

DECOLONIZING THE ENGLISH LITERATURE GCE A-LEVEL VIA THE SOUTH AFRICAN EX-CENTRIC

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Abstract

In this snapshot article, I outline the background and context for the development of research-led teaching activities aimed at students pursuing the WJEC Eduqas GCE A-Level English Literature qualification. The aims of these activities are threefold: first, to assist students' learning and preparation for the exam component 'Unseen Prose' (worth 10% of the overall qualification); second, to extend the impact of AHRC-funded research on South African literature to 16- to 18-year-old learners; and third, to mobilize the first two aims in support of decolonizing efforts in English Studies.

The teaching activities outlined below are conceptualized in terms of the *ex-centric*, which functions as both descriptor and methodology to facilitate student-led analyses of primary texts by South African writers, Olive Schreiner (1855–1920) and Solomon Plaatje (1876–1932). As descriptor, the *ex-centric* is used in postcolonial studies to identify epistemologies and genealogies that emerge from outside of the colonial 'centres' of Western Europe, or sometimes more broadly, Euro-America. As methodology, the *ex-centric* provides the vantage point from which to challenge entrenched Euro-American ideas and systems, because as Homi Bhabha explains, the 'post' in postcolonial will 'only embody its restless and revisionist energy if [it] transform[s] the present into an expanded and *ex-centric* site of experience and empowerment'.¹ Bringing these lines of thought together, I use the *ex-centric* to identify South Africa's location on the fringes of the British Empire; Schreiner and Plaatje's positions on the margins of literary modernism; and the methodological, political and pedagogical impetus for

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¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994; repr. 2004), p. 6.

decolonizing work. It is of course also expedient that the ex-centric's near-homophone – eccentric – provides an additional cue to teachers and students to expect liberatory and challenging literary content in the teaching sessions.

The current drive to decolonize universities is indebted to, and has been led by, campaigns from outside of the 'centre'. These provide the models-in-action of Bhabha's ex-centric as a political force to conceptualize and work towards a postcolonial world. The most prominent of the recent decolonizing campaigns was the 2015 South African student-led movement #RhodesMustFall, which aimed to have a statue of colonist Cecil Rhodes removed from the University of Cape Town campus as part of its decolonizing mission.² Media coverage of this was global, though as Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh points out, 'one of the most neglected aspects of the "Must Fall" movement is its spread to Euro-America', and in particular, its 'advance to the epicentre of colonial nostalgia: elite Euro-American universities'.³ Indeed both the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign at the University of Oxford, and 'Royall Must Fall' campaign at Harvard University, were directly inspired by, and emerged in solidarity with, the South African protests.⁴ #RhodesMustFall also helped to draw attention to other student-led initiatives in the UK such as 'Why is my curriculum white?';⁵ influenced and intersected with various international calls to decolonize and/or indigenize education;⁶ and helped to shape and further develop South African-originary student movements #FeesMustFall, #AfrikaansMustFall and #ScienceMustFall.⁷

² See Twitter @RhodesMustFall; Facebook <www.facebook.com/RhodesMustFall> [accessed 20 November 2020].

³ Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, 'The Game's the Same: "MustFall" Moves to Euro-America', in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. by Susan Booysen (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016), pp. 74–86 (p. 75).

⁴ See *Rhodes Must Fall Oxford* <<https://rmfoxford.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 14 November 2020]; Twitter @RMF_Oxford; *Harvard: Royall Must Fall* <<https://www.facebook.com/RoyallMustFall>> [accessed 14 November 2020]; Twitter @RoyallMustFall.

⁵ 'Why is my curriculum white?', online video recording, *Dismantling the Master's House UCL*, 9 December 2014 <<http://www.dtmh.ucl.ac.uk/videos/curriculum-white/>> [accessed 1 November 2020].

⁶ See Claude Alvares and Shad Saleem Faruqi, eds., *Decolonising the University: The Emerging Quest for Non-Eurocentric Paradigms* (Pulau Pinang: Penerbit USM, 2011); Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, eds., *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto, 2018); Alison Sammel, Susan Whatman and Levon Blue, eds., *Indigenizing Education: Discussions and Case Studies from Australia and Canada* (Singapore: Springer, 2020); Carl Mika, *Indigenous Education and the Metaphysics of Presence: A Worlded Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁷ For an analysis of the context and effects of the #FeesMustFall movement, see Musawenkosi W. Ndlovu, *#FeesMustFall and Youth Mobilisation in South Africa: Reform or Revolution?* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).

The far-reaching impacts of these various campaigns have led to questions of decolonization being asked at the highest institutional levels internationally. Indeed, a 2019 report by the Open University identified ‘decolonising learning’ as the third most important global innovation in education practice for shaping teaching at all levels over the next ten years.⁸ In the UK, many universities have recently formalized working groups and networks, and have published public manifestos, and vision and strategy papers, to address issues of decolonization.⁹ Initiatives in this area span curriculum design and delivery, student access and attainment, staffing and career development, research agendas, international intellectual collaborations, and public engagement, amongst other concerns. As a list, this serves to illustrate how efforts to decolonize universities will require multi-faceted and multi-tier work that will also need to extend far beyond the latitude of individual institutions too. In terms of the first criteria, however – curriculum design and delivery – initial changes can be fairly quickly made. As many UK academics are fortunate in being able to (co-)design their own programmes and modules for study, they are well-positioned to begin decolonizing the subjects, materials, sources and methods used in university-level teaching. Whilst decolonization will always remain a partial, incomplete and ongoing process, the opportunities to implement early changes makes university teaching unique in the context of broader UK education systems. For educators working in primary and secondary state schools, as well as in Further Education, decolonizing curriculums continues to prove a challenge, as UK national curriculums are issued by law, and schools and colleges are required to deliver set qualifications via approved exam boards.¹⁰ GCSEs and A-Levels, for example, are studied in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and can only be awarded by AQA, OCR, Edexcel, WJEC Eduqas, and CCEA.

In England in 2013 and 2020 the Department for Education published two revised documents that constrain the ability of teachers of English Literature to undertake decolonizing work. The 2013 overhaul of GCSE English

⁸ Rebecca Ferguson and others, ‘Innovating Pedagogy 2019’, *Open University Innovation Report 7* (2019), pp. 3–4 <<https://iet.open.ac.uk/file/innovating-pedagogy-2019.pdf>> [accessed 23 November 2020].

⁹ See for example *Decolonising DMU* <<https://decolonisingdmu.our.dmu.ac.uk/>> [accessed 23 November 2020]; ‘Keele Manifesto for Decolonising the Curriculum’, 7 June 2018 <www.keele.ac.uk/equalitydiversity/equalityawards/raceequalitycharter/keeledecolonisingthecurriculumnetwork/#keele-manifesto-for-decolonising-the-curriculum> [accessed 23 November 2020]; ‘Decolonising SOAS Vision’, November 2017 <www.soas.ac.uk/decolonising-soas/> [accessed 23 November 2020].

¹⁰ Although UK Private Schools, Free Schools and Academies are not required to follow the national curriculum, they are registered with the government, and subject to inspection by Ofsted, the Independent Schools Inspectorate, or the Schools Inspection Service.

Literature removed ‘seminal world literature’ from the statutory requirements, leaving only the directives to include: at least one play by Shakespeare; at least one nineteenth-century novel; a selection of poetry since 1789, including Romantic poetry; and a post-1914 fiction or drama from the British Isles.¹¹ Unsurprisingly therefore, literature by white British and American writers continues to dominate the set text lists, with only tokenistic inclusions of books by Chinua Achebe, Meera Syal, Kazuo Ishiguro and Maya Angelou across the boards.¹² More recently, on 24th September 2020, the Department for Education released guidance for primary and secondary school leaders on how to ‘plan, develop and implement the new statutory curriculum’, outlining that:

Schools should not under any circumstances use resources produced by organisations that take extreme political stances on matters. This is the case even if the material itself is not extreme, as the use of it could imply endorsement or support of the organisation. Examples of extreme political stances include, but are not limited to [. . .] a publicly stated desire to abolish or overthrow democracy, capitalism, or to end free and fair elections.¹³

It is likely that this guidance would prevent the teaching of a wide range of anti-colonial and postcolonial literatures. As historically the global spread of capitalism went hand-in-hand with colonization, so too do many works of anti-colonial and postcolonial literature draw on, and espouse, anti-capitalist ideas.

Whilst A-Level teaching in England is not subject to the same prohibitive guidelines outlined above, the 2013 and 2020 changes nevertheless encourage a culture of hostility towards decolonizing discourses and praxes. Certainly the A-Level exam boards avoid the language of decolonization, opting instead for the language of diversity. Whilst depoliticized diversity agendas may

¹¹ ‘English literature: GCSE subject content and assessment objectives’, *Department for Education*, 1 November 2013, p. 4 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254498/GCSE_English_literature.pdf> [accessed 24 November 2020].

¹² For lists of set texts across all exam boards, see: *The National Curriculum GCSE English Literature Texts* <<https://thenationalcurriculum.com/gcse-english-literature-texts/>> [accessed 6 November 2020].

¹³ ‘Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum’, *Department for Education*, 24 September 2020 <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-your-relationships-sex-and-health-curriculum>> [accessed 6 November 2020]. These guidelines also extend to external speakers and agencies used by schools, and are currently being challenged by the Coalition of Anti-Racist Educators (Care) and Black Educators Alliance (BEA) via a judicial review pre-action letter, 1 October 2020 <https://static.crowdjustice.com/group_claim_document/20.10.01_JR_DofE_PAP_sent.pdf> [accessed 23 November 2020].

seem positive and egalitarian in offering routes to inclusion, they largely ignore the marginalizing effects of uneven social and political conditions, resulting in silent reaffirmations of established norms and hierarchies. Decolonization, in contrast, is a historically-specific endeavour, way of thinking, and action, and therefore seeks to tackle inequalities head-on, with the aim of freeing people from colonial rule and its legacies. As mentioned earlier, decolonization therefore provides a rather more difficult prospect for educators who are required to follow national curriculums.¹⁴ So, whilst I maintain that diversity agendas continue to pose fundamental barriers to change, it is also possible to use some of the in-roads provided by these agendas to undertake more radical decolonizing work. In this sense, the GCE A-Level English Literature appears to provide more opportunities than the GCSE, because the exam boards build in greater elements of choice, and in some cases, encourage diversity when guiding teaching teams in their selection of texts.¹⁵

The Department for Education guidance for GCE AS and A-Level subject content for English Literature currently remains broad enough to encompass all world literatures in English, as well as ‘texts in translation that have been influential and significant in the development of literature in English’.¹⁶ Whilst the GCE A-Level set text lists are still dominated by white British male writers, scope to include work by the global majority is made possible through options. Some relevant options include ‘African culture’ as one of six themes in the internal assessment component of the CCEA qualification, with set texts by Aminatta Forna, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nadine

¹⁴ Some initiatives and resources to support decolonizing work include *The Black Curriculum* <<https://theblackcurriculum.com/>> [accessed 23 November 2020]; ‘Reject Racism’, *Equaliteach* <<https://equaliteach.co.uk/for-schools/classroom-resources/reject-racism/>> [accessed 23 November 2020]; Justice 2 History <<https://justice2history.org/>> [accessed 23 November 2020]; *The Black Presence in Britain* <<https://blackpresence.co.uk/>> [accessed 23 November 2020].

¹⁵ Kirsten Wilcock and Rhodri Jones, ‘Exploring Diversity in our A level Englishes’, *Eduqas* <<https://eduqas.co.uk/articles/exploring-diversity-in-our-a-level-englishes/>> [accessed 6 November 2020]; AQA produce three diversity guides for use with their English Literature GCE A-Level: ‘Contemporary Black British Writing’, ‘British Asian Literature’ and ‘LGBTQ+ Literature’ <<https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/edexcel-a-levels/english-literature-2015/teaching-support/new-diversity-guides.html>> [accessed 6 November 2020].

¹⁶ ‘GCE AS and A level subject content for English literature’, *Department for Education*, 9 April 2014, p. 2 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/302110/A_level_English_literature_content.pdf> [accessed 12 November 2020].

Gordimer and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o;¹⁷ 'The Immigrant Experience' as one of five themes in the OCR exam component 'Comparative and Contextual Study', with a set text by Mohsin Hamid, and suggested comparators by Jhumpa Lahiri, Monica Ali and Andrea Levy;¹⁸ the AQA internally-assessed unit 'Theory and Independence' in which students have the option to analyse poetry or prose in relation to postcolonial theory;¹⁹ and the thematic option 'Colonisation and its Aftermath' in an exam-based Edexcel assessment that uses set texts by three white European and American writers, Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain and E M Forster, and only one by black Caribbean writer, Sam Selvon.²⁰ Whilst these options invite analyses of literature in wider racial and global purviews, the fact remains that teachers are under no obligation to select the work of non-white writers from outside of Britain and the USA in free-choice assessment components. Moreover, their choices will no doubt be informed by a range of structural considerations including (amongst other things) college and departmental cultures and directives, the programme content of teacher training from undergraduate degree programmes through to PGCE and CPD, and access and breadth of multi-media resources on relevant topics to support students' learning.

In the context of the WJEC Eduqas GCE A-Level there seem to be two key openings for decolonizing work. The first is Component 4: Prose Study, worth 20 per cent of the qualification, in which teaching teams can nominate their own texts for the internal assessment. The second is Component 3, worth 20 per cent of the qualification and assessed by an exam, in which students have to analyse 'Unseen Texts'. The teaching activities that I have co-developed and delivered with colleagues Emma Barnes and Hannah Bury, are aimed at supporting students in their preparations for Section A of Component 3, 'Unseen Prose' (worth 10 per cent of the overall qualification). Here, students are required to analyse an extract from either the period

¹⁷ 'GCE Specification in English Literature', *CCEA*, 1 November 2019, p. 33 <https://ceca.org.uk/downloads/docs/Specifications/GCE/GCE%20English%20Literature%20%282016%29/GCE%20English%20Literature%20%282016%29-specification-Standard_o.pdf> [accessed 24 November 2020].

¹⁸ 'A Level Specification: English Literature', *OCR*, February 2019, p. 35, p. 37 <<https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/171200-specification-accredited-a-level-gce-english-literature-h472.pdf>> [accessed 24 November 2020]. 'The Immigrant Experience' option is organized in a way that would still allow students to study literature by exclusively white, male, Euro-American writers.

¹⁹ 'AS and A-Level English Literature B', *AQA*, 1.3 (12 September 2019), p. 26 <<https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/specifications/AQA-7716-7717-SP-2015.PDF>> [accessed 24 November 2020].

²⁰ 'A Level English Literature', *Pearson Edexcel*, 6 (September 2015), p. 7 <<https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/A%20Level/English%20Literature/2015/Specification%20and%20sample%20assessments/GCE2015-A-level-Eng-Lit-spec-Issue-6.pdf>> [accessed 24 November 2020].

1880–1910, or the interwar years 1918–1939, in order ‘to show an understanding of the ways a variety of contexts can influence texts and also how texts may be read in more than one way’.²¹ Both options span the years usually associated with heyday of literary modernism, and so my current AHRC-funded research project, *South African Modernism 1880-2020*, is well-placed to progress students’ learning in this area. The central hypotheses of this research project are first, that early South African writers responded to the combined and uneven development of modernity using modernist literary forms; and second, that modernism continued and continues to provide a politically-charged mode of representation for South African writers responding to major historical events and changing political, economic, social and cultural contexts across the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

The research-led teaching activities are based on close readings of extracts from two formative works of South African fiction. The first is Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which is famous as both the first South African novel and the first example of New Woman fiction; and the second is Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (written 1920, published 1930), famous as the first Anglophone novel written by a black African. At first glance, these texts certainly seem to be outlier choices, as past papers have included extracts from five white British and Irish male writers and one English female writer to date, including proto-modernists George Moore and John Galsworthy, and canonical modernists Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf.²² Importantly however, Schreiner and Plaatje’s texts engage with many of the same concerns as the work of these writers, as both were embroiled in key debates and issues associated with literary modernism. These include capitalism and labour, empire, new technologies and transports, war, women’s rights, migration and movement, tensions between the primitive and modern, and formal experimentation. The key difference lies in their ex-centric vantage point, as although Schreiner and Plaatje experienced the same conditions of modernity as their British and Irish counterparts, they did so from the sharp end of the colonial dynamic. I suggest, then, that there is no trade-off to be negotiated, and nothing to be lost, by preparing GCE A-Level students for the ‘Unseen Prose’ aspect of their qualification using South African (or indeed other colonial) literature from the named periods. Rather, this approach helps students to develop richer, fuller, and more critically-engaged perspectives on the

²¹ ‘WJEC Eduqas GCE A Level in English Literature’, *Eduqas*, 3 (March 2020), p. 9 <<https://eduqas.co.uk/media/gkxh25ep/eduqas-a-level-english-lit-spec-from-2015-e.pdf>> [accessed 24 November 2020].

²² See ‘AS/A Level English Literature: Past Papers’, *Eduqas* <https://www.eduqas.co.uk/qualifications/english-literature-as-a-level/#tab_pastpapers> [accessed 17 November 2020]. The exam component ‘Unseen Texts’ has comprised part of the WJEC Eduqas qualification since 2017. The 2020 exams were cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

core textual and contextual issues at stake in *fin de siècle* and early twentieth-century writing.

In detailing the background to research-led teaching activities aimed at GCE A-Level English Literature students, I have sought to make connections between the anticipatory and galvanizing role of the South African #RhodesMustFall and decolonizing education movements, with the use of South African literature as a means to decolonize the English Literature GCE A-Level. Indeed there is much we can learn from South Africa's long history of pioneering anti-colonial struggle, which extends from at least as far back as the first KhoiKhoi rebellion against Dutch colonists in 1659, through to recent combined efforts by India and South Africa to 'decolonise the vaccine' by requesting that the World Health Organization enable 'the unhindered global sharing of technology and know-how in order that rapid responses for the handling of COVID-19 can be put into place'.²³ In these senses, South Africa appears as one of the many countries in 'the global South' that anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff claim 'is running palpably ahead of Euro-America'.²⁴ As they point out, "'the south" is a window on the world at large', and 'ex-centricity, in all senses of the term' provides us with 'the angle of vision [...] from which to estrange the history of the present in order to better understand it'.²⁵ In the use and analysis of South African literature too then, we can find ways to draw on the political thrust of ex-centricity as a route to decolonization within and beyond Higher Education.

Please do get in touch if you would be interested in taking part in A-Level workshops: southafricanmodernism@salford.ac.uk

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²³ 'Waiver from certain provisions of the TRIPS agreement for the prevention, containment and treatment of COVID-19: Communication from India and South Africa', *World Trade Organisation*, IP/C/W/669 (2 October 2020), p. 2 <<https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/IP/C/W669.pdf&Open=True>> [accessed 23 November 2020].

²⁴ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 24.

²⁵ Comaroff and Comaroff, p. 47.

answering my queries about A-Level assessments. The views expressed are entirely my own.

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