

opacifier le futur, à saisir à l'avance sa part d'ombre. Là réside l'ultime séduction du littéraire (séduction qui comble ceux qui s'y vouent): comme il n'y a jamais de légitimité à écrire, ce qui se décrit concerne toujours les mouvements de légitimation qui ordonnent mot à mot, figure à figure, geste à geste, ce que nous sommes, il ne faut donc pas s'étonner si littérature et études littéraires, d'un même élan et systématiquement, lâchent toujours la proie pour l'ombre. Loin d'accepter des être calculables, se possédant pleinement, des êtres prometteurs, tout ce qui fait du temps le comptable des événements, les études littéraires insistent au contraire sur l'érosion secrète des affects et des concepts. La discipline des études littéraires ne touche pas au corps, mais à l'ombre portée du temps sur le langage, à l'instar du langage angélique qui est à la fois illumination et secret. Puisque nous ne sommes désormais plus dans le secret des dieux, pourquoi ne pas en échanger l'absence contre le secret des anges?

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National Identity and National Literatures in South Africa: Notes on the Protracted Birth of a Nation and the Protracted Death of a National Literature

First try:¹ O.J. Simpson and the Rugby World Cup (where I am writing from)

It is June 1995. Just over a year ago, the first democratically elected government in the history of South Africa took office. Now, a year later, something special is happening in the public representation of our national identity. This month, South African television displays two daily rituals of national identity. Far away, and very much in the background, we watch the American public constituting itself in acts of communal isolation before its television sets. In the midst of postmodern assaults on national space, the television networks are offering their viewers the opportunity to reconstruct American national identity through a simple act of speculation: how will the O.J. Simpson game end? Guilt or innocence are not at issue, after all, everyone *knows* he is guilty/innocent.² At issue is only the game, and who will win.

Here at home, a similar ritual is taking place. It is called Rugby World Cup. The finest teams from the Rugby playing world are assembled in South Africa to test the limits of their own national masculinities. And the South African team is going to win. The sport which for decades was played in splendid isolation by Apartheid's most popular heroes is about to give our young nation one of its finest hours.

Rugby is a sport whose arcane obscurity in the eyes of the average American is probably matched only by the indifference which the name O. J. Simpson arouses in the rest of the world. But, for a short period of time, Rugby has been a unifying force in a new African nation. The South African

1 "try, n.; pl. *tries*, 1 the act of trying; an attempt; an endeavor; a trial; an experiment 2 a sieve; a screen. [Obs.] 3 in Rugby football, a grounding of the ball on or behind the opponent's goal line..." *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*.

2 Check the box of your choice. The Simpson trial has convinced me that it is only a matter of time before trials like this will be conducted on the World Wide Web, the jury being constituted as the entirety of the online-public. *Click here if you think O.J. is innocent. Click here if you think he is guilty.*

team has emerged victorious. Nelson Mandela appears in a team jersey to congratulate his compatriots. Double-decker buses ride through Johannesburg bearing the banner "One team, one nation." A jubilant newscaster tells the camera that this is just the thing our young nation needs.

What exactly is it our young nation needs that it thinks it finds in the spectacle of Rugby World Cup? What representational codes have fired our national pride (dare I say it?) more than last year's general election? This victory seems to want to promise us a set of national stereotypes outside of the racist iconography of Apartheid. To find these stereotypes, viewers did not have to look past the opening ceremony, which produced what J.M. Coetzee calls "a dehistoricized vision of Tourist South Africa: contented tribesfolk and happy mineworkers, as in the old South Africa, but purified and sanctified, somehow, by the Rainbow" (20). And where our own national identity could emerge only by banishing history, then other nations could present their identity only through the crudest variety of national stereotyping. Quoting Coetzee again, the guest nations appeared to South Africans as "an uninhibited riot of clichés: gaucho Argentinians, matelot Frenchmen, gondolier Italians, shamrock-green Irish leprechauns..." (20).

It occurs to me that as a teacher of a European national literature at a South African university, its institutional structures seem to want me to propagate this same regime of national identities – at worst as an uninhibited riot of clichés, and at best as a relentless whisper of truth in the ears of my students, those young individuals whose lives are caught up in the production of South African national identity in a way my own life cannot be. I wonder whether their South African identity will be sold to them as a vision of a tourist utopia outside history. And I wonder whether my university, and South African universities as a whole, will succeed in institutionalizing European literature in a way that allows students to contemplate what it means to be South African without imagining a world divided by the national boundaries which first defined my discipline almost two centuries ago.

Second try: Playing Rugby and playing literary criticism (where nations begin and end)

The inseparable chasm dividing O.J. Simpson from the Rugby World Cup should tell South Africans and North Americans something about one another. The United States has always liked to think of South Africa as the killing-field of its hopes and the nursery school of its nightmares. But we do not understand one another. South Africans do not understand the passions emanating from the boring, repetitive and predictable rituals of American television justice. And Americans do not understand the passions attached to the rules of Rugby.

But in the university landscape we are experiencing similar situations. South African universities are currently going through a crisis of disciplines, and literary studies will not escape unscathed. Although this seems scarcely to have been recognized by those worst affected, it has a lot to do with the current crisis in South African national identity. Crisis in national identity? Just when we seem to have a national identity for the first time? Yes, that's the point.

The years between Mandela's release from prison in 1990 and the general election in 1994 demonstrated with painful clarity how thoroughly the institutions of Apartheid have perverted any sense of a coherent national identity in South Africa. As election campaigning grew in momentum, the attempts to muster group and national identities became increasingly convoluted. Predictably enough,³ the Pan-Africanists provided the strangest encounters with our national identity. Publicly called to task for the slogan 'one settler one bullet,' whose conception nobody wanted to claim their own, Pan-Africanist leaders struggled to define what it meant to be a Settler, what it meant to be an Africans. The resultant manichaeism left the latter category open for virtually anyone who was prepared to declare some guiding passion for the African soil, while it appeared on the other hand that if the category of the Settler was taken seriously virtually everyone would fall prey to Pan-Africanist bullets. Was our new national feeling to follow in the footsteps of the *Blut und Boden* ideology that had forged German national unity in the first half of the twentieth century?

While Pan-African nationalism searches for a unifying national identity, the various nationalisms which had dominated the age of empire in Southern Africa seem much more powerful, and much more dangerous. Zulu nationalism and Afrikaner nationalism continue to promote the ethnic divisions of the Apartheid past, often with bloody results. In the search for a national decolonization of public language, eleven national languages have been provisionally identified. These may be traced directly back to mid-nineteenth century ethnolinguistics, that powerful tool which European missionaries applied in order to produce national and ethnic groups along the lines of Herder's linguistic nationalism.

In the midst of the present chaos of South African national identities, what can become of national literature as we know it in the Westernized South African university today? Here, as elsewhere, the shadow of Apartheid continues, and will continue, to darken the field. For years, South African universities were content to replicate the structure of national language and literature departments they had inherited from its European prototypes, and

3 See Kwame Anthony Appiah's discussion of the founding ideology of Pan-Africanism in chapter 1 of *In my father's house*.

the rise of the nationalistically flavored university syllabus in early nineteenth century Europe continued to provide the point of reference for literary studies in this country. Why should this anachronistic state of the university disciplines persist in the humanities, and particularly in literary studies in South African universities?⁴

The question is vital to any investigation of literary studies in this country. We are at present trapped within outdated institutional structures, whose anachronistic persistence is finally beginning to crumble. And while the national language and literature departments at the South African universities gradually succumb, we are unable to decide what could or should take their place. Consequently, the decision is being made for us by university administrations caught in the financial squeeze that has changed universities across the world over the past two decades.

In South Africa, the problem is compounded by the complex legacy of Apartheid education politics. As universities attempt to come to terms with the growing demands for legitimacy, fair access and training, and Africanization, European literary studies should be asking itself where it stands once it can no longer rely on widespread support from a student body drawn from the privileged white middle class.

But the guiding force of institutional change will not be solely conceptual. Already, the financial crisis experienced by universities since the mid-eighties has resulted in widespread reforms in the teaching and research of literature in South Africa. Some universities have followed the model forced by Thatcherism in the USA and Britain, consolidating national literatures into blanket Modern Literature departments. Others continue to struggle with departments of Afrikaans, French, German, Italian, etc. fed by constantly declining student numbers, balancing indecisively between the teaching of national literature in the vernacular for the sheer love of it, and the teaching of beginner's language courses for unabashed profit. If the present trend continues, literary studies at the universities designated 'white' by Apartheid education policy will become increasingly ghettoized, with the foreign literatures being taught in the vernacular to small groups of linguistically pre-exposed students pursuing curricula that mimic those in the mother country, while the disadvantaged local students struggle to keep up. These departments are in general faced with the choice of modifying their teaching methods and curricula in literary studies, or justifying their existence primarily through the teaching of "foreign" national languages.

But the concept of a "foreign" language is just as difficult to take seriously as is the Pan-Africanist dichotomy of Settlers and Africans. Like the notion of a settler, the institutionalization of foreign languages continues to throw

all African languages and literatures into a single institutional category, where their marginality of the past is propagated. In the Apartheid university, African literatures, where they were accorded the honor of an independent department, existed for the main part on the fringe of the European literatures. There are notable exceptions,⁵ but generally African literature was little more than a small homeland on the institutional map of South African culture.

This situation will have to be revised. If we take our national identity seriously, we cannot afford to institutionalize a vaguely homogenized African culture opposite a minutely and anachronistically differentiated set of European cultures, while placing both under the shadow of English and Afrikaans. At the universities where Apartheid education policies designated English as the teaching medium, Afrikaans departments could in the past be guaranteed significant numbers of students due to language requirements for various other degrees. The corresponding trend held true for Afrikaans-medium institutions. And both departments were important at the "bush colleges," the tertiary institutions set aside for Blacks and Coloreds. This is no longer necessarily the case. Afrikaans and English departments that could in the past rely on the conquerer's cultural supremacy are having to rethink their positions.

If South Africa's universities are to succeed in transforming literary studies to reflect changing expectations in the national and cultural identities our nation is producing, it will mean a close cooperation between African, English, Afrikaans and 'foreign' language and literature departments. And if this cooperation works, departmental boundaries will not remain as they have been. The changing cultural landscape of South Africa will demand and is demanding a changed institutionalization of literature and national culture.

Last try: Thinking about changing rules (three questions for the future)

Literary studies as it has been conducted in universities throughout South Africa is a dying enterprise, and this is a good thing. One of the prime rules which has dictated the game of literary studies in the past has been that the field in which texts can be discussed and explicated is staked out – both institutionally and hermeneutically – in national terms. The literary intellectuals (to use C.P. Snow's unfortunate formulation) who presided over this field played a complex game, pitting their own teams against imaginary others, casting humanity into places safe from the aliens it dreamt dwelt outside. In this game, humanists are magicians who have forgotten how to spell, alienating what the previous generation thought was nature, and

5 One example is the Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, founded under the professorship of Ez'kai Mphahlele.

4 See Thornton for an interesting treatment of this question.

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naturalizing that generation's aliens. Like Ridley Scott in *Alien II*, we put our own aliens on the planets that seem easiest to nuke out of existence.

For a number of years, literary intellectuals in South Africa have been convinced of their own marginality. Interestingly enough, the watershed year 1990, in which the path was laid for a democratic South Africa, brought with it a striking self-examination of the role and relevance of literary studies in this country.⁶ As critics become increasingly frustrated with the gap between the urgency of political change and the abandon of the various literary formalisms in currency, questions of literary studies begin to be reformulated with an eye to the changes in the country.

The coming years will tell whether we are to succumb to a kind of C.P.-Snowian dismay over the inability of literary studies to come to terms with social change, or whether we are able to create institutional structures for aligning changes in literary studies with changes in our own understanding of who we are, here and now. But irrespective of whether we continue to rely on the curiosity value of national literature or the assumed efficiency of amalgamated departments, we will not be able to avoid asking a number of difficult questions. These are intimately intertwined with questions of national identity in our new nation, and the kinds of institutional answers we put forward and actualize will, in the best of all possible worlds, influence how the next generation will conceive of what it means to be South African.

Question one: who are our students? Are they the lingering remnants of European national identity transplanted to the colonies in past generations and clinging disparately to a fiction of their own national otherness? Are they aspiring cultural minorities whose distinct national identity can contribute positively to multiculturalism in the best possible sense? Are they in search of a historical and geographical contextualization of their own African identity?

Question two: what can we offer our students? The Eastern Seaboard Association of Tertiary Institutions recently described the worst possible scenario for the future of tertiary education in South Africa as an overflowing of the Humanities and Social Sciences faculties, resulting in an excess of unemployed graduates holding "useless" degrees (see Garson). Are we going to continue designing degrees that are perceived as useless (and thus become useless)? Is literary studies fated to become overshadowed by the teaching of language skills, whose utilitarian value is easier to sell in the academic marketplace? Dare we dream of what our North American colleagues call

the 'Job Market,' for which there is, for obvious reasons, no comparable designation in South Africa? Is there such a thing as a field of general hermeneutic skills we impart to our students which makes them invaluable to employers outside the university? And if so, how do our graduates begin to sell those skills? In short, what do the texts and methodologies of our field have to offer students once South African tertiary institutions begin to look as democratic as our new constitution?

Question three: how do we define our discipline? This is inseparable from the first two questions, and it will probably be the question which, if posed seriously, will allow us not simply to lament the state of our field, but to act positively to influence how it develops. Our choice seems relatively clear. Either we continue to teach our field according to a national consciousness which has, finally, become as anachronistic in South Africa as it is in the rest of the Western world, or else we ask ourselves how we can teach those texts and methodologies we consider important while at the same time freeing them from the anachronistic institutionalized nationalism which still, for the main part, characterizes them today.

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6 See for example the exchanges between literary intellectuals at the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, February 1990, in the "Positions" section of *Pretoria* (Cape Town) 2/1 (1990) 69-103. Also the articles in *Current Writing*, 2 (1990), 1-70.