

Decolonising English (Changing English 27.4)

Editorial

Twenty-one years ago, a government-commissioned report into the circumstances surrounding the death of a Black teenager, murdered by a group of racist thugs on a street in southeast London, was published. Though the main focus of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry had been the institutional racism of the police, the report did not confine itself to matters of policing and criminal justice; as its authors acknowledged, the eradication of racism had to be understood as, above all else, an educational programme:

If racism is to be eliminated from our society there must be a co-ordinated effort to prevent its growth. ... As we have indicated, the issue of education may not at first sight sit clearly within our terms of reference. Yet we cannot but conclude that to seek to address the well founded concerns of minority communities simply by addressing the racism current and visible in the Police Services without addressing the educational system would be futile. The evidence we heard and read forces us to the conclusion that our education system must face up to the problems, real and potential, which exist. We therefore make a number of Recommendations aimed at encouraging schools to address the identified problems. (Macpherson 1999, 46.34)

The first of these recommendations was:

That consideration be given to amendment of the National Curriculum aimed at valuing cultural diversity and preventing racism, in order better to reflect the needs of a diverse society. (Macpherson 1999, Recommendation 67)

It is worth pausing to reflect on the historical significance of this mild proposal. Its starting point is the simple recognition of difference: we live in a diverse society and this reality should be reflected in the curriculum. But the report goes further in that it represents diversity as a positive feature of modern society, thus contributing to and being valued through the experience of schooling. It thus locates the problem not in difference (the difference of minoritized communities, say) but in the refusal to embrace difference. In this it runs counter to the dominant discourse of education policy in this country (and elsewhere in the Anglophone world), particularly in the two decades since the publication of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report.

Addressing the 2007 Labour Party Conference, the then prime minister, Gordon Brown declared, 'I stand for a Britain where it is a mark of citizenship that you should learn our language and traditions' (Brown 2007). His successor, David Cameron, repeatedly inveighed against 'the wrong-headed doctrine of state multiculturalism' (Cameron 2009; cf. Cameron 2011). The brutal manifestation of this insistence on the myth of a monocultural national identity – one language, one culture, one history – was to be seen in the deliberate and systematic promotion of a 'hostile environment' for migrants – the policy promoted by

Cameron's own successor as prime minister, Theresa May, when she was Home Secretary (Hill 2017). This was the policy that resulted in the Windrush scandal – the illegal harassment, detention and deportation of hundreds of people, mainly of Caribbean heritage, who had lived and worked in the UK for decades (Gentleman 2019, JCWI 2020).

Precisely the same viciously illiberal, stridently intolerant insistence on a single national identity informed the curriculum (DfE 2014a) imposed by Cameron's education minister, Michael Gove. This was (and remains) a curriculum predicated on the promise that 'All pupils will learn our island story' (Gove 2010), a curriculum that prescribes a rigid, narrowly circumscribed English literary canon as the main diet for all secondary students in England.

In the intervening years, then, it is not that the recommendation of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry has not been implemented but that it has been utterly disregarded. Now, with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, it seems not only opportune but also imperative that we consider what a properly decolonised curriculum, responsive to the needs of a diverse society, might look like. And this is, in very different ways, the question addressed by the contributors to this issue. What they do not offer, individually or collectively, is some sort of alternative curricular template, an idealised programme of study for English to be adopted seamlessly elsewhere. This is not, therefore, decolonisation from above, nor even, primarily, a set of demands on government or policy-makers; what these essays offer, rather, are accounts of situated practice that recognise and work with the contradictions and challenges of culture and history.

The very notion of a decolonised curriculum needs to be interrogated, in that what it might seem to promise is that all that is required is a change in curricular content. The choice of text matters, without doubt. But, as the contributions from Mimi Marstaller and Humayra Iffath make clear, this is only one dimension of the issues of representation that are confronted in English classrooms. How texts are framed, how they are presented individually and how configured in relation to other texts, matters, too. And what matters much more are the pedagogic relations of the classroom, how students are positioned, what space is provided for them to draw on the knowledge they have acquired and reflect on the experiences they have had beyond the school gates. It is, thus, in the enactment of the curriculum (Barnes 1976) that decolonisation becomes realisable. And, as Libin Mohamud's unsparingly honest account of moments of teaching and learning demonstrates, the enacted curriculum involves difficult negotiations of identity.

The following three contributions might all be considered as provocations in the debate about canonical literature and its place in the English curriculum. Mehrunissa Shah tells the

story of her Year 10 ‘intervention group’ and their encounters with *Jane Eyre*; Sulaxana Hippisley examines her A-level students’ intertwined exploration of the representation of two transgressive duchesses – Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi* and Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex; and Lucy Thompson-Sharpe shows us how her Year 7 students took ownership of *King Lear*. These are accounts of different literature classrooms, different teachers working, under somewhat different constraints, with different groups of students. What emerges, very powerfully, in each of these accounts, however, is a sense of the agency of teachers and students. They offer glimpses of a pedagogy of possibility (Simon 1992), in which students are positioned as already-knowledgable and are enabled to engage with, and make meaning from, canonical texts.

In the current version of the English national curriculum, students are positioned as passive receivers of the cultural capital that is invested in canonical literature; their role is merely to learn to appreciate works whose value has already been established (‘the best that has been thought and said’ [DfE 2014b, 6; cf Arnold 1869/1993, Yandell & Brady 2016]). What becomes obvious, though, in the accounts of practice provided by our contributors is that this is simply not what happens in the classroom. Like toppling a statue, reading literature involves an engagement with the past; like toppling a statue, reading literature also involves bringing that past into a dialogic relation with the present – with often unpredictable results. Questions of value, as Lucy Thompson-Sharpe’s young students demonstrate in their appraisal of the relative merits of Shakespeare’s and Tate’s endings to *Lear*, are not already resolved by *ex cathedra* judgements: they remain, quite properly, matters of debate and contestation.

A decolonised curriculum is not one that turns its back on history – though it is one that might enable students to understand that ‘There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’ (Benjamin 1955/1970, 259). And it is one that rejects the exclusionary force of current policy. There were good reasons for Mimi Marstaller to expand the reading of her students, to present them with texts not written by white men, to introduce them to the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, to August Wilson and James Baldwin. And, as Ruth Whatley, Racheal Banda and Nathaniel Bryan argue, there are good reasons to take an ecumenical view of textuality and thus to recognise the value of political music in supporting students’ critical literacy development.

We conclude this issue with Zubin Miller’s exploration of live comedy in India, an essay that suggests that the affordances of stand-up provide scope for significant identity work. It is not only in classrooms that people perform complex acts of cultural negotiation. As English

teachers, our interest in language goes far beyond 'the correct use of Standard English' (DfE 2011, 11), whatever that might mean, to encompass the full variety of sign-making that is accomplished between people in the world. And, as Humayra Iffath's account reminds us, school students, similarly alert to the resources of language and what people do with them, need opportunities to investigate these phenomena as part of their entitlement to a decolonised English curriculum.

References

- Arnold, M. 1869/1993. *Culture and Anarchy and other writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barnes, D. 1976. *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1955/1970. *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. Glasgow: Collins.
- Brown, G. 2007. Speech to Labour party conference, 24 September. Online at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7010664.stm
- Cameron, D. 2009. Proud to be British. Online at: <http://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2009/07/david-cameron-proud-to-be-british.html>
- Cameron, D. 2011. Speech at Munich Security Conference. Online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference>
- DfE [Department for Education]. 2011. *Teachers' Standards*. London: DfE. Online at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/665520/Teachers_Standards.pdf
- DfE [Department for Education]. 2014a. National curriculum in England: English programmes of study. London: DfE. Online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study>
- DfE [Department for Education]. 2014b. The national curriculum in England: Framework document. London: DfE. Online at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/381344/Master_final_national_curriculum_28_Nov.pdf
- Gentleman, A. 2019. *The Windrush Betrayal: Exposing the Hostile Environment*. London: Guardian/Faber.
- Gove, M. 2010. All pupils will learn our island story. Speech to Conservative party conference, 5 October 2010. Online at: <https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601441>
- Hill, A. 2017. 'Hostile environment': the hardline Home Office policy tearing families apart. *The Guardian*, 28 November 2017. Online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/hostile-environment-the-hardline-home-office-policy-tearing-families-apart>
- JCWI [Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants]. 2020. Windrush scandal explained. Online at: <https://www.jewi.org.uk/windrush-scandal-explained>
- Macpherson, W. 1999. *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report*. London: The Stationery Office. Online at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277111/4262.pdf
- Simon, R. L. 1992. *Teaching Against the Grain: Texts for a Pedagogy of Possibility*. New York, Westport & London: Bergin & Garvey.
- Yandell, J., & Brady, M. 2016. "English and the politics of knowledge." *English in Education* 50 (1):44-59. doi: 10.1111/eie.12094.

