

Reading for Justice
On the Pleasures and Pitfalls of a Decolonizing Pedagogy

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Like most people seeing the video clip of the police killing of George Floyd in May of 2020, I was viscerally shocked and inconsolable. While it is true that racial and social injustice have been commonplace throughout the entire history of the United States, the George Floyd moment seems to have intensified our consciousness of it in a way different than had been in the past.¹ In addition to this, my relatively recent arrival in the USA in 2017 meant that I was on an acute learning curve to understand such fraught race relations at very close quarters, something that my sojourns in the UK and Canada over the previous two decades had not quite prepared me for, despite the evident tensions in race relations in those countries too. The events around George Floyd's death also opened my eyes to the fact that my entire literary training, both personal and professional, had not prepared me for thinking about how to relate what I did as a professor of literature to what was unfolding around me in the outside world. I kept asking myself if what I did in the classroom had any bearing on the terrible conditions of racial and social injustice that were being persistently expressed around us. While I had myself grown up in a context of political turmoil in Ghana in the 1980s under the military junta of J. J. Rawlings, in which the study of literature was always done with an eye to the political turmoil of the outside world, I had never been personally disposed to connect the torn halves of my intellectual life in any coherent way. At any rate, the question of instrumentalist readings of literature had always remained anathema to me, and I insisted in my teaching and writing on first prioritizing close attention and respect for literary details within the texts themselves before any attempt was made to apply them in any way to the outside world. And it was not unusual for me to stop at the level of textual analysis itself, enacting what I thought was radical enough through different forms of close-reading inflected by Marxism, postcolonialism, or forms

disruptive of what appeared to be predictable interpretations of the African postcolonial text, or indeed the canonical Western text. And the more I thought about these matters in the context of the United States, the more I felt that I needed to do a full and careful rethink of my most fundamental principles as a literary scholar and teacher. As I stated to various colleagues and friends in the months following George Floyd's killing, teaching literature anywhere in the United States is not like teaching it in Prague or Accra. If proof were needed of this truism, 2020 had amply provided it.

But then a major and recalcitrant question arises. What does it actually mean to read for justice and what might this entail? To read for justice each one of us has first to have a personal commitment to fighting against injustice. Now, depending on our particular interests, we will likely define injustice quite differently. But the point is to feel strongly that there is something not quite right with the world as it is, and to commit oneself to making it better. In other words, you cannot really read for justice if you think the world is just fine as it is. Something must bother you about the outside world to start with, and no matter how little it is, an irritating speck of sand in the eye even, you must want to do something about it. But the thing that is bothering you may be something that you see only by yourself. The important thing is that it should be bad enough to galvanize you to try and do something about it. Reading for justice will then be a constituent part of that larger set of concerns. This also means being comfortable with lifting your head out of the books you are reading and looking at the world outside with new, committed eyes.

One of the things that struck me most forcefully as Ankhi Mukherjee and I started working on the proposal for *Decolonizing the English Literary Curriculum* is how important it is to come to terms with the struggles for justice of other equity-seeking groups so that we can understand how to decolonize the literary curriculum more holistically and not just from the perspective of critical race theory or postcolonialism. As we note in the Introduction, demands for reform of the English literature curriculum are often made by equity-seeking groups seeking either the overhaul of the curriculum or its complete replacement with something that appears more equitable to such groups. The term "decolonizing" has historically specific as well as metaphorical implications. Thus, the term "equity-seeking groups" would minimally include at least the following: people of color and racial minorities, persons with disabilities, persons with nonheteronormative sexual orientations, formerly colonized people, Native peoples (pertaining specifically to Australia, Canada, and the United States), women, Jews, and Muslims, among others.

Here, I want to register a note of caution, which as you will quickly see, comes from my thoroughly engrained scholarly disposition. I do not think that reading for justice or attempting to decolonize our reading practices simply means reading for political positions inside of the literary text, whatever those political positions might be thought to be. And I do not think that reading for justice is merely reading literary content for the extent to which a particular text empowers or disempowers various communities of the dispossessed. Those are obviously important questions, but as I repeat at the start of all my African literature classes, to read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is not the same as reading the *New York Times*. We are obliged in reading the former to think of the ways in which Achebe mediates our access to nineteenth-century colonial relations between the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria and the colonial authorities depicted in his novel. And to do this, we are obliged to get a clear sense of what he is doing as a writer of literature primarily, and not as a journalist or indeed historian. I may have irreparably undermined my case for trying to set out some methods for reading for justice in what I have just said, but I think it is important to keep the distinctions between literature and other nonliterary writings in mind even as we intentionally try to bridge the gap between them.

Just Add Achebe (or Toni Morrison)!

In reading for justice, a preliminary distinction must be drawn between decolonizing the curriculum and decolonizing our reading of individual texts. The first is much more elusive and difficult than the other, especially as it touches on what is typically conceived of as the breadth requirements completing a degree in English literary studies. Steady criticisms of the literary curriculum from different interest groups since the late 1960s, rising in intensity in the 1980s, have led to progressive changes to the curriculum in many parts of the world, most critically in Europe and America. The changes have taken place on two fronts: first on that of adding writers to the curriculum from different cultural traditions – Achebe or Morrison or Head or Rushdie or Coetzee. But these additive changes often do not alter the way in which the literary texts themselves are taught. For while work by Shakespeare and Milton is often taught as literary texts, with all the rigorous apparatus of discursive proof that this requires, Achebe and others from the postcolonial and non-White world are merely viewed as ethnic sociologists and native informants. The problem then is not that students in most Euro-American university programs

are required to study large period papers, but that when they are exposed to literatures from outside of mainstream White Euro-America, those are treated in a subliterary way, such that there is an implicit structural bias in how they are embedded into the curriculum in the first place. What is even more worrying is that in most English departments, breadth requirements are structured such that areas such as postcolonial or world literature are tagged on as electives rather than as core requirements, so that it is perfectly possible for a student to complete an entire English literature degree without having even the faintest acquaintance with anything beyond the Euro-American hegemonic White canon. And yet the corrective to this often-undisguised bias is not just to make acquaintance with writers from other traditions a core requirement of the degree, important though this is, but also to assess whether professors have made a commitment to evolving beyond their original areas of expertise to encompass and incorporate insights from other literary and cultural traditions. For most other literary specialists, there is no incentive to know anything beyond one's immediate area, the perfectly defensible position being that those things are best left to the specialists in those other areas. This, I think, is a serious mistake both in the ways in which we train our students and in our pedagogical dispositions. For the English literary curriculum ought to be thought of holistically and interconnected in all its parts, with each part able to speak to all the others. I will elaborate on some ideas for conceiving of this broader curricular purview later on in this chapter.

Context versus Contexture: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

As Edward Said has pointed out: "Every act of criticism is always literally tied to a set of social and historical circumstances; the problem is in specifying or characterizing the relationship, not merely in asserting that it exists" (*Reflections* 171). This applies both to the context of production, and as Michaela Bronstein adroitly argues in *Out of Context* (2018) with respect to modernist literature, in the transhistorical encounter between texts and readers across time and in different cultural contexts. This explains for example how Ngũgĩ rereads, critiques, and replicates formal and thematic details from Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* for his own *A Grain of Wheat* (see Bronstein 147–59). Achebe echoes similar principles in invoking the elemental character of the Umuofian forest at different points in *Things Fall Apart*. In various accounts of literary history, the literary text has been interpreted as a form of social chronicle, or as the

expressive ensemble of a class or social fraction, and thus been made to yield direct insights into discrete sociological forms beyond the literary. As noted earlier (p. 258), this is especially true with respect to texts from the non-White Euro-American world, though not exclusively. This tendency has by no means remained uncontested, since it is also patently the case that literary form transcends its context or repeatedly refuses straightforward contextualization. This generates efforts to identify the particular syntax of such sociocultural forms, whether they are ultimately relatable to classes or other methodologically definable sociological entities. The social, on the other hand, has also been seen as produced by the referential relays within a discursive ensemble in which different fragments “speak” to each other across the interplay of knowledge, ideology, and power. This is essentially the view of Stephen Greenblatt and the New Historicists. Gallagher and Greenblatt note: “The interpreter must be able to select or to fashion, out of the confused continuum of social existence, units of social action small enough to hold within the fairly narrow boundaries of full analytical attention, and this attention must be unusually intense, nuanced and sustained” (26). The operational phrases in their formulation seem to be “confused continuum of social existence” and “units of social action.” We might add the observation that every social context identified as providing the “background” to the literary representation is already processual, in motion and on the threshold of dissolving into something else. This then requires the careful bounding of the analytical field to which we give the name of context. As Valentin Daniel and Jeffrey M. Peck note in their introduction to *Culture/Contexture* (1996), from the many borrowings between literature and anthropology over the past several decades has come the realization that both disciplines are mutually alive to their extrinsic and intrinsic contextures. For them, contexture points in two directions at once: it is the historical, sociological, and political background to the text, but it is also what lies beyond the text that serves to manufacture certain modes of significance inside of it.

The difference between context and contexture is directly pertinent to a decolonialized reading of the literary curriculum. While there are many instances where this can be tried out, I shall focus here on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which is a historical test case both for discussions of modernism and of postcolonialism, and also in its various afterlives in literature and in film. When I was first introduced to Conrad’s novel in my undergraduate degree at university in Ghana, no mention whatsoever was made of colonialism or indeed of the real violence of the Congo Free State that had deeply informed its context. The interpretation provided us was steadfastly aimed at highlighting modernist devices. We studied *Heart of*

Darkness in a course that also included T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and some stories from *Dubliners*, among others. Looking back now, I think the course could have been minimally augmented with the modernist poetry of Gabriel Okara and the inimitable Christopher Okigbo. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name*, Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, and Dambudzo Marechera's collection of stories in *The House of Hunger* could also have been thrown in for good measure from within the African literary tradition. But that is not what we were offered as undergraduate students of English at Legon. The focus was on modernism as a set of devices seemingly pertinent specifically to the English canon of the early twentieth century and completely separated from any other cultural context. And the course we took on African literature had all the usual suspects from that tradition but also made no reference to modernist or indeed formalist experimentation of any kind.

Rereading *Heart of Darkness* in 2020 following the killing of George Floyd and specifically in the context of an episode on the novel I prepared for Critic.Reading.Writing, the YouTube channel in which I started to explore the relationship between literature and other vectors of social life, the contexture of the novel suddenly gained extraordinary prominence as an essential part of my decolonized reading of it.² Conrad is famous for having depicted the Congo River and the forest around it as the sites of primal impulses and longings, thus converting them into the locations of various elusive epiphanies. And yet the problem of representation, couched by Conrad in terms of the contrast between narrative surfaces and their kernels, also allows *Heart of Darkness* to partially divest the historical Congo of the horror of its more sordid details and to render it the staging place of a different kind of crisis, namely that of representation itself.

The Congo Free State was given to Leopold II of Belgium (King of Belgium, 1865–1909) after the Berlin Conference in 1884–1885, and he run it as his personal property from 1885 to 1908. The Berlin Conference was assembled to decide on the terms of the European colonization and regulation of trade in Africa and is credited by historians to have formally started The Scramble for Africa, with the Congo as its epicenter. The Congo Free State at the time of King Leopold's ownership was a whopping 905,000 square miles in size. This is roughly the size of France, Spain, Germany, Italy, the UK, Ireland, Portugal, Belgium, The Netherlands,

and Greece all put together, or Texas, California, Montana, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Colorado as a single continuous land mass.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was first serialized as a three-part story in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899. The novella draws on material that Conrad wrote in his diary on a six-month trip to the Congo in 1890, when he worked as a ship's captain on a boat on the Congo River. His eyewitness observations of the atrocious methods of Belgian exploitation of the region and its natives were so upsetting that it led nine years later to one of the most famous representations of the violence of colonial extraction in all of world literature.

To understand how Conrad converts the scenes of near-apocalyptic devastation to those of supersubtle and elusive modernist narration, however, we must first come to grips with the real historical, geographical, and social context that informed his impressions. Here is where context gives way to contexture, that is to say, to the ways in which the historical period both provides the framing and insinuates itself in the modernist formal structure of elusiveness that Conrad used to capture his phenomenological sense (and not just the facts) of the events.

As we have noted already, the then-Congo Free State was privately owned by King Leopold II of Belgium from 1885 to 1908. King Leopold had managed to procure the Congo Free State by convincing other European states and the USA at the Berlin Conference that he was going to turn the region into a Free Trade zone and rid it of slavery, which at the time was dominated by Arab traders. What happened next was the direct opposite of what he had promised, and the region was subjected to systematic and rapacious plunder, with the most horrific violence being visited upon the people of the Congo in a bid to extract ivory, and after that rubber and other minerals, for sale on the international market. The extraction of the precious primary products was done through the granting of large concessions to various merchants and corporations that divided the country up into different fiefdoms, with the Belgians themselves forming a company with a skeletal bureaucracy that oversaw the entire region. They also set up a much-feared army.

The Congo Free State was the source of incredible wealth that serviced first the luxury tastes of Europeans and Americans through its ivory production, and then also the demands of the growing automobile industry and its dependence on rubber for tyres. As David Van Reybrouck tells us in his book *Congo: The Epic History of a People* (2014):

In Antwerp there were warehouses packed full of tusks. In 1897, 245 metric tons of ivory were exported to Europe, almost half of the world's production

in that year. Antwerp outstripped Liverpool and London as the global distribution center for ivory. Pianos and organs everywhere in the West were outfitted with keys of Congolese ivory; in smoky salons the customers tapped billiard balls or arranged dominoes that were made from raw materials from its equatorial forest. The mantelpieces of middle-class homes sported statuettes made of “elfin wood” from Congo; on Sunday the people went out strolling with walking sticks and umbrellas whose handles had once been [elephant] tusks. (III)

The methods that the Belgians used in the Congo had a devastating effect on all the communities along the Congo River as well as in the hinterland. Girls as young as eleven and twelve were seized by European merchants to act as their concubines, sometimes even being incorporated into large harems for the merchants. This is the source of the image of Kurtz’s “Intended” in Conrad’s novella. More importantly, the extraction of ivory and rubber depended on various acts of wanton brutality upon the natives. Africans were routinely seized and held hostage until their chiefs or families delivered set cargos of ivory and rubber. If the cargo was not satisfactorily delivered, the hands of captives were chopped off as punishment. Sometimes, girls’ hands were also chopped off for refusing to have sex with Belgian men, or simply as a show of unbridled lust and power. Every bullet shot by members of the *Force Publique*, the Belgian army in the Congo, had to be accounted for by bringing back either a dead body or cut-off limbs. In combination with disease epidemics and the social disruptions brought on by these violent colonial extraction atrocities, the local population was decimated, with an estimated 500,000 Congolese dying in 1901 alone.

The atrocities were finally exposed by the diplomat and Irish nationalist Roger Casement (1864–1916), who was asked by the British government in 1903 to investigate the rumors of atrocities in the Congo. He delivered the Congo Report to the British government in 1904. Casement had already been acting since 1901 as the British consul at Boma, a trade station on the Congo River. To write his Report Casement travelled for weeks interviewing people throughout the region, including overseers, mercenaries, and African workers. The revelations of the sordid reign of terror that had been unleashed on the people of the region led to an international outcry and universal condemnation of King Leopold’s methods from all quarters, which in turn led to the termination of his private ownership of the Congo Free State. Leopold surrendered the region to the Belgian government in 1908, and Belgium ran the Congo until its independence in 1960. Casement and Conrad had briefly met in the Congo in 1890, and even though they were united in exposing the atrocities in the region, it is the

differences in their depictions of the African natives in their two accounts that is most telling from the point of view of the question of the contexture behind the literary representation (see Armstrong xii).

To conduct his investigation, Roger Casement had by necessity spoken to many African natives. Even though he is credited with having spoken some African languages at the time, many of his interviews were conducted through translators. At various points in his report, Casement describes the demeanour and character of his African interlocutors, painting a picture of their fears, anxieties, and their humanity in the face of the Belgian-inflicted apocalypse. It is evident that in Conrad's own six-month stay in the Congo he too would have had to rely on Africans for a variety of services, including being taken care of when he was down with malarial fever and dysentery toward the end of his stay. In other words, even though unlike Casement, he did not speak any local languages, Conrad too must have communicated with African interlocutors of various social statuses through translators, thus gaining some familiarity with them over his six-month stay.³

And so, it is something of a surprise, as Chinua Achebe notes in his famous critical essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (1977), that Conrad does not grant his African characters even a modicum of language. Achebe laments how Conrad refuses to grant speech to the Africans in his novella, simply reducing what they say to grunts, jabbering, and other strange and presumably incomprehensible nonlinguistic sounds. Conrad also refers to them as "savages" at various points in the work. When compared with the account in Casement's report, we find that not only is Achebe correct in his critique of Conrad, but that there is also an additional question that needs to be answered regarding the nature of the literary representation of colonial atrocity. Why did Conrad decide to pare down the Africans in his novella simply to elemental sounds, when he must have known full well that they not only had language, but also well-constituted forms of communication, which he most likely had himself been a beneficiary of?

However, an accusation of anti-Black racism on the part of the writer on its own does not quite reach the heart of the matter, for Conrad also produces an excoriating representation of the Belgians in the Congo, whom he ironically calls "pilgrims" throughout the novella. One way to address the troubling question of Conrad's obvious racism is to look at the ways in which *Heart of Darkness* harnesses the problematic question of literary representation to those of allegory rather than of realism. In this regard, we must recognize that the Africans in the novella are assimilated into the register of inscrutability encapsulated in the vital yet elusive

backdrop of the Congo River and its forest themselves. The effect of this assimilation of the African human characters into the geographical landscape is to render both landscape and characters as equally incommensurable as representational objects. Collectively, they all thus offer an ever-elusive and recalcitrant problem for modernist literary representation, a problem, as Brian McHale notes in *Postmodernist Fiction* with respect to modernism in general, of the dominance of epistemological doubt in modernist representation (see McHale 3–21). Conrad couches the problem of representation partly in the perceived contradictions between kernel and surface, between manifest and latent dream content, and between narrated form and described events. But for Conrad, as we shall see in a moment, the form or reality precedes the literary content, that is to say, it is the very structure of the real world that generates the dreamlike and elusive content that retains the content's persistent representational difficulty, thus making the two ultimately inseparable as two categories of representation. At one point in his storytelling, Marlow exclaims in exasperation to his listeners on the *Nellie* the difficulty he faces in conveying the dream-like sensation of what he has been describing to them:

I became in an instant as much of a pretense as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims. This simply because I had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see – you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. . . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone. (27)

Marlow is here making broad generalizations about the difference between dream fabric and dream sensations or between manifest and latent dream content, if we follow a Freudian analogy from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). But the generalization needs to be questioned, because not all dreams we have are necessarily elusive in the way Conrad or indeed Freud describes them. There are many simple dreams we have for which the content and the sensation completely coincide and are easy to convey to a listener. Dreams of the satisfaction of primary bodily functions, for example, may sometimes appear garbled and confusing, but at other times appear exactly as what they point to, namely, as the satisfaction of the urge to eat, or pee, or have sex, or otherwise relieve oneself of some

pressing physical need. What Marlow seems to be doing in the novella is actually transferring the sense of unreality about his experiences in the Congo, which he has already been struggling to describe to his listeners, into the description of elusive dreamscapes in general.⁴ In other words, it is his experiences along the Congo River that create the sensation of elusiveness, for which he then casts about to find a narrative form and a descriptive metaphor. Thus, when he says it is like the difference between the dream and the dream sensation, he is really saying that the experience of the Congo explains the character of what he takes to be the dreamscape, rather than the other way round. Not only has the form of his experiences in the Congo preceded the analogy with the dreamscape, but it has also prefigured the elusive texture of the narrative of the novel itself. Marlow has created an affective leakage between experience and dreamscape in which it is experience that defines dreamscape but for which dreamscape stands as a metaphorical or indeed allegorical exemplar. This is what I mean by the form preceding the content of narration in the novella at all levels, even, as we see here, at the level of analogy. First, the elusive experiences in the Congo elicit a particular form of narration that has specific structural features, such as the novella's adjectival insistence first noted by F. R. Leavis (177–80), the reduction of majority of the characters to fleeting walk-on roles or locations in tableaux-like settings and without the attribution of names, and the description of landscape and background as always somehow containing something brooding and filled with indescribable sounds as if to overwhelm all the senses completely. We may argue that Conrad uses the metaphor of dreamscape to explain the experiences in the Congo that have always remained incommensurable to him. But because the experiences are so elusive and impossible to pin down, they distort what might be understood as the dreamscape and forces a generalization of the elusiveness of all dreams rather than of some dreams, and thus of the difficulty of conveying dream sensation as a general rule. We might say, then, that for Marlow and for Conrad beyond him, the form of experience in the Congo distorts the idea of dreamscape and makes the dreamscape into its own image. Thus, to understand the dreamscape in *Heart of Darkness* you must first explore the contexture of life in the Congo itself and not vice versa.

As we have already noted, what Conrad does in representing the African characters is to assimilate them to the depiction of the Congo River and its forest and to render all of them as somehow the source of primal realities that defy representation as such. They are taken to arouse the most subliminal cognitions of both infinite resemblances and infinite

possibilities in the European mind, as if, in the face of such realities, anything can literally happen, including the recreation of the world and of all human relationships within it. This is what Marlow tells us about the journey up Congo on a steamer:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once – somewhere – far away in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence.

In literature, epiphanies often involve an intensification of the perspectival sensorium, that is to say, a heightening of all the senses of smell, touch, sight, color, sensation, and other aspects of feeling and perception. But along with these, epiphanies also sometimes involve the intensification of the sense of time, as though time reveals a primary eternal dimension that either obliterates immediate sense perception or ties it to something much larger than the moment of perception itself. This is what we see in this passage of Marlow going up the Congo River. Going back to the beginnings of the world implies not just the beginning of things, but that anything at all is possible. The thing to note, however, is that Marlow seems to be the only one to experience these sensations of epiphany on the Congo River. The other White pilgrims, being completely devoted to extracting ivory and thus making money, do not seem to experience the same perspectival intensifications. This also assigns to Marlow the contradictory location of an inside/outsider, as though he is both part of what he is observing and experiencing and yet somehow also separate from it, as if looking from some transcendental place beyond it.

In putting matters in this way, Conrad was breaking ranks fundamentally with the ways in which the world outside of Europe had been represented in the highly popular masculine adventure narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Starting with Daniel Defoe's

Robinson Crusoe (1719), R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), and H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), as well as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and the novellas of A. G. Henty, among various others, young European boys and men were depicted in different parts of the Empire doing all manner of things, including conquering the natives and attempting to reveal the ways of God to them. Many of these novels were blockbusters when they were first published, with some running into several editions and selling 100,000 copies each. They were frequently given as presents to young boys. And at the same time, respected scholars such as the priest, historian, and social reformer Charles Kingsley at Cambridge and the famous art critic John Ruskin at Oxford delivered inaugural lectures in 1860 and 1870 respectively in which they extolled the virtues of young British men going out into the Empire to prove themselves. As Miranda Carter puts it in an article in *The Guardian*, these novels provided:

a vast, exotic, canvas, far from increasingly safe and conventional Britain, on which to recast old familiar plots: quests, struggles with evil, tests of strength, [and] exciting encounters with the unfamiliar. Their protagonists were tested and came through. An energetic plot was vital – it is no accident that many of the most famous have spawned multiple film versions.

The question of the justification for why they would go to such places when they had not been invited was never raised in these masculine adventure narratives at all, for the White men (and these were typically men) asserted an inalienable right to be wherever they happened to be without needing to explain themselves to anyone, including the natives whose wealth they were happy to plunder. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was the first literary work to raise serious doubts about the White man's place in different parts of the New World and to seriously interrogate the relationship between the civilizing mission and the quest for profit. In his novella, self-assurance is replaced with doubt, and the justness of the European as an actor in other parts of the world is turned to a question of deep existential anguish. But Conrad did this by also linking the entire question of the White man's place in the Empire to that of literary representation, thus delivering insights that have continued to exercise generations of readers interested in colonialism and its aftermath. And it is by understanding the complex nature of the contexture in which it was set, and the ways in which this contexture puts pressure on the literary-aesthetic choices of the writer, that we are able to stop reading *Heart of Darkness* as simply a classic of modernist narration somehow insulated from the effects of the

context it was trying to depict.⁵ And the method relayed here can be extended to other kinds of texts that represent both violent encounters between races, or simply the privileging of one subject position over another.

If I have so far read *Heart of Darkness* in relation to a contexture that helps to explain the novel's literary devices, I will now turn to a different kind of decolonized reading that also invokes context but this time sees in it important intersectional dimensions deriving from the sometimes-implicit discursive positions of equity-seeking groups that can be discerned in a literary text even in their absence.

Intersectionality: The Irruption of Blackness in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

The term intersectionality was first introduced into academic discourse by Kimberlé Crenshaw from the perspective of legal studies to point out the multiple ways in which women of color are oppressed from different directions in terms of their race and class status, as well as their gender. For Crenshaw, intersectionality is a mode of critique as well as a practice, thus the starting point of critique is to grasp the simultaneity and conjunctural processes of oppression, and, even more importantly, to attempt to devise a collective means for ending that oppression. In terms of praxis and not simply critique the Combahee River Collective, the radical group of Black feminist lesbians in Boston who started working in the 1970s, may be considered to have modeled its main terms. They perceived themselves as dedicated to "struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems are interlocking" (9). In both Crenshaw and the Combahee River Collective usages, intersectionality is considered to be only the starting point of a longer process of linking perception to modes of action. It is in this spirit that I deploy the term here.

Despite Baz Luhrmann's best efforts at introducing Black figures in peripheral roles in his movie of *The Great Gatsby* (2013), readers of Fitzgerald's novel itself will know that, in spite of its being set in New York's Jazz Age, we see only one reference to Black characters. This is as Tom drives with Gatsby's car into New York from West Egg: "As we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry" (69).

This single mention, as we can see, is met with a form of derisive or nervous laughter from Nick (but what is so funny about these modish Black folk, one might ask?). The absence of Blacks is most telling in the rumbunctious party scenes at Gatsby's mansion, to which we are told "People were not invited – they went there" (41). The list of names of partygoers that Nick gives us has no hint of any Black people among them:

From East Egg, then, came the Chester Beckers and the Leeches, and a man named Bunsen, whom I knew at Yale, and Doctor Webster Civet, who was drowned last summer up in Maine. And the Hornbeams and the Willie Voltaires, and a whole clan named Blackbuck, who always gathered in a corner and flipped up their noses like goats at whosoever came near. And the Ismays and the Chrysties (or rather Hubert Auerbach and Mr. Chrystie's wife), and Edgar Beaver, whose hair, they say, turned cotton-white one winter afternoon for no good reason at all. (48)

While some might argue that you cannot necessarily tell simply from a name the race of its bearer, the point is that as a general rule in writings by White writers if a person is not specifically marked for race it can safely be assumed that they are White. And at no point does Nick in any of the descriptions he gives of the many people he meets both at the parties and in different settings (at the impromptu get-together at Myrtle's apartment; with Meyer Wolfsheim at the social club in New York City) give the faintest indication that any of them is Black. Nor do Tom, Daisy, and Jordan indicate at any point that in either their present lives in East Egg or earlier when they were in Chicago that they consorted with any but White folk.

And so, it comes as something of a surprise (a big one) when in the revelation scene at the Plaza Hotel, Tom goes as far as calling Gatsby the n-word, not directly, but by heavy imputation. To understand how this happens we must first reconstruct the scene and the conversation the main characters have there. This will be done in broad strokes, but the scene is worth attending to slowly. Tom, Daisy, Jordan, and Nick rent themselves a large suite on an upstairs floor of the Plaza Hotel on a sudden whim because of the oppressive summer temperature and the fact that they all experience a lot of awkwardness when Nick brings Gatsby to visit Tom and Daisy at their home for the first time. Directly below their hotel suite is a wedding ceremony and, as the scene unfolds, there wafts to them from time-to-time strains of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* as well as sounds of other music and dancing from the celebrants. The spatial arrangement of the scene is significant, because it suggests a contrast between the

revelations of marital infidelity that we are soon going to be privy to and the inception of a pristine marital relationship marked by marriage vows and the witnessing of others. It is not entirely accidental that at some point during the scene Tom, Daisy, and Jordan refer back to events when Tom and Daisy got married some five years earlier. They mention someone fainting, the strange case of a chap called Biloxi who made boxes, and Asa Bird. By this, the three friends invoke a social circle from their shared past of which Gatsby is not a part. This insulation of a social fraction is then scaled up and given a hard-edged racial (and not just social) articulation by Tom, shortly after it becomes unambiguously clear to him that Gatsby was having an affair with Daisy. After the unexpected disclosure that Gatsby did indeed go to Oxford, only not as a regular student but for three months as a veteran from the army, Tom is red-faced and clearly seriously upset. His wife tells him to "Please have a little self-control." To which he blurts out angrily:

"Self-control!" repeated Tom incredulously. "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that's the idea you can count me out . . . Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white." Flushed with his impassioned gibberish, he saw himself standing alone on the last barrier of civilization.

As though to underline the utter ridiculousness of what Tom has just said, Jordan murmurs plaintively: "We're all white here" (130).

The scene and Tom's outburst is nothing short of extraordinary because he has, even if not in so many words, practically called Gatsby the n-word. But why? When Nick first goes to visit Tom and Daisy early in the novel, Tom is extolling the virtues of *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, a book by one Goddard. The actual book that Fitzgerald is referring to here is the eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color* published in 1920, the subtitle of which was "The Threat Against White World-Supremacy." But Tom's mention of Goddard rather than Stoddard as author of the book also helps to invoke the eugenicist Herbert Goddard's *Human Efficiency and Levels of Human Intelligence*, also published in 1920, as another part of his mental makeup on the question of race relations. Both these texts predate *The Great Gatsby* by five years and so were part of the discursive backdrop to the novel. But if his outburst places Gatsby firmly amidst the colored threats to White supremacy, it is not simply because Tom has just had confirmation that Gatsby has been sleeping with

his wife, or indeed that he is a crook who has even had something to do with fixing the World Series of 1919, but for another reason altogether, for understanding which we have to turn to the social context of bootlegging during the period of Prohibition. For among other unsavory things, Gatsby and Meyer Wolfsheim, whom we have met earlier in the novel, have made much of their money from bootlegging alcohol. Prohibition, which ran roughly from 1920 to 1933, coincided first with the nativist and anti-immigrant movement in the United States, and then with the Christian temperance movement, which was itself driven by strong anti-immigrant sentiment. This is partly because much of the illegal sale and distribution of alcohol in the period was done by newly arrived immigrants from Europe, specifically Poles, Italians, and Jews. What is more striking with specific reference to Gatsby, however, is that the period from the mid-nineteenth century also saw the ultimately unsuccessful attempt of Jews to settle as farmers on the East Coast and the Midwest. As Michael Pekarofski (2012) persuasively argues, Gatsby's fragmentary description of his background before his fateful meeting with Mr. Dan Cody, the owner of the yacht on which the seventeen-year-old James Gatz was to undergo his metamorphosis into Jay Gatsby, provides strong hints that his parents were unsuccessful Jewish farmers who had settled in the Midwest. The young James Gatz had been born in rural North Dakota and had himself worked along the shores of Lake Superior as a clam-digger and salmon-fisher before his encounter with Cody. That he is likely Jewish is entirely plausible from his deep association with Meyer Wolfsheim and his "gang." The central point to be noted here, however, is that when Tom Buchanan accuses him of being representative of the darker races that threaten to overrun the White race, he is seeing him as a prime example of a Jewish gambler, bootlegger, and all-round crook. In other words, the comment is both racist and anti-Semitic at one and the same time. But to get to its inherent anti-Semitism you must first interrogate its blatant racism. The question of why Tom practically calls Gatsby the n-word is the starting point for grasping how race is a placeholder for an intersectional form of otherness in the novel, in this case both Black and Jewish, both of which are only latent and not manifest in the narrative. An intersectional reading, in which we bring to bear on our interpretation as many interests and perspectives from different equity-seeking groups can also deliver a form of reading for justice, effectively decolonizing our interpretation by forcing us to complicate any simple monological reading of who or what group is the subject of microaggression or indeed oppression.

“Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day”: Pedagogy and the Politics of Comparison

One of the key problems with the English literary curriculum in most departments is the way in which the compulsory period papers do not necessarily speak to one another, and much less to the elective components of the curriculum. Some might say that this is because of the steady retreat from the large survey courses that start from Beowulf to say Sandra Cisneros or Nnedi Okorafor. I must admit to a slight sense of regret for the passing of the era of the Great Tradition of English literary studies. Harold Bloom’s ambitious yet ultimately flawed *The Western Canon* (1994) when it first came out was no help in this respect, because it was mainly composed of piecemeal attention to various texts that he considered of canonical status, but with no real attempt at reading them contrapuntally, to invoke Edward Said’s highly productive term for comparative reading that he exemplified to great effect in *Culture and Imperialism*. But both conceptual and methodological problems must be confronted in trying to establish a Great Books literary survey that is both inclusive and treats each text with equal critical attention. How is this to be achieved? I think there are two ways of doing this, the first is via what I describe elsewhere as interleaving, and the second is by following a particular cluster of questions that are incrementally taken up in each installment of the literary survey from beginning to end.

As I note with respect to the principle of interleaving in the final chapter of *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (2021):

The idea of an interleaved reading is best understood in terms of how we read well-known canonical texts from any tradition. Each well-known text you encounter is always read as if for the second time, even if it is your very first time of encountering the text in question. Or your second, or your third, or your fourth reading. Interleaving also means that to take any literary text seriously you have to read it with the subliminal or explicit knowledge of all the various ways in which it is impinged upon by other texts and may in its turn impinge upon others. This should be the preliminary starting point, even if you have no idea how these interrelations might be established. In other words, every text is to be read as a portal to other things of literary value and not simply to confirm already-established cultural experiences and dispositions. In this type of reading, attitude is incipient action, that is to say, to read as if what you are reading is part of a larger set of cross-cultural illuminations is to be open to finding out more about how such cross-cultural illuminations take place. (302)

Thus, an interleaved reading by definition takes seriously everything that has been read before or alongside the text being read. It is this that allows us to read Okonkwo's decision to walk off and commit suicide at the end of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a gesture similar to Oedipus' act in taking out his eyes in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. They are both acts of defiance against the inscrutability of what they consider their destinies. They are acts that humanize them and that assert a form of agency despite their clear futility.⁶ Or that the description that Gatsby gives Nick Carraway of the first time he kisses Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* is evocative of a form of epiphanic elementalism that puts it in the same frame of the perceived transcendence of time that we just saw in *Heart of Darkness* but that we also see more than once in Tayeb Saleh's *Season of Migration to the North*, and in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, among various others.

Which brings us to the second proposition for establishing transhistorical comparative frames for our teaching that help to elevate individual texts from their simple fixity within their respective periods. It seems to me worthwhile to think always in our teaching of clusters of ideas, concepts, and themes that might help to animate texts comparatively. The key question of course is whether the transhistorical is another name for thematized course offerings. The rationale behind many period courses, such as the Oxford Final Honour School 1760–1830 paper, is that students need to learn a wide range of literary forms, from polemics to novels to Romantic poetry, and not just the salvageable bits, of this period. What I am suggesting here is that the idea of “coverage” be thought of more creatively, and even while introducing students to a wide range of forms, it might still be possible to model the diversity of forms within the framework of transhistorical comparison.⁷

I have already mentioned two of them above, but it is entirely possible to find others that are both capacious and generative. Take for example the concept of doubt. How do we adopt doubt as a concept to animate different texts, genres, and features of the literary curriculum? While we can start from as far back as the Greeks, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a good place to begin for those without much patience or expertise with the *longue durée* of English literary history. And yet even in Shakespeare, *Hamlet* is not the only one subject to doubt: we have the examples of *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Richard II*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* to draw on. Each of these would deliver a different configuration of the problem of doubt. Once the terms of doubt are established, there are any number of texts that can be considered pertinent to the general question, including sacred texts such as the Bible, the Quran, the poetry of the Sufi mystics, and on to Virginia

Woolf, William Faulkner, Jorge Luis Borges, Toni Morrison, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Wole Soyinka, J. M. Coetzee, and many others that readily spring to mind. Or, to take another broad and productive example, suffering. Where do we not see suffering in English literature, and why is it that we are not able to compare representations of suffering in different literary and cultural traditions? But what I am saying here has implications not just for the design of large survey courses, but also for the internal orchestration of echoes and resonances within individual courses. While it should be impossible to teach a survey course on the history of poetry at an American university without paying serious attention to the Harlem Renaissance or Native American poetry (amazingly, this has been known to happen!), it should also be impossible to teach any course without getting your students to realize explicit and implicit connections to the rest of the broad literary tradition. And thus, in my own classes on African literature, I resolutely refute any imputation, real or imagined, that my students are being inducted into a cultural enclave, namely, that this is a course strictly on African literature and nothing else. Rather, my students are required to attend systematically to all manner of other texts in the broader literary tradition. The point for me is to get my students to see the entailments of African literature in the rest of their literary training. This is also important for decolonizing the curriculum.

It is also important to acknowledge the essential difference between what I have described here so far as decolonizing the curriculum, and how Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh interpret the concept of the decolonial more specifically.⁸ For Mignolo, the decolonial requires the complete jettisoning of Western models of thought and their replacement with Indigenous modes from Latin America, Africa, and India, among others. The problem with this idea for the English literary curriculum is that writers practice a form of interleaving in the way that I described it a moment ago, so that it would be practically impossible to completely parenthesize, say, Sophocles from our reading of Achebe (or vice versa), or Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner from our interpretations of Toni Morrison's novel. In the second instance, this is simply because we cannot discount the fact that Morrison wrote her MA thesis on the earlier writers. By the same token, it would be irresponsible to refer the meanings of Achebe and Morrison's writings exclusively to the Euro-American tradition without paying attention to the Igbo and African American traditions that inescapably infuse their works. The point, *contra* Mignolo, is to read contrapuntally or dialectically, paying as much attention to what originality these and other postcolonial or minority writers bring to bear on their work

from their own traditions, but not discounting the inspiration that they also draw from the Euro-American one that is a central part of their education and literary aesthetics.

Conclusion: Articulating Principles

1. A preliminary approach to reading for justice is to focus on the manner of the text's representation of historical events, what I refer to as its contexture. Here, while we may be treading on slippery ground, what we are interested in are the representational choices that are made because of the background, the ways in which historical context might be seen as impinging determinedly upon the text. Another dimension to doing this is to see all historical (and cultural) details as thresholds rather than particularities, and thus as the means by which the relevant text deploys such details as fulcrums connecting other dimensions of the text. The manner in which we are able to do this would lend complexity to what might risk becoming the mere attempt at synchronizing literature with historical events, or as reading literature as the simple and unmediated mimesis of historical reality.

2. The second vector of reading for justice is in the broad shape of a holistic understanding of the curriculum and its constituent parts as in dialogue with one another. As I hope to have shown, reading for justice and indeed decolonizing the curriculum requires a broad grasp of all the literary curriculum simultaneously and as a matter of principle, even if it is manifest as individual instantiations in the first instance. The student, and indeed their instructors, must see the entire curriculum as interconnected and not just a collection of disparate parts. This may require a radical change in the way we undertake training in the profession, because the enclave mentality enjoined by strict specialisms actually undermines the prospect of decolonizing.

3. Related to the previous point, one of the important critical procedures in reading for justice is that to do it properly requires forms of intersectionality, and of reading from the perspectives of different equity-seeking groups simultaneously. Some of such intersectional readings have already been adroitly done by feminist, postcolonial, and critical race scholars. Two great recent examples of such intersectional reading are to be found in Ian Smith's *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race* (2022), and in Geraldine Heng's *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (2018).

Neither of these is likely to escape controversy in their respective fields, but the point is that the intersectional readings that they deploy require us to see things from multiple equity-seeking perspectives at once. In the case of Smith's book, it is that of critical race theory and Shakespeare, while Heng's gives us situated intersectional readings of race, gender, and the vagaries of anti-Semitism in the period in question all at the same time.

Ultimately, however, we must convey to our students in the classroom the absolute passion of what we do, for it is the passion that may ignite their interest in encountering and reencountering the texts that we introduce them to, and, hopefully, to an understanding that literature is also a tool for dismantling befuddled forms of thinking. But first, you have to read it properly.

Notes

1. On my attempt to interpret the George Floyd incident in light of the principle of tragedy and *musuo*, the Akan concept of taboo, see Quayson, "On Postcolonial Suffering."
2. See Ato Quayson, "Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: Representing Colonial Atrocity," <https://youtu.be/qgYZEZvtQls>.
3. On Casement's Congo Report, see the 5th Norton Critical Edition of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong (Conrad 138–54).
4. What I am trying to describe here resonates somewhat with Ian Watt's concept of delayed decoding, except that in his case, the concept is explored with respect to *Lord Jim* and not *Heart of Darkness* and applies to the delay between a character's sensory impressions and what they understand as happening to them. My interest here is in how Conrad himself transfers what are the overwhelming sensory impressions he experienced in the Congo into the domain of his literary representation in *Heart of Darkness*. For his account, see Watt 269–85.
5. For different interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* that also insist on not reading it simply as a modernist classic separate from its postcolonial implications and to which my own reading is particularly indebted, see Said, "Two Visions" and Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism*, among various others. Achebe's essay on the racism in the novel that I have already cited is also critical to reading the novel.
6. This point is well articulated by Peter Szondi with respect to Schelling's views on the tragic. See his *An Essay on the Tragic* 7–10.
7. I want to thank Ankhi Mukherjee for this brief description of a period paper from Oxford English, which coincides with the way that period papers are structured in other universities I have worked at including Cambridge, Toronto, NYU, and Stanford.
8. For Walter Dignolo and Catherine E. Walsh's powerfully articulated position, see *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. See also Boaventura De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*.

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