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Decolonizing Futures

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The End of the English Department: Decolonizing Futures

Ronald Cummings
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Call this apocalyptic propaganda if you must:
The World Ended in the Spring of 2006.
But how much you are willing to accept this story
depends on how far your minds can stretch.

Kei Miller
A Light Song of Light

The epigraph which opens this brief discussion is taken from a poem by the Jamaican writer Kei Miller. The poem begins with a declaration of the end of the world, which Miller locates in 2006. Although he is not specific in identifying any single apocalyptic event, he references a confluence of happenings: "America, Iraq, Korea; / the pressing of buttons; the detonation of bombs / from one pole to the next; the grand explosion / of people" (32). He declares "what we most feared / would happen has happened." If 2006, in Miller's narrative, marks one end of the world, it proves interesting now to look back on that time from a fearful and unsettled present. We can find another accounting of that time and of the detonation of lives daily in Dionne Brand's book *Inventory,* published in that fateful year, 2006. She closes that volume with an important declaration about

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the need for truth telling in times of crisis: "I have nothing soothing to tell you, / that's not my job" (100). My own attempts here to reflect on what I am calling the end of the English department is similarly saying soothing things in these troubled times. It is a call to attend urgently to the fraught and precarious present in relation to the work we do as scholars within universities and in literature departments. But to understand the end of the English department as an event, or a singular moment, is also to miss the point. Rather, this work is joining a call, one variously echoed, revisited, and reframed in the essays in the discussion forum by Nadine Attewell, Sonnet L'Abbé, and Aubrey Hanson, where they each urge us to think collectively about and, even more importantly, to meaningfully and purposely engage in the decolonization of the study of literature. They ask us to think seriously about the terms on which we continue to do literary studies as well as about the institutional contexts that enable and, even more tellingly, constrain decolonizing work.

While they each extend a keen invitation to dialogue and deeper thinking about our individual and collective praxis, in my own reflections here I want to further suggest that what might be at stake in ongoing calls for decolonization is perhaps also an end of the English department. At the very least, we are being asked to think seriously about the restructuring of our discipline, its function, purpose, and interventions. In our current moment of Black and Indigenous political insurgency, with calls to decolonize the curriculum and diversity initiatives within the university, what does it mean to continue to do work under the sign of English studies? What new formations and possibilities might our current moment of institutional precarity and change, including the panic of the pandemic, allow us to imagine? Whither the future of the English department?

In Miller's poem, referenced above, what he calls the end of the world is not a finite end of things. It is the end of a particular formation of things. Much like Francis Fukuyama's haunting notion of the "end of history," which attends to the end of a particular structuring of the geo-political world (the historic organization of political and economic life and futures through the ideological divide of communism and capitalism), Miller's "end of the world" is importantly and strategically rendered as a potential opening to "parallel universes" (32). He offers an invitation to think about "the one thousand lives we lived simultaneously / and which could only be glimpsed through magic / mirrors or déjà vu" (32). This is also a rejection of linear formulations of histories. Particularly in his attention to déjà vu, as structuring affect, Miller asks us to sense and remember how the world, as one might know and feel it and as it has been ordered, has ended several

times and invites us to contemplate possibilities outside of the structures of our present-now.

We also find similar, poignant reminders of narrative, political, and ideological endings and restructurings in Sylvia Wynter's work such as in her essay "1492: A New World View." Here Wynter writes that "1492 was the prelude to a mode of exchange in which 'genocide' and 'ecocide' were traded" (7). The year 1492, then, was not just an epoch shifting *keydate* but a time and a moment through which we might trace the end of worlds.[1] Wynter forcefully reminds us that we live in the "wake of Columbus' landfall in the Americas" (50) which she describes as "that world-fateful day in October 1492" (49). She further unfolds for us how, "that world-fateful day" (49) would also inaugurate "representation systems and categorical models" (41) that have continued to structure systems of naming, categorizing, knowing, and narrating the world. In this regard, Wynter's body of work usefully helps us to understand the formation of disciplines and the structuring of the Humanities. We might think about her work as invariably giving us a counter discursive map delineating the formations and outcomes of Enlightenment and post Enlightenment thought.

To understand the colonial formations of the Humanities and in particular the colonial foundations of the discipline of English studies, we might also conjoin a consideration of Wynter's work with that of Gauri Viswanathan. In her essay "The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India," Viswanathan makes clear that "literary study gained enormous cultural strength through its development in a period of territorial expansion and conquest" (2). Her work also extends Edward Said's important insights in *Culture and Imperialism* about the ways in which the rise of the English novel was part of an era of colonial expansion. She further notes that "the subsequent institutionalization of the discipline in England itself took on a shape and an ideological content developed in the colonial context" (2). The implications of this link between colonial expansion and the institutionalization of the study of English is starkly rendered in Viswanathan's wider book-length study *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, where she notes the fundamental "irony that English literature appeared as a subject in the curriculum of the colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country" (2–3).

Viswanathan's writings offer not just a narrative account but also a methodological approach to thinking about the institution, practice, and

1 This notion of keydates builds on Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (1976). For a discussion of "keydates" see Phanuel Antwi and Ronald Cummings.

ideology of English studies. Her approach to outlining this history is useful to consider here in two important ways, related to questions of space but also of temporality. In the first instance, her approach to engaging with the problem of historical periodization and of synchronicity or what we might call in Miller's terms "the one thousand lives" of the English department is instructive. We see this most thoughtfully articulated in her reflections on "beginnings" as an orienting concept for her work. Viswanathan notes that:

> I have titled my essay "The Beginnings of English" rather than, say "The Rise of English" or "The Growth of English" to emphasize two things: first, my interest is in seeking out the historical moment at which English literature as a subject for study made its appearance in India, a moment that can be identified as a "beginning" which, in Edward Said's formulation, "includes everything that develops out of it, no matter how eccentric the development or inconsistent the result"; and second, my method of doing so is by describing the historical conditions which enabled that appearance in the first place, indeed even necessitated it. ("Beginnings" 2)

Her work also informs my thinking about endings. My use of the concept of "end" as critical marker in this paper is meant to echo and situate this discussion in dialogue with Viswanathan's writings. Her complex thinking about beginnings might also help us to theorize similarly complex and inconsistent ends. Rather than simply a terminal point or an altogether apocalyptic end of the world as we know it, I want to map out a particular critical break that we might potentially use as one key way of (re)contextualizing what precedes and what follows, "no matter how eccentric the development or inconsistent the result" (Viswanathan quoting Said, "Beginnings" 2). In particular, I want to attend to the desires made visible and which can be felt *in the break*. Attention to the rupture offers the potential of conceptualizing something different emerging from the possible ruins of English studies as a colonial project.

The 1960s is one such point of critical, ideological, and political rupture for us to keenly consider, revisit, and engage. The 1960s, after all, was the end of many things. This was the generation that produced the radical sounds of The Last Poets in the United States with their succinct response to Keorapetse William Kgositsile's poetry, "we are the last poets of the world."[2] Sylvia Wyn-

2 The Last Poets emerged in the late 1960s in the context of the civil rights movement and Black nationalism. Their name is inspired by the South African writer Keorapetse William Kgositsile's poem "Towards a Walk in the Sun." The original

ter's work attends to the complexities as well as the simultaneous disjunctures and conjunctures of the time when she argues that "the general upheaval of the 1960s made possible a new opening—that of collective challenge made to the symbolic representational systems" (50). The "general upheaval of the 1960s" for Wynter was a necessary response to the colonial structures made possible through the previous "upheaval" of 1492. She contextualizes the 1960s through an attention to the anticolonial thought and social movements of the time and the critical rethinkings of race and representations these enabled and necessitated (see, for instance, her insightful discussions of Frantz Fanon's work in "1492: A New World View"). But she also situates this time through an attention to the unsettling occasioned by women's and gay liberation movements (37). Her centring of the question of representation importantly consolidates a focus on the role of literary studies as a key part of the long colonial project. Throughout her essay she is keen to situate this focus on representation as part of the broader consideration of the cultural work of anti-colonial struggle. She asks us to think about how we might read that moment of the 1960s in relation to a necessary construction of a "new poetics of the *propter nos*" (28) to challenge the "first poetics of the propter nos" of 1492 (20).[3]

Attending to the 1960s, as Wynter does, allows us to recall, as part of this wider discourse and praxis of unsettling, the calls for the abolition of the English Department, leading to the 1968 Nairobi declaration calling for that very abolition. In its stead, it was renamed the Department of Literature, as part of a process of transforming the disciplines and curricula in a postindependence African university. The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who along with Henry Owour-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong were the primary architects of this call for abolition, has detailed some of the political and ideological imperatives of this call in his important volume *Decolonising the Mind.* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o would later trace, in insightful ways, some of the developments and outcomes of this movement for abolishing the English department:

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trio included Abiodun Oyewole, Gylan Kain, and David Nelson. The Last Poets has gone through several formations. They have been influential in Black popular culture and laid the foundations for the emergence hip-hop. See, for example, their album *The Last Poets*, Impact Sound Studio, 1970.

3 In the introduction to the inaugural issue of the journal *Propter Nos*, which takes its title from Wynter's work, the members of the True Leap Publishing Collective write: "Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter invokes the phrase 'Propter Nos' to rethink the sense of 'we' that was universalized after Europe's genocidal conquest of the so-called 'New World'" (6).

> By 1972 we had started breaking away from the centrality of English literature in our syllabus to a new dispensation that emphasized the centrality of the African experience at home on the continent and abroad in the Caribbean, Afro-America, and other parts of the world. We wanted a dialogue among all the literatures of the entire pan-African universe and between them and those of South America, Asia, and Europe in that order. Central to the enterprise was orature, the long tradition of verbal arts passed from mouth to ear in both their classical and contemporary expressions. (wa Thiong'o, "Voice" 677)

Much can be said about Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's thoughtful articulation of the process and imperative of this unsettling of the epistemology of the study of literatures. However, for me, what is useful to note here is how this important moment (what we might understand in Wynter's terms as a general upheaval) has been situated in the historiography of literary studies where it has been primarily discussed and examined as a site and moment of concern just for African studies and/or postcolonial studies rather than being seen as a central part of the history of the discipline. Locating this upheaval in these terms has had particular outcomes. As Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez reminds us "African literature is marginalized in relation to literary Eurocentricity" (5). How might our understanding of the history of English studies and of the end of the English department, as well as our thinking about the possibilities of decolonial futures, be rethought through attending to this specific moment and history and by its repositioning as central (rather than marginal) to the field? In arguing for the end of the English department, I am not inaugurating a new history or historical moment but calling for a new kind of historiographical approach.

While the story of 1968 offers one specific, important moment of general upheaval and reorientation for the study of literatures, this was also not the only one. The cultural studies turn of the 1980s and 1990s, with the related attention to film studies, visualities, and other cultural texts, has also offered a fundamental challenge to the formulation of English studies albeit in a different way.[4] This resonated in different places, including in Canada. The department in which I now teach at McMaster University was renamed as the Department of English and Cultural Studies in 2005 in the wake of this critical turn.[5] It proves instructive to think about these two turns or "upheavals"

4 For an understanding of the cultural studies turn see Stuart Hall. Also see Hua Hsu.

5 While the department was renamed in 2005, my discussions with senior colleagues in the department indicate that these discussions extend back to the early 1990s at least.

alongside each other. The cultural studies turn, led by Stuart Hall in England, which resonated in the British academy, and in Europe more generally, has often been recalled and centred in accounts of shifts in the field. The critical insurgency in Nairobi is less often recalled beyond discussions in African and Caribbean studies. Yet Sylvia Wynter's work might help us to understand how the cultural studies turn of the 1980s onwards was made possible by the anticolonial turn of the 1960s. She reads the related 1980s multicultural agenda as part of the unsettling made possible by the 1960s. Yet she is also keen to attend to the specificity of each moment. According to Wynter: "The origin of this deconstruction is to be found not in the neoliberal humanist piety of the 1980s but in the poetics of a new *propter nos* that began with the "general upheaval" of the 1960s" (41). Wynter's referencing of these two historical moments, much like Viswanathan's attention to temporality, also asks us to think relationally across moments in tracing different sites of "deconstruction" and "general upheavals" and their wakes. However, her crucial focus on the 1960s and its poetics of a "new *propter nos*" insists that we take a closer look at that moment.

In taking up this challenge, Viswanathan's work proves useful in a second important way. In addition to her thinking on time (her charting of temporality, historicity, and simultaneity), the other thing that Viswanathan's writings offer us methodologically is an understanding of the importance of engaging a multi-sited approach in any attempt to tell any story of English literary studies. Rather than situating or mapping the colonies as outposts or peripheral within this narrative, Viswanathan usefully begins with and in India to tell a different kind of story. She suggests that it is in colonized spaces and not necessarily the colonial metropole that we should look to understand the complex formation and the colonial function of the discipline. I want to also suggest that attention to peripheralized histories (by this I mean institutional histories not centred in Europe or the U.S.) might allow us to tell different stories about the end of the English department and might help us to understand the fundamental ways in which English studies as a field been variously challenged and rethought.

In 1968, the call for the abolition of the English department did not end in Nairobi, or, rather, we should not read that moment and that critical demand in singular terms. Carolyn Cooper highlights this fact by telling us how the aftermath of that moment reverberated in the Caribbean. Recalling the story of the arrival of a new lecturer in the department of English in 1968 in Jamaica, Cooper recounts the following:

> A similar movement was taking place at The University of the West Indies. In 1968, a young Trinidadian scholar came to lecture at Mona. It was Kenneth Ramchand, who had just completed his PhD at the University of Edinburgh. His dissertation became the classic *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*. Within a month of his arrival, Ramchand took down the sign on his office door that defined him as a lecturer in English. He replaced it with "Literatures in English." A colleague wickedly asked, "You are inventing your own department now?" (n.p.)

In 1969, Ramchand would notably go on to develop and teach the first full course in West Indian literature to be offered at a university. This was a landmark moment in the field of West Indian literature and Caribbean literary studies and marked a departure from the English-focused curriculum that had been offered up until that point.[6] Cooper was one of the students who took that class.

In the spirit of the times, interventions and inspiration did not only flow in a singular direction *from* Nairobi. Such a unidirectional reading would fail to acknowledge the dynamic interconnectedness that shaped that time of political decolonization across areas of the British Empire. This was a moment in which "networks of transnational Black radicalism" facilitated a complex flow of people as well as ideas across spaces and enabled different interrelated sites of knowledge and contestation (Cummings and Mohabir 25). In 1972, Ramchand's colleague and sometimes collaborator at the University of the West Indies, Kamau Brathwaite (then Edward Brathwaite), would travel from Jamaica to the University of Nairobi to be their first visiting fellow as part of the newly restructured Department of Literature. It is there that Brathwaite would take the name Kamau (an enactment of a refusal of the colonizer's terms of naming). Recalling the impact of Kamau's time in Nairobi, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has written: "These [Caribbean] islands have given so much to twentieth-century Africa and the world, and our students in Nairobi could now see that for themselves in the presence of the lecturer before them. It was remarkable, and Brathwaite was the talk among the students and faculty" ("Voice" 678). However, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o also recalls tensions with university administration about Kamau's visit and what it represented and accomplished: "alas, our enthusiasm was not necessarily shared by the establishment, who thought they had already given in too much by agree-

6 In 1994, the department at the University of the West Indies would officially change its name to the "Department of Literatures in English," a name change also adopted by Cornell University in 2020.

ing to have a scholar who came from places other than England itself, the real home of real literature" ("Voice" 678).

Important institutional shifts were also happening elsewhere. Attention to these "upheavals" might additionally ask us to rethink approaches to literary historiographies which have tended to centre moments and spaces in Europe and the United States. In Canada, in 1971, another course on West Indian literature was developed and taught at York University by Frank Birbalsingh, a young lecturer who was hired as part of what was essentially a targeted cluster hire, spearheaded by Clara Thomas. This was part of an initiative to hire core faculty to develop a curriculum in Canadian literature. As Birbalsingh recalls:

> There were no courses in Canadian literature at York University in 1967, when I first arrived in Toronto, but by 1970 York University introduced the first multisection, Canadian literature course in Canada. Before that, individual Canadian writers may have been studied but not in a full course on Canadian literature. Already the hold-all term "Commonwealth literature" was looking shaky, with a growing assertion of national literatures in English in former British colonies all over the world. Although I began teaching Canadian literature at York University in 1970, I also initiated a course in West Indian literature in 1971. I am not sure whether Kenneth Ramchand in Jamaica or I in Toronto was first in teaching a full-year university course in West Indian literature. (Mohabir and Cummings 112)

Birbalsingh significantly connects the shifts in the Caribbean to fundamental shifts that were also happening in Canada and in the study of Canadian literature. Additionally, he further links these to the wider context of the study of "English in former British colonies all over the world" (112). While he points to a nationalizing impulse and imperative, one which is still variously articulated in what we have come to know as CanLit, I would argue that this moment must be understood in terms of a wider move beyond English literary studies.

There were more shifts and demands, that we can usefully note, in other Canadian institutions at the time. In 1969, for instance, the well-known literary critic Northrop Frye founded the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto. This was not just a move beyond English studies as the framework for literary criticism but also, as Linda Hutcheon highlights, a shift beyond the departmental framework and toward the work and structure of "small interdisciplinary 'centers' and

'institutes'" (4). Hutcheon argues that these institutional configurations might enable and hold "the most intellectually engaged and therefore most adventurous (and serious) configurations of faculty and students, all focused on a particular constellation of pressing issues—things like diasporic and transnational questions" (4). Also in 1969, there were demands for Black Studies articulated by students occupying the computer centre at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal in protest against institutional racism. Literature functioned as part of their rallying cry for a new kind of university and curriculum. Their turn to the poetry of Claude McKay, as part of their protest, as well as their call for the inclusion of history and writing from Africa to be taught as part of the curriculum should also be read as part of the general upheaval that Wynter's work allows us to remember and contextualize as an important intervention of the time.[7]

In our contemporary moment, calls for decolonization continue. Across our various campuses, decolonization has notably become a buzzword for university administrators. But what does decolonization mean for us today in the neoliberal university? What might decolonization mean in literature departments where Black and Indigenous scholars and faculty of colour continue to be in the minority? What does it mean for those who continue to work under the sign of English Literature? My call here is not simply about renaming departments. Such a move can operate as a symbolic or administrative gesture that accomplishes no real change. The questions that I raise are about the reimagining of the study of literature. They are about remapping the terrain of study to resituate what might be considered marginal as central and to reposition what has been central as obsolete and/or as relational. My queries are about decentring the hegemonies that still persist in our departments. For instance, in the ongoing discussions about Indigenization and literary studies, it is important to note how the question of English itself is very little contemplated or questioned within the context of our English departments. Rather, English often operates as the fundamental ground from which discussions proceed. What of literary studies and Indigenous writing and storytelling beyond English? In the context of the 1960s and 1970s, that generation understood decolonization as a call for change—to do things differently from the models they inherited. In our current moment, decolonization becomes often linked with calls and desires for diversity and inclusion. However,

7 For discussions of the Sir George Williams University Protest, see Ronald Cummings and Nalini Mohabir.

the terms of inclusion should be queried. In various departments, we often work to bring in new scholars with diverse and different experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives and then expect them to simply function within pre-existing frameworks without enacting any fundamental change. Many diversity and inclusion initiatives recruit Black scholars and Indigenous scholars into departments where the impetus and work of curriculum and pedagogical change falls squarely on their shoulders while they also battle colleagues and university administrations resistant to change. The operative prefix "de" in decolonization signals the pulling apart of things. Decolonization should be a call to enact the end of colonial structures as we have known them and have inherited them.

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