much of their work in the face of significant opposition, even disparagement, from their colleagues'.[44]

Ironically, then, it was the still emergent local canon's appeal to locality as an inherent value of literature – and even as an inherently literary value – that gave Hofmeyr's rejection of that canon much of its clout. Her own

40 Although it is interesting to note that there was a certain influx of working-class black students at Wits in the 1980s. Interview with Isabel Hofmeyr, April 2014.

41 Shireen Ally, 'Oppositional Intellectualism as Reflection, not Rejection, of Power: Wits Sociology, 1975–1989', *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, no. 59 (2005): 80. To this should be added also a deeper incompatibility between Marxism and BC: as Magaziner convincingly shows, in its early phase in about 1970, BC emerged out of thoroughly theological and existential thinking. Its Christian tenor was not a stand-in for something else – a camouflage for some other political vocabulary – but on the contrary completely sincere. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*.

42 Barker and De Kock, 'How South African Literature Got Squeezed Out', 31.

43 Colin Gardner, 'Conference Report', *English in Africa* 6, no. 2 (September 1979): 88.

44 Barker, *Literary Discourse*, 209.

article demonstrates, however, that the semantic sedimentation of locality was becoming increasingly diversified in the 1970s. Hofmeyr's mention of Tim Couzens, to whom we will turn later, points to methodological and archival innovations that provided substance for this diversification. As for class and Marxist theory, this can be linked to what Tony Morphet once dubbed the 'Durban moment' of the early 1970s, associated not least with the public intellectual Rick Turner and, in the literary sphere, with Mike Kirkwood.[45]

'Butlerism'

Although Marxism had had a presence in South Africa at least from the 1920s, and was developed as a mode of literary criticism by Dora Taylor in the 1940s, it had been pushed back relentlessly in the 1950s and 1960s by the apartheid machinery, including surveillance and direct persecution of radical academics – Turner himself being assassinated in 1978.[46] The core epistemological turn in this Marxist revival was the displacement of a previous liberal conception of apartheid as an irrational pathology in favour of a class analysis. 'In the narrative of white domination', as Morphet phrases it, 'the central figure was no longer Afrikaner nationalism. Capital and its state apparatus was placed in the leading role.'[47] In the literary domain, this change in the terms of analysis found its single most influential articulation in a paper delivered by Mike Kirkwood at the 'Poetry '74' conference in Cape Town in 1974. With half a century's hindsight, 'The Colonizer: A Critique of the English South African Culture Theory' defends its reputation as a landmark intervention that, moreover, was not an exercise in orthodox Marxism but combined materialist analysis with what we today would call a postcolonial outlook. Grounded in local historical materials, Kirkwood launched an attack on the white English literary sensibility he termed 'Butlerism'. The coinage addressed the work of Guy Butler, the most articulate exponent of this sensibility, yet Kirkwood's real aim was nothing less than to diagnose the colonial predicament of South African society. In an intellectual climate marked by the rise of Black Consciousness, he did so by exercising White Consciousness, that is, an attempt 'to cultivate a self-awareness sufficient to generate the possibility of self-transcendence'.[48] Chris Thurman has argued that the essay was wide of the mark in respect of Butler's complex and varying views, characterised

45 The Durban moment was above all a moment of labour activism, resulting in the strikes of 1973, accompanied by intellectual activism at the University of Natal.

46 Sandwith, *World of Letters*; Ally, 'Oppositional Intellectualism'.

47 Tony Morphet, '"Brushing History Against the Grain": Oppositional Discourse in South Africa', *Theoria* no. 76 (1990): 96.

48 Mike Kirkwood, 'The Colonizer: A Critique of the English South African Culture Theory', in *Poetry South Africa: Selected Papers from Poetry '74*, ed. Peter Wilhelm and James A. Polley (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1976), 102.

by 'philosophical scepticism' and 'a reluctance to commit wholeheartedly to a single ideology, version of history or expression'.[49] This needs to be acknowledged. Yet Kirkwood's purpose was hardly to give a full account of Butler's position, but to interrogate cultural commonplaces in white South Africa. Intriguingly, he even admits that 'Butlerism' itself invites the form of dialectical self-questioning that the essay propounds.

Specifically addressing the self-understanding of English-speaking white South Africans, Kirkwood uses Butler's identification with the English 1820 settlers and the assumption of a 'special role' for the English whites as a point of departure for his own analysis of South Africa's colonial predicament. The claim here is that 'a sentimental loyalty to 1820 ancestordom and the "English South African heritage" blunts what should be Butler's most dependable tool in fashioning an adequate self-awareness: his historical sense'.[50] Kirkwood's gaze is suitably cold instead, insisting on how 'the men [*sic*] of 1820 quickly fell into line with the South African pattern of reliance on cheap Black labour, and distinguishing between menial and "White man's work"'.[51] By insisting on the commonality between English-speaking whites and the Afrikaners in the colonising enterprise, Kirkwood is directly challenging the careful cultivation of a *separate* English identity (always divided in its allegiances) in South Africa, subsuming it instead under the prevailing racialised logic of the economy.

In his densely textured discussion of Butler and South African history, it is Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Octave Mannoni, J.A. Hobson and the sociologist Peter Worsley that furnish Kirkwood with a vocabulary to identify South Africa as a peculiar colony that has liberated itself from external imperialist coercion, but continues to exercise colonialism within its borders.[52] This was a significant and prescient reframing of the theoretical archive: neither Fanon nor Memmi are mentioned in Hofmeyr's 1979 article, and it would take until the reception of postcolonial theory in South Africa in the 1990s before this mode of critique caught on (again) in English studies. Arguably, the drift towards Marxism among white academics was for Kirkwood not yet a matter of bracketing a racially inflected mode of analysis. In keeping with his decolonial ambition to achieve self-awareness, his concern is with the implicitly racialised 'ontology' of the coloniser, shaped by 'an economic relationship with the colonized, imposed by conquest and a more advanced technology, and maintained explicitly or implicitly by force'.[53] Mannoni then enables him to refine the account of the mentality of the coloniser whose life

49 Christopher Thurman, 'Beyond Butlerism: Revisiting Aspects of South African Literary History', *English Studies in Africa* 51, no. 1 (2008): 50.

50 Kirkwood, 'The Colonizer', 105.

51 Kirkwood, 'The Colonizer', 105.

52 Fanon's work was, at the time, banned in South Africa. To circumvent this, he is quoted in the essay but not referenced in the endnotes.

53 Kirkwood, 'The Colonizer', 123.

of ease 'is the making of some very charming people', but only at the cost of a self-serving denial of objective inequalities.[54]

Kirkwood relies, however, in his essay on a received conception of literature. His methodology is in fact *thoroughly* literary, steeped in the Anglo culture that he shares with Butler. His style is witty and erudite, carrying the pedigree of a rigorous British-style schooling, and his counter-cultural intervention is performed on the assumption of literature's integral role in social self-reflexivity. His initial close reading of Butler's poem 'Bronze Heads' is indeed partial, as Butler himself complains many years later, but for our purposes it is notable that Kirkwood relies on the close-reading method of practical criticism to ground his pivotal claim concerning the bad faith of white English South Africans' historical consciousness.[55] Close reading leads him *to* the local context, not *away* from it: 'In these stanzas memorializing his 1820 ancestors Butler falls into an insoluble contradiction which, when we have grasped it, provides a basis for the critique of his culture theory.'[56] Hence, Kirkwood takes both the historically contingent distinctiveness of literature as a cultural domain and the textual resources of the South African literary field for granted in order to stage his argument. Without denying the force of his polemic, one can easily observe how Butler's long-standing efforts to draw the attention of readers and critics to South African English literature were a prerequisite for Kirkwood to make his point effectively. This returns us to the irony we detected in Hofmeyr's 1979 article: the value of the local in literature, and of local literature, first needed to be established as a minimal consensus before the radicalisation of literary critique could gain traction. The conference 'Poetry '74' could be taken as evidence that by now, as Haresnape puts it, 'the legitimacy of the subject was taken completely for granted' – although it still could be experienced, by the proponents of the subject, to be precarious.[57] Regardless, all of the papers gathered in the volume of proceedings certainly deal with South African literature, from the relatively canonised figures of Roy Campbell and William Plomer, to historical and contemporary black poets such as I.W.W. Citashe and Mongane Serote.

Both Hofmeyr's and Kirkwood's polemics need therefore to be read in relation to a longer history. It is thanks to other agents in the field – Guy Butler not least among them – that they found themselves in a position to mount their attacks. It would lead beyond the limited purposes of this chapter to provide a full account of Butler's contribution as an academic and critic in the 1950s and 1960s,[58] but pertinent to my discussion is the emergent dynamic

54 Kirkwood, 'The Colonizer', 129.
55 Guy Butler, *A Local Habitation: An Autobiography 1945–1990* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991), 247–50.
56 Kirkwood, 'The Colonizer', 104.
57 Haresnape, 'The Battle for the Books', 48.
58 Christoper Thurman, of course, has provided the most thoroughgoing study of Butler in *Guy Butler: Re-Assessing a Literary Life* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press,

between an ethnic-settlerist Grahamstown model (at Rhodes University) and an Africanist Johannesburg model of configuring literature as an object of knowledge. The Johannesburg scholar Tim Couzens studied at Rhodes in the 1960s and was formed by Butler's openness to local literature – so one should avoid thinking of these models as opposites. The crucial point of contact was a consensus on the value of the local, which allowed the two models to mix and converge on the pages of the Grahamstown journal *English in Africa*, which started appearing in 1974, on Guy Butler's initiative. What these two profiles shared was a common methodological investment in local textual archives, without which the scholarly Africanist turn of the 1970s would never have happened. But, again, the local *as such* needed first to be recognised as a valid stake in the game of criticism. To trace this foundational shift, we need to move one final step back in time.

The Spectre of Provincialism

Two events are often singled out as instrumental in directing disciplinary attention in 'English' towards the local: the conference 'South African Writing in English and Its Place in School and University' in Grahamstown in 1969, and a conference in Johannesburg in 1956 that gathered writers, publishers, editors and university teachers of English. The 1969 event was convened by Butler, arguably at the peak of his influence, and has been extensively commented upon.[59] Here, local literature was already placed front and centre, with the Wits professor Philip Segal as the only dissenting voice. His mode of argument nonetheless commands respect by not assuming 'that we know just what "South African writing" implies'.[60] Segal resists seeing it, in other words, as a 'natural' classification, and insists that 'the phrase "South African writing" gets its meaning and intention from an implied or stated theory', which resonates with the argument in this chapter.[61] The sceptical conclusions he drew from this premise – 'Isn't it merely futile to try to manufacture a local English tradition marked in capitals, "Not Imported"?' – were rapidly being superseded, but by insisting that the category of South African writing was not a pre-theoretical given, his reasoning is in fact in line with Hofmeyr's 1979 article. The difference between the two lay in their emphases, with Hofmeyr

2010). As for the wider field of English, see Haresnape, 'Battle'; Barker and De Kock, 'How South African Literature Got Squeezed Out'; Barker, 'English Academic Literary Discourse'; Laurence Wright, ed., *Teaching English Literature in South Africa: Twenty Essays* (Grahamstown: ISEA, 1990).

59 Haresnape; Barker and De Kock, 'How South African Literature Got Squeezed Out'.

60 Philip Segal, 'The Place of South African Writing in the University', *English Studies in Africa* 13, no. 1 (1970): 175.

61 Segal, 'South African Writing', 175.

positing class conflict as the basis for literary theory and Segal remaining attached to the transcontinental trajectory of English. (It would not be until much later, when methodological nationalism was being questioned with the rise of 'transnational' and 'world literature' studies, that this aspect of Segal's view could be revisited on terms that did not seem retrograde.)

Already by 1969, then, despite Butler's own pessimism ('not one academic devoted to the study of South African writing in English'), there is, if not a consensus, then certainly a tendency within the English academy to acknowledge the value of local literary production.[62] Why now? Clearly, the early years of apartheid, defined politically by Afrikaner nationalism, British liberalism (with a residual 'Commonwealth' identity) and non-violent political mobilisation against apartheid, generated a crisis of sorts in the meaning of 'literature'. We see here the first stirrings of an anglophone challenge to methodological Eurocentrism, albeit on terms that we would have difficulty today in recognising as 'decolonial'. In 1952, J.P.L. Snyman published *The South African Novel in English (1880–1930)*, the first study of its kind after Manfred Nathan's pioneering *South African Literature: A General Survey* in 1925, and certainly the first to emerge from a South African university.[63] In Snyman's book, Olive Schreiner and Sarah Gertrude Millin are dealt with in some depth in two separate chapters; the remaining four chapters are best described as annotated bibliographies. As in the case of Nathan's study, no black writers are mentioned at all: literature is seen as an all-white domain. Produced, notably, at Potchefstroom, an Afrikaans university, Snyman's thesis is written in a spirit of (white) national pride in '[o]ur own literature', which nonetheless requires 'scholarly organisation of the material available'.[64] He insists that 'we should not allow ourselves to be influenced by the popular argument that the greater part of our literature is unworthy of serious consideration' – a 'we' that gestures towards a white cultural elite, anxious both to secure the value of national culture and not to appear provincial.[65]

These anxieties are clearly evident at the 1956 conference, which took place in the cosmopolitan Anglo setting of Johannesburg – a distinct contrast to Potchefstroom. At this gathering of representatives from all corners of the literary field, local literary production was explicitly addressed by most participants. A notable exception is the Orange Free State professor W.H. Gardner's paper on the bearing of linguistics on the study of literature, couched as it is

62 Butler, 'The Purpose of the Conference', 16. This can seem early, considering other dates mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, where either the 1990s or early 1980s were seen as the pivotal moments in the localisation of literary studies. But there is of course no single moment where change is finally achieved.

63 J.P.L. Snyman, *The South African Novel in English (1880–1930)* (Potchefstroom: University of Potchefstroom, 1952); Manfred Nathan, *South African Literature: A General Survey* (Johannesburg: Juta, 1925).

64 Snyman, *South African Novel*, xi.

65 Snyman, *South African Novel*, xi.

in the framework of English studies in England (and to some extent Europe). Gardner makes no mention of South African literature whatsoever, only of the difficulties and drawbacks of teaching English in South Africa. In other words, he treats the location of the discipline as contingent and of no consequence for its content, which should in the first instance consist of historical linguistics. Of the remaining eight contributions, however, seven explicitly discuss South African literature. The writers William Plomer, Alan Paton and Uys Krige present various appraisals of contemporary writing. The Cape Town professor R.G. Howarth argues for the importance of 'indigenous literature' in English studies, Guy Butler looks at poetry and drama in South Africa and the *Rand Daily Mail* editor L. Sowden discusses newspaper criticism.

What can be gleaned from these papers is just how high the stakes were in allowing local experience to carry authority in the definition of literary value. Most speakers (Howarth less so) share a fear of being *caught out* – caught out valuing that which has no value, and their arguments therefore proceed with caution, distributing value across different temporalities: the deep history of the English language, the history of the British canon, the history of English settlers in South Africa, the history of social and racial conflict in South Africa. It is as though the epistemic mastery of multiple temporal frameworks could redeem the settler-colonial apprehension of insignificance – the loss of face in view of the imperial Mother or the cosmopolitan Other – but it is equally clear that for all their adeptness at accommodating diverse histories, the participants mostly ignore African temporalities. For Paton, time is the moral challenge of racial injustice in the contemporary moment. For Krige, it is the diachrony of European languages, leading up to the present. *Literature* is clearly the main stake in the game, the vehicle of value, whereas the value of literature from South Africa was typically seen to be dwarfed by the accumulated history of the metropolis. Accordingly, the biggest sin for these writers and scholars is 'provincialism', and many discussions organise themselves around the dangers of overestimating versus underestimating local literary production. This anxiety is exceptionally revealing: the value of the local is here *by definition* conceived of in a 'global', cosmopolitan temporality. The title of William Plomer's talk spells this out explicitly – 'South African Writers and English Readers' – and his interest is precisely in those South African writers who currently 'are more conspicuous overseas', namely those who write in English. In this way the cosmopolitan pole has priority, and the local is inscribed in a Eurocentric world republic of letters with an assumed meridian of value located elsewhere than South Africa.[66] Differently from Pascale Casanova's world republic, however, this republic comes in at least two versions: the multilingual Uys Krige's conception, which is closest to Casanova's description,

66 William Plomer, 'South African Writers and English Readers', in *Proceedings of a Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University Teachers of English. Held at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg from the 10–12 July, 1956* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1957), 54.

and that of other contributors, essentially confined to the globalised space of the English language (and in complete confidence of being the owners of this language in South Africa).

It is within the Anglo framework that the exiled Plomer – on his first and only return to the country in 30 years – can extol the virtues of contemporary South African literature, only to temper his judgement in more detailed discussions. South African literature should be judged by 'the standards of the best creative and critical minds', he says.[67] But contrary to the pioneering days of the short-lived modernist journal *Voorslag* in 1926 – an attempt by Plomer, Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post to foster a local modernism – he is now full of enthusiasm over the 'flourishing state' of South African literature in English, a phenomenon that he sees in restricted racial terms as the outcome of 'the cultural energies of the comparatively small white population, whether of English, Afrikaner, Jewish or any other origins', although, to be fair, he does also briefly mention Peter Abrahams and A.S. Mopeli-Paulus.[68] The value of South African literature, for Plomer, is produced through a dialectic of local experience and international recognition. He makes no systematic attempt to tease out the implications of this dialectic, but he does identify the push and pull of, on the one hand, 'interpreting [the] country […] to the outside world' and, on the other, of being true to the vernacular texture of the local.[69] He fears, for example, that Herman Charles Bosman requires 'too familiar an acquaintance with South African life to stand much chance of appealing widely to English readers'.[70] Yet when it comes to the wholly forgotten novel *The Fire-raisers* (1953) by Marris Murray, he claims that Murray's powers of description manage to convey the unfamiliar (to the English reader) with 'no real need of a glossary with explanatory notes about wattles or tick-birds.'[71] In this instance, Murray's style manages to invest local experience with such authority that the tension between the vernacular and the cosmopolitan poles apparently dissolves and transforms into pure literary value. (One might compare this with the protagonist John's British Library epiphany in J.M. Coetzee's *Youth*.[72])

Similarly, it is through their respective cosmopolitan notions of the literary that Krige and Butler address the creativity of local usage. Krige in particular speaks of how Afrikaans 'is as characteristic of our country as the long yellow grasses are characteristic of most of South Africa in the winter', and is convinced that a writer 'could not wish for a language at a more interesting stage than Afrikaans is to-day'.[73] As with Plomer, we see how Krige appeals to

67 Plomer, 'South African Writers', 55.
68 Plomer, 'South African Writers', 56.
69 Plomer, 'South African Writers', 58.
70 Plomer, 'South African Writers', 62.
71 Plomer, 'South African Writers', 64.
72 J.M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2002), 135–9.
73 Uys Krige, 'Has Africa, Like America, a Characteristic Contribution to Make to Literature?', in *Proceedings of a Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University*

landscape rather than people as a locus of authenticity, which is characteristic of 'white writing' in Coetzee's famous definition.[74] Guy Butler diverges from this pattern by drawing attention to the rich potential of poetry grounded in local experience: 'Our society is bubbling with things that have never been said, shapes which have never been separated and contemplated, "still unknown modes of being", if you like' – a claim that rings even truer than Butler perhaps imagined.[75] Arguing that some critics and writers 'have pulses mainly sensitive to works of art, to books', whereas others 'respond more to locality, to actual men [*sic*] and scenes', Butler speaks strongly in favour of the latter.[76] He remains nonetheless attentive to how literature in English is a global phenomenon, 'setting mercifully high standards, which should prevent us from becoming isolated, uncritical and provincial'.[77] This dual alertness to an Anglo-globality and to the social texture of South Africa is nonetheless accompanied by an extreme, and paradigmatically colonial, disavowal of Africa that vindicates Kirkwood's later argument about the failings of this historical sensibility. 'Africa has no history', Butler writes; 'it ticks to a different clock, under constellations many of which are mythless'.[78]

In brief, the 1956 Wits conference provides evidence of a growing conviction among key players in the field that at least certain kinds of literary production in South Africa required, indeed, *merited* attention. The climate in which these calls were received was hostile, with a contingent of conservative English scholars voicing scepticism towards the very idea that local writers should be accorded scholarly attention, thereby causing, as Guy Butler glossed it, a 'loss in the *value* of a literature course' and risking 'that local writers might be rated above their *worth*'.[79] Yet the ground was being prepared for a conception of literature rooted in South Africa, albeit with a limited, racially exclusive outlook: the names mentioned are more or less the same as Hofmeyr's list in 1979, namely Schreiner, Smith, Millin, Plomer, Van der Post, Campbell. Johannesburg in 1956 was in the midst of the Sophiatown renaissance, but *Drum* is mentioned in passing only by Uys Krige. The ethos of much of the English

Teachers of English. Held at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg from the 10–12 July, 1956 (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1957), 75, 76.

74 J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

75 Guy Butler, 'Poetry, Drama and Public Taste', in *Proceedings of a Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University Teachers of English. Held at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg from the 10–12 July, 1956* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1957), 108.

76 Butler, 'Poetry', 104.

77 Butler, 'Poetry', 108.

78 Butler, 'Poetry', 110.

79 Comment by Guy Butler in *Proceedings of a Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University Teachers of English. Held at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg from the 10–12 July, 1956* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1957), 53.

literature establishment at this time – and this applies particularly to someone like Butler – can best be described not as provincial but as *ethnic*, relatively self-absorbed and even identity-political, driven by a need both for external recognition and a consolidation of their internal techniques of recognition. And yet, in relation to the habitus of the agents in the field at that time, even the roll call of the local white writers introduced something qualitatively new in the semantics of literature in South Africa. The conference inspired Lionel Abrahams to publish the subsequently influential little magazine *The Purple Renoster*, and it led to the founding of *English Studies in Africa*. It is here, then, that we can locate the beginnings of the *institutionally* sanctioned shift towards the local. Not one, but two ironies need to be noted here. First, we see how Hofmeyr's disparaging words about the 'peculiar pageant' of South African English writers repeats the belittling charge of provincialism that an earlier generation struggled to rid themselves of. Second, it is even more striking how the ambition to ground literary studies in matters of local concern was already latent in the Leavisite paradigm of the period. One of its key proponents, the Pietermaritzburg English professor G.H. Durrant, wrote approvingly in the first issue of *Theoria* of the current, Cambridge-derived ambition to 'relate the study of literature to life' and to pursue 'an integrated experience' – words that, incidentally, echoed in another time and context when Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o asked 'what's the relevance of literature to life?'[80] Indeed, Durrant himself would occasionally switch from his main focus on the canonical Englishman Wordsworth to write about South African works by Roy Campbell and Alan Paton.[81] A strong expectation on the potential of literature to produce a fuller sense and understanding of one's place in history and in the world seems to be a critical constant – a minimal consensus – across the minefield of divergent ideological stances in South African literary criticism. The most substantial disagreement concerned instead what *counted* as literature.

Dissident White Anglophones

To the extent that the *content* of the category 'literature' is the main stake in South African criticism, it is to the 1970s we must return. In the succession of decolonising moments, it is here that not just locality but the conception of literature in South Africa is radicalised. The impact of Black Consciousness and Marxism has been mentioned already, and the political acceleration of the 1970s is plain for all to see: the Durban strikes in 1973, the Mozambican revolution in 1975, the Soweto uprising in 1976, the wave of repression that

80 G.H. Durrant, 'On the Teaching of Literature', *Theoria* no. 1 (1947): 3, 5; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics: A Re-Engagement with Issues of Literature and Society*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), xv.

81 Elizabeth Meihuizen, *The Work of G.H. Durrant: English Studies and the Community* (MA thesis, UKZN, 2009).

followed in its wake. Yet if we accept that a handful of mainly white critics contributed to transforming academic literary studies in the 1970s (Mphahlele being a notable exception), we need to understand why they were *predisposed* to do so. That they *could* do so was a straightforward matter of structural and racial privilege. Apartheid laws and the booming economy of the 1960s had secured an unprecedented level of privilege for the white population at the cost of the non-white majority (the negative descriptor 'non-white' is motivated in this instance) and access to university positions was likewise racialised. Despite this, a young, albeit small, group of anglophone academics was prepared to challenge the status quo, even when the personal stakes could be extremely high, as in the case of Rick Turner. We must therefore ask what made them intellectually responsive to political developments.

The historian Jonathan Hyslop provides some credible answers in a partly autobiographical essay. Referring to his own experience of growing up as an English South African, Hyslop reminds us of the complex social status of white anglophones. If, conventionally, the triumph of the National Party in 1948 signifies the advent of apartheid, to English South Africans it meant the eclipse of British hegemony:

> For all of their history, [the white anglophones'] primary political identity had resided in their sense of being part of Britain's empire. While a new feeling of South Africanism had emerged with some strength since the 1920s, it lived within a context of loyalty to King and Commonwealth. […] With the advent of apartheid this self-image fell apart. The newly independent nations of Africa and Asia slowly but effectively brought about the isolation of Pretoria in the Commonwealth and the Empire. And with the departure of South Africa from the Commonwealth in 1960–61, institutional links with Britain were shattered.[82]

As a distinctly minor drama overshadowed by the tragedy of apartheid, white anglophone South Africans – so-called ESSAs ('English-speaking South Africans') – growing up in the 1950s and 1960s experienced in other words an odd kind of identity crisis: while remaining privileged as whites, and still economically better-off than the Afrikaners, neither Britain nor the Afrikaner state of Verwoerd provided, as Hyslop puts it, 'a plausible source of political identity'.[83]

In this context, the university discipline of English must be thought of as a strategic element in the elite reproduction of 'British' identity in South Africa and the perpetuation of what Bourdieu calls 'legitimate culture'.[84] But by the

82 Jonathan Hyslop, 'Rock and Roll Marxists?', in *At Risk: Writing on and over the Edge of South Africa*, ed. Liz McGregor and Sarah Nuttall (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007), 121.

83 Hyslop, 'Rock and Roll Marxists', 122.

84 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4.

same logic, this very discipline was bound to be affected by the alienation of which Hyslop speaks, given that the grounds for its version of legitimate culture eroded. The attenuation of the local field, as Ian Glenn has pointed out, was compounded by the brute fact of emigration: 'The double shock of the early 1960s, with the political upheaval symbolised by Sharpeville and the loss of the Commonwealth tie, is dramatically recorded demographically in the exodus of university teachers in subjects such as English and history.'[85]

Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius, speaking as historians, confirm that the 'pulse of university life' slowed in the 1960s: 'the state enforced segregation on the English-speaking campuses and there was a steady exodus of left and liberal intellectuals, weakening the ties between the older generations of radicals and the younger students of the time'.[86] Although there had been several local strands of radical thought in South Africa from the 1920s onwards, it is yet again clear that the emerging generation in the 1970s had to start afresh. Their own sense of *causing* an intellectual rupture was in other words reinforced by the de facto historical rupture of the 1960s.

If we have, then, a minority of young whites poised to overturn received notions of literature (and most other things besides), what needs to be added to the picture is that the apartheid state itself had a vested interest at this time both in South African literature and in black South African literature. The state was, as Peter McDonald has demonstrated, a self-designated supporter of South African literature, albeit mainly defined as writing in Afrikaans (provided that it didn't go too far in its criticism of the political system). Through the Balkanised system of education departments and school-book publishing, the government also supported a reductive and reactionary version of black South African literature that pandered to apartheid's policy of entrenching separate and 'traditional' ethnicities that each spoke their own language. As McDonald states when tracing the history of publishing in South Africa, '[t]he area most directly affected by the advent of apartheid itself was the literary publishing in the nine African languages, which was from the 1950s increasingly taken over by Afrikaner interests and refashioned along apartheid lines'.[87] This signals the insufficiency of received postcolonial explanatory models: the apartheid state was involved in, if not a decolonial, then certainly a *de-imperial* cultural project all of its own, seeking not just to construct a national particularity that differed from the British imperial legacy but also to legitimise its divide-and-rule policy on the basis of a degraded Herderian conception of self-contained ethnic identities. The fact that this emphasis on particularity was premised on a racist ordering of

85 Ian Glenn, 'University and Literature in South Africa: Who Produces Symbolic Value?', *Critical Arts* 3, no. 2 (1984): 20.

86 Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius, 'Radical History and South African Society', *Radical History Review* 46–47 (1990): 13–45.

87 Peter D. McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85.

society does not make it any less de-imperial in intent. On the contrary, the attempt to foster what McDonald calls a 'volk avant-garde'[88] would seem to cohabit neatly with Pascale Casanova's model of rivalry in the world republic of letters: identifying the British cultural legacy as one dominant pole in the world republic, the volk avant-garde had recourse to the continental models of both Germany and France as alternative repositories of cultural authority as it accumulated symbolic capital on behalf of 'South African literature', or *suid-afrikaanse letterkunde*. Taking the long view, the impact of the apartheid state on the status and meaning of literature in South Africa was perhaps less enduring than it seemed at the time, but it certainly inflected the Africanist tenor of Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray's work.

In his introduction to *Southern African Literature*, Gray sees the proclamation of the Republic of South Africa in 1961 as a watershed, in much the same way as Hyslop. Citing a catalogue from a 1960 exhibition called 'The Book in South Africa', featuring Es'kia Mphahlele, Sol Plaatje, Alan Paton and William Plomer as part of the same literary landscape, Gray notes that since 1960, 'as many as half of South Africa's English-language writers of all colours' had been driven into exile and that local literature in English had split 'so irremediably and bitterly into two, that it makes sense to talk of there being two distinct literatures', namely white and black.[89] Gray's own response to this situation is to provide – for the first time – an inclusive, if not comprehensive, account of literary history in South Africa based neither on language nor on cultural or racial identity, but on an attachment to the geographical region of southern Africa. Couzens's strategy and inclination was, as we have seen, different: his work at the time focused entirely on black writers. In both instances, however, we encounter attempts at articulating a *national* literary identity, coupled with a discursive investment in locality. To be precise, they build symbolic capital by imbuing place with distinct but dense forms of temporality. For Gray, it is above all a matter of literary temporality. His seven chapters move from early beginnings to the contemporary moment, with chapter headings such as 'The White Man's Creation Myth of Africa', 'The Imaginary Voyage through Southern Africa', 'Olive Schreiner and the Novel Tradition' and 'The Emergence of Black English'. An idiosyncratic feature of his book is that he inscribes bona fide South Africans such as Olive Schreiner and Mphahlele in a narrative that comprises European canonicals such as Luis de Camões and Jules Verne (in so far as their work touches upon southern Africa). One could say therefore that he borrowed foreign literary capital to make an investment in local literary value – which was where his stronger interest lay. Gray's subsequent work, particularly as an anthologiser of southern African literature, but also as a literary biographer, was remarkably consistent with this early commitment.[90]

88 McDonald, *Literature Police*, 90–103.

89 Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), 1.

90 Some examples: Stephen Gray, *Modern South African Stories* (Johannesburg:

In terms of positionality, it is notable that Gray, despite his professorship in English at the then Rand Afrikaans University (now the University of Johannesburg), pursued a parallel career as poet and novelist, and is best known for his publications in the trade market. This is in keeping with his commitment to literature and literary history, and the culture of the *littérateur*, rather than to academic discourse in the strict sense.

Couzens's interest lay more in social than literary temporality. It is here, in his favouring of 'scholarship' over 'criticism', that we can observe the clearest *methodological* break with previous New Critical or Leavisite academic English studies in South Africa. Yet it was really a *return* of sorts to an earlier historical methodology. From that perspective, we are considering less of an absolute opposition between the old and the new, or between the colonial and postcolonial, but rather an opposition within a field – English studies – that in South Africa at the time was placed at several different margins: at the margin of the apartheid state, of English studies as defined and practised in Britain and the USA, of the university (the humanities are marginal by default), of white South African culture (literature has always been a minority sport in South Africa) and certainly at the margin of – or completely separate from – black, coloured and Indian cultures in South Africa. If we combine that sense of marginalisation with the otherwise exceptionally privileged and central position of white anglophone scholars at the time – in terms of economic resources, mobility, recourse to a global language of scholarship and publication, personal and institutional ties with Oxford, SOAS and other metropolitan institutions – we begin to see how a generation of scholars were able to make such an impact on the field. Ever since the inception of South African humanities a century ago, a feedback loop with central institutions in the UK, continental Europe and, increasingly, North America has been in place. This was to some extent ruptured in the late apartheid years, when boycotts and travel restrictions curtailed the mobility and international intellectual leverage of white academics, but the links were never fully severed. In the national space of South Africa, this residual connection with Northern centres of academic knowledge-production was a point of anchorage providing symbolic capital for academics who did not fully identify with the class and race position into which they were marshalled by the state, and instead enabled them to devise dissident discursive and institutional positions.

In this context, Africanism must be recognised as a distinct strand of literary studies. Although it could intersect with Marxism, the intellectual allegiances of Africanism were different, less theoretical and more connected to anti-colonial practices across the continent. In English studies, Tim Couzens was the leading Africanist pioneer. In his student years at Rhodes, Couzens had not only adopted Guy Butler's basic respect for local literary production,

Ad Donker, 1980); Stephen Gray, *The Penguin Book of Southern African Verse* (London: Penguin, 1989); Stephen Gray, *Beatrice Hastings: A Literary Life* (London: Viking, 2004).

but also formed a strong friendship with the historian Charles van Onselen. It was with the latter that Couzens would build an African studies environment at Wits. But not without resistance. When arguing in the early 1970s for the need to study black South African literature, the professor in his department (presumably Segal) interjected: 'But there is no black South African literature!'[91] In his magnum opus *The New African*, Couzens underscores the enormity of this denial: 'When this work was begun a number of people maintained, firstly, that there was little or no writing by black South Africans and, secondly, that it was not worth looking at. It is difficult for me to convey the totality of ignorance and indifference I encountered in this respect.'[92] In his experience, then, there was in the 1970s still no sanctioned space in English studies to pursue locally oriented, Africanist enquiries. Couzens's response to the professor's rebuttal speaks however eloquently of how he, bit by bit, created such a space: 'Well, I've got 27 kilos of it.'[93] Against the symbolic violence of denial, Couzens retorted with the weight of materiality, of the empirical hereness and thingness of actual books, manuscripts and photocopies. For the recalcitrant professor, legitimacy still hinged on guarding the values of canonical English literary studies. For Couzens, perhaps unwittingly influenced by the earlier local turn, the challenge was to redefine value in relation to the work of black writers in South Africa.

The Africanist intervention of the 1970s was in this respect revolutionary. Contrary to the ethnic settlerism of Butler, the Africanist turn entailed an opening towards the deeper and broader history of southern Africa. If Kirkwood made it clear that the Butler position on the value of local literature hinged on the valorisation of a very particular space of experience whose clock started running in 1820, the Africanist approach summoned a range of other temporalities, often but not exclusively entangled with settler temporality. Institutionally, it was a considerably tougher challenge to disciplinary inertia and required more far-reaching methodological innovations. This is where a real difference emerges between the above-mentioned Rhodes and Johannesburg models. The success of the Africanist turn depended to no small degree on Couzens and Van Onselen's founding of the African Studies Institute at Wits in 1977.[94] It was in this way that they managed to attract Es'kia Mphahlele, whose recruitment as senior research fellow in 1979 would eventually result in the establishment of the Department of African Literature (which still retained an anglophone focus).

91 Interview with Tim Couzens, 1 May 2014.

92 Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), xv.

93 Couzens, interview.

94 Couzens and Van Onselen had urged the university to form such an institute, but not in order to secure jobs for themselves. Formally, it was established by the vice chancellor Belinda Bozzoli. Couzens himself would not join the institute until 1979. Interview with Tim Couzens.

This constituted a significant break with Butler's Rhodes-based custodianship of English literature.[95]

It was his discovery in the 1960s of the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe that led Couzens on the Africanist path. When looking for a South African counterpart to *Things Fall Apart*, he found Solomon Plaatje's *Mhudi*, first published by the Lovedale mission press in 1930 but at that point largely forgotten in South Africa. The article resulting from this (re)discovery, 'The Dark Side of the World: Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*', presents a revisionist case in defence of the novel. Having been disparaged by critics such as Janheinz Jahn and Martin Tucker, Couzens argues instead that Plaatje can 'lay claim to some remarkable achievements', namely:

> (1) a perceptive awareness and built-in critique of his own use of language, (2) a fascinating view of history, in the way in which it is presented almost unique in South African literature, (3) an elaborate defence of traditional custom, (4) a skilful and very early use of the folktale in the African novel as a device to reinforce the model of history Plaatje is creating, and (5) a complex concentration of the novel around the idea of race relations and its major 'pin-prick' in South Africa – the land question.[96]

This reappraisal of *Mhudi*, with its dual emphasis on formal accomplishment and local relevance, appeared in a 1971 issue of ESiA. It was in that same year that Couzens initiated his wide-ranging investigation into the life and work of H.I.E. Dhlomo (1903–1956) after a serendipitous discovery of Dhlomo's remaining papers stuffed away in a canteen cupboard in Durban. (It should be mentioned that Nick Visser, who often collaborated with Couzens, discovered the Dhlomo archive at almost the same time.) The task of recovery would culminate 14 years later with the publication of *The New African*, a milestone in South African literary studies. With Dhlomo as a focal point, Couzens resurrects an entire social world of the 1930s and 1940s, populated with dozens, if not hundreds, of named individuals, and reads his way through swathes of publications and manuscripts by most of the black writers and journalists who were active at the time. This is indeed 'scholarship', but with a twist:

> It […] became clear that the sedentary reading of published texts alone, while an essential starting-point, provided insufficient knowledge for a proper understanding of the texts themselves, the man [H.I.E. Dhlomo], and the society in which he was located. This perception led to the development of (for me) a new methodology or, rather, new methodologies. In the newspapers I found hundreds of pages of Dhlomo's journalism,

95 N. Chabani Manganyi and David Attwell (eds), *Bury Me at the Marketplace: Es'kia Mphahlele and Company, Letters 1943–2006* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010).

96 Tim Couzens, '"The Dark Side of the World": Sol Plaatje's "Mhudi"', *English Studies in Africa* 14, no.2 (1971): 188.

> thousands of pages of the journalism of writers who thought like him. […] The newspapers were the grain-fields from which a rich harvest could be gleaned. […] I also found that many teachers in South African universities and schools implicitly believed that poems should be seen and not heard. The spread of the study of oral literature in other parts of the world has been slow to reach this corner. But the inevitable logic of writing a biography led to the need to see people, to compile information through interviews. Oral history, scorned by many, is a rich source of invaluable data […][97]

It was, in other words, by identifying alternative sources of knowledge and through liberal use of the recently invented photocopier, that Couzens could move forward.[98] Note here the explicit emphasis on local archives, both in a conventional sense but more significantly in terms of people, which required him constantly to travel across the land:

> The search for people brings knowledge of geography. A knowledge of the mine compounds, the valleys of Zululand, the hundreds of black townships, the old and humble churches, the farms, the ruins of the missions schools, the photographs on the walls of the homes, the hand gestures of old people reliving the past […][99]

A knowledge, we may say, that openly challenged the spatial and social divisions entrenched by apartheid and previously ignored by literary critics. This is, however, scholarship of a kind that challenges Joseph North's opposition between the retreat into professional specialisation and the broader social relevance of 'criticism'.[100] Couzens's method, on the contrary, was a cogent response to the problem space of the 1970s and 1980s: it helped to create a past that the emergent South Africa needed to shape self-reflexively a possible future. This connection is often made explicit, as in this comment on a 1946 essay by Dhlomo:

> The idea of art 'living in us' is crucial. It is one Dhlomo had got from his researches in oral literature, and it is close to that which informed the work of the *Staffrider* writers. According to this theory, art exists within the audience as well as (or as much as) on the page. Art, too, must be returned to the living world, the world of the people, for 'The African people's cultural struggle is as important as the political because both aim at establishing the African as a free citizen.'[101]

Staffrider, the most influential and widely circulated South African literary journal in the early 1980s, returns also in a later comparison:

97 Couzens, *New African*, xii.
98 Couzens, interview.
99 Couzens, *New African*, xiii.
100 North, *Literary Criticism*.
101 Couzens, *New African*, 265.

> There was […] a closeness and continuity between the forties and the fifties which should not be underestimated or ignored. There was less of a closeness between these decades and that of the seventies. […] The effects of Bantu Education were to become evident two decades and a generation later. In a curious way, the modern magazine *Staffrider* is a product of Bantu Education. Before the advocates of Bantu Education rush to claim *Staffrider* as evidence of the success of their system I would suggest that they think the whole issue through thoroughly, weighing the stance of *Staffrider*, its successes and failures, its alternatives, and the period in between the fifties and eighties. It should then become clear to what extent *Staffrider* both reflects the deficiencies of the Bantu Education system and represents a reaction against and rejection of it.[102]

Couzens's fine-grained historical empiricism is in other words matched by repeated references to post-1976 conditions, which serve to position *The New African* as not just a historical study, but as a means to explore also current literary conditions.

Having taken much longer than anticipated to complete, *The New African* serves as a triumph and endpoint of sorts for the Africanist turn. Or rather: it set a new baseline for the continued pursuit of local literary studies. The conditions under which it was received in the 1980s had also become much more favourable. In 1979, the same year as Hofmeyr's article, Gray's *Southern African Literature* had appeared, famously suggesting that the region's literature should be considered as 'an archipelago'.[103] *The New African* appeared, moreover, shortly after Brian Willan's first biography of Sol Plaatje and Chabani Manganyi's biography of Es'kia Mphahlele.[104] Further signs of the times: in 1982, the conference 'Publisher/Writer/Reader: The Sociology of South African Literature' was held at Wits, with contributions covering a wide range of aspects – concerning English, Afrikaans, feminism, black writing, criticism – of literary production and consumption in South Africa.[105] In 1984, a special issue of the South African journal *Critical Arts* on the theme of 'English Studies in Transition' even more clearly manifested the ongoing shift in the conception of the discipline.

The importance of the 1970s lies therefore not only in the sharpening of the analysis of South Africa as a colonial-capitalist society, as we saw in Kirkwood's essay, but even more in the turn towards a *different* past – a

102 Couzens, *New African*, 354.

103 Gray, *Southern African Literature*, 14.

104 Since then, biography has remained a strong sub-genre of literary research in South Africa. See, for instance, J.C. Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2012) and Shaun Viljoen, *Richard Rive: A Partial Biography* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014). Willan's second biography of Plaatje, *Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, 1876–1932* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press) appeared in 2018.

105 Gardner, *Publisher/Writer/Reader*.

different textualised space of experience – on behalf of a future-oriented form of literary studies in South Africa. Couzens's work is instrumental here: the 27 kilos in the anecdote bear witness to an archival commitment in the most material terms – at one and the same time instituting and preserving a literary history that, within the spaces of academic knowledge production, had been utterly ignored. This resonates uncannily with Derrida's understanding of how archives are constructed after the breakdown of living memory, in this instance a breakdown precipitated both by apartheid laws and the longer history of racially coded ignorance.[106]

Es'kia Mphahlele and the Tyranny of Place

'Dear Tim, Are you there?'[107]

The first personal correspondence between Es'kia Mphahlele and Tim Couzens dates from the mid-1970s. They never wrote frequently, but when Mphahlele returned to South Africa in 1978 they were already well aware of each other's work. Knowing that it would take another ten years until *The New African* was published, it is striking to see Mphahlele anticipating the book on Dhlomo as early as 1975.[108] For the much younger Couzens, of course, Mphahlele had something of a stateman's stature as the most prominent of the South African literary exiles. Importantly, Mphahlele's return coincided with the establishment of the African Studies Institute, which soon became his professional base – but not without various setbacks and bureaucratic contortions. As Attwell explains, Mphahlele had his sights set on working at one of the 'black' universities, but '[c]abinet-level interference forced the homeland authorities and the University of the North to buckle, blocking his appointment to a chair in the Department of English'.[109] In this context, when Couzens invited him in 1979 to take up a position as senior research fellow at the institute, Wits became 'the most strategic option because from Johannesburg he was able to reach out to black constituencies close to his roots'.[110]

Their personal connection and common interests notwithstanding, Couzens and Mphahlele also represent divergent approaches to literature. If Couzens's historical method invites a weak notion of literature that comprises textuality

106 Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever', trans. Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63.

107 Manganyi and Attwell (eds), *Bury Me at the Marketplace*, 257.

108 Manganyi and Attwell, 257.

109 David Attwell, 'Introduction: Reading in the Company of Es'kia Mphahlele', in *Bury Me at the Marketplace: Es'kia Mphahlele and Company, Letters 1943–2006*, ed. N. Chabani Manganyi and David Attwell (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), 14.

110 Attwell, 'Introduction', 14.

in general, Mphahlele, as a writer of fiction himself, was invested in a 'strong' concept of literature as part of living, contemporary culture. He shared with Couzens a deep commitment to locality – indeed, his understanding of how literary creativity is beholden to the 'tyranny of place' is one of the signal formulations of this commitment. At the same time, locality was for Mphahlele a complex and layered category, formed through his cosmopolitan itinerancy, world literary erudition and Africanist allegiances.

He returned in at least four separate essays between 1974 and 1983 to the notion of 'tyranny of place', a concept that allowed him to circle around this fecund and conflicted confluence of experiences.[111] It served both as a means to grapple with the existential hollowness of exile and to justify what some saw as a controversial decision to return to South Africa. Not beholden to any particular political movement, Mphahlele nonetheless pursued a variety of Africanist criticism that was in tune with Black Consciousness's call for intellectual and cultural self-reliance. If Couzens documented history and gave it editorial form (as in his and Stephen Gray's edition of Plaatje's *Mhudi*), Mphahlele's elliptic, evocative style always revolved around the pressures bearing down on the present, as refracted through his subjectivity. Autobiography carried a distinct and layered meaning for Mphahlele not just as a genre of writing among others, but as a means to constitute an African self. His criticism forms part, in this way, of a larger autobiographical project. There is never a moment in his non-fictional work when he is detached from his topic – on the contrary, the personal investment is always evident.

As Mphahlele is one of the most thoroughly studied South African writers, my own comments here will restrict themselves to one of his key essays, 'Exile, the Tyranny of Place and the Literary Compromise'. Published in 1979 and written shortly before his move to Wits, it serves as a counterpoint to the more academic Africanism of *The New African*. The essay begins, characteristically, with the author tracing a version of his life's trajectory, from childhood in the country and in Pretoria, through exile, and finally to his return. But this account is also, emphatically, an account of becoming a reader and writer – life and textuality are intertwined. Some of this is familiar to readers of his first autobiography, *Down Second Avenue* (1959), such as his childhood discovery of *Don Quixote*, but the essay is written two decades later and carries the mark of the experienced and widely travelled university professor. The range of reading touched upon in his essay is astonishingly broad (and just as astonishingly limited – with one exception – to male writers): Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, John Milton, Jane Austen, Maxim Gorky, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, William Faulkner, H.I.E. Dhlomo, Richard Wright, Dennis Brutus, Alex La Guma, Keorapetse Kgositsile, André Brink, T.S. Eliot – to name just a few.

111 Katherine Skinner and Gareth Cornwell, 'Es'kia Mphahlele: A Checklist of Primary Sources', *English in Africa* 13, no. 2 (1986): 89–103.

Mphahlele is unapologetically canonical and Africanist at the same time, given that his writerly project relies so strongly on combining the two. This literary ethos is something he shares with the other two writer-critics that we turn to later in this book, Léopold Senghor and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, but also with Uys Krige and William Plomer, as discussed above. If the thrust of Couzens's and Hofmeyr's intellectual projects at this time was to strengthen locality by weakening the concept of literature, Mphahlele's ambition to synthesise his local commitment with a cosmopolitan repertoire was completely reliant for its authority on a more canonical conception of literature. This is, in my reading, the essence of what Mphahlele calls the 'literary compromise':

> Creators of serious imaginative literature, engaged in a middle-class occupation, can only be read by the educated, who can move beyond the supermarket thriller. It does not matter if we write about the concerns of the common man sometimes, or always. We are not read by him. He [*sic*] reads us only when we oversimplify experience or give him a ride on the wings of fantasy. The politicians and financiers run our world, not people who play with images and symbols. Politicians and financiers run the Third World even though they may not live there. Yet we keep writing, because we are obeying a compulsion. We are historians of feeling.[112]

Mphahlele negotiates here between the writer's subjective need for attachment and their objective disconnection from a potential audience. The anxiety of readership is one he shares with many writers in Africa, yet he insists that the 'cumulative impact' of literature can be registered only 'in the context of a national culture, a culture that has a definite geographic place and integrated objectives'.[113] Not unlike the Senegalese cases discussed by Tobias Warner, Mphahlele evokes a disjointed, non-linear sense of time to navigate this contradictory situation.[114] As 'historians of feeling' – a striking phrase – writers need to consider imaginative literature as 'an investment in the cultural well-being of [their] people, a way of keeping a language alive, of increasing us, something that matures or does not, that may be relevant today and irrelevant in the future and again relevant at another time'.[115]

The tyranny of place of which Mphahlele writes has, then, multiple dimensions – political, geographical, cultural, racial, writerly, existential. What it consistently engages is the ambiguity of the writer's belonging. On an explicit level, his essay is an extended argument *against* cosmopolitan detachment, and in that sense against world literature. He laments how South

112 Es'kia Mphahlele, 'Exile, the Tyranny of Place and the Literary Compromise', *Unisa English Studies* 17, no. 1 (1979): 43.

113 Mphahlele, 'Exile', 43.

114 Tobias Warner, *The Tongue-Tied Imagination: Decolonizing Literary Modernity in Senegal* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

115 Mphahlele, 'Exile', 43.

African writers in exile are condemned to write for 'that vaguely defined or non-existent "world intelligence"'.[116] Yet, as we have seen, his own involvement with such a world intelligence, also in its most canonical and Western guise, runs deep. It is in other words the positioning and mode of address of the writer that is at stake here, not the validity of the world republic of letters. Or to put this slightly differently: to establish his speaking position within the national context of South Africa, Mphahlele is drawing on a vast repository of intellectual resources – not just incidentally, but deliberately. This introduces an alternative dynamic to the formation of literary criticism in South Africa. If, as we have seen, the fault lines have run primarily between canonical (British but also American) and local instantiations of 'English', Mphahlele's personal investment in a cosmopolitan canonical constellation – his elective affinities – opens the field in both directions: it becomes both more Africanist and more world literary at the same time.

In this wager, a premium is placed on a distinct figuration of temporality. The notion of the 'literary compromise' is also a compromise between a conflicted space of experience and a dynamic horizon of expectation: what writers do 'may be relevant today and irrelevant in the future and again relevant at another time'. The pathos of this view is produced through the inscription in this horizon of the African self as a complexly temporal phenomenon. As precisely a *writer*-critic, and as a black writer, Mphahlele is able to venture into intellectual terrain inaccessible to his more strictly academic, white colleagues. This lineage of critical thinking is then continued in the 1980s not least by Njabulo Ndebele – most prominently in his seminal collection of essays *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, which offers a particularly strong synthesis of literary and academic perspectives on the lived texture of South African society under late apartheid.[117]

Coda

The placement of literature, as we have seen in this chapter, is always a matter of time. In recent critical work on contemporary South African literature, temporality figures as a pathology: stasis, waithood, boredom, disappointment, nostalgia and uncertainty are among the terms being used to describe a fundamental disruption of futurity in 'post-transitional' or 'post-post-apartheid' South Africa.[118] Corresponding structures of feeling in about 1990 would have been, among others, anticipation, apprehension,

116 Mphahlele, 'Exile', 41.

117 Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1991).

118 Andrew van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Rita Barnard and Andrew van der Vlies (eds), *South African Writing in Transition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

euphoria and perplexity. The title *Spring Is Rebellious*, which was prompted by Albie Sachs's essay 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom', speaks eloquently to the distinct temporal affect of that moment. The 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, were marked by a sense of entrapment in the moment – but also by outrage, hope, bewilderment and determination, as registered in work by Mongane Serote, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and others. These various terms, as we normally expect of criticism, are mainly generated from an engagement with literary texts and then employed as descriptors of a particular social or historical mood. But what do we find if we shift our attention to the temporality of the *concept* of literature in South Africa?

Following the trail from 1950s through to the 1980s, and keeping in mind my earlier point about the foldedness of temporality, we can see that the semantics of literature has been tightly connected to shifting and interacting conceptions of community. The peculiar status of the English language has made these shifts all the more dramatic. It is not just that English is both a cosmopolitan and national language – in South Africa, largely because of its cosmopolitan currency, it is also a language that has transitioned across communities who otherwise are considered (or compelled) to be separate. The instability of the concept of literature, in the anglophone context, can therefore be ascribed not just to the general instability of South Africa as a political construct, but specifically to competing claims of ownership of the English language.

In the 1950s, as we have seen, white critics unhesitatingly assumed a continuing sense of ownership of the English language, and hence of its literature. This essentially ethnic sense of community, whose futurity became increasingly precarious in the apartheid years, was severely challenged by Mike Kirkwood's critique of Butlerism. By reconfiguring the historical narrative of the white anglophones along Marxist and anti-colonial lines, Kirkwood opened up other future horizons. It is here, then, in 1970s critical practice, that we also witness a conceptual loosening of the ties between literature in English and the white ESSA community – especially through the Africanist turn. Politically, this was reinforced by the ethnic policies of the apartheid government – notably through Bantu Education – and its promotion of Afrikaans, which provided English with an added subversive edge.

But 'community' is not a self-evident category. Two other orders of belonging with more cosmopolitan reach have also proven to be instrumental in this account: the community of academics and the community of writers. It is notable how younger professional academics appealed to the authority (and tempo) of a world republic of *theory* in order to make their points: Hofmeyr's 1979 article and Attwell's 1990 article bear reference here. To this one should add the growth of institutions of higher learning in South Africa at this time, which also enabled the establishment of local academic journals in the humanities as contributions to a global academic conversation. In contrast to this, although he also was an academic, we see Mphahlele building his case for the irrepressible determinations of place by inscribing

himself in a transhistorical and globe-girdling community of writers, which is more in line (as we will see) with other critical practices in Africa at this time. The interesting point here is that the world republic of *letters*, with added pan-African inflections, offered an authorising instance for African writer-critics with a weaker institutional foothold. Conversely, a scholar such as Couzens, with comparatively stronger institutional backing, could afford to bracket the values of the world republic of letters to explore the social world of black writers.

As a distinct episode in the worlding of literature, the fate of 'English' in post-1945 South Africa presents us, in other words, with complex combinations of different spaces of experiences and horizons of expectation. Regardless of its non-linearity, and irrespective of the numerous pronouncements across almost a full century that South African literature has 'not yet' arrived, or that it has come 'too late', or indeed that it is 'no longer' a critical concern, the cumulative, diachronic effect of this critical labour is exceptionally clear.[119] In 2020, a search on the subject term 'South African Literature' on the Modern Language Association (MLA) bibliography yields more than 11,000 results. Compare this to the modest, indeed, timid, claims made on behalf of South African literature in English by Guy Butler, William Plomer and the other participants at the 1956 conference, and it should be clear not only how much has changed, but how firmly entrenched South African literature is by now in the finely reticulated world concept of literature.

119 De Kock, 'Notes on the Construction of "South African English Writing"', *English Studies in Africa* 53, no.1 (2010): 108–12; Visser, 'The Critical Situation', 2–8.

CHAPTER TWO

A Latin American Counterpoint: Antonio Candido and the São Paulo School of Criticism

Having tested the currents, the initial sense of disorientation that Brazil can inspire in an Africanist gives way to recognition: yet again, so many variations on colonial cringe and the affirmation of locality, so many methodological disagreements fuelled by the desire for a proper conception of Brazilian literature (or a properly Brazilian conception of literature). If, as I am arguing, the decolonisation and conceptual worlding of literature are two aspects of the same world-historical process, then Brazil presents us with an astounding range of self-reflexive takes on its unfolding, a few of which will be in focus in this chapter. Schematically, we can identify four crucial phases in Brazilian criticism: 1) the long romantic period during early independence (post-1822), with its cult of individuality and indigeneity; 2) the positivist-evolutionist phase in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, heavily influenced by Comte, Taine and Spencer; 3) the modernist phase of the mid-twentieth century, with Antonio Candido and Afrânio Coutinho as leading (and opposed) institutional figures; 4) postmodernism, which began to be articulated in about 1970 – in parallel with the Tropicália movement – and has transformed continually until today. We could also add a fifth phase, premised on the Brazilian take on postmodernism: the growth since the millennium of gender, black and indigenous studies. This is a tentative chronology, not a neatly sequential image of intellectual history. On the contrary, these tendencies often co-exist and interlace with one another in a folding temporality, as we could see in the South African examples.

The second phase listed above coincides with the generation of the 1870s and the moment, in Candido's own estimation, when the literary 'system' of Brazil consolidates its autonomy – most famously in the figure of Machado de Assis, the 'master in the periphery of capitalism'.[1] This illustrates dramatically

1 Roberto Schwarz, *Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo: Machado de Assis* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1990).

the temporal gap between South African and Brazilian literature. When Olive Schreiner published *The Story of an African Farm* in London in 1883 there was nothing remotely resembling a self-sustaining field of literary publishing and criticism in the Cape Colony, the early stirrings of Xhosa print culture and the *Cape Monthly Magazine* (1857–1881) notwithstanding.[2] Machado's pivotal essay 'Instinto de nacionalidade' speaks, by contrast, already in 1873 to and from a fully formed local field. Arguing against the facile assumption that local colour would secure the authenticity of Brazilian literature, Machado already had his sights set on a more profound conception of national poetics: 'What we should expect of the writer above all is a certain intimate feeling that renders him [*sic*] a man of his time and country, even when he addresses topics that are remote in time or space.'[3] This statement predates both the first Afrikaans language movement in 1875 and Schreiner's, by comparison, extremely modest declaration of aesthetic independence in her 1883 preface to *African Farm*, where she dismissed the flights of fancy of London-produced colonial romances and opted to dip her brush into 'the grey pigments' that surrounded her in the Cape.[4] It is nonetheless as a counterpoint to South Africa that Brazil first enters my argument. Both countries have histories of rapid industrialisation, extreme inequalities and high levels of institution-building in the twentieth century. The strange hybrid of fascist authoritarianism and welfare-statism under Getúlio Vargas in the 1930s and 1940s, and its democratic continuation in the 1950s until 1964, offers both a contrast to and point of comparison with the apartheid era's mode of social engineering. If the former adopted an ideology of 'racial democracy', the latter developed racism as a legal technology – yet both can be described as racialised statist governmentality with thoroughgoing cultural consequences. Within literary criticism, the post-1945 decades were a period of intense productivity and change in both societies, although here the comparison needs to acknowledge local factors such as individual agency and specific events (the military takeover in Brazil in 1964, say, or the Soweto uprising in 1976). What does allow for comparison are the ways in which the concept of literature has been semanticised in the force-field of local and transnational discourses. This brings us back to the scale and temporal depth of Brazilian intellectual history: if the North–South dialectic of 'English' in South Africa tended to run, parochially, along the Britain–South Africa axis, at least until the advent of the world republic of theory in the 1980s, in Brazil the transnational outlook was far wider, with direct access to ongoing developments not just in France, but equally in

2 I must stress here that I am referring precisely to the autonomous aspect of literature – heteronomous forms of textual production and reading occurred of course in many other ways in South Africa at the time.

3 Translated by Robert Patrick Newcomb as 'Reflections on Brazilian Literature at the Present Moment. The National Instinct', *Journal of World Literature* 3, no. 3 (2018): 408.

4 Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975), 24.

Germany, Italy, the UK and the USA, as well as Hispanophone Latin America. This strength, as will become clear in this chapter, could also be seen as a weakness, in so far as it solidified a mode of intellectual Western-centrism that passed for cosmopolitanism. When eulogising Antonio Candido in 2017, Roberto Schwarz recalled how in the 1960s the group responsible for the department of literary theory in São Paulo would monitor new publications in English (that is, from the UK and USA), French, German and Italian: 'Thus, our department would keep abreast of critical developments in five major centres, or, in other words, with the worldwide state of the art.'[5] I will return to this statement at the end of the chapter, but it indicates with precision how the impressive range in such a critical outlook made it all the more difficult to fathom its constitutive limitations. It was arguably easier in South Africa to provincialise 'Little England' (as in Kirkwood's attack on Butlerism) and from that point on to construct a rooted African cosmopolitanism (as did Es'kia Mphahlele). In Brazil, the lines of dialogue have been more entangled, Eurocentric positions more entrenched – and it is only in recent decades that Africanist (diaspora) positions have gained some prominence in the intellectual field, if not primarily in literary studies.[6]

These last points illustrate the second reason for my inclusion of Brazil in this book: the combination of Brazil and the three African cases is what builds support for my claims about the conceptual worlding of literature in the global South. South–South comparativism is an essential component of such an investigative endeavour, as many have argued before me, although this can be understood in two different ways.[7] If we take it to mean comparativism based on direct interactions, then merely a handful of writers and critics in Angola, Mozambique and Cape Verde stand for the majority of Latin American connections on the African side. Not only have they been attuned to Brazilian and Cuban culture in different periods, but after the 1975 revolutions both Mozambique and Angola attracted a number of dissident Latin American intellectuals (not to mention Cuban military support in Angola's fight against South African aggression).[8] Literary

5 Roberto Schwarz, 'Antonio Candido 1918–2017', *New Left Review* 107 (2017): 51.

6 I will return to the particular case of Afro-Brazilian literature towards the end. Among recent studies contributing to the shift one might mention Regiane A. Mattos, *História e cultura afro-brasileira* (São Paulo: Contexto, 2007) and Marina de Mello e Souza, África e Brasil africano (São Paulo: Ática, 2008). Another interesting development is the current reception of African – mainly lusophone – literature in Brazil, as exemplified by Rita Chaves et al. (eds), *A kinda e a misanga: encontros brasileiros com a literatura angolana* (São Paulo: Cultura Académica, 2007).

7 See, for example, Russell West-Pavlov (ed.), *The Global South and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). and Gesine Müller et al. (ed.), *Re-mapping World Literature: Writing, Book Markets and Epistemologies between Latin America and the Global South* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

8 And this has of course much to do with African literature's entanglement with the Cold War, the most authoritative account of which is Popescu's *At Penpoint*.

journals in Angola and Mozambique, from the 1940s onwards, bear witness to a limited but important reception of Brazilian and other Latin American literature, and crucial twentieth-century figures such as the novelist Castro Soromenho or the filmmaker Ruy Guerra were rooted both in Brazil and Africa.[9] These examples notwithstanding, African and Brazilian literatures have mostly been worlds apart. The impression one gets from mid-century literary criticism in Brazil is of a supreme detachment from all things African (with 'Africa', if invoked at all, referring not to the continent but to the African diaspora in Brazil).[10] A corresponding detachment from Latin America and Brazil applies in South Africa (with rare exceptions such as the poet Wopko Jensma's riff on Drummond de Andrade or André Brink's setting of his play *Pavane* in South America).[11] But this mutual South–South ignorance presents us with another, arguably more important comparative angle: the resonances between the terms of debate in each field, resonances that clearly do not result from 'influence' but from historical positionalities produced by colonialism and global capital. The absence of mutual reception and contact alert us, in other words, to a deeper historical logic. Take, for example, this statement by Silviano Santiago in his famous essay 'O entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano' ('The space in-between of Latin American discourse') from 1971:

> The origin is the pure and unattainable star that contaminates without ever sullying itself, and which shines for the artists of Latin American countries whenever they depend on its light for their creative expression. It illuminates the movement of the hands yet simultaneously subjects them to its superior magnetism. Since any critical discourse that speaks of influences establishes this star as the only value that matters, to establish the bridge – and thus reduce the debt and distance between the artist, a mortal, and that immortal star – is surely the essential role and function of the Latin American artist in Western society. In addition, he [*sic*] must fully understand the implications of the movement toward the star that the critic mentions and do so in order to inscribe his project on the horizon of Western culture.[12]

9 Helgesson, *Transnationalism*; Ros Gray, *Cinemas of the Mozambican Revolution* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2020).

10 To which I must of course immediately add a caveat: the historian Luiz Felipe de Alencastro has ever since the 1970s explored the African–Brazilian connections back in time, and more recently, scholars such as Carmen Lucia Tindo Secco, Rita Chaves and Nazir Can have produced first-rate research on African literatures. Brazil's academic relationship with Africa has in other words changed significantly for the better.

11 Helgesson, *Transnationalism*, 91; André Philippus Brink, *Pavane* (Cape Town: Human en Rousseau, 1974).

12 Silviano Santiago, *The Space In-Between: Essays on Latin American Culture*, trans. Tom Burns, Ana Lucía Gazzola and Gareth Williams (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 32. Silviano Santiago, 'O entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano',

In a nutshell: Latin American art is structurally positioned as derivative and belated. This is directly relatable to the South African anxieties concerning provincialism and literary value in the 1950s and 1960s. It is a theme with almost endless variations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Brazil – and in Latin America more generally, from Rodó's *arielismo* to Retamar's Caliban.[13] Santiago's analysis, contemporary with Retamar's, appears, however, at a decisive moment in the history of this theme. Rather than present a materialist critique of dependency, Santiago deconstructs instead the notion of source and origin. It is in his dialogue with Derrida and Foucault that the Brazilian reception of postmodernism begins in earnest and an intellectual paradigm with the potential to challenge the version of critical theory shaped by Antonio Candido and his *paulista* followers – the main focus of this chapter – begins to emerge.

These are decades rife in intellectual pathos and energy. The 1950s and early 1960s were a moment of 'recuperative acceleration' when 'local experience gathered weight', to draw on formulations by Celso Furtado and Roberto Schwarz.[14] The cultural process that had kicked off with the famous *semana de arte moderna*, the modern art week, in São Paulo in 1922, culminated in the 1950s and 1960s with bossa nova, *cinema novo*, and the high-modernist works of João Guimarães Rosa, Clarice Lispector and the poet João Cabral de Melo Neto. The illusion that this cultural blossoming accompanied an inevitable and progressive democratisation of Brazilian politics was, however, shattered by the coup in 1964 – causing an extended crisis also in cultural critique, to which Santiago's essay quoted above is one response.

This was, among other things, a crisis for the strong concept of literature. It occurred in parallel with the Africanist turn in South Africa in the 1970s, but with much higher literary stakes, as this chapter sets out to show. The post-1945 period in Brazil presents us, in fact, with some of the most

in Santiago, *Uma literatura nos trópicos: um ensaio sobre dependência cultural* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco), 18: 'A *fonte* torna-se a estrela intangível e pura que, sem se deixar contaminar, contamina, brilha para os artistas do países da América Latina, quando estes dependem de sua luz para o seu trabalho de expressão. Ela ilumina os movimentos das mãos, mas ao mesmo tempo torna os artistas súditos de seu magnetisma superior. O discurso crítico que fala das influências estabelece a estrela com único valor que conta. Encontrar a escada e contrair a dívida que pode minimizar a distância insuportável entre ele, mortal, e a imortal estrela: tal seria o papel do artista latino-americano, sua função na sociedade ocidental. É-lhe preciso, além do mais, dominar esse movimento ascendente de que fala o crítico e que poderia inscrever seu projeto no horizonte da cultura ocidental.'

13 José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, trans. Gordon Brotherston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Roberto Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, trans. Edward Baker (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989).

14 Roberto Schwarz, *Sequências brasileiras* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1987), 107: 'uma arrancada recuperadora'; 22: 'peso acrescido da experiência local'. My translation here and elsewhere in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated.

sustained efforts to legitimise a strong concept of literature from a global South standpoint. The contrast with South Africa is therefore twofold: if, on the one hand, the hegemony of European literary values has been longer and more pervasive in Brazil, then, on the other, so has the attempt to overcome that hegemony. My identification of Antonio Candido as a central figure in that complex endeavour is hardly original, but no less motivated for all that. The clarity, integrity and cogency of his work has set the benchmark for generations of literary critics in Brazil to this day. At the same time, his unwavering dialectical commitment to a universalist vision of literature as a socially significant aesthetic resource would inevitably clash with postmodernist pluralism, which resulted in the 1980s in significant restatements of his position. It is the main task of this chapter, then, to trace the fate of the strong concept of literature in Candido's work. To do so, I begin with a long section focusing on Candido's magnum opus, *Formação da literatura brasileira* – both on its intellectual preconditions and its reformulation of the literary question in Brazil. Here I pay special attention to Candido's take on the racial dynamic of romanticism, which is a less discussed aspect of his work. Section two expands on the modernist genealogy of Candido's elite radicalism, and the third section looks at Candido's own response to the crisis of this position, as registered in the two later essays 'Literature and Underdevelopment' (1969) and 'The Right to Literature' (1988). The chapter, ends finally, with a note on the surprising failure of the São Paulo critics to account for Afro-Brazilian literature.

Relocating the Centre in Brazil

Sporting six images on each of two sides in the style of Egyptian hieroglyphs, the sharply rectangular slab of concrete rises some 40 metres above ground. This is the tower at the *praça do relógio*, or clock square, in the centre of the vast campus of the University of São Paulo (USP), with its images representing different fields of scientific enquiry. At the very top of this modernist riff on ancient obelisks there is indeed a clock, combining the antique allusions with the registration of an ongoing present. So here I am (or was, in 2015), at the internationally most recognised university in Latin America, facing a symbolic manifestation of the transfer of intellectual, academic capital to Brazilian soil. But this centre, if that is what it is, is not exactly teeming with people. The action is instead dispersed across the vast campus, with clusters of students teeming around various departments and schools, defying the modernist attempt at manifesting centrality architecturally. During my visit, I hear a few versions of the same story: that Getúlio Vargas wanted a dispersed campus, allowing potential student unrest to be nipped in the bud.

The short history of USP, founded in the 1930s, is an object lesson in how centrality and contemporaneity can be wilfully, and successfully, constructed. In its early decades, the university was staffed to a large degree by French

scholars who rapidly changed the terms on which São Paulo academics engaged with their respective disciplines.[15] And these academics, in turn, would have a decisive influence on subsequent generations of scholars in Brazil. The symbolism of the *praça do relogio* – the aspiration towards centrality and contemporaneity in the local space – seems in other words to carry greater weight than is immediately apparent.

The problem of (re)locating the centre is an old one in Brazil. According to Paulo Eduardo Arantes, a prominent USP philosopher and leftist intellectual, the 'dialectic of the local and the cosmopolitan' is nothing less than a law governing the country's 'mental evolution'.[16] The founding of USP and its rapid emergence as the first 'contemporaneous' Brazilian university is a key moment in this dialectic, but it is also a recent chapter in a much longer history. The Brazilian elite in the nineteenth century were obsessed with 'catching up' with modernity as represented above all by Paris. Euclides da Cunha, in 1902, famously spoke of the urban Brazilians as 'blind copyists' dazzled by European civilisation, and characterised the national space of Brazil in terms of a temporal rift between the modern, 'contemporary' South and the laggard inland.[17] This drama of belatedness and peripherality would be reconsidered and rearticulated throughout the twentieth century as Brazil transformed into an uneven industrial economy. Three works in particular contributed to this reorientation of Brazilian self-perception: Gilberto Freyre's *Casa grande e senzala* (1933), Sergio Buarque de Holanda's *Raízes do Brasil* (1936) and Caio Prado Júnior's *Formação do Brasil contemporâneo* (1942).

Each of these interventions arose out of a perceived need to *make sense* of Brazil and its place in the modern world. This presupposed not only that the epistemological frameworks of the modern production of knowledge (sociology, anthropology, history, political economy) could be brought to bear on Brazilian material, but also that Brazil presented a riddle to be solved according to the protocols of what we today would call methodological nationalism.[18] The framework of the nation united all intellectuals of the period: it constituted the obvious, if not always ultimate, horizon of their thinking. This was not for jingoistic reasons, but because the category

15 Paulo Eduardo Arantes, *Um departamento francês de ultramar: estudos sobre a formação da cultura filosófica uspiana* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1994). This transfer of French academic capital is mentioned also in Santiago, *The Space In-Between*, 17. Claude Lévi-Strauss is the most famous of these visiting academics; others were Roger Bastide, Robert Garric and Jean Maugué.

16 Paulo Eduardo Arantes, *O sentimento da dialética na experiência intelectual brasileira* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1992), 9: 'caso fosse possível possível estabelecer uma lei geral de nossa evolução mental, ela tomaria forma de uma dialética de localismo e cosmopolitismo'.

17 Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands: The Canudos Rebellion*, trans. Elizabeth Lowe (New York: Penguin, 2010), 168.

18 Ulrich Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Condition: Why Methodological Nationalism Fails', *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007): 286–90.

of the nation presented a *problem*. Holanda, for instance, openly stated that '[w]e have brought our forms of association, our institutions, and our ideas from distant countries, and though we take pride in maintaining all of them in an often unfavorable and hostile environment, we remain exiles in our own land'.[19] This experience of exile was what *Roots of Brazil* sought to alleviate – although Holanda's 'we' was exclusionary, and predictably so, given that he only seriously considers the legacy of white male European descendants in Brazil. Freyre offered instead an affirmative account of Brazil's 'multi-racialism', especially of the importance of the African slave population and the sexual traffic between masters and slaves. The mingling of Portuguese and Africans on Brazilian soil was in his view ultimately benign, resulting in a society 'more harmonious in terms of racial relations than any other in the Americas'.[20] Freyre's ideological imaginary was, however, fatally flawed: by the 1950s, it had degraded into an apology for *contemporary* Portuguese colonialism – encapsulated in the notion of 'lusotropicalism' and eagerly exploited by the Portuguese dictator António Salazar's regime.[21] Caio Prado Jr, by contrast, entertained no illusions about the motivation for colonialism:

> All things considered, and viewed from a global and international angle, the colonisation of the tropics appears as a massive commercial enterprise, more complete than the older trading post model, yet retaining its key features by aiming to exploit the natural resources of a virgin territory for the benefit of the European economy. This is the true *significance* [*sentido*] of tropical colonisation, of which Brazil is one of the results […][22]

19 Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Roots of Brazil*, trans. G. Harvey Summ (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 1. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2014 [1936]), 35: 'Trazendo de países distantes nossas formas de convívio, nossas instituições, nossas ideias, e timbrando em manter tudo isso em ambiente muitas vezes desfavorável e hostil, somos ainda hoje uns desterrados em nossa terra.'

20 Freyre, *Casa-Grande*, 160: 'a sociedade brasileira é de todas da América a que se constituiu mais harmoniosamente quanto às relações de raça'. My translation here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated.

21 Claudia Castelo, *'O modo português de estar no mundo': O luso-tropicalismo e a ideologia colonial portuguesa (1933–1961)* (Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 1998), 69–109. Freyre's own complicity is demonstrated not only by his eager cooperation with the Portuguese regime, but also in his support for the Brazilian military coup in 1964.

22 Caio Prado Jr, *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2011), 28: 'No seu conjunto, e vista no plano mundial e internacional, a colonização dos trópicos toma o aspecto de uma vasta empresa comercial, mais completa que a antiga feitoria, mas sempre com o mesmo caráter que ela, destinada a explorar os recursos naturais de um território virgem em proveito do comércio europeu. É esse o verdadeiro *sentido* da colonização tropical, de que o Brasil é uma das resultantes […]'

For Prado, this is the necessary starting point for any interpretation of Brazilian society and culture which also accounts for the historical originality of tropical colonisation. The commercial model of the plantation did not just repeat European practices of exploitation, but was an innovation whose essence was banal. Brazil came into existence to provide European markets with 'sugar, tobacco […] gold and diamonds; later, cotton, and eventually coffee'.[23] All else follows from that initial fact: originality and subjection to European demands are dialectically intertwined.[24]

These were some of the intellectual interventions that shaped young Candido, who eventually would spend his entire career at USP. Their urge to explain Brazil feeds directly into his *Formação da literatura brasileira*, a title that mirrors both Freyre's and Prado Jr's (with the subtitle *Momentos decisivos* also echoing Prado). In a famous turn of phrase, Candido explained that he wished to write a history of the Brazilians in their very 'desire to have a literature'.[25] The foregrounding of the *Brazilians* rather than *literary texts* as the core topic of his study places his work in the lineage discussed above. But so does the tell-tale use of the singular indefinite article in '*a* literature' ('uma literatura'), which already tweaks the concept of literature in a decolonial direction. The notion of a collective desire to form *a* literature, and the distinctiveness of this desire's history, is hence the starting point for Candido's resemanticisation of 'literature' in Brazil.

The 'national' element in his thinking is, however, always only conceived dialectically in relation to 'the universal', a concept that he uses affirmatively and unhesitatingly. 'Our literature', he wrote in *Formação*, 'is merely an offshoot from Portuguese literature which, in turn, is a minor shrub in the garden of the muses', a statement whose self-deprecating tone indicates precisely the cosmopolitan ethos that underwrote all of Candido's work.[26] Candido's project was never to provincialise Europe, in the spirit of Dipesh Chakrabarty, but rather to bring the critical appraisal of Brazilian and Latin American literature to the same level as the best European criticism.[27]

I state this up front, as his Europeanism stakes out the enabling and limiting condition of Candido's work. The claim might surprise Brazilian readers, for whom Candido's project always was to think from within his Brazilian location. Both statements are true and cannot, for that reason, be

23 Prado Jr, *Formação do Brasil*, 29.

24 Hence, a materialist, 'revisionist' historical analysis was established at an academic level in Brazil three decades before there was a corresponding development in South Africa.

25 Antonio Candido, *Formação da literatura brasileira: momentos decisivos 1750–1880*, 13th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2012), 27: 'uma "história dos brasileiros no seu desejo de ter uma literatura"'.

26 Candido, *Formação*, 11: 'A nossa literatura é galho secundário da portuguesa, por sua vez arbusto de segunda ordem no jardim das Musas …'

27 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

dealt with prematurely: we are speaking here of a historical predicament rather than an individual shortcoming. Therefore, this chapter attempts to approach this contradiction *by way of* Candido's own thinking, from within his intellectual and political horizon. For this reason, and in keeping with the concept-historical thrust of my investigation, I will now engage closely with some central ideas and constitutive tensions in *Formação*. This will then eventually expand into a further investigation of Candido's own formation as a public intellectual and university-based critic.

Pushback

Under what institutional conditions was *Formação* received in 1959? More admired than discussed at the time, according to Schwarz, the book nevertheless sustained one heavy critical attack.[28] In his 1960 essay *Conceito de literatura brasileira* ('The concept of Brazilian literature'), Afrânio Coutinho accused Candido of short-changing Brazilian literary history by opting for a political rather than aesthetic definition of literature. Candido, he claimed, had elided whole centuries of Brazilian literature – from the Baroque onwards – so as to privilege the late colonial and early independence periods as the 'beginnings'. In the 1980s, the poststructuralist Haroldo de Campos would similarly complain that Candido had neglected the Baroque poet Gregório de Matos, but for Coutinho it was not just a matter of including this or that writer – it had to do with national pride and integrity.[29]

The Rio-based Coutinho was for many decades a leading figure in Brazilian literary criticism. Candido's senior by seven years, it was, however, his misfortune to publish *Introdução à literatura no Brasil* the same year as *Formação* appeared.[30] As a single-volume work of literary history, *Introdução* aimed to occupy the same space as *Formação*, but with a broader historical range and a New Critical methodological agenda. Disqualifying, in the spirit of Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*, all 'extrinsic' approaches to literature, his ambition was to arrive at a purely aesthetic account of literature in Brazil – and this is of course what animates his critique of Candido. But rather than an end in itself, New Criticism was for Coutinho a means to achieve the definitive decolonisation of Brazilian literature. To claim, as Candido did, that Brazilian literature was formed only after 1750 was 'a reactionary, Portuguese hypothesis, which can only be accounted for

28 Interview with Roberto Schwarz, 7 August 2015.

29 Haroldo de Campos, *O sequestro do barroco na* Formação da literatura brasileira: *O caso Gregório de Matos* (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2011 [1989]).

30 And it is somewhat ironic that Candido contributed to Coutinho's multi-volume project *Literatura no Brasil*, which started appearing in 1955. But, at the moment, Coutinho no doubt extended an invitation to a bright young colleague from what he felt to be a strong and unthreatened position of authority.

on the basis of a waning Portuguese theory of historiography which still repeats schemas and formulations that today are completely unacceptable'.[31] In *Introdução*, it becomes even clearer that Coutinho's concern is to liberate literature from its reductive inscription in the teleology of nation-building, which turns literature into 'a document of or a testament to the political fact' – hence his emphasis on 'literature in Brazil' (*literatura no Brasil*) rather than 'Brazilian literature'.[32] Indeed, as the title of a later book by Coutinho shows – *O processo da descolonização literária* ('The process of literary decolonisation') – his ambition to consider literature separately from the history of *political* decolonisation is animated, somewhat paradoxically, by a powerful decolonial pathos. Pronouncing programmatically on the history of Brazil, Coutinho states that 'the local intelligentsia never allowed itself to be intimidated by the show of brute force […] which resulted in a truly autochthonous culture'.[33] This emphasis on decolonisation by a self-proclaimed New Critic makes the divergence between Coutinho and Candido a point of genuine interest.

Coutinho argued in good faith that Candido was behind the times. *Formação* should have been published, he claimed, in 1945, when it would have served as a bridge between Sílvio Romero's older sociological school of literary history (the topic of Candido's PhD thesis) and the supposedly modern approach to literature that Coutinho himself represented. Schwarz means on the contrary that the methodology of *Formação* was ahead of its time.[34] These conflicting views confirm that the highest stake in criticism in the late 1950s was precisely the decolonisation of Brazilian literary studies, as understood by the academic elite at the time. On this, Coutinho and Candido could no doubt shake hands. The disagreement had rather to do with how to make decolonisation operational in critical practice. If Coutinho championed Brazilian literature by adopting the internationally most prestigious and influential conceptualisation of literary autonomy at the time, Candido's subtly dialectical method mapped out the local emergence of the very idea of Brazilian literature. This historicised Coutinho's pathos in ways Coutinho himself was blind to.

31 Afrânio Coutinho, *Conceito de literatura brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Académica, 1960), 47: 'Essa é uma tese reacionária, portuguesa, só explicável pelo marasmo da teoria historiográfica lusa, que ainda repete esquemas e fórmulas hoje inteiramente inaceitáveis […]'

32 Afrânio Coutinho, *Introdução à literatura no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria São José, 1966 [1959]), 32: 'A inteligência local não se deixou intimidar ante a violência da mão forte […] resultando uma verdadeira cultura autóctone.'

33 Afrânio Coutinho, *O processo da descolonização literária* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1983), 12.

34 Schwarz, *Sequências brasileiras* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999), 54–70.

Neo-classicism and Romanticism

As the subtitle *Momentos decisivos 1750–1880* announces, the sixteen chapters (and 800 pages) of *Formação* deal with Brazilian literature before and after independence in 1822. Candido's originality lies in his double emphasis on neo-classicism and romanticism. While romanticism had always been understood to manifest a 'national longing for form' (to use Salman Rushdie's phrase), the neo-classicist period had typically been seen as colonial, derivative and not properly Brazilian. Conversely, the advent of romanticism had been regarded – prematurely – as a rupture with the colonial past, rather than itself shaped by external influences. Candido looked beyond such nationalist rhetoric. Trained as a sociologist, he combined textual and socio-historical analysis in order to understand the two literary periods as being both formed in a dialectic between the local and the cosmopolitan.

He makes clear already in the introduction that his conception of literature differs from casual uses of the word: 'we need first of all to distinguish between *literary manifestations* and *literature* proper, regarded here as a system of works connected by common denominators which enable the recognition of dominant traits in a given period.'[35] Implied here is a strong idea of what constitutes *a* literature. No literary text is an island, and no literature is constituted by texts in isolation. Instead, it is the conjunction of common denominators, both internal and external, that must be the object of literary scholarship:

> These denominators are, besides internal features (language, themes, images), certain social and psychological elements – albeit organised in a literary fashion – that manifest themselves historically and turn literature into an organic aspect of civilisation. Among these one may discern: the existence of a group of literary producers who are more or less self-aware of their role; a group of recipients that form different kinds of audiences and without whom the work will not live; a mediating mechanism (in general terms a language, translated into styles), that connect the one group with the other. The combination of these three elements enables a type of inter-human communication, namely literature, that appears from this angle as a symbolic system through which the most arcane whims of the individual are transformed into elements of contact between people, and of interpretation of different spheres of reality.[36]

35 Candido, *Formação*, 25: 'convém principiar distinguindo *manifestações literárias*, de *literatura* propriamente dita, considerada aqui um sistema de obras ligadas por denominadores comuns, que permitem reconhecer as notas dominantes duma fase.'

36 Candido, *Formação*, 25: 'Estes denominadores são, além das características internas (língua, temas, imagens), certos elementos de natureza social e psíquica, embora literariamente organizados, mais ou menos conscientes do seu papel; um conjunto de receptores, formando os diferentes tipos de público, sem os quais a obra não vive; um mecanismo transmissor, (de modo geral, uma linguagem, traduzida em estilos), que liga uns a outros. O conjunto dos três elementos dá

Once the activity of writers in a given period integrate to form such a symbolic system, another 'decisive element' appears:

> [T]he formation of literary continuity – a passing of the torch between contestants that secure a coherent movement through time, thereby defining the outlines of a whole. This is the proper meaning of tradition, that is, of the transmission of something among people, and the conjunction of the transferred elements, forming standards that impose themselves on thought and behaviour, and to which we are obliged to refer, in order either to reject or accept them. Without such a tradition there exists no literature as a civilisational phenomenon.[37]

This is virtually a blueprint for *a strong conception of literature* – a bare-bones description of its constitutive elements that allows Candido to piece together a history of Brazilian literature afresh, without ceding ground either to premature celebrations of national literature, or to inherited European models. The need for such a table-clearing gesture should be evident: dominant accounts of Brazilian literature in Brazil, including the work of Sílvio Romero, had been too caught up in the nationalist project themselves, even when grounded in the determinism of Taine rather than the romanticism of Madame de Staël.[38] As will become evident, however, Candido's own position is also split between distance and engagement, a split that retraces precisely the cosmopolitan–vernacular tension that undergirds his analyses. Put simply, he speaks both of 'Brazilians' at a remove, and speaks *in the name of* a Brazilian collectivity when invoking 'our' literature.

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lugar a um tipo de comunicação inter-humana, a literatura, que aparece sob este ângulo como sistema simbólico, por meio do qual as veleidades mais profundas do indivíduo se transformam em elementos de contacto entre os homens, e de interpretação das diferentes esferas da realidade.'

37 Candido, *Formação*, 25–6: 'a formação da continuidade literária, – espécie de transmissão da tocha entre corredores, que assegura no tempo o movimento conjunto, definindo os elementos de um todo. É uma tradição, no sentido completo do termo, isto é, transmissão de algo entre os homens, e o conjunto de elementos transmitidos, formando padrões que se impõem ao pensamento ou ao comportamento, e aos quais somos obrigados a nos referir, para aceitar ou rejeitar.'

38 Sílvio Romero (1851–1914) is a towering figure in Brazilian intellectual history, commonly seen as 'the founder of modern criticism in Brazil' (Antonio Candido, *O método crítico de Sílvio Romero*, 4th ed. [Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul 2006], 17). It would be misleading to think of him as a naive nationalist. Rather, he dismissed romanticist conceptions of the nation and developed instead a naturalistic (if inconsistent) perspective on Brazilian literature, influenced not least by Hippolyte Taine. Candido's own critical intervention can arguably best be understood against the backdrop of Romero's legacy. Of importance here is that Candido resists Romero's valorisation of 'folklore' and popular literature, on the grounds that this may be of ethnographic (and hence national) interest, but fails to account for the specific aesthetic qualities of literature.

The crucial point here is his claim that Brazilian literature has always been 'engaged' (*empenhada*). The literary dialectic of imagination and reality is therefore always ultimately recuperated by a specific intuition of national duty:

> Given that there exists no literature without an escape from the real, and attempts to transcend it through the imagination, writers often felt themselves hampered in their flight, compromised in their acts of imagination by the weight of a sense of duty which entailed the tacit obligation to describe the immediate reality, or to express particular sentiments with a general reach. This inbred form of nationalism contributed to a certain renunciation of the imagination or a certain incapacity to apply it properly to the representation of the real, a conflict which was sometimes resolved through the coexistence of realism and fantasy, of documents and daydreams, in the work of one and the same author, as in the case of José de Alencar.[39]

Candido is only able, in other words, to tell the story of the autonomisation of Brazilian literature by way of its multiple and changing forms of connectedness: between word and world, text and readership, author and nation. But he approaches this social dimension most compellingly through form and style.

His understanding of the fundamental difference between classicism and romanticism is captured neatly in what he identifies as the changed balance between language and its object. If, for the neo-classicists, language was fully adequate to the task of describing nature, romanticism caused imbalances: 'In eighteenth-century aesthetics, nurtured as it was by classical ideals, there were two superior terms in reality: nature and art, understood as craft; the artist was an intermediary who, in theory, would disappear from view once the artwork had been completed.'[40] With romanticism, this equilibrium between art and nature was unsettled. Language and form became inadequate to its task, resulting in a crisis of representation. The work of art could only intimate what was impossible to contain in language. Instead of an

39 Candido, *Formação*, 28–9: 'Como não há literatura sem fuga ao real, e tentativas de transcendê-lo pela imaginação, os escritores se sentiram freqüentemente tolhidos no vôo, prejudicados no exercício da fantasia pelo peso do sentimento de missão, que acarretava a obrigação tácita de descrever a realidade imediata, ou exprimir determinados sentimentos de alcance geral. Este nacionalismo infuso contribuiu para certa renúncia à imaginação ou certa incapacidade de aplicá-la devidamente à representação do real, resolvendo-se por vezes na coexistência de realismo e fantasia, documento e devaneio, na obra de um mesmo autor, como José Alencar.'

40 Candido, *Formação*, 342: 'Para a estética setecentista, nutrida dos ideais clássicos, havia na verdade dois termos superiores: natureza e arte, concebida como artesanato; o artista era um intermediário que desaparecia teoricamente na realização.'

equivalence between language and nature, romanticism privileged nature and the artist, relegating language to a secondary, always inadequate, position. The 'sob' (*o soluço*), expressing at one and the same time the intensity of the artist's emotions and the shortcomings of language, became thereby a prime objective of romantic poetry.[41] This also entailed a withdrawal of the poet from the public realm, since that public realm was incapable of containing the vision of the poet. At the same time, this withdrawal aimed at drawing *the reader* into the artistic vision. This, writes Candido, is what explains 'the romantic *magic* that replaces the mere *enchantment* of the Arcadians; magic as a literary atmosphere and as a technique deliberately employed to create this atmosphere'.[42]

Despite, or rather because of, the perceived inadequacy of language, romanticism led to a gradual 'purification' of the lyric. Poetry would increasingly dispose of other functions such as commemoration and public debate in order to concentrate on 'lyrical investigation' as well as favouring the sonorous, melodic qualities of language at the cost of meaning. In this way, lyric let go of 'a rich ballast of novelistic, rhetorical and didactic techniques' – at exactly the same moment as the novel started coming into its own.[43] The novel in Brazil begins after all with romanticism, and can therefore be understood as the outcome of a new literary division of labour. Such a division of labour is what normally goes by the name of 'genre', but the new generic pair of the novel and the lyric displaced the older system of genres. It is also the case that the Brazilian novel made use of lyrical techniques in its imagery and vocabulary, hence refashioning the prose genre. In other words, the romantic crisis of representation disrupted in multiple ways the long-established, hierarchical order of language, whereby eighteenth-century poets were bound by rhetorical decorum to make use of stock phrases (describing the sun, for example, as 'blond Phoebe'), and introduced instead a poetics of singularity that aimed at shaping expression uniquely for each new instance.[44]

If this account of the shift from classicism to romanticism seems familiar to any student of European literature, this is not by chance. Candido is consistent in viewing Brazilian literature as a post-European affair. He demonstrates not only how Portuguese and European the neo-classicists were in their training and outlook, but also how the romantic turn was mediated via Europe, mainly France, but also Portugal, Germany and England. The French bias meant that romanticism was 'belated', but the impact of Madame de Staël and Chateaubriand, as well as the Portuguese writer Almeida Garrett, was profound and would have far-reaching consequences in independent Brazil

41 Candido, *Formação*, 342.
42 Candido, *Formação*, 343: 'Daí a *magia* romântica, sucedendo ao simple *encanto* dos árcades; magia como atmosfera da literatura e como técnica deliberadamente usada para criar essa atmosfera'.
43 Candido, *Formação*, 343.
44 Candido, *Formação*, 346.

(which, like the nation-states in Europe, also was an outcome of the post-Napoleonic order). What is of interest here is how Candido historicises this literary and aesthetic development. Or to use another vocabulary: he demonstrates some of the colonial and postcolonial twists of Brazilian romanticism, leading gradually to increasing differences between the substantive meaning of 'literature' in Brazil and in France and/or Europe.

Indianismo, Slavery and Abolition

The two most obvious indices of this semantic rift are *indianismo*, or Brazil's own version of nativism, and the poetry of slavery and abolitionism. Both are articulated from a middle-class and 'white' perspective, but their trajectories and motivations are significantly different. The *indianismo* of Gonçalves Dias and José de Alencar was little more than a fantasy, but this does not detract from the literary quality of their work, according to Candido. Although the *índios* of Gonçalves Dias were not more authentically *indigenous* than earlier attempts, they were more authentically *poetic*.[45] Candido singles out Dias, author of the long poem *I-Juca Pirama*, as the greatest innovator of style and diction in the romantic era, and seems to prefer him to the other major canonical figure of the period, Castro Alves. This evaluation says a great deal about Candido's refusal to make reductive connections between society and literary form. The meaning of the *índio* in Dias's work does have social implications, but this needs to be read first from within the historical logic of poetic form, rather than in terms of documentary or ethnographic veracity.

Such a reading, which addresses Dias's lyrical achievement, does not contradict the critical take on the *índio* figure that we find in the later chapter on Castro Alves and abolitionism. First-nation Brazilians, Candido explains, 'were virtually absent from the cities and therefore almost mythological' in the eyes of the writers. This enabled a sentimentalised projection of creole desire for national authenticity onto the *índio*, eliding the violence of colonial conquest. Sanctioned also by the European authority of a Chateaubriand, whose *Atala* (1801) provided a blueprint for precisely such a mythological projection.[46] This made it easy to transform the *índio* into a 'touchstone of patriotic pride'.[47] The African slaves, by contrast, were integrated into daily life and therefore difficult to 'elevate to an aesthetic object within a literature ideologically tied to a caste structure [*estrutura de castas*]'.[48] Castro Alves

45 Candido, *Formação*, 405.

46 And Chateaubriand himself drew inspiration from, among other things, early French travel writing on the Americas, such as Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre's *L'Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les François* (1667–1671).

47 Candido, *Formação*, 589.

48 Candido, *Formação*, 589.

managed, however, more than any other poet to bring the figure of the slave and the African into the ambit of Brazil's white writing.[49] Candido describes this as a 'literary miracle', given that it challenged the powerful urge among the middle class to suppress their mixed heritage by simply ignoring and/or camouflaging the African presence not just in Brazil, but *in themselves*. A darker complexion, he explains, could be attributed with pride to an 'Indian' ancestor in order not to confront a slave heritage. The literary transformation of the black character into a hero was therefore a significant changeover that nonetheless remained marked by racial anxieties. To make a black slave a hero, he or she had to be whitened. The idealised slave protagonist was typically of mixed heritage, making him or her possible to 'contain within the bounds of *white* sensibility', and thereby position him or her within the affective register of the bourgeoisie.[50]

Interestingly, if *indianismo* was an offshoot of French romanticism, Candido argues that Castro Alves's slave poetry derived from a rhetoric of humanitarianism, which enjoyed a high moment in the mid-nineteenth century – evident, for example, in the ineffectual but well-intentioned banning of the slave trade (not slavery) in 1850. The purification of lyric and the inward turn, as discussed above, were therefore not the only results of romanticism. This long era also engaged a social and public verbal practice that intensified in the politically dramatic decade of the 1860s. Even if Candido accuses this rhetorical turn of 'typically Brazilian verbal incontinence', expressive of conventional wisdom, the more important observation is that the 1860s saw the emergence in Brazil of a more vibrant daily press and outspoken advocates of democracy – in brief, of a public sphere in the modern sense of the word.[51] In its successful literary moments, the synthesis of romanticism and rhetoric resulted in a stirring abolitionist poem such as Alves's 'O navio negreiro' (1868, 'The slave ship'), which combined sonorous cadences, the romantic sublime – the infinity of sky and sea, the depth of suffering – and emotional outpourings with a social appeal. Underlying such poetry is a dialectic of man against society, and of master and slave, which in Candido's reading ultimately subsumes the historicity of slavery by inserting it into the drama of 'human destiny' and drawing in this way on messianic tendencies in romanticism. A sceptical reading of such recoding of slavery by a white writer could see it as a way to evade, or at least attenuate, accountability. This should not, however, detract from the pathos of stanzas such as these

49 This could be compared to the role of Thomas Pringle's poetry written during and after his sojourn in the Cape Colony. Pringle was earlier by several decades, however, and a driving force in Scottish abolitionism.

50 Candido, *Formação*, 590. The full sentence reads 'Assim, os protagonistas de romances e poemas, quando escravos, são ordinariamente mulatos a fim de que o autor possa dar-lhes traços brancos e, deste modo encaixá-los no padrões da sensibilidade *branca*', emphasis in the original.

51 Candido, *Formação*, 585: 'a incontinência verbal tão brasileira'.

from 'O navio negreiro', where conspicuous ellipses flaunt how the horror of slavery exceeds the poem's linguistic grasp:

> Era um sonho dantesco... o tombadilho
> Que das luzernas avermelha o brilho.
> Em sangue a se banhar.
> Tinir de ferros... estalar de açoite...
> Legiões de homens negros como a noite,
> Horrendos a dançar...
>
> Negras mulheres, suspendendo às tetas
> Magras crianças, cujas bocas pretas
> Rega o sangue das mães:
> Outras moças, mas nuas e espantadas,
> No turbilhão de espectros arrastadas,
> Em ânsia e mágoa vãs!
>
> E ri-se a orquestra irônica, estridente...
> E da ronda fantástica a serpente
> Faz doudas espirais ...
> Se o velho arqueja, se no chão resvala,
> Ouvem-se gritos... o chicote estala.
> E voam mais e mais...[52]
>
> (As in a vision of Dante,
> I saw the quarterdeck, slippery with blood,
> The skylight washed with crimson.
> The clanking irons … the crack of a whip …
> Legions of men black as the night,
> Dancing their horrible death-dance …
>
> Black-mouthed and listless children
> Hang at their black mothers' exhausted breasts
> Spattered with blood
> Shivering and naked girls,
> A crowd of ghosts dragging
> Their wretched bodies …
>
> The ironic chorus laughs at itself
> As the dark serpent coils
> Its mad and spiralling dance …
> If an old man gasps for breath … falls to the ground,
> There are screams, the cracking of whips …
> And their feet move on and on ...)[53]

52 Antonio de Castro Alves, 'O navio negreiro – tragédia no mar', in *Obra completa* (Rio de Janeiro: José de Aguilar, 1960), 280.

53 Antonio de Castro Alves, 'Tragedy at Sea: The Slave Ship', in *The Major Abolitionist Poems*, ed. and trans. Amy A. Peterson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990),

Alves's fragmentary diction in this poem shows how the romantic crisis of representation is exacerbated by its thematic turn towards the social reality of slavery. This is a crucial point. Slavery, after all, *is* being addressed by Alves (and Fagundes Varela and others), despite inheriting a conception of literature in which contemporary slavery and African subjects simply have no place. His occasional ventriloquising of African voices and his poetic projections of African landscapes are indeed 'romantic' in the pejorative sense of the word – imaginative, freewheeling, sentimental. But even so, the rupture with literary convention is palpable and ultimately as formal as it is thematic. Alves – and this is my way of developing Candido's point – transforms in 'O navio negreiro' the romantic sublime into an encoding of what might be called a trans-Atlantic sublime under the aegis of colonialism and capitalism, with the world-system metonymically and allegorically condensed to the slave ship, where French, English and Italian mariners share the same space as the slaves they torture and who recall their freedom in 'Sierra Leone'.

'O navio negreiro' can in other words be read as a privileged textual node that ties together the Brazilian, African and European trajectories of this book, but it also helps us to specify the overall tendency of Candido's historical account: it is those moments where topic and form connect and disrupt each other that are the 'decisive moments' in the formation of literature. The connection *and* disruption – both need to be considered simultaneously – can be understood, in Koselleck's sense, as versions of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous. There is no homogeneous temporality here, in Benedict Anderson's sense of the imagined community: literary forms accumulate their own temporality, including the gradual emergence of a local tradition, which is so important to Candido's understanding of the literary system. But social and political time will likewise intervene in the literary realm, regularly producing aesthetic crises that affect the scope and meaning of literature. It is within such a layered diachronic view that we need to appreciate Candido's national conception of literature. National literature, as Schwarz correctly notes, is for Candido not an end in itself, but rather a significant instance of this ongoing and uneven historical-aesthetic transformation of the semantics of 'literature'.[54]

This point is powerfully brought home in the final chapter of *Formação*, where Candido traces the history of literary criticism in Brazil. In doing so, he not only shifts focus to the self-reflexive element of this (national) transformation, but provides also a lucidly reflexive analysis of this self-reflexivity itself. The challenge of literary history, as he explains with hermeneutic sensitivity in the beginning, is to account for how literature was conceived of at the time, rather than impose contemporary categories on the past – but as his chapter demonstrates, such a retrieval of past semantics will inevitably reinstate a

15–17. It should be noted that this is a domesticating translation that smoothens the syntax and disambiguates Alves's elusive imagery.

54 Schwarz, *Sequências brasileiras*, 20.

critical distance to the past, as it releases the contemporary observer from unexamined yet lingering attachments to past ideals and notions. Beginning with the claim that literary criticism in Brazil only came into its own with romanticism, he shows how this 'national' movement was in fact shaped transnationally by European thinking. He first pinpoints the programmatic inversion of literary value achieved philosophically by Wilhelm Schlegel when he contrasted 'top-down' classicism with 'bottom-up' romanticism. This inversion was given its less confrontational French articulation by Madame de Staël, and then conveyed to Brazil through the Portuguese writer Almeida Garrett and the globetrotting Frenchman Ferdinand Denis. We see here the workings of Casanova's 'Herder effect', which in Denis's version insisted that Brazilian literature must correspond to the 'genius' of Brazil rather than imitate classical models.

In Candido's view, Denis's *Resumo da história literária do Brasil* ('Summary of Brazilian Literary History') (1826) counts as the very foundation of 'the theory of our literature' and is the first time Brazilian literature is *identified* as a thing of its own. It would thereby have a defining impact on Brazilian criticism 'almost until today', a vague temporal indication that is intriguing if only because it reiterates once again Candido's own split vision of the national literary project.[55] Importantly, Candido sees the doctrine of national literary identity as not only attempting to equate 'national differentiation' with 'aesthetic differentiation', but also linking literature to an ideology of freedom. In Denis's formulation, 'America [here: Brazil] should be as free in its poetry as in its government.'[56] The irony is that the programmatic attempt to manifest such freedom in writing easily results in an externalised self-representation:

> In the Brazilian case it became, in line with the dictates of the moment, imperative to pay heed to race and environment. In view of the latter, this resulted in wordy expositions […] of the difference and grandeur of the tropics, which forcefully gave rise to different sentiments [than in Europe]. This led to a persistent exoticism which has contaminated our self-perception to this day, making us look upon ourselves as foreigners have done and perpetuating the literary exploitation of the picturesque in its European sense, as though we were condemned to exporting tropical products also in the domain of spiritual culture.[57]

55 Candido, *Formação*, 638.

56 Candido, *Formação*, 639.

57 Candido, *Formação*, 639: 'No caso brasileiro impunha-se, portanto, segundo os cânones do momento, considerar a raça e o meio. Quanto a este, tudo se resumiu em tiradas […] sobre a diferença e a grandeza tropical, originando forçosamente sentimentos diferentes. Daí um persistente exotismo, que eivou a nossa visão de nós mesmos até hoje, levando-nos a nos encarar coma faziam os estrangeiros, propiciando, nas letras, a exploração do pitoresco no sentido europeu, como se estivéssemos condenados a exportar produtos tropicais também no terreno da cultura espiritual.'

What we see here is not just that what Graham Huggan once dubbed the 'postcolonial exotic' has a long history, but also how Candido's critique of literary nationalism is itself premised on the *value* of the national.[58] Without ignoring his self-professed universalism, it is, I argue, his orientation towards the assumed authenticity of national experience that authorises his criticism in *Formação* of outdated, inauthentic versions of national literature. At the very heart of this account lies the transition towards a conception of language as inadequate and dynamic, as discussed above, that is, 'the passage from a poetry based in the inherent properties of the word, to one which tries to exploit its musical potential to the very limits' but that also recognises the 'frailty of the word'.[59] It is in this liberation both of the signification and sonorous qualities of (the Portuguese) language that the national element comes into its own, enabling, as Candido puts it in his peroration,

> the process by which the Brazilians became conscious of their spiritual and social existence by way of literature, combining in various ways universal values with local reality and, in this way, earning the right to express their dreams, their pains, the joy, their vision of the world and of their fellow Brazilians.[60]

This conclusion indicates Candido's horizon of expectation at the time: ultimately, he was compelled to affirm the link between literature and the national community as such, even when providing an intermittently scathing appraisal of actual Brazilian literature. The apparent methodological paradox resulting from this is that Candido consistently works in two registers. One we might call the formal-historical register, which results in the conclusions I have presented thus far. Here Candido proceeds in a descriptive and analytic vein. The other is a formal-critical register, which tends to be unapologetically normative. Candido passes judgement on writers with harsh precision, flatly pronouncing on whether or not their work is of any enduring value.

The paradox can be accounted for if we recall that Candido's history of formation is also a history of autonomisation – and that his own literary generation had been shaped by a greater *local* aesthetic autonomy than ever before. To catch sight of this, we must return to the beginnings of Candido's role as a public intellectual during the Estado Novo, in São Paulo.

58 Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*.

59 Candido, *Formação*, 671, 678: 'a passagem de uma poesia baseada nos valores próprios da palavra, para uma outra que tentará explorar até os limites máximos as suas virtualidades musicais.'

60 Candido, *Formação*, 681: 'o processo por meio do qual os brasileiros tomaram consciência da sua existência espiritual e social através da literatura, combinando do modo vário os valores universais com a realidade local e, desta maneira, ganhando o direito de exprimir o seu sonho, a sua dor, o seu júbilo, a sua visão das coisas e do semelhante.'

Back to the Future

For those who experienced the Vargas period there was, according to Candido, a palpable sense of a before and an after. The decline in the previous decade's avant-gardism was inversely proportional to its 'relative incorporation in the habits of artistic and literary practice'.[61] This gave way in the 1930s to what Candido describes as a spreading of regionalist aesthetics on a national scale. The previous dominance, upheld by the Brazilian Academy, of linguistic purism and a 'culture for show' (*'cultura de fachada'*) tailored to meet the expectations of an external readership gave way to a poetics of non-conformism and anti-conventionalism. In the 1930s, Candido writes, 'almost every writer of note ended up as a beneficiary of the emancipation achieved by the modernists which contributed to the anti-rhetorical cleansing of language in favour of an increasing simplicity and colloquialism which parted ways with earlier artificial ideals'.[62] It was, of course, the 1922 São Paulo modernists – spearheaded by Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade – who first achieved this rupture. Instead of the anxious normalisation of form that occurred with realism and naturalism, which upheld aesthetic and linguistic norms that were assumed to be European and 'cosmopolitan' but that had become outdated and produced increasingly conventional reproductions of the picturesque, the modernists reinscribed the local and the particular by drawing liberally on the new formal resources developed by European avant-gardes. In doing so, they redefined beauty and inverted the value of the local:

> Our *deficiencies*, assumed or real, are reinterpreted as signs of *superiority*. […] It should no longer be necessary to say and to write, as in the time of Bilac or the count Afonso Celso, that everything here is beautiful and cheerful: instead the roughness, the dangers and the obstacles of the tropical landscape are emphasised. The mulatto and the negro are decisively incorporated as objects of study, as inspiration, as examples. Primitivism is now a source of beauty and no longer an impediment to cultural development. This shift is evident in literature, painting, music, the human sciences.[63]

61 Antonio Candido, *A educação pela noite*, 6th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2011), 223: 'Nos anos de 1930 houve sob este apecto uma perda de auréola do Modernismo, proporcional à sua relativa incorporação aos hábitos artísticos e literários.'

62 Candido, *Educação*, 225.

63 Antonio Candido, *Literatura e sociedade*, 9th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2006), 127: 'As nossas *deficiencias*, supostas ou reais, são reinterpretadas como *superioridades*. […] Não se precisaria mais dizer e escrever, como no tempo de Bilac ou do conde Afonso Celso, que tudo aqui é belo e risonho: acentuam-se a rudeza, os perigos, os obstáculos da natureza tropical. O mulato e o negro são definitivamente incorporados como temas de estudo, inspiração, exemplo. O primitivismo é agora fonte de beleza e não mais empecilho à elaboração da cultura. Isso, na literatura, na pintura, na música, nas ciências do homem.'

But no shift is definite. Candido's own slippage in this paragraph between the first-person plural (used in this particular essay in 1953 in an expatriate German-speaking context in Brazil) and the ambiguity of the 'mulatto and the negro' being incorporated *yet set apart from those doing the incorporation* is symptomatic of the problem of elitism that he highlights with greater critical force in his later essay (from 1980) on the cultural dynamic of the 1930s. While modernism's 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière's term *partage du sensible* seems particularly apt here)[64] briefly combined aesthetic and democratic radicalism, the social domain of Brazil remained almost as uneven as before, with the impoverished and illiterate majority remaining virtually untouched by the advent of the New Republic. The cultural transformations of the period, which included the rapid popularisation of samba, a burgeoning interest in Brazil's African heritage and all round a heightened attentiveness among artists and writers to the social world of the 'masses', must therefore be understood as affecting a severely restricted sector of society, that is, the 'white' middle and upper classes. Without diminishing the intrinsic importance of these cultural and intellectual achievements, Candido's analysis nonetheless demonstrates the necessity to view the rebellious and democratic impetus of the period against a broader historical canvas. The 'margin of opposition' among cultural workers was dependent on 'the greater or lesser elasticity of the dominant system's aptitude to tolerate them [the oppositional artists] without disabling their work from exercising its corrosive function'.[65] A powerful illustration of this fundamental contradiction is Cândido Portinari's famous mural at the former Ministry of Education in Rio de Janeiro, which was commissioned by the proto-fascist government in 1937 yet expressive of an anti-authoritarian and anti-racist ethos.

On one level, then, modernism's democratic impetus could be read in a compensatory vein, as a means for the elite, in the context of international economic and cultural rivalry to come to terms with 'the people' and the paradoxes of Brazilian modernity, and in this way be relieved – thanks to the symbolic resolution of conflict – from the burden of substantially changing the power relations that produce these paradoxes. On another level, precisely by decisively and even aggressively expanding the autonomy of aesthetic labour within a restricted field of production, it inaugurates new and unprecedented formal possibilities, the significance of which is not contained exclusively by the political conjuncture of the 1930s or, indeed, of any specific moment, but is in unpredictable ways amenable to future reinscriptions.

The importance of the 1930s as not only Candido's intellectual seedbed but as the consolidation of a new and durable 'cultural contract' in Brazil

64 Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible* (Paris: Fabrique, 2000).

65 Candido, *Educação*, 236: 'A sua margem de oposição vem da elasticidade maior ou menor do sistema dominante, que os pode tolerar, sem que os deixem com isto de exercer a sua função corrosiva.'

is corroborated by Paulo Eduardo Arantes. Drawing on Weber's 'routinisation of charisma', Arantes argues that state institutions such as the new universities (USP most prominently) and São Paulo's municipal Department of Culture absorbed and routinised the charismatic force of the modernism of 1922.[66] Both were necessary, one could say, in order for modernism to gain significance as a new distribution of the sensible: both the aesthetic rebellion of a handful of individuals, and the reinvention of public culture on the back of this rebellion.[67] Hence, Candido's self-inscription in this phase of Brazilian intellectual history is noteworthy not because it individualises a historical process, but because it historicises the individual. He observes the generalisation of regionalism in the fact that a young boy in the 1930s, 'for example in the interior of Minas Gerais' (referring to himself), could travel all across Brazil through the works of Jorge Amado, José Lins do Rego, Abguar Bastos and others: 'It was as if literature had produced for the reader a new and unconventional vision of his country as diverse yet united.'[68] It is this youth, the son of a prominent doctor, springing from the 'petty oligarchy of Minas Gerais' in Roberto Schwarz's phrase, that would enter the fray as a public intellectual in São Paulo, apparently already fully formed, in the early 1940s.[69]

The Little Magazine *Clima*

Candido first entered the public stage in the São Paulo press, particularly by way of the journal *Clima*. This was produced by a small group of young intellectuals – Candido himself was one of the editors – who all would come to enjoy prominent positions in the university system and/or the cultural sphere. Its first issue appeared in May 1941; the fifteenth and final issue appeared in October 1944. The very fact that it could go on publishing throughout the critical years of the Second World War speaks volumes of how Brazil's historical rhythm differs from Europe's. Starting as a self-avowedly non-political journal, devoted to literature, art, music and film – but also, to some degree, science, economics and law – politics enters the pages dramatically with a declaration in issue 11 (July–August 1942), dated 25 August 1942 and co-signed by nine young men (including Candido), just as Brazil entered the

66 Paulo Eduardo Arantes, 'Providências de um crítico literário na periferia do capitalismo', in *Sentido da formação: três estudos sobre Antonio Candido, Gilda de Mello e Souza e Lúcio Costa*, Otília Beatriz Fiori Arantes and Paulo Eduardo Arantes (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1997), 41–3.

67 Rancière, *Le Partage*.

68 Candido, *Educação*, 227: 'Foi como se a literatura tivesse desenvolvido para o leitor uma visão renovada, não convencional, do seu país, visto como um conjunto diversificado mas solidário.'

69 Schwarz, interview.

war on the allied side.[70] Although Vargas's belated decision to support the allies was opportunistic, the declaration in *Clima* is a clear statement by these 'soldiers to be' defining the war as a war against fascism. To dispel the confusion caused by the fact that Brazil is a Latin country with strong historical ties to Italy, the youngsters denationalise the conflict and insist instead that fascism is endemic across the world (they name, notably, Oswald Mosley in Britain as well as fascist movements in the USA, Belgium and France), but most powerfully supported by the governments of Germany, Italy and Spain. They take care at the same time to distance themselves from communism and introduce also a national dimension to their argument by claiming that it is in Brazil's own interest to combat racial ideologies.

We have here, then, a thinly circulating yet prestigious journal that against the intentions of its contributors must engage with the pressing matters of the day – and does so with history on its side. Yet, if we look at Candido's own contributions, the social dimension was never absent. In fact, in his first piece in the inaugural 1941 issue, Candido discusses the task of criticism by way of two possible choices:

> The critic can position himself either in relation to the author or to the complex reality of the author and the environment. I believe I can say the latter is our chosen path. Criticism *sub-specie societatis*? Not quite. In one way or another, however, a type of criticism that refuses to see the author as an autonomous entity; that tries to discern the author's profound connections with the times and with the social group within which he [*sic*] works and creates.
>
> There is however one difficulty that almost makes me lay down my pen before we have begun: the problem of the legitimacy and value of such a critical endeavour in view of the contemporary historical moment. The world is experiencing, under the aegis of disaster, one of its most pressing crises ever. […] And while everyone is wringing their hands over whatever will decide the fate of man, what is the value of the literary work, and what attitude should one adopt in relation to it? Its justification lies in affirming, as far as possible, the individual's conscience [*consciência*] in the face of tragedy as an enduring manifestation of human dignity.[71]

70 The signatories were Lourival Gomes Machado, Alfredo Mesquita, Antônio Branco Lefèvre, Antonio Cândido de Mello e Souza, Décio de Almeida Prado, Marcelo Damy de Sousa Santos, Paulo Emílo Sales Gomes, Roberto Pinto de Sousa and Ruy Galvão de Andrada Coelho.

71 Antonio Candido, 'Livros', *Clima* 1 (May 1941), 108: 'E o crítico pode colocar-se em face do escritor ou em face da realidade complexa escritor-meio. Creio poder dizer que esta é a nossa tendência. Crítica *sub-specie societatis*? Nem tanto. De qualquer maneira, porém, crítica que se nega a ver no autor uma entidade independente; que pretende sentir as suas ligações profundas com o tempo, com o grupo social em função do qual trabalha e cria.

Há uma dificuldade, entretanto, que me faz quasi [*sic*] suspender a pena no início dos nossos trabalhos: o problema da legitimidade e do valor de semelhante tarefa

At the age of 23, this is already the Candido of *Formação* speaking, an impression strengthened by his full-length review, published in issue 2 of *Clima*, of Almir de Andrade's *Formação da sociologia brasileira*. The phrasing in the quotation above is more idealistic than the mature Candido would appreciate, but his fundamental concern with the nexus of literature and society is in place. In a subsequent essay, 'The Novel Has Sold Its Soul', Candido accuses contemporary novelists of having forgotten the specific value of novelistic narrative as a craft and an art, caught as they are between the imperative to use the novel as an instrument to address social problems and the 'scandalous curiosity of modern man, aroused by advertising and sensationalism, and elevated almost to the category of a fundamental need that must be satisfied'.[72] *Littérature engagée* and mass culture are the problem, in other words. But in what can seem like an Adornian twist – he is writing simultaneously with the composition of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* – he insists that he is not calling for a retreat to art for art's sake, which 'morbidly exaggerates the question of form'.[73] Rather, the novel at its best achieves a transformation of whatever material it uses. Referring to writers such as Stendhal and Machado de Assis, Candido states that it is not 'the problem' in focus that makes a novel valuable, but rather how the novelist transposes the problem through plot and attention to detail.

A similar attentiveness to form is evident in his remarkably early 1944 review of the first volume (of the first version) of Fernando Pessoa's complete works, where he reflects on how to make sense of the three heteronyms Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos and Alberto Caeiro plus the author name Pessoa. While the individual struggle with inner conflict normally leads either to a harmonisation or to a pathological fragmentation of the psyche, what is extraordinary about Pessoa is that he evades pathology and manages to write poetry that 'is a miracle issuing from four heads'.[74] His aesthetic assessment is nonetheless balanced, identifying a 'Gongoric flaw' in the 'verbal antics' but also acknowledging 'unprecedented images' and moments when 'poetic

diante do momento histórico. O mundo experimenta, sob o signo da catástrofe, uma das crises mais angustiosas por que tem passados. […] E enquanto todos se crispam diante dos fatos que decidem a sorte do homem, qual o valor da obra literária, e qual a atitude a se tomar em relação com ela? A sua justificativa está em afirmar, até onde lhe for possível a conciência [*sic*] do indivíduo diante da tragédia, como manifestação permanente da dignidade humana. Se, portanto ela continua a existir apesar de tudo, é porque há razão e há necessidade da sua existência.'

72 Antonio Candido, 'O romance vendeu a sua alma', *Clima* 6 (November 1941), 28: 'esta escandalosa curiosidade do homem moderno, excitada pela propaganda e pelo sensacionalismo, e elevada quasi [*sic*] á [*sic*] categoria de necessidade basica [*sic*] a ser satisfeita.'

73 Candido, 'O romance', 29: 'Como já disse, nada tem a vêr com a arte pela arte, que, exagerando morbidamente questões de forma, passa a considerar o meio em vês do fim.'

74 Antonio Candido, 'Livros', *Clima* 15 (October 1944), 65: 'um milagre de quatro cabeças'.

artifice disappears in view of its graceful simplicity'.[75] Candido wrote this long before the full scope of Pessoa's oeuvre became known, which is what makes the review astonishing: Candido exhibits from the very beginning an ability to combine independent aesthetic judgement and historical analysis in a cosmopolitan spirit.

All told, *Clima* has a conspicuously 'world republic of letters' profile, with essays devoted to Proust, British romanticism, French romanticism, Spengler and Kant, North American film, contemporary British poetry, even Chinese poetry, but it is notable that this cosmopolitan horizon feeds into a strong sense of national purpose. The 'engaged' intellectualism of Brazil of which Candido speaks in *Formação* is evident here, as is a feisty, oppositional spirit. Some of its most political material includes an essay (already in 1943) on the viability of a future United Nations (UN), a searing critique of the ideology of racism and a long piece by Pierre Monbeig in the penultimate issue on Algeria, democracy and the resistance. The geographer Monbeig, one of many Frenchmen teaching in Brazil, sees Algeria as a privileged site for French resistance against Hitler and the flowering of a post-war democratic order. He does so, however, without questioning for a moment the *colonial* order of French rule. *La résistance*, he writes, becomes both a patriotic and a democratic force through which the French find themselves in communion with 'other enslaved peoples'.[76] This enables a return to the French democratic tradition, whereby France, 'in Michelet's expression', can serve as a 'pilot of humanity'.[77] Yet, he flatly states that Algeria is not a colony but a French department – in accordance with official French discourse at the time.[78] The contradiction, in what is otherwise a glowing appeal to democracy, is glaring and altogether characteristic not just of the 1940s but of what would become the 'liberal' option in the Algerian conflict.[79] This conspicuous absence of

75 Candido, 'Livros', *Clima* 15, 66: 'Muitas das suas poesias trazem uma tara gongorica que lhes dá um esplendor dourado e difícil de obra rara. As ousadias vocabulares se sucedem, e o poeta segura o idioma com vigor, tirando dêle imagens imprevistas, construções complicadas – as únicas capazes de exprimirem o seu sonho. Outras vezes, entramos em plena seara de João de Deus, clara, escorreita, tão levemente melodiosa que o artifício poético desaparece ante a sua simplicidade cheia da graça.' João de Deus (1830–1896), it should be noted, was a Portuguese poet, known for the unaffected simplicity of his style and regarded by authoritative critics as 'more modern' than any of his contemporaries. See António José Saraiva and Óscar Lopes, *História da literatura portuguesa* (Porto: Porto Editora, 1987), 973–5. Luís de Góngora (1561–1627) was a major Spanish baroque poet.

76 Pierre Monbeig, 'A resistência, Alger e a democracia', trans. Ruy Coelho, *Clima* 14 (September 1944), 25.

77 Monbeig, 'A resistência', 25.

78 Monbeig, 'A resistência', 17.

79 The most famous proponent of this option being Albert Camus, who supported the establishment of democracy with equal rights in Algeria, but without severing ties with France.

anti-colonial perspectives in *Clima* is noteworthy. Racism and fascism are on Candido's and his co-editors' agenda, but not colonialism. His cosmopolitan habitus is directed instead towards Europe and North America, largely in accordance with the imperial 'order of civilisations', which ignored entire swathes of the world's populations and placed them beyond the purview of sovereignty. Monbeig's essay demonstrates such a world view in action.

This alerts us to the peculiar status of the postcolonial order in Brazil and Latin America, where decolonisation in the nineteenth century (with Haiti as the lone exception) consolidated the position of creole elites but perpetuated the repression and silencing of indigenous groups as well as racialised slave (descendant) populations, and maintained an exceptionally uneven ownership of wealth and land.[80] These colonial-derived problems are precisely *not* understood as colonial but as national problems, often coded in terms of miscegenation and uneven development (as in *Os sertões* by Euclides da Cunha). Crucially, the renewed interest in the 1930s in Brazil's colonial past was never connected to *contemporary* instances of colonialism in the world. It is from this historical and intellectual horizon we need to take stock of Candido's brand of radicalism. In the 1940s and 1950s, Candido is far removed from what Robert Young calls 'tricontinentalism' and the anti-colonial surge in Asia and Africa.[81] As was the case for his generation of intellectuals, both left and right, colonialism was a Brazilian – and Portuguese – legacy.[82] Prior to the radicalisation of the 1960s and the rise of *tiers-mondisme* in Brazil – spearheaded by the film-maker Glauber Rocha – it therefore seems that there are few expressions of South–South solidarity in Brazil.

'Underdevelopment'

Moving beyond the moments of *Clima* and *Formação*, it becomes clear that Candido's position in relation to the 'Third World' evolved over time. Combining a *comparative* and a *cumulative* optic, as Arantes puts it, Candido grasped the historical unfolding of 'dual loyalties' that have torn Brazilian writers between the ambition to '*update oneself* to the extent of losing sight of one's local grounding and float around in empty space like a make-believe

80 In Alfredo Bosi's analysis, the very creation of Brazil was the work of a 'plantation bourgeoisie within a system dependent on slavery and agricultural exports' ('burguesia latifundária em um sistema agroexportador e escravista'). Alfredo Bosi, *Literatura e resistência* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2002), 12.

81 Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

82 In the case of Gilberto Freyre, as mentioned earlier, this would lead to an obscene *defence* of Portuguese colonialism, also in twentieth-century Africa, under the banner of 'lusotropicalism'. See, for example, the propagandistic pamphlet produced in Lisbon for an international audience: Gilberto Freyre, *The Portuguese and the Tropics* (Lisbon: The International Congress of the History of the Discoveries, 1961).

European [*europeu postiço*], or align oneself with the falsified position [*posição em falso*] of the country, which is nonetheless the only real one, and turn one's back on the contemporary world'.[83] Importantly, Arantes recodes the geographical problem of literature in temporal terms. As we could see in the case of South Africa, it is *contemporaneity* that is at stake, or rather, the conflict between contemporaneity and the sedimentation of local time. If the perennial dilemma of Brazil had been understood as a lack of a consistent and gradually developing local tradition, it is *the unfolding history of the lack* that becomes increasingly central to Candido's account. Put differently: it is the temporal deficit of 'incompleteness' and 'backwardness' as such that intrigues Candido. But as soon as that is said, it needs to be understood dialectically, as an inroad to the resolutely local quality of Brazilian experience.

'Literature and Underdevelopment', a widely circulated essay, provides a sharp consideration of the temporal deficit, written at the height of repression in Brazil in 1969. Here it is the contemporary condition of possibility for literature in Brazil as well as Latin America generally that is in focus, and the argument is directly relevant to constructions of 'theory from the South'. The instructiveness of the essay in relation to *Formação* lies in its focus not on national autonomy but rather on the world-systemic predicament of 'underdevelopment'. Drawing on Mário Vieira de Mello, Candido notes that the content of Brazilian futurity began to transform in the 1930s. If the main narrative until then had framed Brazil, optimistically, as 'the new country' that hadn't *yet* come into its own but possessed a glorious future, an increasingly influential sense of 'underdevelopment' emerged from the 1940s onwards. In the temporal structure of underdevelopment, the future would not entail transcendence but only – at best – a reduction of differences with the 'advanced world'. This seems to contradict not just Candido's argument about the cultural confidence of the 1930s, but also the successes of Brazilian modernity and modernism in the 1950s and early 1960s. However, it needs to be read as an attempt at tracing retrospectively a subtle shift that could help to account for the reactionary political turn of the 1960s. Candido registers the shift through its national effects, but it had of course world-historical dimensions: 'development' and 'underdevelopment' were key terms in international relations post-1945, at no point more powerfully so than in the 1960s, as noted at the time by, among others, Claude Lévi-Strauss.[84] This was, in other words, a point at which Candido's concerns and those of post-1945 decolonisation met.

Underdevelopment is not all bad. Provocatively, Candido sees it as a reality check. If the previous 'country of the future'-paradigm had been a fantasy that

83 Paulo Eduardo Arantes, 'Providências de um crítico', 32: '*atualizar-se* a ponto de perder de vista a implantação local e girar no vazio como um europeu postiço, ou alinhar com a posição em falso do país, porém a única real, e dar as costas ao mundo contemporâneo', emphasis in the original.

84 Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Anthropology: Its Achievements and Future', *Current Anthropology* 7, no. 2 (1966): 124–7.

compensated for the impoverished grandeur of Brazil ('In America everything is great, only man is small'), the sense of underdevelopment might provoke a political response to the national problems. This leads Candido for the first time to address illiteracy as a key index of Brazilian and Latin American 'backwardness', in terms that would have been relevant to the situation in South Africa at the time:

> In fact, illiteracy is linked to the manifestations of cultural weakness: lack of the means of communication and diffusion (publishers, libraries, magazines, newspapers); the nonexistence, dispersion, and weakness of publics disposed to literature, due to the small number of real readers (many fewer than the already small number of literates); the impossibility, for writers, of specializing in their literary jobs, generally therefore realized as marginal, or even amateur, tasks; the lack of resistance of discrimination in the face of external influences and pressures. The picture of this weakness is completed by such economic and political factors as insufficient levels of remuneration and the financial anarchy of governments, coupled with inept or criminally disinterested educational policies.[85]

But if illiteracy is a *general* feature of underdevelopment, Latin America differs from other 'underdeveloped' regions in so far as two European languages are widely spoken on the continent – languages connected, moreover, to two of the few 'underdeveloped' countries in Europe, Portugal and Spain. A striking remark: this is the first time Candido places Brazil and Latin America in a comparative 'Third World' framework, juxtaposing the predicament of Latin American writers to that of Léopold Senghor and Chinua Achebe, 'doubly separated from their potential publics', given that they are read only in the metropolitan West or by an 'incredibly reduced' local public.[86] In Latin America the *potential* audience is vast, although Candido predicts a bleak future for

85 Antonio Candido, 'Literature and Underdevelopment', in *On Literature and Society*, ed. and trans. Howard S. Becker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 121–2. Antonio Candido, 'Literatura e subdesenvolvimento', in *Educação pela noite* (Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2011), 172: 'Com efeito, ligam-se ao analfabetismo as manifestações de debilidade cultural: falta de meios de comunicação e difusão (editoras, bibliotecas, revistas, jornais); inexistência, dispersão e fraqueza dos públicos disponíveis para a literatura, devido ao pequeno número de leitores reais (muito menor que o número já reduzido de alfabetizados); impossibilidade de especialização dos escritores em suas tarefas literárias, geralmente realizadas como tarefas marginais ou mesmo amadorísticas; falta de resistência ou discriminação em face de influências e pressões externas. O quadro dessa debilidade se completa por fatores de ordem econômica e política, como os níveis insuficientes de remuneração e a anarquia financeira dos governos, articulados com políticas educacionais ineptas ou criminosamente desinteressadas.'

86 Albeit an acknowledgement, the remark also reveals a very superficial acquaintance with Senghor's and Achebe's work. Candido, 'Underdevelopment', 123; Candido, 'Subdesenvolvimento', 174.

'erudite literature': the masses, he says, are embroiled in folkloric culture and oral communication, exchanging rural folklore for the urban folklore of mass culture once they move to the city. His argument – as we already saw in *Clima* – is directed with particular vigour against commodified 'mass culture', which can sound almost quaint in our day. But his reasons for doing so have a political grounding. '[T]here is no point', he writes, 'for the literary expression of Latin America, in moving from the aristocratic segregation of the era of oligarchies to the directed manipulation of the masses in an era of propaganda and total imperialism.'[87]

Candido's strong conception of literature, steeped in Enlightenment values (with a capital 'E'), is put to the test here. Speaking out against 'aristocratic segregation' is in itself a questioning of the legacy of Enlightenment thought in Latin America. With Brazil's Pedro II and the Ateneo group in Venezuela as notable examples, a cult developed around education and the printed word. Castro Alves even imagined 'America' to be the true homeland of print. His poem 'O livro e a America' ('The Book and America') connected Gutenberg's invention of print technology to Columbus's voyage.[88] In Candido's reading, Alves's attempt to claim the imagined glorious future of America as a historical necessity was a disavowal of the conflicted conditions of Latin American literature having largely been written for an imagined ideal audience in Europe. Anticipating Pascale Casanova by several decades, he speaks of writers having produced 'false jewels unmasked by time, much contraband that gave them an air of competitors for some international prize for beautiful writing'.[89] In this way, Candido underlines the uneven and layered aesthetic temporality of the republic of letters:

> All literature presents aspects of backwardness that are *normal* in their way, it being possible to say that the average production of a given moment is already tributary to the past, while the vanguard prepares the future. Beyond this there is an official subliterature, marginal and provincial, generally expressed through the Academies. But what demands attention in Latin America is the way aesthetically anachronistic works were considered valid; or the way secondary works were welcomed by the best critical opinion and lasted for more than a generation – while either should soon have been put in its proper place, as something valueless or the evidence of a harmless survival.[90]

87 Candido, 'Underdevelopment', 125. 'E não há interesse, para a expressão literária da América Latina, em passar da segregação aristocrática da era das oligarquias para a manipulação dirigida das massas, na era da propaganda e do imperialismo total': Candido, 'Subdesenvolvimento', 176.

88 Castro Alves, 'O livro e a América', in *Obra completa*, 76–8.

89 Candido, 'Underdevelopment', 127. Candido, 'Subdesenvolvimento', 179: '[…] muita joia falsa desmascarada pelo tempo, muito contrabando que lhes dá um ar de concorrentes em prêmio internacional em escrever bonito'.

90 Candido, 'Underdevelopment', 128 (translation modified). Candido, 'Subdesenvol-

Candido parts ways with the later model of Casanova in his emphasis on locally grounded legitimacy. 'Anachronism' may be not just legitimate, but the only durable antidote to the extroverted predicament of Latin American literature, which the successes of Jorge Luis Borges, Mário Vargas Llosa, Júlio Cortázar, Juan Rulfo, João Guimarães Rosa or Clarice Lispector demonstrate. Here, Candido is at one with the moment of the Latin American 'boom', but not as a translational phenomenon produced in North America.[91] Rather, what he sees in these writers is a reconfiguration of the aesthetic field that takes the inherent anachronisms of Latin America as its substance and point of departure, rather than anxiously locate the centre of aesthetic gravity elsewhere, in Paris or New York. Of course, such an account needs to be tempered with the reminder that each of the above-mentioned writers (with the exception of Rulfo) led peripatetic, 'cosmopolitan' lives with long sojourns in Europe and North America. Even so, in the context of 'underdevelopment', writers from the 'developed' strata of Latin American societies achieved an enduring connection with the full 'combined and uneven' panorama of their life-worlds. Borges less so, and in Lispector's case it becomes more evident in her late work, but it is emphatically the case with the others.

The Right to Literature

'Literature and Underdevelopment' coincided with Silviano Santiago's 'O entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano', which I quoted at the start of this chapter. Symbolically, this could be seen as a changing of the guards: the young Santiago, backed with the most current French poststructuralist thought (notably Foucault and Derrida), entering the scene to displace Candido's authority and, more importantly, the quest for a sociologically grounded conception of literary form. Contrary to the materialism of Candido's 'literary system', Santiago's project of emancipation sets out to deconstruct the logic of the 'source' and 'origin'. The Brazilian reception of poststructuralism and postmodernism is not my topic here, but I would nonetheless warn against a sequential understanding of these developments. Santiago held Candido

vimento', 180–1: 'Toda literatura apresenta aspectos de retardamento que são *normais* ao seu modo, podendo-se dizer que a média da produção num dado instante já é tributária do passado, enquanto av vanguardas preparam o futuro. Além disso, há uma subliteratura oficial, marginal e provinciana, geralmente expressa pelas Academias. Mas o que chama a atenção na América Latina é o fato de obras secundárias serem acolhidas pela mehlor opinião crítica e durarem por mais de uma geração – quando umas e outras deveriam ter sido desde logo postas no devido lugar, como coisa sem valor ou manifestação de sobrevivência inócua.'

91 And his argument resonates, I must add, with other key theorisations of Latin American literature at the time, not least Angel Rama's.

in high regard, and it is rather the case that poststructuralism unfolded *alongside* other approaches. The São Paulo school, with its materialist reading of literary form, would continue to flourish (to this day) thanks to critics such as Roberto Schwarz, Salete de Almeida Cara, Benjamin Abdala Jr, Walnice Nogueira Galvão, Alfredo Bosi and Maria Elisa Cevasco. The question then becomes how Candido adapted his strong concept of literature to a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

In one of his late essays, 'O direito à literatura' ('The right to literature') from 1988, we can witness this concept being stretched to a breaking point. The reason is obvious: after 'Literature and Underdevelopment', Candido's conception of literature remained fatefully challenged by popular and 'unlettered' culture. If the validity of literature hinged on the desire of 'Brazilians' to have a literature, and if literature was equated with writing, this left out the majority of Brazilians with no stake at all in print culture – a proportion of 'sixty-thousand readers to 110 million inhabitants', as this absurdity was once stated.[92] 'O direito à literatura' was his attempt to square the circle of social justice and aesthetic discrimination. The title is a sign of the times: if human rights discourse had a low profile in the 1960s, it rose sharply in the 1970s and 1980s. A simple ngram search on the term 'human rights' shows a steep and steady ascent from 1972 until the turn of the millennium.[93] The result corroborates Samuel Moyn's identification of the 1970s as the turning point for human rights discourse, but also its depoliticised apotheosis in the post-1989 period as the 'last utopia'.[94] But the local timing is even more important: 1988 marked the end of 24 years of military rule in Brazil, which meant that human rights were no mere theoretical concern.

In the essay, Candido suggests that our age is marked by extreme hypocrisy in relation to the ideal of justice. Never before has it been as technically feasible to achieve social equality. Never before have human rights been so widely proclaimed. Never, in fact, has civilisation been so advanced and so pervasive. And yet, social injustices remain, inequalities are aggravated and barbarism is rife. Both rationality and irrationality are at peak levels. But it is *because* of this situation, in which 'barbarism is directly connected to a maximum level of civilisation', that human rights are being pursued more intensively than ever before.[95] Hypocrisy can therefore be given an optimistic interpretation: contrary to earlier eras, it is no longer possible for leaders to valorise barbaric deeds. Instead, they must be denied or camouflaged, since there has developed at least a minimal consensus concerning the right to human rights.

92 Santiago, *The Space In-Between*, 79. The figure derives from the 1970s. Today, the population has almost doubled.

93 Google books ngram viewer, 23 July 2020.

94 Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

95 Candido, 'O direito', 172: 'uma barbárie ligada ao máximo de civilização.'

Literature enters Candido's argument in two ways. First as an anthropologically generalisable phenomenon: 'all poetic, fictional or dramatic creation at all levels of society and every cultural context, from what we call folklore, legends, jokes, to the most complex and difficult written artifacts of the great civilisations'.[96] In this respect, it is a 'universal manifestation of all human beings throughout the ages', and there is no group of humans anywhere that has lived without 'some form of fabulation'.[97] Calling literature, with a nod to Otto Ranke, 'the waking dream of civilisations', he concludes that it is as essential to the sanity of societies as sleep and dreaming are to the individual.[98]

Although the appeal to the 'universal' is familiar, this is a reversal of Candido's strong concept of literature in *Formação*. In the earlier work, he insisted on a substantive conception – an accumulated density of readers, publishers and writers – whereas here the premise is an anthropological abstraction of literature. 'O direito à literatura' *begins* therefore by claiming the high ground of universality and placing literature outside of national constraints altogether, but does so at the cost of allowing literature to become a weak concept. By adopting 'humanity', 'civilisation', but also 'world' as operative terms, he is attempting to reformulate literature as a value that is not reducible to instrumentalist or rationalist formulae:

> Whether we see this clearly or not, the orderedness of the literary work makes us capable of organising our own feelings and thinking; and, as a consequence, more capable of bringing order to our vision of the world. This is why a hermetic poem that is hard to comprehend and lacks any tangible connection to the reality of the mind or the world, can work to such an effect, by offering a kind of order that suggests a way of overcoming chaos. The literary product pulls the words from nothingness and presents them as an articulate whole. This is the primary humanising level, contrary to what people normally think. The ordering of the word communicates with our spirit and prompts it, first of all, to organise itself; secondly to organise the world. This happens even with the simplest forms, the ditty, the proverb, the fable, that synthesize experience and reduce it to a proposal, a moral, a piece of advice or simply a mental spectacle.[99]

96 Candido, 'O direito', 176: 'todas as criações de toque poético, ficcional ou dramático em todos os níveis de uma sociedade, em todos os tipos de cultura, desde o que chamamos folclore, lenda, chiste, até as formas mais complexas e difíceis da produção escrita das grandes civilizações.'

97 Candido, 'O direito', 176: 'manifestação de todos os homens de todos os tempos', 'alguma espécie de fabulação'.

98 Candido, 'O direito', 177: 'o sonho acordado das civilizações'.

99 Candido, 'O direito', 179: 'Quer percebamos claramente ou não, a caráter de coisa organizada da obra literária torna-se um fator que nos deixa mais capazes de ordenar a nossa própria mente e sentimentos; e, em consequência, mais capazes de organizar a visão que temos do mundo. Por isso, um poema hermético, de entendimento difícil, sem nenhuma alusão tangível à realidade do espírito ou do mundo, pode funcionar neste sentido, pelo fato de ser um tipo de ordem,

It is perhaps never clearer than in this passage that Candido, other similarities notwithstanding, is *not* a Brazilian Bourdieu. Literature is presented here as an irreducible value, far exceeding the specifics of print publication and position-taking. But it is also clear that Candido is attempting to reconcile two imperatives: social justice and what we might call literary justice. His materialist instincts do not abandon him here – he is fully outspoken about poverty and the abuse of power. He refuses nonetheless to abandon quality as a criterion for literary judgement. As Maria Sílvia Betti puts it, his unwavering insistence on the importance of so-called erudite literature derives from the fact that a 'greater aesthetic effectiveness and more complex expressive resources' has a more thoroughgoing 'humanising potential'.[100] In other words, the structural reduction of form, which Candido sees operating in the shortest of jokes as well as the longest of novels, is directly connected to his conception of human society as an unfinished project. But because of the complexity of that project, it is also the more complex aesthetic forms that deserve special attention and whose dissemination needs to be supported in a democratic society. Indeed, literature itself has contributed substantially to the very idea of human rights. Candido mentions how 'the poor' enter literature through the work of Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens, but also how Castro Alves brought slavery to the readership's awareness. Not unlike Lynn Hunt in her historical account of human rights, Candido grants literature a privileged role in the historical and, indeed, global emergence of egalitarian ideals.[101]

The contradiction between equality and quality is of course not *resolved* in this essay. But the structure of the argument is no less important for all that. By engaging rights discourse (as Homi Bhabha would later do with his coinage of the 'right to narrate'),[102] Candido reconfigures the strong concept of literature to position it – just as neoliberal instrumentalism was on the rise – as an essential component of an emergent democracy. The temporal logic of this 'right' is proleptic: it speaks to the present by anticipating a possible future. But this is *not* a teleology of the future anterior ('it *will* have been') – instead, it is an open future in which the right to literature enables the continued, dialectical and above all unpredictable labour of making society inhabitable and more just. In one of his last public appearances, at the age

sugerindo um modelo de superação do caos. A produção literária tira as palavras do nada e as dispõe como todo articulado. Este é o primeiro nível humanizador, ao contrário do que geralmente se pensa. A organização da palavra comunica-se ao nosso espírito e o leva, primeiro, a se organizar; em seguida, a organizar o mundo. Isto ocorre desde as formas mais simples, como a quadrinha, o provérbio, a história de bichos, que sintetizam a experiência e a reduzem a sugestão, norma, conselho ou simples espetáculo mental.'

100 Maria Sílvia Betti, 'Sobre "O direito à literatura", de Antonio Candido', *Literatura e Sociedade* 30 (2019): 59.

101 Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007).

102 This has long been a theme in Homi Bhabha's work, and his long-awaited book with that title remains forthcoming.

of 90, Candido explicitly addressed accusations that he was a proponent of 'Enlightenment' values:

> I consider this reprimand to be the highest praise. It means that I remain loyal to the tradition of Western humanism as it was shaped from the eighteenth century onwards, according to which man is a being capable of perfection, and that society can and shall adopt measures to improve social and economic conditions, having as its horizon the achievement of the highest possible level of social and economic equality and of harmony in human relations. Our present moment seems to doubt or even deny this possibility, and there is generally little faith in utopias. But the important thing is not whether the ideal goals are reachable, fully and concretely. What counts is that we dispose ourselves *as though* we could reach them, because this may impede or at least attenuate the proliferation of the worst in ourselves and in our society.[103]

Provocative though the emphasis on *Western* humanism (and on Western *humanism*) can seem today, I think we at this stage can read the statement not as a conservative attachment to a fixed set of values, but as an unwavering commitment to historical change, and to the interpretation of that change, in the service of a justice always yet-to-come. To contemplate these words today, in the era of the extreme-right takeover in Brazil, is doleful, to say the least.

Afterthoughts: Of Négritude and Literature in Brazil

But Candido himself, and the São Paulo school, must ultimately themselves be historicised. Candido's 1988 essay appeared on the cusp of a new period of democracy – or democratisation, rather – as well as on the centenary of abolition in Brazil. His principled broadening of the scope of literature chimes with the new democratic spirit, but it is notable that his engagement with *actual* texts in the essay does not extend the domain of literature.

Ten years previously, in 1978, a slim anthology of poetry entitled *Cadernos negros* appeared in São Paulo. Drawing inspiration from African decolonisation

103 Quoted in Salete de Almeida Cara, 'Percurso histórico-estético da ideia de formação', *Literatura e sociedade* 30 (2019): 45: '[C]onsidero esta restrição como um elogio. Ela quer dizer que me mantenho fiel à tradição do humanismo ocidental definida a partir do século XVIII, segundo a qual o homem é um ser capaz de aperfeiçoamento, e que a sociedade pode e deve definir metas para melhorar as condições sociais e econômicas, tendo como horizonte a conquista do máximo possível de igualdade social e econômica e de harmonia nas relações. O tempo presente parece duvidar e mesmo negar essa possibilidade, e há em geral pouca fé nas utopias. Mas o que importa não é que os alvos ideais sejam ou não atingíveis, concretamente na sua sonhada integridade. O essencial é que nos disponhamos a agir como se pudéssemos alcançá-los, porque isso pode impedir ou ao menos atenuar o afloramento do que há de pior em nós e em nossa sociedade.'

and Black Atlantic intellectual formations – notably négritude – this collection challenged the silencing of black writers in the Brazilian literary field; it would lead in 1980 to the formation of the Quilombhoje, a São Paulo-based activist group of black writers and artists. Although new *Cadernos* have continued to appear annually ever since, 'becoming increasingly prominent in their endeavour to promote black Brazilian writers and break the "publishers blockade" against this work', their example was not invoked by Candido, despite their obvious relevance to the complex matter of literature and human rights.[104]

To be fair, the problem is a much broader one in Brazil, as noted by the Portuguese scholar Pires Laranjeira:

> In the books by Alfredo Bosi, Antonio Candido, José Aderaldo Castelo, Massaud Moisés and others one encounters, if anything at all, merely scant references to specific black authors, who also fail to show up in the circuits of literary distribution and critical legitimation: whatever happened to Carolina de Jesus, Luiz Gama, Solano Trindade, Oliveira Silveira, Cuti, Éle Semog or Conceição Evaristo? A book or two with a second-rate publisher, a book analysed in a course at university or a regional college, a national edition once every 20 years, a certain level of fame in the world of song lyrics (as in the case of Nei Lopes) or obscurity pure and simple, such is the fate, even today, of black Brazilian writers.[105]

But this is precisely why Candido's omission can seem so puzzling. As Medeiros da Silva argues, it is Candido's *own* theoretical conception of the literary system that can enable an analysis of the position of black writers in Brazil. Their marginality, that is to say, must be understood as *constitutive* of their literary production, just as Candido saw 'underdevelopment' as constitutive of Brazilian literature.[106] In addition, Silva's study also makes clear that Candido had *registered* the existence of contemporary black writers, but little

104 Nazareth Soares Fonseca, '*Cadernos negros*: sobre a história da coleção', *Afro-Hispanic Review* 29, no. 2 (2010): 55: 'um lugar de destaque entre as publicações destinadas a tornar mais visíveis a produção literária que pretendia mostrar os textos de escritores negros brasileiros e furar o "bloqueio editorial" a essas produções.'

105 João Pires Laranjeira, 'A poesia "é-sou" negra', *Acta Scientiarium. Language and Culture* 32, no. 1 (2010): 36: 'Não encontrarão, nos livros de Alfredo Bosi, Antonio Candido, José Aderaldo Castelo, Massaud Moisés e outros senão parcas ou nulas referências a certos escritores negros, que nem sequer aparecem condignamente nos circuitos literários de distribuição e legitimação de fortunas críticas e fiduciárias: *cadê* Carolina de Jesus, Luiz Gama, Solano Trindade, Oliveira Silveira, Cuti, Éle Semog ou Conceição Evaristo? Um ou outro livro saído numa editora secundária, um livro analisado num curso universitário ou num vestibular regional, uma edição nacional a cada 20 anos, alguma fama em letras de canções (como acontece com Nei Lopes) ou simplesmente a obscuridade, eis o destino, até à data, dos escritores negros brasileiros.'

106 Mário Augusto Medeiros da Silva, *A descoberta do insólito: literatura negra e literatura periférica no Brasil (1960–2000)* (Diss., Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2011), 51–2.

more than that. The silence and general neglect with which Afro-Brazilian writers long were treated, alerts us therefore to a fault line between two conceptions of literature among the intellectual left in Brazil – the dominant one organised according to a national–universal dialectic (comprising also cultural hierarchies), the emergent one attuned to the hierarchies of racialisation. If, in the human rights essay, Candido saw 'folklore' and 'popular literature' as an aspect of literature, *Cadernos negros* would have presented him with recognisably 'erudite' literature – criticised by other Afro-Brazilian activists for being merely a 'bourgeois distraction'[107] – yet a form of literature that resisted absorption into the dominant conception of national Brazilian literature. The question is a complex one, given that canonised writers such as the black Cruz e Sousa and the *mestiço* Machado de Assis have indeed been central in the Brazilian canon. Even the modernist Mário de Andrade has been claimed as black, although not without controversy.[108] But the prominence of such writers – if their racial positioning had been taken into account at all – would previously have been taken as evidence of the *non-racial* nature of Brazilian society. *Cadernos*, Quilombhoje and the work of writer-intellectuals such as Cuti who self-identify as black issued in this way a challenge to Candido's foundational formulation of the 'desire to have a literature'.[109] The appearance of *Cadernos* in 1978 manifests such a desire for which *national* literature in Brazil rather than European literature presents itself as the big Other. It offered an alternative 'formation' not reducible to the procedures of methodological nationalism, but presupposing a transnational/cosmopolitan intellectual horizon shaped by the Harlem Renaissance, négritude, the work of Frantz Fanon, but also a Brazilian lineage of marginalised black writing – including Abdias do Nascimento's journal *Quilombo* (1948–1950), which was fully in tune with international developments among black writers and activists.[110] This is therefore a point where the conceptual temporalities of literature in Brazil twist and turn, and it becomes clear that African and diasporic criticism is, in this specific sense, far ahead of the game. Schwarz's pronouncement on the 'worldwide state of the art' in literary theory in the 1960s as being an exclusively western European and North American affair expresses a de facto disavowal of this development.[111] Put differently, Schwarz's comment is beholden to a particular version of literary time that, for all the sophistication of his critical take on its dynamic of dominance and peripherality, failed to register the twentieth-century articulation of a new regime of literary relevance within the Black Atlantic. It is in this regard ironic that the instant canonisation of Paulo Lins's 1997 novel *Cidade de Deus* (*City of*

107 Leonardo Nascimento, 'A força literária e política de *Cadernos negros*, que completam 40 anos em 2018', *Pernambuco* 145 (March 2018): 15.
108 Medeiros da Silva, *A descoberta*, 112–13.
109 Candido, *Formação*.
110 Medeiros da Silva, *A descoberta*, 52.
111 Schwarz, 'Antonio Candido 1918–2017'.

God) was due not least to Schwarz's enthusiastic review in *Folha de São Paulo*.[112] A more generous reading, however, is that this review was one moment when the temporalities of canonical literature and black writing merged, producing new future possibilities for the formation of Brazilian literature.

112 Schwarz, *Sequências*, 200–10.

CHAPTER THREE

Léopold Senghor's Performative Criticism

The example of the São Paulo critics' failure to recognise the implications of négritude for Brazilian literature shows how Africa – understood metonymically – presents a distinct challenge to the worlding of literature, an observation further confirmed by the belatedness of the Africanist turn in South Africa. This resistance to incorporating 'Africa' within the concept of 'literature' has, as we have seen, numerous dimensions. For Tim Couzens, overcoming this resistance was a material and methodological challenge – the archive needed to be constructed before it could be consulted. In material terms, moreover, the access to print technology and book markets remained, in absolute terms, extremely limited in most African contexts in the post-1945 decades, and the wider circulation of African writing was, accordingly, reduced.

But the absence of Africa and Africans from the semantic field covered by the concept of literature was not just a matter of material constraints or linguistic limitations. As has been discussed famously by V.Y. Mudimbe and others, there was a deeper Eurocentric philosophical heritage that, to begin with, *fabricated* 'the idea of Africa'.[1] This was a primary step: there is nothing natural or given in the category 'Africa'. The category was then defined negatively by excluding Africa and its inhabitants from the circle of human civilisation. The racial dimension of the conceptual history of 'Africa' is undeniable, as is the symbolic burden of defining Africa as a continent without writing. Given the strong association in the post-enlightenment era of writing with reason, this negativity tended to shape racial perceptions also of diasporic Africans.[2] The marginalisation of Afro-Brazilian writers is directly attributable to this baleful tradition.

1 V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 38–70; V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

2 Henry Louis Gates Jr, 'Introduction: Writing "Race" and the Difference it Makes',

In brief, then, in the twentieth-century history of the conceptual worlding of literature, a tremendous pressure builds around the position of 'Africa' – and of those writers associated with Africa – in literary critical discourses, as has been accounted for in classic studies by Lilyan Kesteloot and Abiola Irele, among others. The final chapters of this book will therefore examine two regionally and linguistically distinct interventions in this historical process whereby 'Africa' and African subjects enter the transnational semantics of literature. Léopold Senghor's Dakar-based activities and the decolonial critical discourse that evolved in Nairobi and East Africa – most famously through Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work – are often seen as polar opposites. Through my world literary take on decolonisation, however, I hope to provide an understanding that reads them not in terms of a political binary but as distinct and internally contradictory attempts at bringing literary critical discourse to bear on African concerns.

Senghor is often located on the margins of critical debates today. Even so, his wide-ranging achievements – often encapsulated in the term 'négritude' – are an obvious and necessary place from which to begin taking stock of the conceptual transformation of literature. But already the juxtaposition of 'négritude' and 'literature' requires further consideration. If we agree that literature is an elusive concept, négritude can seem to be cut-and-dried. Intimately associated with Senghor and Aimé Césaire – two of the twentieth century's most influential thinkers – négritude clearly has a beginning in the 1930s and an end of sorts in the 1970s. Yet, even if we accept such a description, which frames négritude as a historically specific cultural and political intervention in the waning years of territorial colonialism, it is not as easy to pin down the exact meaning of the term. Having emerged among emigré students and intellectuals in 1930s Paris, with Césaire being the first on record to use the term in writing, there is no *single* text or moment that defines it once and for all. Reiland Rabaka privileges Léon Damas, the third name often mentioned among négritude's originators, as the prime mover – yet Damas himself did not at first employ the term.[3] Conversely, it is often the non-negritudinist Jean-Paul Sartre's debatable interpretation in his preface to Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* ('Orphée noir'), that is taken as a starting point for appraisals of négritude.[4] 'A kiss of death',

in *'Race', Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 1–20.

3 Reiland Rabaka, *The Negritude Movement: W.E.B. Du Bois, Léon Damas, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and the Evolution of an Insurgent Idea* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 89–148. The first textual occurrence of the word is ascribed to Aimé Césaire, who used it in *L'Étudiant noir* in 1935. See Lilyan Kesteloot, *Les Écrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature*, 3rd ed. (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1965).

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Orphée noir', in *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, ed. Léopold Senghor (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), ix–xliv.

according to one observer, Sartre's reduction of négritude to an anti-racist racism was poorly attuned to Senghor's thinking.[5] Rather than a semantically unified philosophical or cultural concept, it therefore seems motivated to consider négritude as a word that mobilised a cluster of related experiences and aspirations among French imperial subjects from Africa and the Antilles – but also as a conceptual lever allowing a radical French intellectual such as Sartre to articulate his anti-colonial stance. Négritude connects, moreover, to a much wider history of Black Atlantic exchanges – as Rabaka and many others point out – but the controversies it caused is also an argument in favour of the concept's relative distinctiveness.

The assertive account of négritude first established by Lilyan Kesteloot in her classic study *Les Écrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature* (1961) remains broadly in place even 60 years later: sparked by the *Revue du monde noir* and the manifesto *Légitime défense*, inspired by French surrealism, consolidated by *L'Étudiant noir* in 1935 and, later, by *Tropiques* and *Présence africaine* in the 1940s and 1950s, négritude crystallised a transnational, anti-colonial network of black writers and facilitated the emergence of a new literature in the modern world – as indicated by Kesteloot's subtitle 'the birth of a literature'. Connected to this narrative is the conventional distinction between the political négritude of Césaire and the more philosophical version of Senghor, but also the recent reappraisal of key contributions of women in the group such as Suzanne Césaire and, not least, the Nardal sisters, who were instrumental in introducing Harlem Renaissance writing in a French context.[6]

The contrasting, largely but not exclusively anglophone, counter-narrative is just as familiar: négritude offered an alienated and romanticising conception of African and black cultures. Es'kia Mphahlele's attack on Senghorian négritude as 'just so much intellectual talk, a cult' in the first edition of *The African Image* set the tone for a number of dismissals that have appeared across the decades, also by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, to whom we will turn in the next chapter.[7] John Lamola has offered one of the most recent and philosophically ambitious critiques in this vein, arguing that Senghor

5 Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude*, trans. Chike Jeffers (London: Seagull, 2011), 29.

6 See, for instance, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002); Jennifer Anne Boittin, 'In Black and White: Gender, Race Relations, and the Nardal Sisters in Interwar Paris', *French Colonial History* 6 (2005): 119–35; Emily Musil Church, 'In Search of Seven Sisters: A Biography of the Nardal Sisters of Martinique', *Callaloo* 36, no. 2 (2103): 376–90.

7 Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele, *The African Image* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 40. It is worth noting that Bachir Diagne traces the key themes of the critique of négritude back to the 1940s – to Gabriel d'Arboussier's Marxist dismissal in *La Nouvelle critique* in 1949 and, ironically, to Sartre's 'Orphée noir'. Diagne, *African Art*, 18.

championed 'an adventurist cultural theory that advocates the cross-fertilisation and symbiosis of colonial and postcolonial cultural systems without questioning the globalistic assumptions of the former'.[8] It is possible to garner evidence in Senghor's work for such an assessment, but here we must pause: rather than confirm Mphahlele's early critique, which read négritude as a notional separation of black culture from all European and modern influences, Lamola laments instead what he sees as Senghor's embrace of creolisation. Indeed, the thrust of Mphahlele's original argument was in *favour* of cultural 'cross-fertilisation' in urbanised 'multi-racial' societies – which he claimed was lacking in Senghorian négritude. This contradiction between two instances of critique is telling: my own belated, intensive engagement with Senghor has taught me that he is a far too elusive, versatile and sometimes disturbing thinker to be pinned down to one position. The realisation that his understanding of négritude was, in Jane Hiddleston's phrase, 'more complex, and more eclectic, than is sometimes assumed by critics', has also enabled important reconsiderations of Senghor in the English-speaking circuit over the years, for example by Abiola Irele, the later Mphahlele and, more recently, Rabaka, Gary Wilder and Ruth Bush.[9] Hiddleston's observation that Senghor's thinking changes with time is particularly helpful.[10] His sprawling work should, in other words, be read as multiple attempts to address the overarching problem of African modernity, or more precisely, of Africa *in* modernity. In so far as Western-dominated modernity in the mid-twentieth century was premised (among other things) on the primitivist negativity of Africa as non-modernity, this could not be anything but a contradictory task for Senghor and his contemporaries. And yet, taking the long view, it must be acknowledged that his work was one crucial component in the discursive struggle to change that very conception of Africa. Given his own embeddedness in French culture, it became a matter of personal survival for Senghor to keep a notion of African difference in play – yet his own example demonstrated that the difference was neither static nor absolute. It is on this basis that my discussion here also resonates with Wilder's ambition to read négritude not as an outright failure, but as a sustained and temporally multidirectional attempt by Césaire and Senghor

8 Malesela John Lamola, 'Senghor, Globalism and Africanity', *Phronimon* 17, no. 2 (2016): 52.

9 Jane Hiddleston, *Decolonising the Intellectual: Politics, Culture, and Humanism at the End of the French Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 42; Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Ruth Bush, *Publishing Africa in French: Literary Institutions and Decolonization 1945–1967* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016). To this list could be added the Swedish critic Mikela Lundahl's reappraisal of négritude, *Vad är en neger? Negritude, essentialism, strategi* (Göteborg: Glänta, 2005).

10 Hiddleston, *Decolonising*, 38–70.

to inscribe the black subject in the narrative of modernity – and hence to 'deprovincialize Africa and the Antilles'.[11]

Négritude is not the central topic of this chapter, however. This is important to note. The concept attaches inescapably to Senghor, but my interest lies rather in the innovations of his critical practice, which pioneered – I argue – an inconclusive yet radical and largely unacknowledged resemanticisation of 'literature' with implications for critical discourses on four continents. There is a surprising dearth of commentary on Senghor's conception of literature, perhaps because it is taken for granted, or because the terms he uses – 'poetry' and 'art' above all – move in the direction of a more general aesthetic philosophy. Yet his work contributes significantly to the worlding of the concept of literature, and this is also where this book's threads of literary time, place and language coil around one another: without Senghor, to put it bluntly, no 1977 Congress of Black Cultures in Colombia, no *Cadernos negros* in São Paulo in 1978, and no emergent challenge to the white Brazilian literary establishment. And yet, the significance of Senghor and Césaire was ignored by the central São Paulo critics, whose work in other respects was methodologically more advanced than, say, their South African counterparts in the 1950s and 1960s. Even more to the point, if Candido, in his reading of Castro Alves, recognised the radicality – in its time and creole social setting – of making Africans the *topic* of literature, Senghor contributed decisively to the gradual twentieth-century recognition of Africans (continental and diasporic) as *producers* of literature, a matter never quite addressed by Candido, his brief remarks on Senghor and Achebe notwithstanding. The fact that the authority of this recognition accrued from and to the main imperial, European languages rather than African idioms defines of course its stakes in coloniality. (There would be other stories to tell about Yoruba, Amharic or Swahili literatures, for example, with different structures of recognition.) But the modes of worlding I am tracing in this book are necessarily complicit with imperial histories, and it is from this complicity that their decolonising potential derives. Négritude needs in this respect to be read as an *immanent* critique within the francosphere, serving to expose and transform the implicit racial coding of the Western conception of literature.

The relationship between literature and négritude is far from straightforward, however. While the most enduring manifestations of négritude as a movement were distinctly literary – I'm thinking in particular of Césaire's *Cahier*, the 1948 *Anthologie* and Senghor's collections of poetry – its emergence was social, its motivation political and its claims existential. As we can see in the variety of topics addressed in the journal *Présence africaine*, which dealt with anything from economic theory to linguistics, négritude was never a theory of literature per se, yet it undoubtedly galvanised attempts at decolonising literature from within a francophone horizon. In addition, the

11 Wilder, 10.

influential narrative established by Kesteloot decisively yoked négritude and literature together. As among others Papa Samba Diop and Claire Ducournau have pointed out, this had the effect in France of dating and placing the beginnings of African literature to 1930s Paris, thereby eclipsing earlier works that had appeared in West Africa – also in other languages than French.[12] The point is powerfully confirmed by Tobias Warner's remarkable excavation of Senegalese literary history in *The Tongue-Tied Imagination*, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The privileging of négritude as the 'birth of a literature' is not just a simple scholarly oversight, however. Instead, it returns us to the recursive nature of critical practice, which both approaches literature as an object of study and constitutes this object at the same time. To *recognise* négritude as the birth of a literature implies already, in other words, a particular understanding of literature as a pluralised phenomenon within a common language (French). In a further twist, however, I am also claiming that Senghor's implicit conception of literature exceeds négritude – literature becomes instead a flexible domain of poetic immediacy as well as of multilingual cultural heritages. If many of his explicit statements on négritude can be read as essentialising, the performance of his criticism had the opposite effect on the conception of literature: it challenged the exclusivity of French and Western claims on the concept. In Senghor's writings, literature emerges as a fungible and translatable resource whose central relevance resides in its intersubjective and self-transcending dimensions. There is no absolute cultural opacity that prohibits literature from functioning as a site of encounter across differences. This, I will be arguing, is Senghor's de-essentialising wager, which ultimately derives from his view of language as a transferable skill. On the other hand, achieving such an encounter across differences through literature requires highly specific labour as well as structural preconditions of which the elite reader Senghor was a manifestation and that did not prevail in Senegal or elsewhere in West Africa except for a minute minority. These objective limitations to his thinking must be acknowledged, even as we attempt to retrieve some of its productive potential.

The primary material for this chapter consists mainly of the first and third of Senghor's *Liberté* volumes. Although appearing years apart, these volumes – the fifth and final of which was published in 1993 – are thematically and not just chronologically organised. The first, subtitled *Négritude et humanisme* (1964), contains texts with a literary and aesthetic focus dating from 1937 to 1964. The second, *Nation et voie africaine du socialisme* (1971), has a political slant, although the majority of pieces were written in the 1950s, before Senghor became president. The third, *Négritude et Civilisation de l'Universel* (1977), is once again more involved with literary and cultural matters, covering the decade from 1963 to 1974. The generic and thematic range we find in

12 Claire Ducournau, *La Fabrique de classiques africains* (Paris: CNRS, 2017), 90; Papa Samba Diop, *Archéologie littéraire du roman sénégalais* (Frankfurt: IKO, 1995).

these 'occasional' texts is very much a part of my argument. We witness here how Senghor, in prefaces, public speeches, reviews, eulogies, philosophical essays and lectures adopts a number of different speaking positions that tend to have a strongly performative function. In my selection I will focus on two of their interrelated aspects: the cosmopolitan and generic hospitality of Senghor's literary attention, and the politics of temporality in his anti-essentialist conception of language and multilingualism (beyond francophonie). Taken together, we can see here the emergence not of a fully coherent body of thought, but of a criticism that endorsed modes of strategic improvisation in order to open future possibilities for literature. Such an assessment of Senghor may sound counter-intuitive to those who have already pigeonholed him as only an assimilated Frenchman, in which case part of my purpose will already have been fulfilled.

My choice to read this as 'performative criticism' requires a brief explanation: if, in Austin's speech act theory, performativity is a function of language that causes (or is meant to cause) something to change in the world – as opposed to making truth claims – then this draws attention both to Senghor's shifting rhetorical ethos and to the transformative potential of his literary thinking. Performativity does not occur in a vacuum. In the aesthetic field, the modernist manifesto is one of the most obvious performative genres of criticism – but the effectivity of a manifesto depends entirely on when and where it appears, and on who presents it. In more conventional social terms, only certain individuals (to use one of Austin's examples) are vested with the authority to make the statement, 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*.' This means that the force of words derives as much from the speaker and the context as from the words themselves. As Austin explains, 'it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*'.[13] Hence, the force of Senghorian performativity derived from his embeddedness in French institutions and the Senegalese state apparatus, as well as from his stature as poet. Conversely, the weaknesses of this performativity was an index of the precarious institutional conditions under which he laboured; performativity, that is to say, can be read as an attempt to bring the unprecedented into being, including an Africa-centred mode of literary criticism. In methodological terms, this requires an alertness not only to the immediate semantic content of Senghor's essays, but also to how his 'role-playing' attempted to suture current conditions with prospective possibilities.[14]

The importance of Dakar (besides Paris) as an enabling location for Senghorian criticism can hardly be overstated. Along with the other three *communes de plein exercice* (Gorée, Rufisque and Saint-Louis) in colonial Senegal, Dakar belonged to the only region in all of French West Africa

13 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 8, emphasis in the original.

14 Hiddleston, *Decolonising*, 38.

where France's 'avowed policy of assimilation was put into real practice'.[15] This already goes some way towards explaining the appeal of négritude for Senghor as a mode of cultural resistance to assimilation. It also indicates how the relative colonial privilege of Dakar – plus its fortuitous geographical location – could translate into a strategic advantage after independence as a node for intellectual and cultural initiatives. Comparatively speaking, its foothold in the transnational networks of publishing and higher education was more tenuous than Johannesburg's or São Paulo's at the time. Yet, seen from a West African perspective, Dakar, along with Ibadan in Nigeria, played a leading regional role that mirrored to some extent Nairobi at the eastern end of the continent. During his term as president, Senghor actively reinforced this role through his statist emphasis on institution-building. This was indeed of a piece with the early independence era's decolonising optimism, but nowhere else on the continent was culture as prominently foregrounded. According to one estimate, as much as 25 per cent of the state budget in Senegal was spent on culture in the early years of independence.[16] The grandest manifestation of this cultural optimism was the First World Festival of the Negro Arts in Dakar in 1966, which was a personal triumph for Senghor.[17] At the same time, his elitist tendency was increasingly criticised also in Senegal by Ousmane Sembène and others. Senghor's involvement in institution-building, which included the founding of the Cheikh Anta Diop University (CADU, initially the University of Dakar), occurred therefore in an ambivalent zone of precarity, contestation and residual colonial privilege. At the inauguration of the university in December 1959, in an uncanny echo of the founding of USP three decades earlier (with its imported French faculty), Senghor flatly stated that this was a French university: 'With its four faculties, it is built on the model of French universities; it is the eighteenth French university. […] It teaches above all the French genius: clarity and rigour, the spirit of refinement alongside the spirit of geometry.'[18] But this prepared the ground for Senghor's performative counter-statement that the university must not only serve Africa by relocating French epistemologies, but even more by creating new African chairs and disciplines under inspiration from 'Negro-African sociology and linguistics, as well as

15 Dorothy S. Blair, *Senegalese Literature: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), preface, n. p.

16 Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

17 David Murphy (ed.), *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966: Contexts and Legacies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

18 Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté 1: Négritude et humanisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1962), 295: 'Avec ses quatre facultés, elle est bâtie sur l'exemple des universités françaises; elle est la dix-huitième université française. […] On y enseigne surtout le génie français: la clarté et la rigueur, l'esprit de finesse à côte de l'esprit de géometrie.' My translation here and elsewhere in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated.

Arab language and culture' that 'are already being taught'.[19] As so often in Senghor's writing, the rhetoric of an axiomatic equality between all human cultures – and hence an unwavering insistence on human dignity – is invoked to counter the humiliating objective inequality of the French–African relation. His various and sometimes damaging disagreements with Cheikh Anta Diop, Sembène and other Senegalese intellectuals notwithstanding, the limited field of cultural and literary studies stood largely to benefit from his policies.[20] The 1963 Dakar colloquium on French-language African literature, which enjoys a mythical status of almost the same proportions as the anglophone Makerere conference in 1962, is testimony both to this cultural flourishing and to Senghor's influence in shaping it.[21]

Extending and Recoding Literature

A lecture held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 1973, offers a key example of Senghor's attempts at cultivating African literary criticism. His assessment of the situation was bleak: 'Since the year of independence, since 1960, and also before then, Negro-African writers and artists have created poetry, novels, painting and sculpture afresh. But criticism has apparently stayed put on the banks of the Seine, where it continues to employ the methods of the nineteenth century.'[22] Senghor had, however, detected the stirrings of a 'new criticism' (*une nouvelle critique*) especially at Yaoundé, which might offer 'a new method, a new vocabulary, a new style'.[23] This did not necessitate, he insisted, a rejection of new Euroamerican criticism, considering 'its debts to Negro-African

19 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 295: 'Dejá sont enseignées la sociologie et la linguistique négro-africaine, la langue et la civilisation arabes.'

20 One may note parenthetically that Lilyan Kesteloot, invited by Senghor to take up a position at CADU in 1971, played a strategic role in this context as an intellectual ally of négritude whose trajectory as an Africanised European neatly inverted and complemented Senghor's own path towards becoming a Europeanised African. See also Hiddleston, *Decolonising*, and Warner, *The Tongue-Tied Imagination*, for more on the discontents of the Senegalese intellectual field at the time.

21 Université de Dakar, *Actes du colloque sur la littérature africaine d'expression française* (Dakar: Publications de la faculté des lettres et sciences humaines, 1965); Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ, *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

22 Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté 3: Négritude et civilisation de l'Universel* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 427: 'Depuis de l'année des indépendances, depuis 1960, et même avant, les écrivains et artistes négro-africains ont crée une nouvelle poésie, un nouveau roman, une nouvelle peinture, une nouvelle sculpture. Mais la critique, au premier abord, est restée sur les bords de la Seine, où elle continue d'employer les méthodes du XIXe siècle.'

23 Senghor, *Liberté 3*, 427: 'une nouvelle méthode, un nouveau vocabulaire, un nouveau style.'

epistemology, especially in the realm of art', but it was nonetheless necessary to 'actively assimilate' the Western model on African terms.[24]

In this brief discourse, Senghor polemicises against the positivist scientific model that he identifies with nineteenth-century criticism, and advocates instead a subjectively engaged and engaging model of reading:

> To be an expression of truth, criticism must therefore be human in the sense that it involves one person's judgement of a work and, by extension, of another person. It is the meeting of one sensibility and imagination with another sensibility and imagination. It is a matter of a reciprocal *attachment* [*saisie*] of the one with the other: the flash of creative intuition and the clarity of style at one and the same time.
>
> An attachment to what? To the writer in his [*sic*] environment, as one says today, historically and geographically, sociologically, but essentially psychologically and, ultimately, morally. You will have understood, moreover, that beyond the artist and the criticism, there are the people who reread them, who nourish them, and are nourished by them. But the artist, even when rooted in a continent, an ethnicity, a society, is above all a man who, in a human movement of freedom, exceeds material and indeed moral determinations.
>
> Hence the necessity of an originary attachment between the involved parties: between the critic and the artist, the critic and the people, and among all three. I speak of a connection of minds, but above all between temperament and temperament, between heart and heart: soul [*âme*]! I say *soul*, as do our Negro-American brothers.[25]

From the remote banks of the Seine to the beating of the heart: this discursive pathway is fully characteristic of Senghor's reasoning. So is his androcentrism:

24 Senghor, *Liberté 3*, 427: 'elle n'est pas sans devoir quelque chose à l'épistémologie négro-africaine, singulièrement la critique de l'art. Loin d'ignorer cette critique du XXe siècle, il nous faut l'assimiler activement.'

25 Senghor, *Liberté 3*, 428, emphases in the original: 'C'est dire que la critique, pour être l'expression de la vérité, doit être humaine puisqu'il s'agit d'un homme jugeant une oeuvre et, par-delá celle-ci, un autre homme. C'est la rencontre d'une sensibilité et d'une imagination avec une autre sensibilité et une autre imagination. C'est une *saisie* réciproque de l'un par l'autre: le coup de foudre de l'intuition imaginante et l'éclair du style en même temps. Saisie de quoi? De l'écrivain dans son environnement, comme on dit aujourd'hui, historique et géographique, sociologique, mais essentiellement psychologique et, pour tout dire, moral. Vous l'avez bien compris, par-delá l'artiste et la critique, il y a le peuple qui les relie, qui les nourrit, et il est nourri par eux. Mais l'artiste, s'il est enraciné dans un continent, une ethnie, une societé, il est d'abord un homme qui, dans un mouvement humain de liberté, dépasse les déterminations matérielles, voire morales. D'oú la nécessité d'une saisie originaire de l'un par l'autre: du critique par l'artiste, du critique par le peuple, du peuple par les deux, et inversement. Je parle d'une saisie pensée, mais d'abord tempérament à tempérament, coeur à coeur: âme! Je dis, *soul*, comme disent nos frères négro-americains.'

his homosocial equation between 'he' and the artist mirrors the patriarchal conventionalism of just about all critics from the period discussed in this book. In these respects, there is nothing that *marks* his discourse as specifically African, save the reference to the American 'brothers'. He adds therefore a négritudian rejoinder against the 'supreme stupidity' of 'wanting to explain a Negro-African poem with arguments from European philosophy or politics' when the real task at hand is to explain 'how and why we are moved by a particular poem'.[26] But note here that the expected dismissal of *European* philosophy and politics amounts to a rejection of *philosophy and politics* as the matrix of criticism. In other words, a 'Negro-African' method of criticism transforms into an aesthetic attitude, not an identity marker.

The rhetorical effectiveness in the 1973 lecture of summoning African criticism by assuming its absence is clear, but it was not an accurate description. In fact, there is a remarkable disconnect between the tone of Senghor's lecture and its context of delivery, a major, bilingual conference devoted to African literature. Under the heading 'Le critique africain et son peuple comme producteur de civilisation'/'The African critic and his people as producers of civilization', a formidable group of writers, critics and academics from Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and North America had gathered for a five-day colloquium in Yaoundé in April 1973. Documented in a 500-page volume, and counting Lewis Nkosi, Ime Ikiddeh, Abiola Irele, Bernth Lindfors, Eldred Jones, Mohamadou Kane and Maryse Condé among its speakers, it was one of the strongest of many manifestations in this period of a culture of African literary criticism.[27] As I will discuss further in the next chapter, the importance of gatherings and events in fostering a critical discourse in the early period of decolonisation can hardly be overstated. The Yaoundé meeting was arguably 'late' in a string of events that included the Makerere conference in 1962, the Dakar and Freetown conferences in 1963, the Nairobi seminar on East African culture and writing in 1965 and the Festival of East African Writing in Nairobi in 1971. To this could be added the parallel sequence of symposia in apartheid South Africa mentioned in Chapter 1, as well as the Stockholm conference 'The Writer in Modern Africa' in 1967 organised by Per Wästberg. Note that I am restricting this account to meetings with a specifically literary focus – a more capacious list would have to include, at the very least, the major festivals of black culture in Dakar in 1965 and in Lagos in 1977. Add to this all that had been achieved by anglo-, franco- and lusophone literary journals such as *Black Orpheus*, *Présence africaine*, *Claridade*, *Transition*, *Busara*, *The Classic* and *A Voz de Moçambique* – to

26 Senghor, *Liberté 3*, 428: 'Car la suprême stupidité […] c'est de vouloir expliquer un poème négro-africain avec les arguments de la philosophie ou de la politique européennes […] quand il fallait dire pourquoi et comment nous sommes émus par ce poème.'

27 Société Africaine de Culture, *Le Critique africain et son peuple comme producteur de civilisation* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1977).

name a few – by the early 1970s, and Senghor's lamentation about a *lack* of criticism seems oddly out of tune with developments.

I mention this partly to foreshadow my discussion of the Nairobi grouping in the next chapter, but above all to underscore my awareness of a disjunction between Senghor's undeniable historical importance and his gradually diminishing ability to connect with his African contemporaries – to achieve the *saisie* that he strives for. It is therefore better to read his Yaoundé lecture not as a comment on the state of African literary criticism at the time, but as a reflection on his own criticism that by then had accumulated over more than three decades and was already a distinctive contribution to the mode of reading he is calling for in 1973. The breadth of interests on display in the first *Liberté* volume's collation of newspaper reviews, polemics, editorial prefaces, public speeches, policy proposals and philosophical essays from the 1930s through to the 1960s is astonishing. It is also, I argue, an index of the institutional deficit under which Senghor laboured as a colonial subject: as one among a tight circuit of Africans at the time with access to French institutions, he was compelled, precisely as a black elite Senegalese, to assume multiple roles as politician, linguist, poet, philosopher and philologist. (In this regard he resembled the South African polymath Sol Plaatje in the early twentieth century.) His critical practice therefore became innovative almost by default, in so far as he engaged with a greater diversity of cultural material than other specialised French critics at the time. This had two striking results: the first was the *extension* of the literary horizon in his reading, the second a form of *intension*, or a recoding of literary value in terms of a vitalist aesthetics (rehearsed also in the 1973 lecture). For the remainder of this section, I will look at how these two tendencies operate in Senghor's criticism.

Beginning with extension, we can see that Senghor developed a restless critical itinerary in the 1940s and 1950s, bringing literature from at least three continents to the reader's attention. The essays in *Liberté 1* engage with Goethe, Harlem Renaissance poets, Victor Hugo, Camara Laye, Peter Abrahams, Birago Diop, René Maran, Latin literature – the list goes on. The presence of Goethe and Hugo, among others, shows that this is not just a search for alternatives to European paradigms of reading and canonisation, but rather an *appropriation* – the active assimilation that he advocates in 1973 – of those paradigms to different ends. Senghor's criticism did not amount to a rejection of Europe or France, nor can it be seen as a systematic attempt at constructing an alternative canon of literary value. Its provocation lay, however, in an *even distribution of critical seriousness*. Regardless of whether he wrote about Saint-John Perse or Tchicaya U Tam'si, the Senghorian voice would retain the same tone of intellectual earnestness. This constituted, in and of itself, a significant challenge to business as usual in French-language criticism and Western criticism more generally. Contrary to the stereotypical image of a wholly francophone Senghor, his critical labour also ranged across several different languages, European as well as African – as I will discuss later in the chapter.

In his expansiveness, Senghor was very much of his time as the most prominent among a growing group of francophone intellectuals in a period of rapid changes in the literary field. A crucial historical point could be made here about the *availability* of reading to Senghor, as well as the new political openings in the shifting landscape of the 1940s and 1950s. With the formation of the Union Française in 1946, the colonies were redefined as 'France d'outre-mer' – overseas France – whereby the equal rights of all citizens of the empire were nominally recognised and higher education made available to small but growing numbers of Africans. This coincided, however, with mounting pressures for independence in West Africa, Algeria and Indochina, all of which had consequences also for the publishing field and book market in France. Benefiting from the centrality of France and Paris in the transnational exchanges of books and texts at this highly charged political moment, not only Senghor but his entire generation of late-colonial intellectuals had recourse to a larger and more contemporary 'world library' in translation than before. In turn, they continued to expand that library with their own work.

As Ruth Bush makes clear, this also asks to be read as a chapter in the transformation of France's centrality in the world republic of letters.[28] The fate of African writers publishing in French in the 1940s and 1950s is, on the one hand, the story of conditional access to the public sphere of print, as well as of the provincialisation of France. Alioune Diop's founding of the journal *Présence africaine* in 1947, the publishing house by the same name in 1949 and the various other publications of African writing in French at this time, was in Bush's estimation 'neither a passive "annexation" to the colonial centre, a body of writing to be siphoned off into a discrete non-metropolitan literary genealogy, nor a singular narrative of anti-colonial resistance'.[29] Rather, they were elements in a larger structural transformation of uneven world literary relations post-1945. This is how we might also read Senghor's literary criticism: as participating in the compromised yet significant collective labour of recalibrating world literature from a French horizon at the time. The newness in literature, the *frisson nouveau* that Senghor himself often seeks in his reading, is in this sense dialectically produced by the limitations he was grappling with.

It is important to note that Senghor's extension of the literary horizon was not just cosmopolitan in a geographical sense, but also catholic as regards style and genre. (As well as Catholic, to some extent, but that is a different matter.) When writing in 1950 about black American poetry, the great discovery of his youth that had been facilitated by the Nardal sisters, he not only introduces and translates a wide range of poets for the benefit of his francophone readers, he also presents the stylistic range of the Harlem Renaissance, moving from what he calls 'the dialect school' to 'the erudite poets'.[30] His pieces on the South African writer Peter Abrahams, the Swiss

28 Bush, *Publishing*.
29 Bush, *Publishing*, 10.
30 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 104–21.

poet Henri Stierlin, the Congolese poet Tchicaya U Tam'si, Albert Camus, or Birago Diop's anthology *Les Nouveaux contes d'Amadou Koumba* (1958; translated into English by Dorothy S. Blair in 1966 as *Tales of Amadou Koumba*, but without Senghor's preface), transcribed and translated from the oral delivery of the griot Amadou Koumba, all demonstrate his *comparative* urge to engage with disparate types of literature without internal historical connections. This could also lead us to see his comparatism as a form of *parallel* reading, expressive of a bifurcated cultural habitus struggling to connect what history had kept apart.

Performatively, then, his essays incessantly, and in encyclopaedic fashion, draw the distant and dispersed, the old and the new, together. These fragments speak to each other only by virtue of the critic's act of reading – and subsequently by their publication in *Liberté* – but this performance, in turn, is consonant with his historical emplacement as a hybrid French-speaking subject. His critical itinerary becomes in other words a translational undertaking. In this translation process, French is the target language and language of power, which also implicates the aesthetic tension in France between autonomous and committed literature, as expressed most famously in Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*[31] Senghor's translational labour tends, however, to defamiliarise, through unprecedented juxtaposition, the coordinates of the French conception of literature.

His preface to Diop's anthology, published by Présence Africaine in 1958, is a case in point. Using established French generic terms – *conte*, *fable*, *drame* (tale, fable, drama) – Senghor makes Diop's translation and transcription of the griot's oral performances aesthetically comprehensible to his French readers, but defamiliarises at the same time the received meaning of the terms. He deliberately uses the generic markers as approximations, indicating that these stories are 'like' the French genres, but not the same. These generic labels are, he writes,

> crude simplifications. In black Africa, there are neither customs officials nor border posts. There are no clear boundaries as one moves from myth to proverb by way of legend, tale or fable. In many of the tales, as in 'A Judgement', animals mix with humans; likewise, in several fables, such as 'The Two Sons-in-Law', humans play more than a marginal role. One may well ask, *without arriving at a satisfactory answer*, whether these stories are tales or fables.[32]

31 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

32 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 242, emphasis added: 'Mais ce n'est là que simplification grossière. Il n'y a, en Afrique noire, ni dounaiers, ni poteaux indicateurs aux frontières. Du mythe au proverbe, en passant par la légende, le conte, la fable, il n'y a pas de frontière. Nombreux sont les contes où, comme dans *Un Jugement*, les animaux se mêlent aux hommes; nombreuses les fables où, comme dans les *Deux Gendres*, les hommes tiennent un rôle non négligeable. L'on peut se demander, sans trouver de réponse satisfaisante, si ces récits sont contes ou fables.'

Senghor's aside – 'without arriving at a satisfactory answer' – shows that this was not just a matter of assimilating African culture to French categories. It indicates instead the *unsatisfactory* nature of the available critical vocabulary, and hence a tension between established and potential meaning that structures Senghor's own criticism.

In order to stretch the critical vocabulary, Senghor makes use of paraphrase and citation. Without directly promoting alternative generic terms, this becomes a way to underline the insufficiency of French categories. Senghor clearly delights, for example, in bringing the singular and decidedly non-French names of characters in the stories to the reader's attention: Yamba-the-Bee, Diassigue-the-Crocodile, Thile-the-Jackal, Makhe-the-Termite, Mbott-the-Toad, Mbam-Hal-the-Warthog.[33] Similarly, when comparing some of the content to drama, Senghor quotes extensively from the text to demonstrate through example the effect of rhythm. This allows him to make the comparative aesthetic point that 'while in Europe, rhythm based on repetition and parallelism "provoke a slowing down", a static movement [*mouvement statique*], in black Africa, to the contrary, repetition and parallelism produce a dramatic progression'.[34]

My attempt at pushing négritude strategically to the background seems to fail here; the binary of Africa and Europe is constantly at play as a structuring principle in Senghor's critical discourse. It is also through this binary that he frequently falls prey to the generalising anthropological clichés about African difference. But if one reads Senghor carefully – and here I am in agreement with Souleymane Bachir Diagne – it becomes just as evident that the binary invites its dialectical negation and gestures towards a differently conceived universality.[35] In the preface to Diop, we see how difference is acknowledged *in order* to make a universalist point. And this is where we arrive at arguably the most fundamental aspect of what I am calling his recoding of literature.

In the preface we read that '[t]he prime virtue of the Negro-African storyteller, *as with any true artist*, is to cleave to reality, to render life visible'.[36] The phrase 'the Negro-African storyteller' is here the anthropological cliché, but the qualifier 'as with any true artist' wants to break free from it. What we confront here, as in so much of his writing in these decades, is a clash between aesthetic philosophy and what today would be called identity politics. At the very same moment that he is advocating for négritude – the Negro-African

33 Yamba-l'Abeille, Diassigue-le-Caïman, Thile-le-Chacal, Makhe-la-Termite, Mbott-le-Crapaud, Mbam-Hal-le-Phacochère.

34 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 249: 'Mais alors qu'en Europe, le rythme, basé sur les répétitions et les parallélismes, "provoque un ralentissement", un mouvement statique, en Afrique noire, tout au contraire, répétitions et parallélismes provoquent une progression dramatique.'

35 Diagne, *African Art*.

36 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 245, emphasis added: 'Le premier mérite du Conteur négro-africain, comme de tout artiste véritable, est de coller au réel, de rendre la vie.'

storyteller – Senghor invokes an aesthetic domain beyond cultural identity. It is at this point that extension, premised as it is on cultural difference, is no longer a sufficient description of his practice, and we instead confront the *intension* of a vitalist aesthetics. This recodes literary value by drawing attention to immediacy rather than erudition and cultural history. Famously, Senghor identified *rhythm* as the key element in such a vitalist aesthetics, as in the essay 'African-Negro Aesthetics', written shortly before the Diop preface:

> What is rhythm? It is the architectural structure of our being, the internal dynamism that gives us form, the network of undulations that Others receive from us, the pure expression of vital force. Rhythm is the vibrant shock, the power which, through our senses, lays hold of the very roots of our being. It expresses itself by the most material, the most sensual means: lines, colors, volume, in architecture, sculpture and painting; stresses in poetry and in music, movements in the dance.[37]

By placing a premium on rhythm, materiality and sensual immediacy, Senghor locates his argument at a level *below* and *before* cultural identification, and hence also on this side of literature as a social institution. Instead, it is the body – the most universal *and* most singular of human categories – that underpins this aesthetic approach. By *subordinating* literature in this way to a more fundamental philosophical aesthetics, he attempted to bypass the contingent historical factors that marginalised writing by continental and diasporic Africans.

This vitalism can be linked to the ontological dimension of *poiesis* of which Pheng Cheah speaks in his theory of world(ing) literature. Arguing against the emphasis on spatial circulation in many varieties of world literature, Cheah instead considers 'world' as a verb and a process that is not subject to rational control: 'As the sheer propulsion that opens a world, worlding is prior to subjects and objects, "below" or "before" all beings. Hence, worlding can neither be reduced to natural forces nor to the normative imperatives of rational action.'[38] In the clear affinities between such 'propulsion' and rhythm, we can see how Senghor has recourse to the aesthetic in its original sensory meaning, *aisthesis*; it is also clear that the intension of rhythm offers a worlding of a distinctly different kind than the erudite extension of the literary horizon. As he reads Peter Abrahams, Harlem Renaissance poetry, Wolof poetry or, for

37 Léopold Senghor, 'African-Negro Aesthetics', trans. Elaine P. Halperin, *Diogenes* 4, no. 16 (1958): 33; Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 211–12: '*Qu'est-ce que le rythme?* C'est l'architecture de l'être, le dymanisme interne qui lui donne la forme, la système d'ondes qu'il émet à l'adresse des *Autres*, l'expression pure de la Force vitale. Le rythme, c'est le choc vibratoire, la force qui, à travers les sens, nous saisit à la racine de l'*être*. Il s'éxprime par les moyens les plus matériels, les plus sensuels: lignes, surfaces, couleurs, volumes en architecture, sculpture et peinture; accents en poésie et musique; mouvements dans la danse.'

38 Pheng Cheah, 'Worlding Literature: Living with Tiger Spirits', *Diacritics* 45, no. 2 (2017): 93–4.

that matter, Albert Camus and Saint-John Perse, Senghor is in other words pursuing two distinct projects. One has to do with recognition, representativity and authority on the illustrious stage provided by the imperial language of French; the other attempts to bypass history and prevailing power relations altogether by recoding aesthetics in terms of embodied being. Through the first project, Senghor, as critic and intellectual, is claiming the right of the racialised subject to speak in the name of the universal. Indeed, beginning in the late 1950s, he will insist that the 'Civilisation of the Universal' (a term he borrows from Teilhard de Chardin) is premised on the full recognition of human diversity; without such recognition, we end up with the opposite, namely hegemonic 'universal civilisation' – as I discuss later in the chapter. Senghor was keenly aware of the transformative force of modern technology that imposed itself on a planet-wide scale through the agency of the major (mostly Western) world powers. It is the attendant acknowledgement of the objective weakness of African societies in this domain of *Realpolitik* that explains many of Senghor's choices, both his advocacy of a Franco-African union – discussed by Wilder – and his strong emphasis on culture as the higher value of human societies. But if the Civilisation of the Universal expresses the philosophical motivation for extension, Senghor's parallel project is both more elusive and intriguing. Particularly by foregrounding of rhythm as an aesthetic category, but also in his embrace of the a-rationality of surrealism, he moves around and beneath the binaries of colonial discourse by grounding primary inter-human affinities in the body and the senses, as these are constituted – also collectively – by unanticipated forces.

Reading Senghor Reading Goethe

If we zoom out and switch scales of analysis for a moment, we see in Senghor's work nothing less than a monumental clash between the enlightenment universalism of the French tradition – as mediated through colonial rule – and a romanticist urge to safeguard and cultivate the particular, the idiosyncratic, the irrational, the living. A clash between 'civilisation' and 'culture', one might say, but also a confusion of the two where either term often substitutes for the other. This far from accidental slippage can be derived from his educational career in the French system, which meant that his adoption of its protocols became layered and complex. As Jacques Louis Hymans points out, '[i]n becoming a black Frenchman he assimilated the critical habits of his acquired culture.'[39] From that time on, 'if he remained loyal to France, it was not an absolute loyalty, but a critical one: he had so assimilated French culture that he could criticize it from within. Henceforth, his thoughts were a very

39 Jacques Louis Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971), 17–18.

complex tapestry combining both admiration of, and infidelity to, Western civilization. France was simultaneously venerated and disparaged.'[40] If one considers the diversity of his philosophical engagements, including the French provincialist (and proto-fascist) Maurice Barrès, the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius, the Catholic humanist Teilhard de Chardin, the philosopher Henri Bergson, along with fellow negritudinists such as Aimé Césaire, Alioune Diop and Birago Diop, it becomes clear that his thinking runs along the parallel and contrasting lines of French rationalism (civilisation) and the counter-enlightenment tradition (culture). Although without explicitly invoking Herder, Senghor's work resonates in these regards profoundly with Herderian thinking – understood as a central lineage in post-enlightenment thought.

This zone of intellectual ambiguity prompts many of the hard judgements of Senghor – Mphahlele's dismissal of négritude as a 'cult' – yet it needs to be recognised as an expression of what John Noyes calls 'the antinomy of universal reason', a term he coins in a redemptive reading of Herder not as the blinkered nationalist, but as a complex thinker attempting to account for the universality of cultural specificity, and the always specific articulation of the universal.[41] In Noyes's reading, Herder saw reason as 'a universal human potential that is actualized with the acquisition of language'.[42] Reason is in other words a bodily predisposition, not an external add-on. This means that '[l]anguage and reason emerge in the progress from *aisthesis* to *aesthesis* – from the formal aspect of sensory life to the active formalization of this experience of life'.[43] The resonances with Senghor should be obvious, but so is the impasse in Herder's thought that Noyes formulates as an antinomy. On the one hand, '[t]here is a universal capacity for reason that makes humans human; human biology (or to be more precise, neurology) ensures that reason is a shared human capacity for cognizing life'.[44] But on the other hand, '[t]here is no such thing as universal reason; reason exists only in the plural, and the plurality of reason ensures that life will be cognized in countless different ways'.[45]

Noyes is right to claim that this antinomy has in no way been surpassed in our own moment. It continues to pervade postcolonial and decolonial thinking, and helps to explain the foundational split in Senghor's thinking as well as its elusiveness. Central terms in his criticism, such as 'poetry', 'art', 'language', 'culture' and even the marker of difference itself – 'négritude' – shuttle back and forth between two poles of the antinomy. But this is also why we must consider reading itself, understood as that self–other dialectic we saw valorised in the 1973 lecture, as one of Senghor's central means not to

40 Hymans, 18.
41 Noyes, 'Herder', 107–22.
42 Noyes, 'Herder', 108.
43 Noyes, 'Herder', 108.
44 Noyes, 'Herder', 113.
45 Noyes, 'Herder', 113.

solve the antinomy, but to engage it. Extension and intension come together here, amounting to an original world literary reading practice.

This practice had a prehistory. In a lecture delivered at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris in 1949, 'The Message of Goethe to the Young Blacks', Senghor recounts his discovery of the German author Johann Wolfgang Goethe when a prisoner of war in a German camp. More importantly, Senghor's appeal to world literature gains traction in the juxtaposition of various elements of European literature – particularly French and German – with diasporic and African writing.

In 1941, Senghor was imprisoned in a Nazi camp in Poitiers – a camp designated for prisoners from the French colonies. Having narrowly escaped execution at the start of his imprisonment, it seems that Senghor's conditions in the camp were at least minimally bearable. He taught himself German during this time, and was allowed to keep a 'miniscule library' that contained Virgil's *Aeneid*, Pascal's *Pensées* and Plato's dialogues. To these volumes he would add Goethe's *Faust* and *Iphigenia*, as his reading fluency in German gradually improved.

He describes his encounter with Goethe as a conversion, a strong word for someone with such close ties to religion as Senghor. But a conversion from what? 'Two years previously', he writes, 'I had still been immersed in a mad passion for the Kingdom of Childhood, for the rediscovery of négritude, consumed by the burning lava of my inner volcano. […] Two years previously, my quest, our quest, had been only for ourselves. […] We stalked only the grounds of those who were like us.'[46] With Frobenius as a mediating link, Senghor approached Goethe as an Other who yet seemed familiar. To the black Frenchman Senghor, Goethe represented something alien in relation to France. Primed by Frobenius, on the other hand, Senghor the negritudinist tended to imagine a cultural affinity between Germans and Africans. In that respect, he was already favourably inclined towards Goethe. He even speaks of the prior engagement with Frobenius in terms of a *Sturm und Drang*, epitomised in Goethe's early novel *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*).

The world literary dynamics operating here are surprisingly complicated. At first glance, Senghor's library of European classics seems to be little more than a predictable outcome of the canonical force of the French and German literary fields, hence reproducing the established Eurocentric hierarchy of the world republic of letters. But add to this the immediate context: Senghor is a Senegalese held captive by the Nazis. His political response to that situation could reasonably have been to reject German culture altogether, yet he does the opposite.

46 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 83: 'Deux ans auparavant, j'étais encore plongé dans l'ivresse du Royaume d'Enfance, de la Négritude retrouvée, en proie aux laves brûlantes du volcan intérieur. […] Deux ans auparavant, ma quête, notre quête n'était que de nous-mêmes […] Nous ne hantions que nos congénères.'

Senghor's cultivation of this paradoxical openness provides us, I want to suggest, with a clue to how we might read his reading. To begin with, his predicament in the war camp could be seen as an allegory of his colonial situation: held captive by French culture and French state power, his strategy all along had been to absorb more and more of French literature. His reading of Goethe in the war camp repeats in this way a pattern one can trace throughout his early career. It is a reading, moreover, aiming at transformation both of the self and of the self's political context. Of his initial encounter with Goethe's work prior to the war, he writes '[w]ith *Goetz von Berlichingen* and *Egmont*, we mounted the assault on capitalist imperialism, demanding for the black populations of the world not only political independence but the autonomy of our négritude'.[47] With the occupation in the 1940s, the horizons darkened. Confronted by the Nazi 'hatred of reason and bloodcult' he writes that 'we black intellectuals […] were soon awakened by the sharp point of disaster, exposed and chastened'.[48] And it is this that brought about a deeper engagement with Goethe's work, such that it became possible for him to see further than the immediate present. The lesson that Goethe taught him in that moment was 'the danger of cultural isolation, of self-preoccupation, of the risks of building only on one's own race, one's own nation, one's native virtues', phrasing that has a renewed poignancy in the polarised climate of our own time.[49]

The story that Senghor tells his audience at a UNESCO conference in 1949 is thereby one of openness, transcultural receptivity and, indeed, the virtue of deep reading. In this regard, it contrasts strikingly with the Manichean account of négritude that Sartre had provided the year before in 'Orphée noir'. Indeed, it almost seems as if there were no point of contact between these two versions of négritude thinking. There is, however, a telling detail in Senghor's essay that bridges the conciliatory and the confrontational dimension. Of his two quotations from Goethe, one is an exclamation by Faust himself in part II, act 2 of the play: 'I don't need healing: my mind is filled with power / There I'd become as base as others are'.[50] ('Geheilt will ich nicht sein, mein Sinn ist mächtig; / Da wär' ich ja wie andre niederträchtig'.)[51] The French version that Senghor uses is more forceful: 'Guéri, je ne veux point l'être! Mon esprit est puissant, / Je serai alors abject comme les autres'.[52]

47 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 84: 'Avec *Goetz von Berlichingen* and *Ehmont* [*sic*], nous montions à l'assaut de l'imperialisme capitaliste, revendiquant, pour les peuples noirs, plus encore que l'indépendance politique, l'autonomie de la Négritude.'

48 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 84: 'Nous nous reveillâmes, bientôt, sous l'aiguillon de la catastrophe, nus et dégrisés.'

49 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 84, 85: 'la haine et la culte du *Sang*'; 'le danger de la solitude culturelle, du repliement sur soi, de la volonté de ne bâtir que sur sa race, sa nation, ses vertus natives'.

50 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust Parts I & II* (Poetryintranslation.com, 2003), 312.

51 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 300.

52 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 84.

Issues with the translation aside, this choice of quotation is far from trivial. Senghor uses it to illustrate the impassioned spirit of early négritude in the 1930s, but it provides us with a clue to Senghor's own critical practice. 'I don't need healing': this is a remarkable refusal that indicates an economy of hurt and growth, of pain and potential. In Goethe's play, the phrasing is of course yet one more manifestation of Faust as the restless male subject of modernity, doomed to but also empowered by unceasing transformation. Linked to the theme of Senghor's essay, it changes our perception of what I have been calling his receptivity.

Healing can mean many things, but a wound that will not heal is an open wound. It is exposed to the outside world. This is a modality of openness that is far from harmless or unthreatening – and it is arguably the kind of openness that Senghor's wholesale assimilation as a Frenchman forced upon him. In this way, he is making a virtue of necessity, but also indicating a corporeal investment in his readerly cosmopolitanism. Put differently: if the wound makes me who I am, then I do not want to relinquish my wound. This recalls Senghor's preface to *Liberté 1* where he – as noted by Hiddleston – speaks of négritude as a 'complex, which one is hesitant to diagnose. And to heal'.[53] As either a black Frenchman or a Senegalese in France, he is never allowed to forget his embodiedness. Yet, it is through this imperfect, never-to-be-healed embodiedness, not despite it, that he teaches himself to approach and be transformed by the other.

Vernacular, Classical, Multilingual

Senghorian criticism's capacity to open the concept of literature to multiple bodies and modes of writing needs, then, to be acknowledged. His attachment to the French language would seem, however, to undercut such a project from the word go. Elected into the Académie française in 1983, and with a lyrical and critical oeuvre written entirely in French, Senghor's personal investment in francophonie is undeniable. This is also what animates many dismissals of Senghor – as when Ngũgĩ argues that he 'cannibalized what African languages had produced so as to enrich the French language' and 'hardly ever talked of enriching any African language'.[54] In sum, when it comes to language, Senghor is seen more as an agent of colonialism than its antagonist, a conclusion that apparently cancels the decolonial potential of his aesthetic thinking. My argument in this section is almost the exact opposite: by de-essentialising language, Senghor enabled in principle – less so in practice – a radical and unprecedented departure from a colonial politics of language, with its tendency to identify languages as discrete entities linked to ethnic or racial

53 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 8; Hiddleston, *Decolonising*, 42.

54 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009), 53, 55.

essences. This will then need to be read in relation to my discussion in the next chapter of Ngũgĩ's turn to the vernacular.

De-essentialisation means here a decoupling from precisely the Herderian paradigm that otherwise holds such a strong appeal for Senghor. The premium that Herder and subsequent German philosophers placed on language is also what produced the powerful mother-tongue ideology that current theories of literary language have been undoing for some time now.[55] By identifying the essence of subjectivity with the language acquired as a child – a figure of thought present also in Gayatri Spivak's valorisation of the 'first language' – the vernacular reversal of literary value identified by Casanova as the 'Herder effect' became possible within the Western context, but it also turned linguistic competence into destiny.[56] Already early in his career, Senghor questions this language ideology by insisting on bi- and multilingualism as the way forward for African societies.

To make sense of this, we need to step back and consider the broader implications of 'language' in Africa. As Tobias Warner argues so persuasively, the so-called language question in Senegal and in African literature more generally should not be taken at face value. Rehearsed ever since the 1960s, the positions in the debate have tended to be inflexible and binaristic (typically represented by Achebe's defence of English as a viable literary language in Africa, on the one hand, and Ngũgĩ's advocacy of African-language writing on the other). The more interesting question, according to Warner, is therefore why there is a problem with language at all. His book demonstrates how multilingual regimes of textuality and literariness in Senegal are products of its becoming-modern. From the first grammar of Wolof, produced by David Boilat, a native speaker of the language, in the 1840s, to the institution of elite, francophone, secular education in 1903, to the Wolof 'orthography wars' in the 1960s and 1970s, and beyond, this entry into modernity is intimately tied to the question of language. Hence, the very *positioning* of language, textuality and literature as central concerns for Senegalese modernity has been remarkably consistent across two centuries, but has also involved changing and competing conceptions of the issue at hand. As Moradewun Adejunmobi makes clear, the very assumption of an 'ideal monolingual order' in African societies preceding the colonial period and waiting to be restored in the age of decolonisation is itself a product of colonial modernity.[57] It must therefore be dealt with cautiously and critically.

55 Naoki Sakai, 'How Do We Count a Language? On Translation and Discontinuity', *Translation Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 71–88; Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); David Gramling, *The Invention of Monolingualism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

56 Gayatri Spivak, 'Rethinking Comparativism', *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (2009), 612; Casanova, *World Republic*, 78.

57 Moradewun Adejunmobi, *Vernacular Palaver: Imaginations of the Local and Non-Native Languages in West Africa* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2004), viii.

Taking such a historical view, it becomes equally evident that Senghor confronted the paradoxes of multilingualism in view of what he saw as the inescapable modernisation of Senegal and Africa. His early thinking was shaped not just by French culture but also by his academic research into the Senegalese language Wolof. Warner observes that when Senghor makes questionable generalisations concerning négritude and the essence of African culture, his argument tends to begin with very specific observations about Wolof words or Wolof poetry, which are then rapidly extended. As Warner puts it, '[a] metonymic chain […] serves to scale up these readings: he observes a poetic technique keenly and brilliantly, only to then make it into the truth of the language, and then from there the nature of African languages or styles of expression more generally, and further still, the essence of African civilization'.[58]

Warner's implication that négritude itself, formulated as a philosophy of difference in the French language, emerged from a multilingual matrix makes perfect sense if one returns to those landmark essays of the 1940s and 1950s. Senghor mastered six or seven languages, several of them African, and nurtured a life-long relationship with English, both as reader and translator. But he was also acutely aware of the unevenness of the world of languages and literatures, and this is where the complexity of his linguistic positioning becomes evident. With conceptual anchorage in the binary between Africa and Europe, and speaking from a position of subordination within the modern world-system, Senghor's project – and this is the core of my argument – was to grant *equal* value to two different *scales* of value: that of rational, technological civilisation (which privileged French and English), and that of poetry (which put African languages on a level playing field with others). That is to say, he frequently expresses hierarchical and normative views on language, but the superimposition of two distinct scales of value makes the outcome of his normativity less than predictable – even more so if we consider how *classical* languages (Latin, Greek and Arabic) serve as a third domain of value for Senghor, destabilising the binary yet further.

It is within this shifting multilingual terrain that linguistic essentialism unravels. If the poetic side of Senghor's argument rehearses aspects of a Herderian understanding of language, and if he has a troubling habit of defining négritude as an essential quality of 'black' populations, it is all the more important that he does *not* think of language as destiny. Languages, in Senghor's view, can be borrowed as well as remade. There is no predetermined ownership that precludes anyone, in principle, from using any language according to their needs. Ultimately, as Bachir Diagne claims, it is the *métis* and *métissage* that wins the day in Senghor's philosophy.[59] On such a reading, multilingualism and the mutability of linguistic belonging and competence is

58 Warner, *The Tongue-Tied Imagination*, 137.
59 Diagne, *African Art*, 191–6.

of central importance to Senghor – quite contrary to the one-sided reading of him as merely an apologist for French.

But let's take this one step at a time. In a 1958 article, 'Le problème des langues vernaculaires ou le bilinguisme comme solution' ('The problem of vernacular languages or bilingualism as a solution'), we encounter a strong instance of how Senghor views language as both a dilemma and a vehicle of emancipatory change. The article, written in response to the historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo's advocacy of mother-tongue schooling in Africa, begins by stating that 'language is not necessarily tied to race'.[60] The Celts adopted Latin, transforming it into French, just as Africans and diasporic blacks adopt French, transforming it in turn – Senghor's case in point being Aimé Césaire. He views thereby the transformation inherent in education as something fundamentally positive, even as he makes his case in strictly, and to our ears shockingly, binary terms: (229) 'The Latin, French, Cartesian values are precisely the opposite of Negro-African values. Hence their *virtue*.'[61] This can be read completely unfavourably – but Senghor's point is not to negate African values. It has rather to do with the generic value of complementarity and alterity. Education, he says, is meant to displace the subject from herself.

More importantly, however, it becomes clear in this essay why Senghor, and in his view Africa, is compelled to say yes to French: it is the objective force of technological civilisation that makes it necessary. When he advocates French in this essay, it is mainly because of its connection to power. It is a 'universal language' *because* it is the language of diplomacy and of science, not the other way round. To this Senghor adds that it is *also* a language of literature, but this status comes second.

Then, in a characteristic reversal, Senghor insists that education is also about rooting the self, and that the risk of cultural deracination is evident if schooling in Africa is conducted only in European languages, with a European syllabus. A language, he writes,

> be it original or borrowed – the people that borrows it always ends up by modifying it according to its own genius – obviously expresses the cultural values of a particular people. The analysis of any Negro-African language will reveal the characteristic traits of the Negro style – image and rhythm – equally well or better than any analysis of our sculpture, our painting, our music. This shows the importance of using vernacular languages in teaching.[62]

60 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 228: 'la langue ne'est pas forcément liée à la race.'

61 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 229, emphasis in the original: 'Les valeur [*sic*] latines, françaises, cartésiennes sont précisément à l'opposé des valeurs négro-africaines. De là leur *vertu*.'

62 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 230: 'qu'elle soit originelle ou d'emprunt – le peuple qui l'emprunte finit toujours par la modifier selon son génie –, exprime, naturellement, les valeurs culturelles d'un peuple donné. L'analyse de n'importe quelle langue négro-africaine révèle les traits caractéristiques du style nègre – image et

We see here the workings of the double scale of value: the externally imposed value of imperial modernity, and the inherent value of culture. Strangely, Senghor does not claim at this stage that African languages can become bearers of modernity (he differs here from Cheikh Anta Diop), yet he insists on the malleability of language in cultural terms. This, once again, is an important deviation from the Herderian language–people–territory paradigm, which his essentialising notion of 'people' otherwise seems to invoke. It is also an absolutely necessary deviation, given Senghor's ambition to trace négritude *across* languages, in poetry and prose in French, Wolof, Serer, English, Portuguese, Arabic and so on.

In the 1958 article, the only available solution to the dilemma posed by two scales of value for Senghor is bilingualism: not either–or, but both–and. 'The challenge', he writes, 'is to choose a method that can reconcile what, at first glance, seems irreconcilable.'[63] The 'irreconcilable' is here another word for what Gayatri Spivak calls the colonial double-bind, evident not least in the postcolonial imperative to constitute nations out of former colonies – an imperative that puts African languages, in their multiplicity, at a disadvantage.[64] Predictably, Senghor's concrete suggestion at the end of his article issues in a characteristic compromise, whereby the mother tongue ('*langue maternelle*') is included in the syllabus, but always secondary to French.

One way to disentangle the compromise and the double scale of value is by looking at their temporal dimension. In the 1950s and 1960s, Senghor shared the popular horizon of expectation of Western modernity, namely that of accelerating technological progress that soon enough would lead humanity to outer space – he uses the image of the *astronef*, or spaceship, several times in his writings. This horizon transcended, in principle, colonial power relations, but it is precisely the anxiety of being left out, or of witnessing a rerun of colonial domination, that leads him incessantly to formulate compromises between that horizon of expectation – which he can only imagine as being spearheaded by the West – and the spaces of experience of African and diasporic populations. Senghor was beholden to a cosmopolitan and racialised world-image that he could neither contain nor control, but that had been thrust upon him by history. A talk he held at the UNESCO offices in 1961 is illustrative of the conceptual solution he would adopt to counter this predicament:

> The progress of the sciences is not just irrepressible; it is irreversible. It has a hold on human nature. Whether we want it or not – and we cannot

rythme – aussi bien, mieux que ne le fait l'analyse de notre sculpture, de notre peinture, de notre musique. C'est dire l'importance des langues vernaculaires dans l'enseignment.'

63 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 230: 'Le problème est de choisir une méthode pour concilier, ce qui paraît, au premier abord, inconciliable.'

64 Gayatri Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1–34.

> not want it – each year pushes progress yet further. Each year, by way of new inventions, new machines and technologies appear. Each year, borders become more relaxed, the ropes of the customs officials are loosened a bit more. International relations are intensified by ship, on road, on railways, by air; tomorrow, by way of rockets and spaceships. Each year, the exchange of people, scientific knowledge and technologies, books and machines, customs and costumes, and ideas becomes ever more intense. These exchanges provoke adaptations [*emprunts*]. Thus is created, little by little, a *universal civilisation*.[65]

Senghor presents in this way the familiar horizon of expectation, or temporal regime, of the early 1960s. It is, paradoxically, a horizon both of accelerating change and of increasing global uniformity – a vision of humanity marching progressively faster and increasingly in step. It is above all an expression of technological civilisation as fate: we cannot not want it.

But Senghor immediately issues a warning:

> Let us be wary of what kind of civilisation this will be. We cannot, without betraying Man and even the idea of Civilisation itself, accept just any civilisation under the pretext that it is universal. A collective insanity, on a planetary scale, won't be any less insane for all that. A civilisation of the atomic bomb would be an *anti-civilisation*: it would end by destroying *Life* itself. A civilisation of robots wouldn't be much better: it would destroy the reasons to live.[66]

This is how Senghor arrives at the formula, not of a *universal civilisation*, but of a *civilisation of the Universal*. Without such a reversal, he claimed, 'the *exotic peoples*, to which we belong, would be condemned for all eternity to be not producers but consumers of civilisation'.[67] It is in this context, where the self is

65 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 308–9: 'Le progrès des sciences est non seulement irrépressible; il est irréversible. Il tient à la nature humaine. Que nous voulions ou non – et nous ne pouvons pas ne pas le vouloir –, chaque année ajoute au progrès. Chaque année, surgissent, avec une novelle invention, de nouvelles techniques et machines. Chaque année, les frontières s'abaissent, les cordons douaniers se relâchent un peu plus. Les relations internationales s'intensifient, par le bateau, la route, le chemin de fer, l'avion; demain, par la fusée et l'astronef. Chaque année, c'est un échange plus intense de personnes, de faits scientifiques et de techniques, de livres et de machines, de coutumes et costumes, d'idées. Ces échanges provoquent des emprunts. Ainsi se crée, peu à peu, une *civilisation universelle*.'

66 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 309: 'Prenons garde à ce que sera cette civilisation. Nous ne pouvons, sans trahir l'Homme et même la Civilisation, accepter n'importe quelle civisation sous le prétexte qu'elle serait universelle. Une folie collective, planétaire, ne serait pas moins folie. Une civilisation de la bombe atomique serait *anti-civilisation*: elle finirait par détruire la *Vie*. Une civilisation des robots le serait à peine moins: elle détruirait les raisons de vivre.'

67 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 309, emphasis added: 'Les peuples exotiques, dont nous sommes, seraient condamnés, pour l'éternité, à être non pas des producteurs, mais des consommateurs de civilisation.'

externalised as 'exotic', that culture becomes a matter of both individual and collective survival: 'At the dawn of planetary Civilisation, whose geographical scope is the world, and whose History is universal history, it is evident that Culture must embrace the dimensions of space and time.'[68] A term such as 'universal history' flies in the face of long-standing postcolonial critiques, yet today, in what is increasingly recognised as a 'planetary age', Senghor's ambiguous phrasing asks once again to be taken seriously.[69] His point here is that culture is always particular, but that each culture in itself encompasses all the facets of the human condition. The civilisation of the Universal is therefore properly understood as a civilisation of dialogue. It is the dream of a level playing field, a rendezvous, as he was fond of saying, that annuls the global power differentials of technological civilisation and capitalism.

Senghor is ventriloquised by his own historical moment. The spectre of nuclear warfare, the acceleration of technological advancement, the advent of the space age, the threat of homogenisation and standardisation: all of this is of a piece with the post-war, Cold War moment. A few years previously, Hannah Arendt had chosen the launching of Sputnik and the 'advent of automation' as her points of departure in *The Human Condition* because of the fundamental questions these events prompted concerning humanity's anchorage on Earth and in the conditions of biological life.[70] And in 1952, Erich Auerbach had reflected on world literature from the double viewpoint of cultural diversity and cultural standardisation – an 'imposed uniformity' being driven both by the United States and the Soviet Union.[71]

If we think then of 'world' as time, this is the hegemonic time Senghor is working with and against. And it is *through* this hegemonic time, which is also a time of accelerated global circulation of print, that Senghor attempts to formulate the world-making alternative of négritude and the Universal. In an essay from 1971, 'The Problematic of Négritude', the underlying logic of this alternative becomes clear. Once again, Senghor outlines the commonality of African and diasporic populations on both sides of the Atlantic. Once again, he rehearses the importance of Paris in the 1930s and the journal *Revue du monde noir* in making this commonality apparent. But added to this, in his conclusion, he discusses three historical examples as a way to support the legitimacy of négritude as a 'cultural movement': the German *Sturm und Drang*, the Scandinavian (particularly Danish) national

68 Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 310: 'A l'aube de la Civilisation planétaire, où l'aire géographique est le monde, et l'Histoire, l'histoire universelle, c'est l'évidence que la Culture doit embrasser les dimensions de l'Espace et du Temps.'

69 Strong support for such a claim can be found in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021).

70 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998 [1958]).

71 Erich Auerbach, 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*', trans. Maire Said and Edward Said, *The Centennial Review* 13, no. 1 (1969): 1–17.

revival in the nineteenth century and the Russian, Slavophilic movement in the same period.[72]

Senghor, in other words, is establishing direct, comparative links with forms of cultural nationalism that are ambivalent at best but rehearse the counter-enlightenment tendency I discussed above. This manoeuvre can be described as follows: *within* the time of Europe, and by way of the non-negotiable European world-image of irreversible, global progress, Senghor is trying, with literature as a privileged medium, to articulate *other temporal possibilities*. It is notable that he speaks, in terms that would be replicated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o many years later, of the European cultural movements as 'renaissances'.[73] Renaissance means starting time anew; the underlying assumption, therefore, is that no temporal regime is absolute, even when hegemonic, and that it is possible by cultural and literary means, to 'open' time differently. The world, as time, can in other words be made and remade. But why does Senghor do it comparatively? In French? In constant deference to Europe and European thinkers? Perhaps because he is both subject and object within the modern world-image, both sovereign cosmopolitan and racialised other. It is this split and entangled position that he ultimately endorses, neither prepared to cede the ground of modernity as a sovereign position of knowledge nor be reduced to an absolute other, external to the contemporary world. His intuition relates therefore to that which Achille Mbembe, much later, would articulate as follows: 'As an age, the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an *entanglement*.'[74] Such a formulation, coming from a moment when Europe no longer can be seen as the centre of geopolitical gravity, was not available to Senghor. The form that the insight took in his work was therefore typically that of (strategic) essentialism. It was a survival strategy and a dedicated effort to channel time, or the entanglement of times itself, in another direction, and hence contribute to making the world differently.

African languages become in this way primarily bearers of the past, through their verbal art. As Senghor puts in a review of a collection of Wolof proverbs, the 'proverb is poetry in its very *substance*', and as such its imagery 'expresses the experience of a civilisation through its reference to climate, history, myths, morals, institutions'.[75] The proverb is not mathematically precise – rather 'the ambivalence, the multivalence, of the image is the very essence

72 Senghor, *Liberté 3*, 268–89.

73 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New*, 69–98.

74 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 14.

75 Senghor, *Liberté 3*, 388: 'le proverbe est poésie dans sa *substance*'; 'exprime l'expérience d'une civilisation, en faisant référence au climat, à l'histoire, aux mythes, aux moeurs, aux institutions'.

of the proverb, just as it is with the poem'.[76] In this way, Wolof is valorised aesthetically, yet clearly positioned in the space of experience. This relegation of African languages to the past and to the task of memory is not consistently the case – Senghor also supported the orthographic, Latin standardisation of written languages in Senegal, which was forward-oriented. But it was easier for him to project imperial languages such as English and French as both languages of the future and of multiple literary reworkings of the African/diasporic space of experience.

To recapitulate, the two main features of Senghor's multilingual thinking thus far seem to be, first, the de-essentialisation of linguistic ownership, and, second, a temporally inflected division of labour between language as a vehicle of literature and cultural memory, and language as a future-oriented vehicle of modernity. The position of 'the vernacular' becomes in this way both privileged and subordinate: privileged in poetic terms, but subordinate within modernity.

Later in his career, Senghor would pay increasing attention to 'classical' languages (although they had been part of his early formation). Here, he posits Latin, Greek and Arabic as a common Mediterranean heritage, which is as African as it is European and Middle Eastern. This sidesteps the drama of colonial modernity by way of a deep-time perspective. Instead of the simple binary vernacular versus modern (or imperial), we must now contend with a tripartite division and interpenetration between vernacular, modern and classical languages. When lecturing at Cairo University in 1967, he states that anti-colonialism is too thin a base on which to build an Arab-African commonality. Instead, it is the deep history of cultural and linguistic exchanges that should rightly be brought into view, with Egypt's influence on Plato, and Arabic's role as the keeper of the Greek legacy. As Annette Damayanti Lienau has pointed out, however, Senghor remains ambivalent with regard to Arabic. For a Senegalese, looking behind the immediate colonial past means confronting a longer history of Arab–African exchanges, which was commercial, cultural and religious in nature, but also morally compromised by the trans-Saharan slave trade. The cultural consequence of this history was the emergence of an Arab-Islamic hegemony. This is how Lienau outlines it:

> Playing a role whose impact has drawn comparison to that of Latin in Europe, Arabic eventually became the orthographic companion to thirty vernaculars in West Africa and to eighty languages in the continent – languages that, in the Arabic context, are categorically encompassed by the term *'ajami*. Often compared to the pejorative Greco-Latin term *barbaros* in its designation of linguistic corruption, *'ajami* – a term canonized in the Qur'an and derived from the Arabic term meaning to mumble or

76 Senghor, *Liberté 3*, 388: 'L'ambivalence, la multivalence, de l'image est l'essence même du proverbe, comme du poème.'

> speak indistinctly – has come to designate ethnically non-Arab vernacular languages written in the Arabic script.[77]

This serves as an essential corrective to the shallow historical and linguistic depth of mainstream postcolonial studies. What it tells us, above all, is that Senghor was contending with the two hegemonies of the West and the Arab world, two cultural regimes with two distinct writing systems that both reduced the indigenous languages of West Africa to vernaculars, albeit in different time frames. Even so, in his 1967 Cairo lecture, he discerns with philological thoroughness resonances between various African languages and Arabic. As so often, Senghor is at his best as a reader of rhythm and poetic form. It is at the level of rhetorical figures such as repetition, paronomasia (puns), onomatopoeia and asymmetrical parallelisms that he detects traces of long-term cultural interaction between the languages. Is this a way of sidestepping the fraught politics of the present? Perhaps. In that 1967 lecture he openly states the following:

> I said earlier that there are two cleavages, two obstacles towards the realisation of African unity: the cleavage between Francophones and Anglophones, and the cleavage between Arabo-Berbers and Negro-Africans on the other hand. The latter strikes me as more important, because it is older and because it issues forth from the ambivalent nature of Africa itself.[78]

Always caught in the middle, averse to conflict and speaking here as a statesman, Senghor's characteristic solution is therefore to gravitate towards the cultural, aesthetic and the existential as points of connection between what is otherwise opposed. Attention to language, linguistic difference and poetic form becomes thereby a strategy both of containment and of opening thought towards unanticipated possibilities for dialogue within the hierarchies that shape the world, as much as the world of languages.

A Tragic Temporality

With his increasing personal isolation in the 1960s and 1970s, both from the urgent daily concerns of the Senegalese population and the main currents of African literature, Senghor's conception of literature became 'outdated'; from its vanguard position in the 1930s and 1940s, it diverged, first gradually and

77 Annette Damayanti Lienau, 'Reframing Vernacular Culture on Arabic Fault Lines: Bamba, Senghor, and Sembène's Translingual Legacies', *PMLA* 130, no. 2 (2015): 419.

78 Senghor, *Liberté 3*, 149: 'J'ai dit qu'il existait deux clivages, deux difficultés à la réalisation de l'unité africaine: le clivage entre Francophones et Anglophones, le clivage entre Arabo-Berbères et Négro-Africaines d'autre part. Celui-ci me semble le plus important, parce que le plus ancien et parce que découlant de la nature ambivalente de l'Afrique.'

eventually sharply, from the dominant literary tempo in the era of African decolonisation. The routinised dismissal of Senghor in many anglophone postcolonial contexts can therefore be read less as a result of a thorough engagement with his work, and more as a rhetorical marker of belonging on the 'right side' of historical time. Yet, speaking from my position in the 2020s, in the wake of lively world literary debates and renewed reflection on modes of universality in a fragmented world, there are – as I hope to have demonstrated – unexplored possibilities in Senghor's thinking. Obscured by the relatively superficial rhetoric of négritude, his approach to aesthetics and literature is driven by the longing for connection, or attachment (the *saisie*), across differences that speak to our own difficult moment of historical fracture.

This Senghorian trajectory contains, nonetheless, an element of tragedy that also can be expressed in temporal terms. Here is how he begins his most famous essay, 'African-Negro Aesthetics', from 1956:

> The twentieth century will be known as the period of the discovery of African-Negro Civilization. At first it was the sculpture alone that provoked amazement, shock, and finally admiration. But soon Europe discovered stories, poetry, music, painting, and philosophy, in turn.
>
> Now that the first surprise has had its effect, we must define the spirit of the civilization; that is to say of African-Negro culture. There is nothing more revealing in this regard than the literature and the art of this singularly 'machineless civilization'.[79]

Through the use of the future anterior, Senghor assumes the voice of an observer from afar. The twentieth century *will be known* in this way. This *will have happened*. But this inevitability – the cultural change resulting in a general acceptance of African civilisation – is assumed to rely on recognition by 'Europe' as a transcendental arbiter of cultural value. After all: Who is the agent of discovery here? Who is the recipient of the 'shock'? Certainly not the Africans.

At the same time, Senghor is speaking *to* Europeans *as an African*: 'the admiration of certain European intellectuals for African-Negro literature and art is not devoid of confusion; it often consists of misconceptions, if not of contradictions in terms'.[80] He adopts here the rhetorical ethos of the subject-

79 Senghor, 'African-Negro Aesthetics', 23. Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 202: 'Le XXe siècle restera celui da la découverte de la Civilisation négro-africaine. De l'Afrique noire, ce fut d'abord la sculpture qui provoqua la stupeur, le scandale, puis l'admiration. Mais voici que l'Europe découvre, tour à tour, le conte, la poésie, la musique, la peinture, la philosophie. Il s'agit, maintenant, par-delá le premier choc, de définir l'*esprit de la civilisation*, je veux dire la *Culture* négro-africaine. Rien n'est plus révélateur, à cet égard, que la littérature et l'art, singulièrement dans une "civilisation sane machine".'

80 Senghor, 'African-Negro Aesthetics', 23; Senghor, *Liberté 1*, 202: 'l'admiration qu'éprouvent certains intellectuels d'Europe pour la littérature et l'art

who-knows in an intervention on the cusp of decolonisation, implicitly relying on the persuasive strength of his self-identification as an African and a cultural insider. His speaking position becomes in this way unstable and paradoxical. It takes the enduring authority of Europe as given while at the same time challenging this authority. It enlists the future to authorise a statement concerning a fundamental *change* in cultural values, and yet this projected future appears *unchanged* in terms of international relations: Europe remains the point of reference.

We have seen by now that Senghor develops, in numerous but not always consistent ways, a strong concept of literature that is decoupled from *essential* attachments to 'Europe' – but that remains in constant dialogue with literature from Europe. This is the primary decolonising impetus of his criticism. Given that '*all* heritages are to be claimed', as Diagne puts it, Senghor performatively assumes the cosmopolitan liberty to move between languages and traditions.[81] Literature serves a privileged role as an enabler of connection across differences and an activator of multiple temporalities. Against this, however, we need to consider his use of the future anterior in the quotation above: rather than present a fundamentally *different* future, Senghor's tragic mood disallowed any sharp – call them Fanonian – ruptures. The active appropriation by Africans of European cultural techniques, the cultivation of Africa-oriented university disciplines, the notional equality of two scales of value, the call for an African literary criticism: all remained shadowed by the unevenness of his own present, an unevenness inscribed in his very subjectivity.

négro-africains ne va pas sans mélange: elle est souvent faite de melentendus sinon de contresens.'

81 Diagne, *African Art*, 195.

CHAPTER FOUR

'Our Cultural Take-off into the World': The Cosmopolitan-Vernacular Making of East African Literature

Plaintively entitled 'East Africa, O East Africa I Lament Thy Literary Barrenness', Taban Lo Liyong's 1965 opinion piece in the Kampala-based journal *Transition* would for some time become a standard reference in the region's literary circles. 'When', Liyong asked flamboyantly, 'will the Nile basin find a Dickens? Or a Conrad? Or a Mark Twain?'[1] Looking to the west and the south of the continent for inspiration, he invoked African literary luminaries for help: 'We need Ngugis in the plural to do a la Guma job between a capital letter and a period. […] Ezekiel Mphahlele […] teach us to write. Open our mouths. Else we choke with lumps of thought. Else we go migrating in search of inspiration to Mbari. Else we cut Ulli Beier into two and leave Nigeria with the legs.'[2]

In a longer version of the essay published in *The Last Word*, the theme of inter-African rivalry is fleshed out. As a student at Howard University in Washington, DC, Liyong had been part of a pan-African community of students. But as soon as African literature was discussed, he felt he had nothing to contribute. The French-speaking Africans brought up Senghor, Camara Laye and Mongo Beti, while the Nigerians boasted of their 'Achebes, Ekwensis, Njokwus, Clarks, Soyinkas, Okaras' and the South Africans spoke of their exiled writers.[3] For Liyong, this was not just a hard act to follow, but downright depressing. The reason, as he saw it, lay in the specifically East

1 Taban Lo Liyong, 'East Africa, O East Africa I Lament Thy Literary Barenness', *Transition* 19 (1965): 11. A reworked version of this invocation, now called 'Wanted (Dead or Alive) Black Orpheus', appeared as the preface to Liyong's collection of poetry, *Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs* (London and Nairobi: Heinemann, 1971). This differed, once again, from the long essay version of the lament in *The Last Word*. See below.

2 Liyong, 'East Africa', 11.

3 Liyong, *The Last Word*, 23.

African experience of colonialism: 'Because the British are a practical-minded people, we became practical-minded too. […] Poetry-writing and the art of fiction were not taught to us though we debated and reasoned.'[4] Liberated from the Philistine British, decolonisation in East Africa would therefore, at best, lead to *more* literature, not less of it. International rivalry – for Pascale Casanova the formative condition of the world republic of letters – is accepted at face value by Liyong as a motivator: without literature, no reason for an outwardly projected national or regional pride.

In Liyong's diatribe we find not so much a criticism of literature as a critic *in search of a literature*. If, as I argued in the previous chapter, Léopold Senghor nurtured a form of criticism that could move across widely divergent types of literature, so as to incorporate African modes of verbal art into a more generalised (francophone) critical discourse, Liyong – and East Africa in the 1960s – presents us with an inverted situation: literary criticism in need of an object. Strictly speaking, as we saw in the previous chapter, *criticism* was already on the rise there and elsewhere in Africa. Counting from the 1962 Makerere conference of African writers, organised by Gerald Moore and Es'kia Mphahlele, and the early contributions of the journals *Black Orpheus* and *Transition*, the amount of anglophone commentary on African writing grew exponentially in the space of a mere decade – even to the extent of oversaturation.[5] This, at least, is one way of reading Wole Soyinka's famous jibe in 1967 that '[t]he average published writer in the first few years of the post-colonial era was the most celebrated skin of inconsequence to obscure the true flesh of the African dilemma'.[6] And yet, from Liyong's point of view, Soyinka had his base in the most productive literary field in Africa, making his own situation seem still more deprived. What motivates Liyong's lament in 1965 is therefore an experience of entering the *institution* of criticism, as an East African, without a corresponding object of critique.

A more upbeat contemporary take on the situation can be found in Liyong's compatriot Okot p'Bitek's piece 'Future of the Vernacular Literature', presented at a symposium in Nairobi in 1965:

> In the evening, we have sat on our big sofa and put our legs on [the] tea table, and said, 'there is very little vernacular literature', and have pulled out a volume of Achebe or Wole Soyinka or *Transition*. Meanwhile all over the countryside, the outdoor fires have been lit, and the folk tales are being performed. And the moonlight dance drums are throbbing in the distance, and the beautiful love songs come floating through the air. […] The vast

4 Liyong, *The Last Word*, 32.

5 And although I lack hard statistics to prove it, I suspect that the anglophone field both caught up with and outstripped the francophone field in this period in terms of volume.

6 Wole Soyinka, 'The Writer in a Modern African State', in *The Writer in Modern Africa*, ed. Per Wästberg (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968), 17.

> majority of our people in the countryside, have a full blooded literary culture, so deep, so vivid and alive that for the moment the very little written stuff appears almost irrelevant.[7]

p'Bitek, of course, was already a contributor to the written 'vernacular literature' in Luo/Acholi and would become even more celebrated in 1966 with the publication of *The Song of Lawino* – that is, of his own English translation of the song. The relevant point here, however, is that p'Bitek's analysis of the literary situation is not far removed from Liyong's, despite its optimism. Although he stresses abundance rather than scarcity, p'Bitek too identifies a misfit between an institution of literary criticism and its object. If, for Liyong, the object was missing, p'Bitek saw it as misrecognised or ignored. Even more to the point, p'Bitek sees the very conception of literature, with its class aspect (note how he contrasts the 'big sofa' with 'outdoor fires'), as part of the problem: 'The term literature when translated to mean "writings of a country or period, writings whose value lies in beauty or form or emotional effect", is too thin for our purpose.'[8] This is a theme he would return to in a later essay, in 1972, with the poignant Sartrean title 'What is Literature?' Redefining literature, he argued, 'opens the gates of post-uhuru schools and universities to the rich and exciting literary materials from the African countryside. The study of literature in these institutions must have as its core the literature of the African peoples, *because it is the expression of the soul of the nation*.'[9]

Both p'Bitek and Liyong committed themselves to strong conceptions of literature, but on different premises. As we see in the highlighted phrase above, p'Bitek's folk-literary optimism pitched literature as the highest of values in a clear Herderian lineage, yet this was premised, paradoxically, on an abstraction of the concept and an initial loosening of its field of reference. He offered criticism and pedagogy an alternative object that was not really specified but supposedly *already there*, constituted by its radical difference and separation from European and British literature. This made the critic's first task an empirical one – a matter of collecting material – whereas the *value* of the verbal arts to be gathered could be assumed a priori. Liyong, to the extent that he was oriented towards written and printed literature, was more agnostic on the question of value and continued therefore to be sceptical of matching criticism and object. This cautious stance is registered in an occasional piece in the Nairobi journal *Nexus* in 1968, an issue that appeared in July of that auspicious year, I should add – a detail of some consequence. Here is Liyong:

> There is African literature, yes. But how much? There's the snag. Yes, we have our myths. But who has done an extensive or definite research in them

7 Okot p'Bitek, 'Future of the Vernacular Literature', in *East Africa's Cultural Heritage* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966), 70–1.

8 p'Bitek, 'Vernacular Literature', 71.

9 Okot p'Bitek, 'What is Literature?', *Busara* 4, no. 1 (1972): 25, emphasis added.

> yet? Or who has used them as literary springboards? We have traditional African literature. But how many traditionals do we have? We have a few stories, and novels, and poems. But who has sifted through the quantity to arrive at quality? Isn't it rather that now any African who gets published is an African writer, meaning a GREAT writer? What about critics? Critics to guide our tastes and choices? In tantrum, we have doubted or repulsed non-us [*sic*] critics and have not demonstrated an ability to do anything, leave alone that of real merit. I am an African and because of that I wish we would wait for five or more years before we begin to think of a Chair of African literature in earnest. Meanwhile, African Literature should feel happy, should have no grudge, being taught as a subject, (one of the subjects) in the Comparative Literature Department, where such departments exist, or in the English Department.[10]

In our day, Liyong is known perhaps first and foremost as one of the three signatories of the department circular 'On the Abolition of the English Department', which sparked what came to be known as the 'Nairobi revolution'. His 'Post Script', published shortly before that signal event, hardly betrays the rebellious fervour of the circular (about which more later). Instead, it reconsiders once again African literature as a dilemma, this time in terms of reception rather than production. If, in the 1965 piece, Liyong wanted to will East African literature into being, three years later the problem seems more to reside in the procedures, premises and values of criticism and scholarship. What has become clearer by this time is Liyong's strong orientation towards assessing specific *works* of literature – exemplified not least by his extended comment on p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* in *The Last Word*.[11] This contrasts instructively with p'Bitek's more *cultural* orientation as a critic, which axiomatically takes value for granted.

With Liyong and p'Bitek, we enter a pivotal moment in East African literary history. Both hailed from northern Uganda, and p'Bitek taught for a period at Makerere University in Kampala, which ever since the 1920s had been a regional centre of learning and literary pedagogy.[12] From the mid-1960s onwards, partly because of political instability in Uganda, the literary centre of gravity shifted to the Nairobi corner of the Kampala–Nairobi–Dar es Salaam triangle. In the space of a few years, Liyong's lament in 1965 had been overtaken by events, and it is this rather heady period that is the starting point for my discussion in this chapter. Beginning with a broad account of literary debates at conferences and in some Nairobi-based journals shortly before and after 1970, I will proceed to look at the famous 'Abolition' manifesto as a significant and innovative instantiation of a world literary outlook. This leads to the third and final section of the chapter, which deals with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's

10 Taban Lo Liyong, 'Post Script', *Nexus* 4 (1968): 5.

11 Liyong, *The Last Word*, 135–56.

12 For an exhaustive account of Makerere's history, see Carol Sicherman, *Becoming an African University: Makerere 1922–2000* (Asmara: Africa World Press, 2005).

attempts to conceptualise literature through what Moradewun Adejunmobi has called a 'minor discourse of the vernacular'.[13] Although Ngũgĩ's positions evolve over the space of several decades, his initial formulations on the politics of language in African literature in *Decolonising the Mind* can be read as an elaborate attempt to synthesise the divergent positions of Liyong and p'Bitek sketched out above.

There are two main reasons for organising the chapter in this way. First, by offering a contextualisation of the Nairobi scene circa 1970, the far and away most famous writer-critic to emerge from it – Ngũgĩ – is regionalised and perhaps also demystified. Second, this allows me to assess how the tensions in Ngũgĩ's discourse of the vernacular can be accounted for in relation to an East African intellectual temporality. In effect, Liyong's and p'Bitek's interventions in 1965 already stake out the coordinates of this compressed history, torn as they are between extroversion and introversion. As a temporality that cannot be conceived separately from that very tension, it is, in other words, not of interest to my argument whether Liyong's yearning for world recognition or p'Bitek's confidence in an inherently valuable oral tradition is the 'correct' take on literature. Rather, the point is to understand the contradictory *form* that the worlding of literature assumes in East Africa, particularly Nairobi, at this time.

The scenario is familiar by now. All the chapters in this book have explored contradiction, yet the contradictions shaping each site and group of critics need to be understood as the local and disciplinary inflection of more general historical conditions. In South Africa, literary criticism was overwhelmed by apartheid, which compelled it to become inward-looking and agonistic. In Brazil, the challenge was to come to terms with the sense of a cosmopolitan inauthenticity in the national literature, produced by histories of colonialism and capitalism. For Senghor in Senegal, if not for all his compatriots, it was a matter of bridging the binary of French universalism and racialised otherness. In the juxtaposition of Liyong and p'Bitek, finally, we glimpse a cosmopolitan–vernacular dynamic that appeals both to the authority of a world republic of letters and to the intrinsic value of indigenous culture, a double movement that is repeated but also revised by Ngũgĩ. This recalls to some extent how I read Senghor's criticism, but if the latter tried to resolve the cosmopolitan–vernacular dilemma produced by French colonialism by de-essentialising language and re-essentialising race, Ngũgĩ's ideology of vernacular writing in *Decolonising the Mind* does more or less the opposite in its response to the legacy of British colonialism: it de-essentialises race while re-essentialising language.

It should be noted that while Dakar and Senghor are assigned a minor role, if any, in current anglophone postcolonial discourses, the Nairobi debates

13 Moradewun Adejunmobi, 'Major and Minor Discourses of the Vernacular: Discrepant African Histories', in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 179–97.

circa 1970 and, in particular, the 'Nairobi revolution' have become *exemplary* of literary decolonisation.[14] The illustrative value of the so-called revolution and Ngũgĩ's successful career have much to do with this, as does the blunt (and profoundly ironic) fact of the global currency of English language. But, in addition, the grounding in a regional East African history among internationally prominent, diasporic scholars such as Ali Mazrui, Simon Gikandi, Evan Mwangi and Grace Musila has contributed yet further to raising the profile of this literary context. Through its dramatic demonstration of the interaction between constructing *a literature* and the *category of literature* at the crossroads of locality and transnational orientations, the Nairobi case thus becomes an essential component of my argument in this book.

The Nairobi Scene

In June 1971, the University of Nairobi hosted a festival of East African writing, with the Scottish writer and visiting lecturer Angus Calder as the main organiser. By now, the Nairobi literary revival was in full swing, and Liyong's complaint in 1965 seemed like a thing of the past. Lasting a full week, the festival comprised both a colloquium on 'Black aesthetics' and a series of talks focusing more on writing as a craft and on the institutions of publishing and teaching. Two books, both of them published by the East African Literature Bureau in Nairobi (originally a colonial institution), have recorded this gathering: *Black Aesthetics* and *Writers in East Africa*.[15] Together, they showcase the efforts at the time to foster literary creativity by grounding literary criticism in the region. It is notable that many participants can be described as writer-critics, a role they shared with most African writers at this time. This is also what ties three of this book's protagonists together: Mphahlele, Senghor and Ngũgĩ. As I have been arguing, the prominence and prevalence of writer-critics in this period in Africa is a key indication that the regional institutions of knowledge-production were under formation at the time. Structurally, there is greater scope for individuals to occupy a range of positions in different fields (in the Bordieusian sense) when these fields are still being formed. The political involvement of Senghor and Ngũgĩ further underscores this, although at different ends of the ideological spectrum: Senghor as a centrist head of state, Ngũgĩ in mounting Marxist resistance to the postcolonial state of Kenya (and to the neo-colonial order of the postcolony more generally).

14 Monica Popescu's account in *At Penpoint* is a recent example.

15 Andrew Gurr and Pio Zirimu (eds), *Black Aesthetics: Papers from a Colloquium Held at the University of Nairobi, June 1971* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973); Andrew Gurr and Angus Calder (eds), *Writers in East Africa: Papers from a Colloquium Held at the University of Nairobi, June 1971* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1974).

When compared to Senghor and Mphahlele, Ngũgĩ was, however, inexperienced: 32 years Senghor's junior and 20 years younger than Mphahlele, his authority as writer-critic was still emergent in 1971. Moreover, because of a visiting professorship in the United States at the time, Ngũgĩ wasn't even present at the festival.[16] But his presence was not essential – there was a much broader group of readers, writers and critics that could ensure its success. *Black Aesthetics*, for instance, contains ten papers (plus an afterword) by, today, fairly obscure intellectuals – if we exclude Ali Mazrui. In their introduction, Gurr and Zirimu glossed the theme of black aesthetics as 'more narrowly […] the cultural problems facing the black writer in Africa as a practitioner of his art, and the black critic in the practice of his which appertains to literature, *be it black or other*'.[17] This focus both on (male) writers and critics, and, even more strikingly, on the reception of literature as a generalisable phenomenon ('be it black or other') and an activity whose agent is 'the black critic' testifies to the confidence of this moment and place.

The emergence of such confidence in Nairobi depended on a broader combination of developments – local as well as transnational, personal as well as geopolitical – than I can account for properly here. It was thanks not just to the output of authors such as Ngũgĩ or Grace Ogot, or to journals such as *Transition*, *Zuka*, *Ghala* and *Nexus/Busara*, but also to publishers such as Heinemann and the above-mentioned Bureau, the growing university campuses of Makerere, Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, and the accelerating number of international exchanges (such as Ngũgĩ's and Zirimu's study periods in Leeds) that the Festival of East African Writing could become a success.[18]

Gurr and Zirimu indicate some of the coordinates of this emergent field of criticism when explaining that

> [t]he issue of Black Aesthetics arose for us from the recent focussing of attention on African and Black literature in East Africa. In the study of this literature questions of *different aesthetic systems and values, criteria of appreciation and evaluation and critical standards* inevitably pose themselves. We remain aware of the debate on Black Arts in the USA in the process of making our own assessment. From the American struggles too we recognise that our target is perhaps an unattainable ideal, but at the same time we see that the struggle is necessary.[19]

16 Carol Sicherman, *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel. A Source Book in Kenyan Literature and Resistance* (London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1990), 9.

17 Andrew Gurr and Pio Zirimu, 'Introduction', in *Black Aesthetics: Papers from a Colloquium Held at the University of Nairobi, June 1971*, ed. Andrew Gurr and Pio Zirimu (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973), 1, emphasis added.

18 The University of East Africa was, strictly speaking, a short-lived affair. By 1970, the three campuses had each become the separate universities of Makerere, Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. See Sicherman, *Becoming an African University*.

19 Gurr and Zirimu, 'Introduction', 2, emphasis added.

The tenets of the strong, post-romantic concept of literature we saw articulated differently by Liyong and p'Bitek are provided yet another spin here: not only is literature itself taken for granted as a value, but so is the need to *compare*, to accommodate aesthetic difference, make distinctions and agree or at least reflect on 'criteria' that may authorise value judgements. Such criteria, nonetheless, are not self-evident but themselves susceptible to change and in need of continued reflection and redefinition. The volume's signposting of a racialised conception of aesthetics seems to respond directly to US American debates, but should be read more in an interrogative than a declarative mode. The cautious tone of the introduction reflects the diversity of positions in the papers themselves, which range from the deputy vice-chancellor Bethwell Allan Ogot's call for critical self-scrutiny as the mark of a properly decolonised literature, to Angus Calder's search for a non-Western Marxist vocabulary that could account for the dialectic of international exchange and national becoming in an age of revolution.

Besides Calder's afterword, with its Fanonian take on decolonisation, there are three contributions of special relevance to my own argument regarding the decolonisation of literature: Zirimu's 'An Approach to Black Aesthetics', Magaga Alot's 'Negritude, Black Aesthetics – the Myths and Realities of the Black Fact' and Ali Mazrui's 'Aesthetic Dualism and Creative Literature in East Africa'. The former two engage aspects of négritude, whereas the latter adopts a more distinctly literary and sociological approach to the matter.

Zirimu – based at Makerere – opposed universalist conceptions of aesthetics, yet remained in favour of critical standards as these had been formed in specific societies. Applying the Baganda concept of *buntubulumu* ('total decorum of personality') to the 'linguistic arts', he saw this as a possible mode of assessing 'verbal creations performed with delight or any other appropriate emotion'.[20] This particularist approach accorded with Zirimu's insistence that assumptions of 'common humanity' must be based 'on the concrete lives of men and women and their progeny, human, social, artefactual, and so on'.[21] His discussion demonstrates, nonetheless, the difficulty in combining such anti-universalism with the very notion of 'black aesthetics', which seemed to offer a para-universalism that could be wielded against imperialism. In circular fashion, Zirimu claimed that 'black aesthetics is an outcome of black aesthetic experiences of black lives in black societies', and approximated Senghorian reasoning not just by identifying rhythm as the unifying characteristic of black art but by underlining the need for a black contribution to 'universal civilisation'.[22]

Magaga Alot, at the time an aspiring author, offered a more critical take on négritude that follows the familiar distinction between Senghor and

20 Pio Zirimu, 'An Approach to Black Aesthetics', in *Black Aesthetics: Papers from a Colloquium Held at the University of Nairobi, June 1971*, ed. Andrew Gurr and Pio Zirimu (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973), 61.

21 Zirimu, 'Black Aesthetics', 60.

22 Zirimu, 'Black Aesthetics', 59, 68.

Césaire. Claiming that Senghorian négritude 'extracts, exploits the African cultural raw material, exports it to the cultural manufacturing houses of Paris and London, and returns it to Africa as "finished" products, either too expensive or unpalatable to the Black masses', Alot advocated instead Césaire's 'existential […] decision to affirm and take pride in those things for which the black person has been despised'.[23] As with Zirimu, Alot's paper is somewhat impressionistic. The gist of his discussion, however, concerns the affirmation of defiance and apartness, of négritude as 'a revolutionary ideology for the black person'.[24] Although superficial as a reading of Senghor and Césaire, the paper aligns with most anglophone and Marxist readings of négritude at the time. Mphahlele is mentioned here, as are Fanon and Soyinka.

If Zirimu's and Alot's essays are indicative of an East African reception of négritude and US American black radicalism, Mazrui's sociological, place-based slant foreshadowed his important 1975 publication *The Political Sociology of the English Language*. Mazrui's target was above all the intellectualism of African literature. Or, to be precise, of East African writing *in English*, which remained 'for the time being a child of education and not of socialization'.[25] African creative writers, he observed, were 'disproportionately well educated', an observation that connects with my point about the prominence of writer-critics in this period.[26] Education equipped 'with an alien tongue newly mastered' but separated them for that very reason from the cultural ferment needed for linguistic creativity.[27] In systematic fashion, Mazrui suggested a four-part plan of action to rectify this situation:

> *Firstly*, attempt to take the new art to the people as a way of building up a socialization base. *Secondly*, bring the old traditional arts to the university and modern schools as a way of reducing the cultural non-involvement of these modern institutions. *Thirdly*, what is foreign in the educational institutions should be diversified so that its foreignness is no longer easily identifiable with what is British, but becomes internationalized further. And *fourthly*, attempt a partial indigenization of the English language itself as a medium of literary creativity.[28]

By pinpointing the institutional condition of possibility for African print literature – what Apollo Amoko later would call 'school culture' – yet without

23 Magaga Alot, 'Negritude, Black Aesthetics – The Myths and Realities of the Black Fact', in *Black Aesthetics: Papers from a Colloquium Held at the University of Nairobi, June 1971*, ed. Andrew Gurr and Pio Zirimu (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973), 72–73, 74.

24 Alot, 'Negritude', 77.

25 Ali Mazrui, 'Aesthetic Dualism and Creative Literature in East Africa', in *Black Aesthetics: Papers from a Colloquium Held at the University of Nairobi, June 1971*, ed. Andrew Gurr and Pio Zirimu (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973), 35.

26 Mazrui, 'Aesthetic Dualism', 36.

27 Mazrui, 'Aesthetic Dualism', 36.

28 Mazrui, 'Aesthetic Dualism', 43.

dismissing its institutionality out of hand, Mazrui's analysis was unusual.[29] He envisioned in this way a deliberate fusion of the institutional and popular domains through writing and teaching. All four points quoted above touch on the cosmopolitan–vernacular dynamic, with point three's broadening of the literary horizon being particularly interesting as a decolonial strategy – if only because it makes explicit the dialectical counterpart to decolonising gestures of indigenisation.[30] As we shall see, this call for further internationalisation reflected what already was underway at the University of Nairobi.

Differently to Zirimu and Alot, Mazrui bypassed race to speak instead of culture, language and society. This testifies to the range of thinking represented by these three speakers, by Calder's third-worldist view from afar (Edinburgh), and by the roster of speakers in the other conference volume, *Writers in East Africa*, which included Okello Oculi, Joe de Graft, Bahadur Tejani and Okot p'Bitek. Arguably, this not only shows how the East African field of critical discourse had transformed since the early 1960s, but also that there was a greater pluralism of approaches at this moment than a few years later, when it seems that the Nairobi department toed a narrower Marxist line. The full list of colloquium participants at the back of *Black Aesthetics* adds to this observation by showcasing the range of agents in the field at this time. It includes almost a hundred names, a few of which – notably Grace Ogot and Micere Githae (who later co-wrote *The Trial of Dedan Kamathi* with Ngũgĩ) – remain familiar in current accounts of African literary history. It would, however, require a more fine-grained social mapping of the East African intellectual community circa 1971 to place the majority of those on the list. The relative obscurity of the names to an external observer such as myself half a century later is important as a reminder of how the local intellectual context was much more populated than the conventional privileging of a few select names in most critical accounts of the period allows for.

As one of those few names, Ngũgĩ was absent in person from the festival, yet frequently mentioned. In an understated act of political defiance, Ali Mazrui referred directly to Ngũgĩ's resignation in protest against the Kenyatta government's refusal to allow the opposition leader Oginga Odinga to speak at a students' club. In other papers, Ngũgĩ's name and work are routinely mentioned alongside other consecrated authors: Achebe, Soyinka, Césaire, Fanon, Baldwin. Interestingly, he is positioned *simultaneously* as an international and a local name. 'International' means here that he, as an author-individual, is seen as *equal* to other, distantly consecrated black authors, which raises the profile of the local East African field. When invoked as a local name, the logic is inverted but the effect is similar: Ngũgĩ's personal prestige as an author boosts the collective prestige of the East African literary field, as

29 Apollo Amoko, *Postcolonialism in the Wake of the Nairobi Revolution: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Idea of African Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

30 For more on this, see the concluding chapter.

when Alot juxtaposes the 'defiant self-acceptance' he finds in Baldwin, Le Roi Jones, Césaire and others with similar East African themes 'in the writings of Okot, Ngũgĩ, Kataka and Atieno-Odhiambo'.[31] As this last example indicates, however, 1971 is also a moment when the consecration of Ngũgĩ is still in its early stages – a mere seven years after his first novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) – and he does not fully overshadow his East African peers as he does now in historical accounts. Mazrui, when claiming that Kenya is now leading the way in East African literary production in English, places Ngũgĩ and Grace Ogot on equal footing as 'the two best known fiction-writers in the English language from East Africa', which contrasts strikingly with the marginalisation of Ogot in subsequent African literary criticism.[32]

As we can see, the Festival of East African Writing richly manifested the breadth and intensity of literary engagements in Nairobi. The second conference volume, *Writers in East Africa*, confirms this, not least the significant contributions on the state of literary institutions in East Africa by Andrew Gurr, p'Bitek and Bahadur Tejani, a writer and lecturer in the Nairobi department of literature.[33] All three attempt to draw a line between the freedom of literary creativity and the rigours of institutionalised pedagogy. 'There are no rules in the creative game', as Gurr puts it, and p'Bitek takes a potshot at 'that dry subject called criticism'.[34] And yet, it is equally clear that all of them maintain that the institutions themselves – for better or worse – contribute to producing the actually existing creative environment. In tandem with Mazrui's essay discussed above, Gurr explains this by the tight connection between education and English as a literary language that, at best, also results in creative initiatives by the institutions themselves – his main example being *Currents*, a journal of creative writing midwifed by the department of literature in Nairobi. p'Bitek argues instead for a multilingual, vernacular approach to literary instruction, reiterating the rhetoric of the 'rich', but largely unspecified, repositories of literature still ignored by educational institutions. He does so, however, without closing the door to instruction in the English language, which is 'a gateway to the rich literature in that language'.[35] Tejani's piece, the most topical and explicitly Nairobi-based of the three essays, provides us with snapshots of ongoing debates in the university, the press and the radio. In so far as Gurr and p'Bitek speak in terms of generalities, Tejani – similarly to

31 Alot, 'Negritude', 72.

32 Mazrui, 'Aesthetic Dualism', 41. An illustrative example of her side-lining; the subject search term 'Grace Ogot' on the MLA bibliography in December 2020 renders 23 hits; the subject search term 'Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o' gives 814 hits.

33 Andrew Gurr, 'Literature and Institutions', in *Writers in East Africa*, ed. Andrew Gurr and Angus Calder (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1974), 115–21; Okot p'Bitek, 'The Crisis in the Teaching of Literature'; Bahadur Tejani, 'Culture versus Literature', in *Writers in East Africa*, 130–49.

34 Gurr, 'Literature and Institutions', 115; p'Bitek, 'The Crisis in the Teaching of Literature', 130.

35 p'Bitek, 'The Crisis in the Teaching of Literature', 127.

Liyong, whom he often invokes – argues that a more stringently craft-oriented and professional critical attention to literature will be the most fruitful way to nurture the literary culture at large. 'The creation of a national literature is an important task', he writes, '[b]ut equally worthy and far more difficult is the maintenance of high quality of literary effort'.[36] The strongest point in Tejani's piece is his articulation of an accelerated temporality in East Africa: 'Each year is like a decade in a dynamic and time conscious society like ours. The sheer quantity of creative writing is proof that we have now the distinct possibility of formulating critical standards along both historical and futuristic lines.'[37] Seeing the acceleration of time as the key feature of decolonisation, this leads him to the principle of engaging – closely – with what actually is produced rather than expressing prescriptive generalities. A clear difference in tendency can be noted here between Tejani and p'Bitek.

The enlivening sense in Tejani's essay of being caught mid-stream in the flow of literary time can be recaptured also by looking briefly at the previously mentioned cluster of journals that appeared in Nairobi towards the end of the 1960s: besides *Currents*, mentioned by Gurr, there was *Ghala* (a literary supplement to the *East Africa Journal*), *Zuka* and, most prominently, *Nexus* (renamed *Busara* in 1968). Crucially involved in nurturing the literary culture that enabled the festival in 1971, and becoming all the more important once *Transition* had been discontinued in Kampala in 1968 (following the arrest of the editor Rajat Neogy), it is not least in these journals one can glimpse the full range of positions in the field at the time.[38] *Nexus/Busara* is of particular interest to the narrative trajectory of this chapter. Styled more as a 'little magazine' than an academic journal, *Nexus* emerged directly out of the English department in Nairobi. If its first name signalled the networked, synchronic nature of literary culture, the renaming of the journal as *Busara* ('wisdom' in Swahili) invoked tradition and local authenticity – albeit in a lingua franca rather than a vernacular, narrowly understood. The renaming coincided with the issuing of the 'Nairobi revolution' manifesto, and we can see how the editorial address changes in 1970 from the 'English Department' to the 'Department of Literature'. The department head James E. Stewart – Ngũgĩ, Liyong and Owuor-Anyumba's antagonist in their campaign to effect this change – remained nonetheless tied to *Busara* until the early 1970s. At the same time, one can register a gradual shift in the journal's content towards more ambitious and theoretically driven essays. Having previously mixed literary and critical material, its final issue in 1976 was exclusively critical, with scholarly essays on, among other things, *The Trial of Dedan Kamathi*,

36 Tejani, 'Culture versus Literature', 140.

37 Tejani, 'Culture versus Literature', 135.

38 *Transition* would later relocate to Accra, Ghana. The most authoritative account of its two first incarnations can be found in Peter Benson, *Black Orpheus, Transition, and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

V.S. Naipaul, Charles Lamming, Zambian literature and Nigerian orality. By this time, the switchover to a department of literature with a strong Marxist leaning had become fully noticeable: D.H. Kiiru's essay 'Form and Content in the Novel, Class[,] the Writer and the Critic' offered a trenchant account of novelistic form as an outcome of social and historical forces, with reference to canonical Marxist theory (Marx, Trotsky) and a wide corpus of Russian, French, African and North American novels – but emphatically not British literature, except for a curt dismissal of F.R. Leavis. In less than a decade, *Busara* traces a movement from a looser, more playful but also more tentative approach to literary criticism, to its decisive professionalisation and institutionalisation. Here, the causal link to the departmental transformation in Nairobi is beyond doubt.

A Cosmopolitan Africanisation of Literature

Okot p'Bitek is the first on record, in 1971, to use the word 'revolution' in reference to the 1968 challenge issued by three lecturers in the Nairobi English department.[39] If it is taken to mean instantaneous change, it is an overstatement. As we can see from our discussion thus far, changes were staggered rather than immediate, and when the manifesto – or internal memo, rather – calling for the abolition of the English department was circulated in October 1968 its force derived from numerous local and international developments. It was first presented as a collegial response to an ongoing revision of the department's syllabus. Rather unintentionally, it would make its way into literary history as 'one of the most radical contestations of the traditional ideology of English literature' in African contexts.[40] Indeed, in Biodun Jeyifo's assessment, it was instrumental in laying the foundations of 'a *curricular* and *disciplinary* consolidation for the rise of African literature in the schools and universities of independent Africa', and thereby put 'a definitive stamp on […] the fact that the constitution of African literary study as a legitimate academic discipline with certified degrees and professional specialization began in Africa, not in Europe or America'.[41] It was, as p'Bitek himself points out in 1971, not an isolated development, but 'part and parcel of the fundamental changes that African universities are undergoing everywhere on the continent'.[42] This alerts us helpfully to the wider set of institutional developments that I have touched on above and de-emphasises the document's importance as a 'beginning'. To this should also be added that the Nairobi document does not at all carry the same symbolic weight in francophone or lusophone critical discourses.

39 p'Bitek, 'The Crisis in the Teaching of Literature', 122.
40 Amoko, *Postcolonialism*, 4.
41 Biodun Jeyifo, 'The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory', *Research in African Literatures* 21, no. 1 (1990): 43, emphasis in the original.
42 p'Bitek, 'The Crisis in the Teaching of Literature', 122.

These qualifications notwithstanding, 'On the Abolition of the English Department' remains both a compelling and surprisingly elusive intervention in the histories of decolonisation. Mindful of (and somewhat daunted by) the chorus of critical voices that have contributed to its reception, I will in my reading suggest some alternative emphases. A keen and exemplary instance of the more recent reception is Apollo Amoko's argument that the manifesto 'embodied powerfully contradictory impulses, at once rejecting and reproducing the cultural nationalist fallacies of colonial discourse'.[43] Amoko reads Ngũgĩ, Liyong and Henry Owuor-Anyumba as being beholden to an ethnic-nationalist conception of literature derived from Matthew Arnold and Leavis: 'Leavis's discourse remains attractive for Ngũgĩ and his colleagues, paradoxically, on account of its ethnocentrism, by which I mean the fundamental nexus it posits between *ethnos* and the institutions of high culture.'[44] Their challenge to 'English literature' is, in other words, underwritten by the assumption that institutionalised literary instruction should produce ideal national citizens.

Amoko's identification of the manifesto's iteration of nation- and race-based conceptions of literature is not inaccurate, but, I will argue, surprisingly one-sided. Although the point about the *ethnos* resonates with my earlier reading of p'Bitek's cultural nativism and connects also with Ngũgĩ's later philosophy of language in *Decolonising the Mind*, there is more than first meets the eye in this manifesto. Other, equally important discursive tendencies are its projections of literature as a cosmopolitan domain, as a multimodal phenomenon (oral and printed) and as a multilingual textual archive. This amounts to a complexly affirmative conception of literature that will be read and evaluated differently at different moments, but deserves nevertheless to be remembered as a signal instance of conceptual worlding that cannot be contained by ready-made accounts of Leavisite influence, or the equivalent.

The manifesto responded to a working paper presented by James Stewart, where he had made a plea for the gradual transformation of English in Nairobi, on the grounds of historical continuity:

> The English Department has had a long history at this College and has built up a strong syllabus which [studies] the historic continuity of a single culture throughout the period of emergence of the modern west […]. *However, it is bound to become less 'British', more open to other writing in English (American, Caribbean, African, Commonwealth) and also to continental writing, for comparative purposes.*[45]

43 Amoko, *Postcolonialism*, 5.

44 Amoko, *Postcolonialism*, 9.

45 Quoted in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong and Henry Owuor Anyumba, 'On the Abolition of the English Department', in *Homecomings: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (London: Heinemann, [1968] 1972), 145–6, emphasis in the original.

Against this reformist view, Ngũgĩ and his co-authors offered their more drastic proposal: the English department should be abolished, a new department of African literature and languages be set up and the 'historic continuity' in focus should be African, not Western. Tit for tat – a perfect example of the Fanonian replacement of a colonial order with a non-colonial one. Or so it would seem. But while its initial premise is spatial, by dint of wanting to place 'Kenya, East Africa and then Africa in the centre', the detailed suggestions for how this is to be achieved layer the semantics of 'literature' with multiple linguistic, cultural and temporal vectors. The authors take care to point out that they are not rejecting 'other cultural streams, especially the western stream'.[46] The influences that have shaped African literature, they write, are multiple. Swahili, Arabic and Asian literatures have been important in East Africa; European literatures have contributed to shaping African literature in English, French and Portuguese; and the African tradition (in the singular) is, as they say in a noteworthy phrase, 'the base from which we make our cultural take-off into the world'.[47]

Point by point, the authors then present short descriptions of and motivations for a reformed syllabus. The oral tradition, Swahili literature, European literature, modern African literature in multiple languages (including what today would be called the black Atlantic writing of the Caribbean and North America) and drama are all included in their ambitious programme. What becomes clear by the end of the document is that the authors are not staging a revolt against *literature*, or even against European literature. Indeed, this is what bothers Amoko and leads him to read the manifesto as a 'mirror image' of Stewart's arguments, with the exception of the 'defensive discourse on Afrocentrism'.[48] But if we think of this instead as a strategic intervention in the worlding of the concept of literature, it is more radically comprehensive than either Amoko's sceptical assessment or more affirmative postcolonial and pan-Africanist readings allow. What happens here, after all, far exceeds the Anglocentric linguistic, literary and institutional horizons of James Stewart. As we have seen throughout this book, the valorisation of locality as a *point of departure* for literary criticism and pedagogy is never a trivial gesture, nor can it be taken for granted, but always involves a deliberate choice within the space of possibilities, to speak with Bourdieu. In the case of Ngũgĩ and his colleagues, this point of departure entailed a far more multilingual as well as multitemporal notion of literature than the discipline of 'English' had ever provided: 'For the purposes of the department', they write, 'a knowledge of Swahili, English and French should be compulsory', and 'whenever feasible', languages such as Arabic, Hindustani, Gikuyu, Luo and Akamba should be introduced into the syllabus.[49] As for the European

46 Ngũgĩ et al., 'Abolition', 146.
47 Ngũgĩ et al., 'Abolition', 147.
48 Amoko, *Postcolonialism*, 9.
49 Ngũgĩ et al., 'Abolition', 147.

literary component, the 'Russian novel of the nineteenth century should and must be taught', alongside selections from 'American, German, and other European literatures'.[50] The feasibility of these suggestions was certainly an issue, but the concept-historical point of interest is that this explicitly decolonial intervention is so thoroughly world literary. Even as it insists on African rootedness and placing East Africa at the centre, its implied geographical imaginary is such that East Africa becomes not a world unto itself, but a point of exchange for, on the one hand, pan-African solidarities and, on the other, a global circulation of literatures in the plural. In this way, East Africa comprises both inward and outward trajectories within a horizon of expectation that exceeds the current space of experience ('our cultural take-off into the world'). The rhetorical achievement of the circular is thus to prime the semantic content of 'literature', so it becomes far more local *and* far more cosmopolitan than anything envisioned by Stewart. In this way, although they to some extent reproduce the canonical hierarchies of world literature, the authors manage to provincialise Europe and, above all, Britain. Here is a strong example of how the cosmopolitan and vernacular trajectories reinforce each other within a self-proclaimed regional context. As we could see in our earlier discussion of Liyong, this intervention is premised on a consensus concerning the existence of a world republic of letters: the offhand mention of 'the Russian novel' as well as of French, German and American literature, confirms on the one hand the authority of a Eurocentric, international literary space as described by Casanova, while it on the other hand mobilises that very authority to strengthen the cause of decolonised literary instruction. This republic of letters, however, is accorded a supporting rather than a central role in the projected syllabus.

Thus far the manifesto. It could have ended there, as a magisterial rhetorical flourish. It sparked instead an intra-departmental debate – what Ngũgĩ would call the 'Nairobi Literature Debate' – and led soon enough to a real changeover.[51] Their perseverance in effecting institutional change is in fact the most impressive achievement of the rebels. Given Ngũgĩ's (temporary) resignation from the department in 1969, we should foreground Liyong and Owuor-Anyumba's role in facilitating this transformation. In an early issue of *Research in African Literatures* in 1971, Liyong detailed the specifics of the new syllabus – and he did so both in English and in French. The article's bilingualism (which would not be feasible in our anglophone age) reflected the two paths – English-based and French-based – the students could choose between. The French syllabus was instrumental, geared towards language proficiency, but included also a literary option focused on francophone African literature. The English-based syllabus is, however, strictly literary and astoundingly ambitious. Students taking this as their main subject over

50 Ngũgĩ et al., 'Abolition', 148.

51 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987), 89.

the course of three years were required to cover a total of ten 'papers' or modules (two in the first year, eight in the remaining years). In years two and three, they could choose from a total of 12 such modules, which clearly built on the suggestions in the manifesto: (1) Linguistics and the theory and criticism of literature, (2) The African novel, (3) Oral literature, (4) Drama, (5) African poetry and its modern context, (6) The classic novel, (7) East African writing and its background, (8) Caribbean literature and politics, (9) Afro-American and American literature, (10) The English poetic tradition, 1350–1940, and its European context, (11) Shakespeare and Tolstoy, (12) Oriental literature.[52] Once Ngũgĩ rejoined the department late in 1971, and especially as of 1973, these offerings would soon have a more distinctly Marxist profile.[53] An illustrative outcome of this is D.H. Kiiru's previously mentioned 1976 article in *Busara*. But in 1971 it seems that structuralism is the main, albeit understated theoretical influence. The module on theory and criticism, for example, is described thus:

> An introduction to the study of language as an auditory system of signs, and as a symbolic system. Students are introduced to certain procedures used in the description of the phonological, grammatical and lexical systems of a language and to some aspects of semantic theory. Features of synchronic and diachronic variation are also described.[54]

In the other short descriptions, theoretical vocabulary tends to be downplayed in favour of content. Modules are described as covering genres – 'contemporary and recorded oral literature', 'Caribbean poetry, fiction and drama' – and sometimes specific authors – as, for example, 'Elizabethan lyrics, Marlow, Donne, Jonson, Tolstoy, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Chekov' in the Shakespeare and Tolstoy course.[55] The emphasis, in other words, is on primary texts, organised mostly on geographical and national principles. The real innovation of the Nairobi syllabus, which speaks directly to our contemporary debates on world literature, lies therefore less in any particular theoretical stance and more in its scope (which, in turn, has theoretical implications). Once again, in analogy with Senghor's critical practice, it is in an African context that we find a more credibly cosmopolitan literary outlook than just about anywhere else at this time – far more capacious than the cosmopolitanism of the São Paulo critics, for example. In view of my previous discussion, it seems safe to assume that Liyong is the strongest driver behind this world literary inclination. If Owuor-Anyumba – who, it should be noted, was not

52 Taban Lo Liyong, 'Language and Literature Studies at University College Nairobi', *Research in African Literatures* 2, no. 2 (1971): 170–2.

53 It is Ngũgĩ who singles out 1973 as the decisive year when 'the majority of the staff in the department were Africans'. Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 95. See also Ogude, 'Ngũgĩ's Concept of History', 96.

54 Liyong, 'Language and Literature', 170.

55 Liyong, 'Language and Literature', 171.

a writer-critic, but a scholar – retained a local and African orientation, and if Ngũgĩ at his time had mostly focused on anglophone and black literature, Liyong had a more pronounced cosmopolitan desire. In the 1971 article, he describes it 'as the most revolutionary syllabus stressing the centrality of East Africa, and fanning outwards through Africa into other human experiences', but with the caveat that '[w]e still have to integrate Australia and New Zealand and Latin America among the refined people of the world whose literatures merit discussion in classrooms'.[56] Clearly, then, we are in this context not dealing with a blinkered, proprietary ethno-national conception of literature – as argued by Amoko – but with literature as a space of encounter between self and other.

As mentioned previously, the extent to which such an ambitious pedagogical programme was at all *feasible*, given the limited resources of the University of Nairobi, is a moot point. Here, Amoko's critique of the 'school culture' version of literature as an elite project, out of touch with prevailing economic and political conditions in Kenya, gains more traction. And this also remains Ngũgĩ's constant dilemma in his three roles as writer, critic and teacher. How could his personal calling to be a writer and inhabit the world of literature translate into local relevance and political effectiveness? Increasingly disaffected by Kenyan politics as the 1970s wore on, it became incumbent upon Ngũgĩ to provide new iterations of 'literature', now at some remove from the optimism of the 1971 syllabus, but, as I will show, no less vernacularly cosmopolitan in its constitution for all that.

The Modernity of the Vernacular

Decolonising the Mind is justly known as a watershed in Ngũgĩ's career. Written in an essayistic and academic register, it not only constitutes his symbolic farewell to English as a vehicle for his literary creativity, but also marks the beginning of a long life in exile. The contradiction between his cosmopolitan vagrancy and his decision to redirect his creative energies, as a professional writer, towards a language community historically located in the Rift Valley region of Kenya, was extreme and would also compel Ngũgĩ to return to, or rather continue, using English as one of his languages of writing. The outlines of the events that led to this situation are well-known: having been involved in a Gikuyu-language community theatre outside Nairobi, Ngũgĩ's play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* was banned in November 1977 and he himself was arrested on New Year's Eve of that year. It was during his year in prison he wrote his first novel in Gikuyu, *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ* (*Devil on the Cross*) (1982), but after his release, a deteriorating political situation in Kenya eventually kept him abroad from 1982 onwards. In this way, *Decolonising* registers both an authorial

56 Liyong, 'Language and Literature', 168.

homecoming (defined as a fusion of territory, language, literary form and audience), and an irretrievable rupture with that 'home'.

Accounting for what Ngũgĩ describes as an 'epistemological break', his apologia for turning to Gikuyu spawned a long trail of critical rejoinders.[57] Most famously, perhaps, Simon Gikandi read it against the evolution of Ngũgĩ's position from 'Makerere liberalism' in the early 1960s to Marxist materialism in the 1970s.[58] With *Decolonising the Mind*, Gikandi argued, tensions in the earlier positions were not resolved, but given a further contradictory twist by combining irreconcilable materialist and romantic/nativist conceptions of language. I have tended to agree with Gikandi, but as I re-read the book, I now wonder whether the hard binary of 'materialism' and 'nativism' offers a sufficient description of Ngũgĩ's exposition on language. By activating the term 'vernacular' as well as some current critiques of monolingualism and multilingualism, I will instead attempt to assess the decolonial concerns of this essay alongside the world literary analysis staked out in this chapter.

Among the many things going on in *Decolonising the Mind*, we find numerous references to the developments in Nairobi referred to above. The closing chapter, 'The Quest for Relevance', provides one of the most widely read accounts of the 'Nairobi Literature Debate' in 1968, and when narrating his arrest in December 1977, Ngũgĩ recalls that he was planning for a course consisting of a 'class analysis of Chinua Achebe's fiction from *Things Fall Apart* up to *Girls at War*'.[59] Essential secondary reading for this course would have been Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* ('mostly the chapter titled "the pitfalls of national consciousness"'[60]) and Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. At this time, with Ngũgĩ as an associate professor, the departmental transformation sparked in 1968 had been fully institutionalised. His reading list for the prospective course is aligned with the new emphases in the syllabus, but the attraction and complication of *Decolonising* is the way it turns so decisively to the question of language.

'Language', he writes, 'carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world'.[61] This comes at the tail end of his extended meditation on language and being in *Decolonising*. There are several possible ways to describe this philosophy of language. It is, first, if we accept the awkward phrase, a 'mother-tongue-ism', which takes for granted the irreplaceable value of the 'native' language. Ngũgĩ argues for this position in explicitly Marxist terms, but it is also uncannily resonant with Herder's conception of language as a communal creation based in and constitutive of

57 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 44.
58 Simon Gikandi, 'Ngũgĩ's Conversion: Writing and the Politics of Language', *Research in African Literatures* 23, no. 1 (1992): 135.
59 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 63.
60 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 63.
61 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 16.

temporal existence.[62] Referring to Marx, Ngũgĩ speaks of 'the language of real life', shaped by 'the relations people enter into with one another in the labour process, the links they necessarily establish among themselves in the act of a people, a community of human beings, producing wealth or means of life like food, clothing, houses'.[63] Assuming a mimetic relationship between 'real life' and language, he then considers spoken language as a mediation among human beings in their endeavour to uphold life. The figure of the child is projected here as the locus of linguistic authenticity: 'The association of the child's sensibility is with the language of his [*sic*] experience of life.'[64]

Connected to such immediacy, however, is the intergenerational dimension of language. This is, for Ngũgĩ, the core definition of language as culture: 'experiences are handed over to the next generation and become the inherited basis for their further actions on nature and on themselves'.[65] Language thereby becomes 'the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history' and makes possible the 'genesis, growth, banking, articulation and […] transmission' of culture.[66] On a *general* level then, language is the means of *specific* communities to acknowledge and articulate a sense of the past as their own past. It is worth observing how close this conception of language is to Senghor's claim that the form of the proverb (with Wolof as his linguistic case) 'expresses the experience of a civilisation through its reference to climate, history, myths, morals, institutions'.[67] Although they conventionally are seen as opposites, Senghor and Ngũgĩ seem to agree on the fundamental link between language and the space of experience. It is in relation to the horizon of expectation that they differ dramatically: Senghor's pessimism regarding the role of African languages in modernity contrasts with Ngũgĩ's optimism, as does, inversely, *Senghor's* optimism regarding the potential to assimilate 'foreign' languages as bearers of culture.

If the conception of language outlined above is presented, normatively, as the natural order of things ('[t]his is the universality of language, a quality specific to human beings'), history intervenes to disrupt that order.[68] The effect of the colonial incursion, in Ngũgĩ's analysis, was to cause a diglossic rift between the domestic language and the language of technology and formalised knowledge – the language of modernity, *tout court*. Once again, the child figure is the locus of this linguistic drama, resulting in 'a disassociation

62 Jürgen Trabant, 'Herder and Language', in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 117–39.
63 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 13.
64 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 14.
65 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 14.
66 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 15.
67 Senghor, *Liberté* 3, 388: 'exprime l'expérience d'une civilisation, en faisant référence au climat, à l'histoire, aux mythes, aux moeurs, aux institutions'.
68 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 15.

of the sensibility of that child from his [*sic*] natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation'.[69] Ngũgĩ's pronominal insistence on identifying this child as a boy makes it hard not to read it as a reference to his own experience, but the generic figure also dramatises the destructive impact of colonialism and places a premium on the promise of the future. This is where Ngũgĩ's mother-tongue-ism properly becomes a discourse of the vernacular. By saying so, I wish to emphasise that the 'vernacular' is not a natural or given category. Rather, vernacularisation is an ongoing socio-historical process of differentiation within and among languages that may or may not be adopted for literary purposes. Language never 'is' vernacular – it is *made* vernacular through the positioning of particular modes of speech in a marginal and subordinate position relative to the language(s) of power. Without invoking such a prior experience of subordination, the critical impetus of the language philosophy presented in *Decolonising the Mind* would falter. The child figure stands at the crossroads of a linguistically coded inheritance and an unknown future, but the colonial vernacularisation of that inheritance splits the child's temporal trajectory and, supposedly, makes it 'see the world […] as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition'.[70]

This, then, is the core motivation for Ngũgĩ's linguistic anti-colonialism. By first linking language as an assumed entity to culture as an assumed entity, he then posits a determinate link between the use of a specific language and an equally specific understanding of the world, in much the same way as Herder considered culture to be, in John Zammito's phrasing, 'distinctive actualizations of the multifarious possibilities of humanity which the course of human history set out'.[71] Each of these connections and entities, if we follow the logic of the argument, are non-negotiable. That is to say, we cannot avoid adopting the culturally produced worldview of a language once we enter that language – what could be described as a Sapir-Whorfian view of language. Whether or not this is nativism depends on how one defines the term, but it is doubtlessly a more essentialising understanding of language than we find in Senghor, for whom language could be reshaped by its new users (although Senghor did not fully acknowledge the implications of his own view). Then again – and this is where the charge of nativism falters – Ngũgĩ valorises the vernacular not least because of its potential to resituate the collective subject of modernity by fusing past, present and future.

This urge to enable an integrated temporality of language and culture becomes perhaps most convincing in the chapter on theatre. The account of the Kamĩrĩĩthũ community theatre is without doubt the happiest section

69 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 17.

70 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 17.

71 John Zammito, 'Herder and Historical Metanarrative: What's Philosophical about History?', in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke (New York: Camden House, 2009), 68.

of *Decolonising the Mind*. When approached by members of the Kamīrīīthũ community wanting to set up a cultural centre, Ngũgĩ finds here a way to articulate contemporary concerns in postcolonial Kenya among peasants and workers in their own domestic language. On the understanding that drama emerges from 'human struggles with nature and with others', he identifies it as an age-old Gikuyu form of celebration and narration expressed through 'songs, dance and occasional mime'.[72] Hence, despite the topicality of his own plays in Gikuyu – to the extent that *Ngaahika Ndeenda* led to his detention – he can credibly claim here to be working from inside a particular linguistic-cultural inheritance. When describing his interaction with the local community, he insists that '[t]here was now no barrier between the content of their history and the linguistic medium of its expression'.[73] The dialogue with workers and peasants was a process of 'continuous learning' of local history, of working conditions and, not least, of 'the elements of form of the African Theatre'.[74] If one recurring task of decolonial critical discourse has been to reshape the substantive semantic content of the concept of literature, we see here how Ngũgĩ rehearses p'Bitek's turn towards indigenous culture, but now with greater specificity and a more dynamic sense of temporality. Although Ngũgĩ emphasises the coherent link with the past as one of the highest values of a linguistically delimited culture, his work at Kamīrīīthũ was steeped in its moment, providing that vernacular synthesis of form, language, audience and political urgency he aspires towards in all of *Decolonising the Mind*.

The real complication, and even contradiction, in this discourse of the vernacular arises when he recounts the genesis of his first novel in Gikuyu. As I have touched upon elsewhere, the prison cell where he composes *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ*, is strongly resonant as a symbol not of the writer's fusion with a community, but of his separation from it.[75] Contrary to theatre, where he could claim to build on Gikuyu tradition, he self-consciously sees himself as the creator of something new and unprecedented: the Gikuyu novel. To state his case, Ngũgĩ unproblematically draws on the full range of his reading. Even as he dismisses the legitimacy of the 'Afro-European' novel, it is Joseph Conrad and George Lamming, and his 'further acquaintance with Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gorky, Sholokov, Balzac and Faulkner', that alerted him to the 'possibilities for the novel in terms of thematic concerns and range of technique'.[76] At this point – and he is referring here to his last English-language novels, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977) – the

72 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 36, 37.
73 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 45.
74 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 45, 53.
75 Stefan Helgesson, 'How Writing Becomes (World) Literature: Singularity, the Universalizable, and the Implied Writer', in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, ed. Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (New York: Routledge, 2016), 31–4.
76 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 76.

'foreignness' of the novel form is no longer an intractable problem, but rather a potential resource to be activated on behalf of the Gikuyu novel. And more, there is even a direct aesthetic connection between canonical modernism and the narrative traditions of the Gikuyu peasants:

> Now my own observation of how people ordinarily narrated events to one another had also shown me that they quite happily accepted interventions, digressions, narrative within a narrative and dramatic illustrations without losing the main narrative thread. The story-within-a-story was part and parcel of the conversational norms of the peasantry. The linear/biographical unfolding of a story was more removed from actual social practice than the narrative of Conrad and Lamming.[77]

A paragraph later, this is once again problematised as he considers the implications of producing a *written* narrative for Gikuyu speakers: 'Would similar techniques carry the kind of reader who had been to see *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I will marry when I want*) at Kamĩrĩĩthũ? And yet how would I return to the linear plot?'[78] Rhetorically, this extended reflection on his own practice allowed Ngũgĩ not only to distance himself from the mode of realism that had served as a model for his earlier poetics, but also to short-circuit the stereotypical colonial dichotomy between backward African tradition and progressive Western modernism. The integrated temporality of language, audience and form that fleetingly is intimated in the Kamĩrĩĩthũ section, gives way here to a folded temporality where the distant and proximate are brought together. This motivates, for Ngũgĩ, his combination of oral and modernist modes of narration in *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ*. Whether his strategy succeeds or fails is not my primary concern here. Rather, what interests me is that these reflections offer an almost ideal-typical synthesis of Okot p'Bitek's and Taban Lo Liyong's positions discussed previously: a cosmopolitan–vernacular resolution of two divergent conceptions of literature resulting in a third, strong conception. 'World literature' is here nothing less than a repository of formal-technical achievements that the African writer can and should embrace (Liyong's position), but the turn to Gikuyu, oral traditions and a nationally located audience is what validates the writer's practice (p'Bitek's position).

The deeper contradiction, seen from the viewpoint of contemporary theory, is really between Ngũgĩ's monolingual ideology and his translingual practice. In the monolingual paradigm, as Yasemin Yildiz understands it, 'individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one "true" language only, their "mother tongue", and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation'.[79] In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ never allows for the possibility that the

77 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 76.
78 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising*, 77.
79 Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 2.

sociolinguistic context of workers and peasants in Kenya is best described instead as multi- and translingual, or that the very identification of 'language as a unity' is itself an imposition on a fluid set of linguistic practices (and quite dramatically so in many African contexts).[80] Even as his discourse of the vernacular evolves through the decades, especially through an increasing emphasis on translation, this basic monolingualist position never changes. Ironically, this applies also to his recent critique of the 'fundamentalism of monolingualism', for the simple reason that he never interrogates what is at stake in the primary identification of languages as nameable entities.[81] In *Something Torn and New*, for example, Ngũgĩ valorises 'Europe's encounter [in the Renaissance] with its own languages' at a time when 'Latin had occupied a position not too dissimilar from that occupied by European languages in Africa today'.[82] In an understated comparison with his own position, he observes that 'the pioneers of this shift were at first apologetic, time and time again finding it necessary […] to answer the question as to why they wrote in the vernacular'.[83] Through the gradual production of vernacular texts – also, not least, through translation – a revolution in literary values was eventually achieved. Ngũgĩ does not celebrate this without qualification:

> [T]he vernaculars grew, and though they had met with resistance, the kind we see in Africa today, by the end of the sixteenth century their victorious emergence from the shadow of Latin was complete. Consider the exuberance of language that we find in Rabelais, Shakespeare, and Cervantes: These are writers who discovered the limitless expressive power of their languages, writers who reveled in the possibilities they saw in their rediscovered tongues. In their journey of emancipation, the languages had moved from diffidence, imitation, and emulation to self-confident readiness, thus surpassing and subjugating other tongues and cultures. The 'I gave you language' line in Prospero's admonition to Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* proceeded from the confident climax that unfortunately was also the beginning of Africa's dismemberment.[84]

This caveat complicates Ngũgĩ's otherwise straightforward advocacy of vernacular writing. His historical argument, after all, cuts both ways. Literary history shows that a close engagement with the vernacular will produce literary value; but when sufficiently successful, the accumulation of this value can transform the vernacular into a cosmopolitan, imperial language that then will make further vernacular revolutions necessary. A deep-time view of world literature (Latin was once a vernacular) reveals this central irony and returns

80 Sakai, 'How Do We Count a Language?', 73.
81 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'The Politics of Translation: Notes towards an African Language Policy', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 30, no. 2 (2018): 126.
82 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New*, 82–3.
83 Ngũgĩ, *Something Torn and New*, 83.
84 Ngũgĩ, *Something Torn and New*, 87–8.

us to Casanova's competitive paradigm of world literary space. It confirms, above all, that the vernacular in the literary sense assumes its contours in relation to a cosmopolitan other, which qualifies Ngũgĩ's strong investment in the primordiality of the vernacular. In Sheldon Pollock's famous historical account of South Asia and Europe, *written* vernacular literatures are never organic, but invented. Added to this, the prime movers of vernacularisation have come from the elite rather than the 'common people': 'the bearers of vernacularization in both southern Asia and western Europe were the cultural and political elites who were associated with or directly controlled the royal court'.[85] In full awareness of the drastic historical leap I am making here, this brings us full circle to the polarity between Liyong and p'Bitek that I discussed initially. Whether oriented towards a 'larger world' or a 'small place', the main agents of literary production and reception have been in a relatively elite position, even if marginalised in and by Europe. Liyong, p'Bitek and Ngũgĩ could all, in varying degrees, be seen as dissidents, but in their postcolonial East African contexts none of them were subordinate. When Ngũgĩ in this late essay therefore sees vernacularisation as politically ambiguous but unequivocally positive in terms of its *literary* effects, this could be read in terms of a personal ambivalence towards the authoritative position from which he himself is pursuing the project of vernacularisation.

Conclusion: A Transnational Vernacular Poetics

Although it was the outcome – and in some respects the endpoint – of a protracted local development in Kenya, *Decolonising the Mind* has become a standard reference in contemporary global debates on decolonisation. For Achille Mbembe, speaking in the wake of the 2015 student protests in South Africa, the enduring point is that Ngũgĩ places African concerns at the centre and rejects 'the notion that Africa is merely an extension of the West'.[86] After which Mbembe immediately adds: 'It is not about closing the door to European or other traditions.'[87] This reading is borne out, I believe, by my discussion in this chapter.

At the same time, Ngũgĩ has always stirred controversy and provoked counter-critiques. The most comprehensive and judicious of these appraisals remains Simon Gikandi's monograph on Ngũgĩ, which grounds itself in a profound respect for his achievements but does not fall shy of exploring their contradictions and blind spots.[88] In a minor key, James Ogude has taken Ngũgĩ's romanticising historiography of the anti-colonial struggle to task,

85 Sheldon Pollock, 'Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History', *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 610.

86 Mbembe, 'Decolonizing the University', 35.

87 Mbembe, 'Decolonizing the University', 35.

88 Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

arguing that his theoretical attachment to dependency has resulted in a silencing of internal contradictions in the Kenyan national project that are not readable against a purely Marxist template.[89] Peter Vakunta has rehearsed concerns about the internal contradictions of Ngũgĩ's language ideology that recalls Gikandi's critique and Adejunmobi's interrogation of the discourse of the vernacular.[90] Apollo Amoko has added yet further to this ongoing critical assessment that can seem somewhat split between what we might call a Kenya-grounded reception and a global (but particularly North American) reception – with the latter tending to valorise Ngũgĩ as a figurehead of decolonisation. By focusing on some formative moments in Nairobi-based criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, and by reading Ngũgĩ's take on language through contemporary language debates, my attempt in this chapter has instead been to reconsider the Nairobi constellation of critics in view of the long history of literature's conceptual worlding. In comparison with the previous examples, one can see how the flourishing of the Nairobi moment was more compressed. Coming out of 'nowhere', which was the spurious impression Liyong gave in 1965, a strongly committed literary culture formed in the space of a few years to address the discontents of the colonial legacy and independence era alike. What initially presented itself as a cosmopolitan–vernacular polarity between Liyong and p'Bitek resulted in an impressive (albeit precarious) synthesis by way of the institutional transformation in Nairobi. Through a dark political irony, Ngũgĩ's peripatetic life in involuntary exile would contribute to globalising this mode of literary thinking. By persecuting Ngũgĩ, the Moi government unwittingly became an agent in the conceptual worlding of literature. If Senghor's version of literary thinking in the Senegalese context was premised on the ties he maintained with Paris, Nairobi in 1968 and Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the Mind* present us with an apparent rupture with the British colonial legacy, yet it is a gambit that becomes transnationally resonant not least because of the rhizomatic language complex of English that derives from that legacy without ever being reducible to it. To return to an earlier formulation in this chapter, what counts is not that we are faced here with a contradictory history, but that it assumes a form through which the contradictions can be addressed. In this respect, the spirit of debate and contestation cultivated in Nairobi – at least until the Moi government entered its most repressive phase – resulted in one of the most successful and trenchant decolonisations of literature on record.

89 James Ogude, 'Ngũgĩ's Concept of History and the Post-Colonial Discourses in Kenya', *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 31, no. 1 (1997): 86–112.

90 Peter Vakunta, 'Aporia: Ngũgĩ's Fatalistic Logic on the Position of Indigenous Languages in African Literature', *ALA: Journal of the African Literature Association* 5, no. 2 (2010): 74–82.

Conclusion: Notes Towards (and Perhaps Against) a Decolonial Conceptual History of Literature

In a recent interview, Kgauhelo Dube explains the motivations behind her Tshwane/Pretoria-based literature initiative called 'LongStorySHORT'. Launched in 2015, LongStorySHORT organises events in and around Tshwane that 'typically take the form of a reading of a short story or extract by an African writer followed by discussion'.[1] These readings, often performed by local celebrities, are filmed and then posted online in various formats. As the interviewers explain, one of the aims with these events is to address 'the sense of dislocation and alienation experienced by African scholars and students in institutional contexts which are still dominated by colonial or apartheid logics'.[2] *Still dominated* – note that this refers to current conditions in South Africa, not the historical period I've investigated in this book. Dube's initiative stems, in other words, from a contemporary experience of disconnection between her educational socialisation in a privileged, mostly white, school and her social context as a black South African on the African continent. Literature serves here as a mediator between multiple orders of belonging:

> There are certain realities that black people find themselves in and maybe literature, particularly African literature, can be part of the healing. Especially when we realize that our realities are not just South African; they're bigger than that. We are part of a bigger struggle. South Africa is a very closed off space because of apartheid; we're so closed off in our thinking. You see the advantage that other African countries have over us in their knowledge of the world.[3]

1 Corinne Sandwith, Khulukazi Soldati-Kahimbaara and Rebecca Fasselt, 'Decolonizing the Reading Landscape: A Conversation with Kgauhelo Dube', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 55, no. 1 (2020): 122.
2 Sandwith et al., 'Decolonizing', 124.
3 Sandwith et al., 'Decolonizing', 128.

How much has actually changed since the 'Nairobi revolution', or since Tim Couzens, in the 1970s, lamented the exclusion of black writing from the South African university curriculum? Everything, but then again much too little. 'Everything' because of the political sea-change in South Africa since the apartheid years, the reordering of priorities in literary instruction, the vast growth of African literature and the revolution in the media ecology. LongStorySHORT's symbiosis with social media makes its events both resolutely local and instantly 'global' at the same time – a prospect literally inconceivable prior to the advent of the Internet.

'Everything' has changed also if we broaden the picture and consider the proliferation of academic work and the range of literary activities in present-day Africa. The listing of some current literary festivals that Ruth Bush, Madhu Krishnan and Kate Wallis provide in their special issue on literary activism in Africa gives us an idea of the intersecting worlds of African literatures to which LongStorySHORT also belongs: AfroLitSansFrontières, Aké Arts and Book Festival, Time of the Writer, Gaborone Book Festival, Heroe Book Fair – initiatives that today are all sustained through social media.[4] I would add to this list the Resiliência festival in Maputo, an important African interface for contemporary lusophone literature from various continents. The Brazilian scene, where Afro-Brazilian writing enjoys increasing prominence, has of course its own established economy of festivals (such as Flipoços) through which an African writer such as Paulina Chiziane has found a public.[5] Academically, African literary studies is firmly entrenched across several continents, and in terms of African literature's 'global visibility' (a dubious notion, I grant that) we are living of course in the age of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, Alain Mabanckou and Tsitsi Dangarembga. Relative to the post-1945 decades, it would indeed seem as though the anxieties and struggles of the critics discussed in this book are a thing of the past and that African literatures are flourishing on their own terms as a system of literary systems, to elaborate on Antonio Candido's theoretical concept.

But appearances can also deceive. 'Much too little' has changed if one considers how familiar Kgauhelo Dube's remarks regarding South Africa's insularity and the need to nurture an Africa-grounded culture of reading can seem, and how they have repeated themselves through the decades. Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire's call for nurturing African literary infrastructures in resistance to what he calls the 'Western Publishing Industrial Complex' is also disturbingly familiar, yet perhaps even more pertinent today with the global corporate streamlining of especially English-language publishing in

4 Ruth Bush, Madhu Krishnan and Kate Wallis, 'Introduction: Literary Activism in 21st Century Africa', *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 1.

5 Chatarina Edfeldt, 'Recoding Paulina Chiziane's Vernacular Poetics', *Interventions* 22, no. 3 (2020): 364–81.

mind.[6] These are projects that need to be understood from within problem spaces that differ radically from the 1970s. In post-transitional South Africa, as the present is sometimes called, 'disappointment, suspension, and radical uncertainty' are more prominent temporal markers than the hope and outrage engendered by the anti-apartheid moment.[7] 'Waithood', similarly, is a term that identifies a more generalised experience of stasis today among youth in Africa and beyond.[8] These are times when a sense of direction and hopeful anticipation is in short supply. But as this book has demonstrated, the temporality of decolonisation has always been non-linear, marked by repetitions, ruptures, reversals and continuities. Committed to curating conversations around literature in the Tshwane area, Dube conveys a sense of moving against the tide, or of clearing a space that would not exist without her initiative. 'Decolonizing reading', as the interview with her is entitled, means here to bring new groups of readers (and listeners) in contact with a contemporary archive of African literature. Mwesigire and Madhu Krishnan explore 'decolonial perspectives' on creative writing in the above-mentioned special issue in a similar spirit.[9] In ways that resonate profoundly with Mwesigire and Krishnan's take on literary activism, LongStorySHORT's distinctly non-academic ethos is all about *cultivating* literature under the conditions that currently present themselves in urban South Africa. This also explains why the initiative is not just local but deliberately aimed at a particular 'racial' community within that locality, although without the slightest concern for the mother-tongue-ism elaborated by Ngũgĩ. LongStorySHORT's emphasis on race functions rather, as is the rule today, as a transnational connector among related but different constituencies in Africa, Europe and the Americas in an attempt to do literature differently, swerving away from the habitual, white-dominated, bestseller-oriented book market in South Africa and seeking 'to engage with the invisibility of African literature in the broader corporate publishing context'.[10] Is Dube attaching herself to a weak or a strong conception of literature? Judging from the interview, she tends more towards a strong conception, but premised on race discourse. The two – 'literature' and 'race' – function here as mutually reinforcing semantic fields, while 'class' is de-emphasised.

6 Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire, 'What Is Literary Activism? (Or Who Keeps the Housekeepers' House)', *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 10–22.

7 Rita Barnard, 'Introduction', in *South African Writing in Transition*, ed. Rita Barnard and Andrew van der Vlies (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 1.

8 Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*; Valentina Currozacrea, 'Moratorium or Waithood? Forms of Time-Taking and the Changing Shape of Youth', *Time and Society* 28, no. 2 (2019): 567–86.

9 Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire and Madhu Krishnan, 'Creative Writing as Literary Activism: Decolonial Perspectives on the Writing Workshop', *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 7, no, 1 (2021): 97–115.

10 Sandwith et al., 'Decolonizing', 125.

But why, more precisely, do the interviewers frame LongStorySHORT as a 'decolonising' endeavour? And why do Mwesigire and Krishnan employ 'decolonial' as a self-evident term? As anyone active in the field will know, decolonisation has in recent years bounced back to become a buzzword in the humanities and social sciences. Choose just about any major conference at random, and you will find papers and probably also a keynote or two with words like 'decolonisation', 'decolonise' or 'decolonial' in their titles. The same tendency can be observed in academic journals, as, for example, the 'Decolonial Trajectories' special issue of *Interventions* in 2020 (vol. 22 no.4) or, indeed, the founding of the Buenos Aires-based journal *Horizontes Decoloniales = Decolonial Horizons* in 2014. And then there is the spate of recent books on decolonial pedagogy, decolonial heritage, decolonial feminism, decolonising universities, decolonial Christianities, and so on (google and ye shall find). This is to no small degree a pure field-effect: we academics echo one another, with some variation, and in that way, at best, we move the discussion forward. But as I signposted in the introductory chapter, there are also two specific reasons behind the revival of 'decolonisation'. The most dramatic is the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements in South Africa – often referred to as 'fallism' – which erupted in 2015 and continued in 2016 and 2017. One could, as historical shorthand, compare this to the student uprisings in Europe and North America in 1968. A more adequate description would be, however, that this was a moment when a frustrated post-apartheid generation confronted the structural and epistemological legacy of South Africa's racialised history – specifically within the confines of the university itself, which accounts both for some of the strengths and the weaknesses of the movement. It is here that 'decolonisation' became a rallying call, referring not to the transfer of state power but mainly to an epistemological project, be it in terms of curriculum reform, representativity among lecturers or as a theoretical task of re-establishing the grounds of legitimate knowledge. This was a rather unexpected development in South Africa, where the *word* 'decolonisation' never enjoyed much currency in the anti-apartheid struggle – although, as I have been arguing, the developments in critical practice in South Africa in that earlier period need to be considered from that broader and deeper historical angle.

The current South African developments dovetail with the second reason behind the renewed interest in decolonisation, namely the Latin American discourse on 'decoloniality' that was forming already in the 1990s but has caught on in the anglosphere over the last decade or so. Some of the prominent names in this theoretical sub-field are Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Maria Lugones, Ramón Grosfoguel and Catherine Walsh. Decoloniality comes in several varieties but can be understood historically as a Latin American critique of political economy and an unlearning of Eurocentric epistemic privilege. I stress its Latin Americanness, since it emerges out of a temporality that differs from African and South Asian postcolonies. Latin America – or Abya Yala, to use one of its decolonial names – was the first major European

imperial conquest after 1492.[11] The extermination of indigenous peoples was more extreme there than anywhere else, the colonisation more thorough (with the later exception of the United States), formal independence came much earlier and the emergence of a home-grown critical theory in Latin America preceded the anglosphere's 'postcolonial theory' by decades. But precisely because of this time-warp, earlier Latin American critical theory (as we saw in the São Paulo chapter) was also steeped, sometimes unreflectingly, in a Eurocentric framework of thinking.

These days, decoloniality tends to present itself as the more radical alternative to postcolonialism. Decolonialists routinely distinguish between the two, mainly for two reasons. The first is that there is no 'after' coloniality (which few, if any, postcolonial scholars actually claim): 'coloniality is still with us: there is no "post" from decolonial perspectives'.[12] The second is that coloniality is not restricted to countries that were colonised or who were colonisers themselves. Rather, coloniality (or the coloniality of power), is another name for the global condition of modernity, or the 'logic of domination, exploitation, and oppression' under which we all are living and a majority is suffering.[13] This may seem compatible with Marxist world-system analyses that make similarly totalising claims about the capitalist world-order, but striking in at least Mignolo's conception of decoloniality is its extreme, indeed, *idealist* emphasis on epistemology. 'What matters is not economics, or politics, or history, but knowledge', he writes as he develops what probably is the most radically relativistic position in academic circulation today: 'ontology is an epistemological concept'; 'it is through knowledge that entities and relations are conceived, perceived, sensed, and described'.[14] In Mignolo's worldview, there simply cannot exist any common ground since 'there are as many "ontologies" and "relationalogies" as there are cosmologies' – and cosmologies, according to this circular mode of reasoning, are what produce epistemologies, which in turn produce ontologies.[15] Despite protestations to the contrary, I detect little dynamism or dialectic in this take on difference, just absolute incommensurability. In Mignolo's and Catherine Walsh's view, the very point of decoloniality is to advance '*radically distinct* perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought'.[16] If there are problems

11 I borrow 'Abya Yala' from Catherine Walsh. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 22–3.

12 Walter D. Mignolo, 'Further Thoughts on (De)Coloniality', in *Postcoloniality – Decoloniality – Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, ed. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 21.

13 Mignolo, 'Further Thoughts on (De)Coloniality', 27.

14 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 135.

15 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 135.

16 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 17, emphasis added.

with this discourse – and there are several – then they reside mainly in an unwillingness to confront its own limitations, paradoxes and underlying moral motivations. In theoretical terms, I read decoloniality as 'Foucault plus Fanon'. Coloniality is the Foucault side of the argument: an impersonal, agentless distribution of power whose manifestations are the nation-state, racism, capitalism and the ideology of progress. Decoloniality is Fanon: an activist undoing of the authority of coloniality. But here we see the old theoretical contradiction between structure and agency repeated, this time with a straightforwardly Manichean twist. Coloniality/Modernity is an evil structure through and through (Mignolo often uses the adjective 'dark' to describe it), whereas decoloniality is its fluid, open-ended undoing. With so much rhetorical energy invested in projecting coloniality as an all-encompassing structure of power, it becomes, however, hard to understand how anyone could possess both the clarity of vision and the agency to disrupt its logic. There is a rift, in other words, between the two sides of the analysis that is bridged rhetorically but not theoretically. Reading Mignolo can sometimes bring to mind Adorno's sharp observation (in his critique of Heidegger) that jargon relieves us from the burden of thinking, since it takes care of the task on our behalf.[17] In its weakest moments, the highly abstract theory of the coloniality of power is airtight and self-confirming, impossible to falsify and liberated from the need for empirical verification.

Even so, having used terms such as 'coloniality' and 'decolonial' in this book, I am also claiming that a looser and more generous reading of the discourse is possible. Walsh's chapters on praxis in her and Mignolo's co-authored book are undeniably powerful. And it seems hard to dismiss Ramón Grosfoguel's clear account of the decolonial project, where he states

> (1) that a decolonial epistemic perspective requires a broader canon of thought than simply the Western canon (including the Left Western canon); (2) that a truly universal decolonial perspective cannot be based on an abstract universal (one particular that raises itself as universal global design), but would have to be the result of the critical dialogue between diverse critical epistemic/ethical/political projects towards a pluriversal as oppose [*sic*] to a universal world; (3) that decolonization of knowledge would require to take seriously the epistemic perspective/cosmologies/insights of critical thinkers from the Global South thinking from and with subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies.[18]

These points tie in with some of what this book has attempted to do and they are not in any way incompatible with the long theory tradition that has accumulated in the work of Subaltern Studies scholars in India or the

17 Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 9.

18 Ramón Grosfoguel, 'The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political Economy Paradigms', *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 212.

wide-ranging postcolonial debates in the anglosphere – a tradition often ignored by the decolonialists.[19] Grosfoguel's points resonate with recent reflections by Achille Mbembe in the context of the South African push for decolonisation. Advocating for a 'pluriversity' rather than a 'university', Mbembe writes, 'is a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but which embraces it via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions'.[20] To this he adds the rider that to 'decolonize the university is […] to reform it with the aim of creating a less provincial and more open critical *cosmopolitan pluriversalism*'.[21]

Note here the important qualifications: 'a truly universal decolonial perspective' (Grosfoguel); 'a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge' (Mbembe). We are still dealing with the antinomy of the particular and the universal that we saw in the introductory discussion of Herder and that has been a recurring theme throughout the chapters, but instead of reading the antinomy statically, the appeal to a never quite attainable universality enables a more dynamic conception. Both Mbembe's and Grosfoguel's remarks are in tune with the 'civilisation of the Universal' that Senghor promoted in opposition to 'universal civilisation', but an acknowledgement of such an aspiration to the universal undercuts the wholesale rejection of modernity that characterises much decolonial discourse. To speak of a 'truly universal' perspective is, among other things, to invoke a moral imperative, a commitment to justice, that admittedly has longer religious genealogies, but whose global iteration has emerged *precisely in the modern era*. Without this aspiration towards an always unrealised universal, decoloniality, postcolonial studies, critical race studies or gender and queer theory would fail to make much sense at all – or, alternatively, fall prey to an arbitrary relativism. Indeed, even as Mignolo insists that 'modernity/coloniality created the conditions for decoloniality', he avoids recognising what this implies.[22] The moral imperative to consider not just group interests but to take the exceptionally difficult step of acknowledging distant, unknown others as co-humans whose suffering makes claims on me, is produced precisely in the globalising crucible of modernity. Without such an imperative, particularist decoloniality and its blanket dismissal of modernity would have difficulty, with any degree of theoretical consistency, to refute various extreme right-wing particularisms and separatisms.

This is a strong statement. But my point is simple: it is the conflictual as well as collaborative involvement of selves with others that generates

19 There is, interestingly, not a single mention of Gayatri Spivak, Simon Gikandi, Dipesh Chakrabarty or Ranajit Guha in Mignolo and Walsh's *On Decoloniality*.

20 Achille Mbembe, 'Decolonizing the University: New Directions', *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016): 37.

21 Mbembe, 'Decolonizing', 37, emphasis added.

22 Mignolo, 'Further Thoughts on (De)Coloniality', 27.

contradiction and alternative pathways. The history of colonialism, after all, is *also* the history of anti-colonialism, and the history of apartheid is *also* the history of Black Consciousness. Examples abound. History is what hurts, as Fredric Jameson once taught us, but the hurt that we either experience ourselves or acknowledge in others means that history is within us, we are involved in it, and it is through this pain, if we cultivate an attunement to it, that a potential for universality is revealed to us.[23] The dimension of involvement, or entanglement, to use the term elaborated by Sarah Nuttall, is constitutively different from the frequent decolonial emphasis on 'delinking'.[24] 'Thinking decolonially', Mignolo says, means 'delinking from the matrix'.[25] This, again, is binary rather than dialectical thinking. Worse, it is binary thinking that can only offer a contradictory, backhanded acknowledgement of its own institutional entrenchment in the university, without conceding that this entrenchment is also what enables crucial forms of dissent and contrarian thinking.[26] An institution that can harbour such a dialectic needs defending, not yet another dismissive position-taking that leaves the university (and the humanities) yet more vulnerable to corporate technocrats who see it as little more than a driver of economic growth. My own take on decolonisation lands therefore on the entanglement side of the argument, on thinking the universal as a difficult labour of dialogue across continents, cultures and collectivities – a dialectic, in the original sense of the word. I will suggest, moreover, that this also entails a commitment to enlightenment with a small 'e', understood not as doxa but as an ethos.

If, for Immanuel Kant, enlightenment was a matter of liberating man from self-imposed immaturity, I would argue that decolonisation amounts to the liberation of human beings from externally imposed inferiority. This, at least, is the understanding that has underwritten my work in this book. If we agree on such a minimal definition, decolonisation is *consonant* with the unfinishable, dialectical endeavour of enlightenment. The meanderings of the theory debates in recent decades – and Mignolo's interventions are just one example – have turned 'enlightenment' into a suspect word, which I believe to be a foundational error. As with 'literature', 'enlightenment' is not what is dictated by a handful of European eighteenth-century thinkers, several of whom also promoted egregious racist ideas. Rather, I understand enlightenment to be a mode of social reflexivity, critique and dialogue that can be nurtured, and also threatened, in any human context. Contemporary political examples of how it can be threatened abound – from Trump to Bolsonaro to

23 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

24 Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009).

25 Mignolo, 'Further Thoughts on (De)Coloniality', 34; Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 106.

26 See, for example, Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 71, 106.

Xi Jinping. Against such monologic authoritarianism, enlightenment can be described as the institutional, individual and cultural capacity to accept the limits of one's understanding and continually to consider where I/we have been mistaken and, on that basis, reconstruct knowledge and political action. Its only real strength is an immanent and paradoxical acceptance of its own fallibility. Disagreement and contestation are therefore integral to enlightenment in this sense, but so is a mode of detachment in the sense developed by Amanda Anderson: 'a distanced relation toward one's self, one's community, or those objects that one chooses to study or represent'.[27] If we consider detachment *and* engagement as the two essential elements in the rhythm of critical thinking, the crucial addendum to Anderson's point is of course that the colonised predicament has typically been that of *enforced* detachment and alienation. The efforts of the critics studied here have therefore invariably been directed at remedying this historical rupture. Ngũgĩ's valorisation of the mother tongue, Senghor's négritude, Hofmeyr's call for a theory of literature grounded in the social conditions of South Africa or Candido's principled focus on the Brazilians' 'desire to have a literature' all speak to the retrieval of what colonialism had broken or disfigured or diminished or obscured. But considering such projects historically leads us to realise that any retrieval is not only piecemeal and idiosyncratic, but already enacted at a remove from any imagined 'origin'. Detachment, in other words, is constitutive of a critical labour in which 'literature' – in its various semantic aspects – negotiates the distance between self (or selves) and other (or others). The others in question can be defined in cultural, racial, class-based, linguistic or temporal terms – or it can be the internal other of double consciousness – but the public and mediated nature of literature is crucial to its potential to intervene in the social fracture that derives from colonial history.

Here we can grasp the deeper implications of Mbembe's advocacy of a 'cosmopolitan pluriversalism' as a goal of decolonisation. If I were to identify one consistent feature in the diverse critical interventions discussed in this book (including Dube's LongStorySHORT), then it is the deployment of literature as a concept negotiating between the distant and the proximate, the foreign and the familiar, the self and the other – a shifter and a middle term, if you wish, that allows for the cross-cutting of vernacular attachments and cosmopolitan orientations. The further implication of Liyong's, Senghor's, Candido's or Mphahlele's labours is therefore the following: if decolonisation has to do with the vindication of the self or selves, then it can equally be about assuming the cosmopolitan authority to adopt whatever cultural resources and legacies that happen to be at hand. Taban Lo Liyong encouraged his peers to let their minds soar, and to do so by engaging the full cosmopolitan range of what the term 'literature' entailed. In closing, then, it is worth reflecting on

27 Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

the double genitive of 'decolonisations of literature': this is not just a matter of decolonising the concept of literature, but of the ways in which literature has also contributed to modes of decolonisation. A decolonial conceptual history of literature presupposes, in other words, a recursive consideration of if, when and how 'literature' has inconclusively been made to intersect with freedom.

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