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The Problem with English Literature:
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What serious theory could support the fantastic liberties of our investigations of African literature, if, at least, on the one hand we do not agree on the urgency of analyzing the conditions of existence of this literature, and on the other hand we do not accept the hypothesis that present-day African criticism might not be African at all?

—V. Y. Mudimbe ("African Literature" 11)

In "African Literature: Myth or Reality," V. Y. Mudimbe raises important and troubling questions regarding both the historical basis and theoretical validity of African literature. At the heart of his objection is the suspicion that African literature has been massively undertheorized and, in consequence, canonized on the strength of rebuttable historical and identity claims. He muses: “Could we arrive at any explicative norms as to the real nature of African literature which will put it into some sort of relation with other literatures and not give us the uncomfortable feeling that it is somehow an indigenized imitation of something else, or an adapted reproduction of psychological confusions imported from the West?” ("African Literature" 7). Mudimbe’s arguments call for a more historically defensible archeology of African literature. Such an archeology would return so-called modern African literature to its specifically colonial origins, what he elsewhere terms the “colonial library.” The colonial library describes an “idea of Africa” that is “a product of the West and was conceived and conveyed through conflicting systems of knowledge.” (The Idea of Africa xi). Elaborating the idea of Africa normalized by the colonial library, he explains:

It represents a body of knowledge constructed with the explicit purpose of faithfully translating and deciphering the African object. Indeed it fulfilled a political project in which, supposedly, the object unveils its being, its secrets, and its potential to a master who could, finally, domesticate it. Certainly the depth as well as the ambition of the colonial library disseminates the concept of deviation as the best symbol of the idea of Africa. (The Idea of Africa xi)

Mudimbe’s counterintuitive contention is that African literature, ostensibly an authentic practice, relies on the colonial library for its legitimation. On that account, he hypothesizes that contemporary African criticism might not be African at all. In this paper, I accept and attempt to defend this provocative hypothesis. I attempt also to understand what contemporary African criticism amounts to if it is not an African practice. Can there be a truly African literary practice? Finally, I attempt to trace the implications of Mudimbe’s hypothesis for the discipline of literary studies as a whole: Is
contemporary American criticism, to pick an example not entirely at random, American, or is that literary formation equally the product of fantasy? What is the connection between identity and aesthetics, between canonicity and citizenship, between the concept of “representation” as the foundational trope in contemporary aesthetic inquiry and the concept of “representation” as the foundational trope in contemporary democratic governmentality?

Although my eventual focus is African literature, my paper begins with a familiar set of questions concerning literary value: Why, at an age when identity politics has ostensibly been theoretically repudiated, do the canons of “English literature” everywhere continue to be defined by the “continental,” national, racial, sexual, gender, and other identities of both authors and readers? How might one account, to put it in John Guillory’s terms, for the “surprising coexistence” of, on the one hand, a now canonical critique of essentialism and, on the other hand, “an otherwise incompatible rhetoric of canon revision in which it is precisely the fit between an author’s social identity and his or her experience that is seen to determine canonical or noncanonical status”? (10). Why are on-going debates about literary canons in English programs in diverse national and “continental” contexts framed as if they were invariably and literally about appropriate forms of citizenship whether the abstract and denuded universal citizen-subject of the right or the infinitely differentiated citizen-subject of the left? To adopt David Lloyd’s terms, why is the integrity of the literary canon everywhere articulated in terms of its imagined integration to a nation-state as well as a racialized civilization? What would it mean to seek justification for literary studies on the basis of aesthetic value rather than the contestible presumption that literary canons function as the preeminent repositories of national cultures and/or racialized civilizations? My hypothesis is that posing the problem of aesthetic value apropos of African literature enables an interrogation of a wider, if generally unacknowledged, legitimation crisis in English literature.

Since the question of aesthetic value is central to the claims of my paper let me provide, at the outset, a specific context for this concept. Following Pierre Bourdieu and John Guillory, I define aesthetic value as a form of cultural or knowledge capital that is produced and disseminated within specific institutional contexts. The aesthetic refers to a particular sensibility or desire that is incited and/or implanted through a process of formal academic training. The institutional context I am interested in is the university, specifically programs in English literature/literature in English. Aesthetic value describes the specific practices of reading and writing consecrated within the restricted confines of the “English university.” These practices endow certain cultural objects—designated “works of art”—with value understood to be primarily “symbolic” rather than “economic.” In much of what follows I will refer to the specific context I have just sketched out using the more general term “school culture” in order to underscore the fact that an aesthetic disposition is the product of a restricted process of formal training and is therefore implicated in processes of unequal social reproduction. Bourdieu provides a concise description of the distinction
between the consumption of economic goods in the general economy and the consumption of symbolic goods in school culture:

While consumption in the field of large scale cultural production is more or less independent of the educational level of consumers (which is quite understandable since this system tends to adjust to the level of demand), works of restricted art owe their specifically cultural rarity to the rarity of the instruments with which they may be deciphered. This rarity is a function of the unequal distribution of the conditions underlying acquisition of the specifically aesthetic disposition and of the codes indispensable to the deciphering of works belonging to the field of restricted production. (“Market” 16)

Bourdieu’s definition of aesthetic disposition as a way of deciphering works of art normalized by a process of formal training within specific and restricted institutions is axiomatic for my study.

I am examining the broad questions outlined above from the perspective of African literature. My investigation turns on a much more specific set of questions: Why does African literature continue to occupy such a marginal place in English programs in the West? Why is Africa thought to be the natural home for texts written in historically European languages and aesthetic forms? Why is there a tendency to couple African literature with African American and Afro-Caribbean literature in both metropolitan and African universities as if race constituted the foundational category of aesthetic classification? Why does the value of African literature (in universities both in the metropole and the postcolony) seem to turn on the extent to which that body of writing is thought instrumentally to convey cognitive information about African history, economics, politics, anthropology and, above all, subjectivity? What would it mean to re-conceive African literature as a relatively autonomous body of aesthetic value with a specifiable institutional history rather than as a body of knowledge about the African world and its many peoples?

Mudimbe suggests that the “colonial library” provided a problematic condition of existence for African literature. If colonial discourses created the idea of an irrational Africa as the validating exception (as the symbol of deviation in Mudimbe’s precise phrasing) to the rational order of the modern Western world, African literary texts have been concerned to create imaginary universes in which the rationality of precolonial Africa, and thereby that of postcolonial Africa, was variously affirmed. As Simon Gikandi has argued:

In terms of social epistemology, African literature first emerged as a mode of knowledge designed to liberate African subjects and worlds from the colonial library; but it could only perform this function by calling into question the empirical and functional tradition that dominated European discourses on Africa in the late modern period. But because African literature was so closely associated with a certain ideology of authenticity or Africanism, it
was—perhaps unconsciously—imprisoned in the very economy of practice it sought to transcend. (3)

Gikandi asserts the African literature sought to positivize the negative image of Africa normalized by the colonial library. These literary texts depended, for their revisionary power, on the grammar and conceptual infrastructure of colonial social science and, in effect, normalized an anthropological episteme for Africa: “The founding texts of African literature claimed to have an African world as their referent but this was the African world which social science had produced for African writers [. . . .] these texts are more useful for telling us about their authors’—and subjects’—anxiety about colonial modernity than they would ever tell us about ‘traditional’ or ‘precolonial’ Igbo, Yoruba or Gikuyu worlds” (28). Gikandi’s essay fleshes out Mudimbe’s hypothesis that African literature may not be an African practice.

Despite its troubled actual materiality and historicity, African literature was subsequently canonized in African universities (and high schools) on the basis of its perceived instrumentality in the production of real African worlds and African subjects during the era of triumphant, or at any rate, optimistic postcolonial nationalism. It is this process of canonization that Mudimbe avers is characterized by fantastic and untenable liberties. A particularly powerful instance of this phenomenon was the movement led by the famed Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o in the late ’60s and early ’70s to abolish the English Department at the University of Nairobi and replace it with a Department of African Languages and Literature. I am suggesting this movement was at once revolutionary and retrogressive in terms of its aesthetic ideology. To the extent that the movement successfully uncoupled the question of aesthetic value from the question of “Englishness” (both as a specific linguistic formation and as a system of ultimately imperial values), it represented perhaps the most radical contestation of ideology of English literature to date. However, to the extent that the movement sought hurriedly to substitute a discourse of authentic “African-ness” for a discourse of alien “Englishness” as the condition for existence for appropriate literary education in African universities, it represented a reactionary instrumentalization of the aesthetic and an ironic affirmation of the idea of Africa invented by the colonial library.

My claim is that Ngugi and his colleagues failed to take full stock of the institutional locus that both enabled and constrained, or to put it very precisely, enabled because it constrained, their critique of the Englishness of English literature.4 The institutional context in question is the postcolonial university, a discursive formation whose links to the metropolitan university are more enduring than may at first be apparent. If the attempts by Mathew Arnold and F. R. Leavis, to cite two famous examples, to constitute an English national culture from the privileged locus of the metropolitan university can be said to have been driven by an intentional fallacy, then, Ngugi’s belated project to canonize an African national culture from the privileged locus of the postcolonial university can equally be said to have been driven by an imitative fallacy.5 I am not suggesting an empirical, much less ethical, equivalence between Ngugi and Arnold. I am contending,
however, that critical differences notwithstanding, what is striking and instructive about both critics is the extent to which they conflate and confuse an actually existing school culture with a substantially imagined national culture.

The confusion of school culture (specifically, the culture of English Literature/Literature in English at the university) for a variety of national cultures is widespread in the perennial debates about literary canonicity, whence the enduring configuration of these debates in terms of appropriate forms of citizenship. As Guillory argues, the most salient, if generally unacknowledged, fact about the canon debate “is its locus in the university” (19). In an important rejection of the conflation of national culture with school culture he contends: “[T]here is no question of producing a national culture by means of a university curriculum. Or conversely, of producing a national multiculturalist ethos by the same means. The question is rather what social effects are produced by the knowledges disseminated in the university, and by the manner of their dissemination” (50). Adopting Guillory’s argument, I am keen to untangle school cultures from national cultures.

My yoking together of cultural critics as apparently diverse as Arnold and Ngugi is intended, in part, as a deliberate provocation. Drawing from Mudimbe’s provocative suggestion regarding the non-African-ness of African literature, the principal hypothesis put forward in this essay is that English literature, as a specific academic discipline institutionalized in universities across the English-speaking world, consists of a singularizable discursive formation whose origin can be traced back to an ultimately imperial pedagogical imaginary. I am seeking, in other words, radically to displace the now canonical opposition between ostensibly Western theory and putatively non-Western texts, or more narrowly, between allegedly Western contexts and purportedly African texts. I am aware of the class-inflected imprecision of the term “English-speaking world” in my hypothesis. It is in fact on account of that imprecision that English literature/literature in English must be understood as constitutive, in the final analysis, of a singularizable school culture and as not the aesthetic materialization of a set of discrete national cultures.

I use the term discursive formation in the precise sense delineated by Michel Foucault to describe the rules that govern the kind of talk that, within a given context, comes to be taken seriously. I am suggesting that essentially the same rarified systems of literary coherence, that is to say, the same codes for decipherment, modes of inquiry, rules of evidence, and protocols of reading govern programs in English Literature/Literature in English everywhere in the English-speaking world. In a fundamental sense, each of these programs is immanently intelligible to all the others. The same set of rules, to put it in Foucauldian terms, define the limits and forms of the sayable, the limits and forms of conversations in all English literature programs in the English-speaking world (see Foucault, “Politics” 59-60). What all English program share is a fundamental condition of immanent intelligibility.
My hypothesis might seem surprising in the context of an essay that was motivated by frustration regarding the enduring marginalization of African literature in English departments in the West. However, my claim is that this marginalization is a consequence of an institutionally sanctioned repression of the extent to which literatures now designated as “African” have been produced and normalized within the same discursive formation as the so-called traditional English literature canon. If African literature is to be placed at the core of literary studies in the West, it should not, I suggest, be because this literature is thought to disclose the secrets of an alien culture. Rather the institutionalization of African literature in the West ought to be because this literature has been produced and disseminated by the same school culture as what is understood as the traditional English canon. It is not without good cause that Kwame Anthony Appiah “ungenerously” describes contemporary postcolonial intellectuals as “comprador intelligentsia”:

Postcoloniality in the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa. ("Postcolonial” 348)

Appiah’s arguments have been extensively cited in critiques of postcolonial theory and of the rarified status of select émigré intellectuals in metropolitan universities. What has not always been appreciated is that the formulation “relatively small, Western style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers” applies with equal force to intellectuals in Africa. Postcoloniality, according to this logic, is a condition of the intellectual that does not depend on location.

My arguments parallel, in a strange and perhaps unexpected way, an early if now somewhat unfashionable attempt to theorize English literature from a global perspective: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back*. In a project whose sheer audacity seems shocking, the three writers attempt to define the rules that govern a field of study they name “english literature” (writing from former British colonies) in contradistinction to English literature (literature of Imperial England). The latter discourse, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, is a condition of possibility for the emergence of the former. The mediating circumstance between the two discourses is colonial history:

More than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the shared experience of colonialism. It is easy to see how important this has been in the political and economic spheres, but in general the influence on the perceptual frameworks of contemporary peoples is often less evident. Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writing, and
through their other arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance that the day to day realities experienced by colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and are so profoundly influential. (Ashcroft et al. 1)

Elaborating what such a general theory of English literature would entail, the three authors proceed to cite examples from the entirety of the English-speaking postcolonial world, across vast historical, geographical and cultural contexts—African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific countries, and Sri Lanka.

In Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s controversial formulation, literary production in the USA is not just “post-colonial” but, in its relationship with the metropolitan center is “paradigmatic for post-colonial literatures everywhere” (Ashcroft et al. 2). What holds together the seemingly diverse national contexts of literary production discussed by the three authors is the fact of British colonialism as well as a particular conception of national culture that is a product of English colonialism. What holds “English literature” together, in short, is the strange but pervasive reality of university pedagogies within which literature is understood as an exemplary representation of national culture. As the title suggests, the central argument in The Empire Writes Back is the claim that formerly colonized peoples across the globe are writing back to the imperial center in gestures of literary self-affirmation that are at once nationalist (in their specific expressions) and global (in their cumulative scope).

While Aschroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin describe “English literature” in terms of oppositional nationalist discourses addressed to the real imperial center by a generalized margin, I would describe it in terms of a common school culture defined by an imagined imperial center. While the three authors place a great premium on the field literary production—“writing” as they term it—I would shift attention to the field of literary consumption—the context of reading. English literature, notwithstanding the presence of “regional variations,” names the common culture of the colonial English school. The English school was implanted in the various historical, geographical, and cultural contexts as a result of colonial encounter. That school has institutionalized, across these differing contexts, broadly similar regimes for practices of reading and writing, which practices purport to produce what are misrecognized as national literary canons. Our attention should turn to these regimes of practices. Michel Foucault suggests that to “analyze the ‘regimes of practices’ means to analyze programs of conduct which have both prescriptive effects regarding what is to be done (effects of ‘jurisdiction’), and codifying effects regarding what is to be known (effect of ‘veridiction’)” (“Question of Method” 75). It is my contention that English literature has produced, across a vast and diverse landscape, effects of jurisdiction regarding what is to be done in terms of programs of study, modes of inquiry, rules of evidence etc. English literature has also produced effects of veridiction regarding what is to be known, above all,
concerning the purported connection between cultural expression and national legitimation.

I may appear implausibly to be homogenizing scholarship in English literature across a diverse range of national, geographical, and historical contexts. This, after all, was the charge that was effectively leveled against *The Empire Writes Back*. It bears emphasizing that, for Foucault, the concept of discursive formation defines a process not of the homogenizing of discourses, but rather, of *discursive dispersion*. He provides the following illustrative criteria for the existence of a discursive formation:

> What individualizes a discourse such as political economy or general grammar is not the unity of its objects, nor its formal infrastructure; nor the coherence of its conceptual architecture, nor its fundamental philosophical choices; it is rather the existence of a set of rules of formation for *all* its objects (however scattered they may be), *all* its operations (which can often neither be superposed nor serially connected), *all* its concepts (which may very well be incompatible), *all* its theoretical options (which are often mutually exclusive). There is an individualized discursive formation whenever it is possible to define such a set of rules. (“Politics” 54)

I have been suggesting that what unifies all of English literature is a common school culture, more specifically, the institutionalized study of English literature in the university. The English school is the condition of existence for a set of rules for *all* the objects, operations, concepts, and theoretical options of English literature, however scattered they may be.

I would like to provide a more specific description of the *content* of English literature/literature in English as a singular discursive formation. As Guillory argues, the school “functions as a system of credentialization” (58). In other words, the school distributes access to literacy unequally and thereby reproduces a system of social stratification. According to Guillory, the school—and here he means specifically the English university programs—constitutes and disseminates cultural capital in two senses. First it provides unequal access to “linguistic capital,” that is, “the means by which one attains a socially credentialled and therefore valued speech, otherwise known as, ‘Standard English’” (ix). In the context of English literature in the West, Standard English comprises of the rarified form of address otherwise known as “academic discourse,” a discourse virtually unintelligible to the vast majority of the population outside the literary academy. In non-Western contexts, Standard English describes, in addition to an immanently intelligible academic discourse, the material and linguistic privilege of a small, educated, urban elite (the “comprador intelligentsia” in Appiah’s famous formulation). Second, the school provides unequal access to *symbolic* capital “a kind of knowledge-capital whose possession can be displayed upon request and which thereby entitles its possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person” (ix). Guillory presents here a particularly negative version of what Bourdieu refers to as an “aesthetic disposition.” The two kinds of cultural capital produced by English literature *both* in Western and non-Western context are “ultimately more socially
significant in their effects than the ‘ideological’ content of literary works” (ix). Whatever regional differences persist, programs in English literature everywhere are united by the reliance on Standard English as the language for an elevated and exclusionary pedagogy. These departments all serve to distribute cultural capital unequally in the name of linguistic correctness. Whatever regional differences persist, English departments everywhere exhibit fundamentally the same rarified instruments for literary decipherment, rules of evidence, systems of coherence, and protocols for reading cultural goods consecrated as “works of art.” These departments therefore distribute cultural capital unequally in the name of aesthetic correctness. In order to open a space for a consideration of literary texts based on aesthetic value it will be necessary radically to displace the fallacious conflation of school culture and national culture. School culture, as Gulliory argues, “does not unify the nation culturally so much as it projects out of a curriculum of artifact-based knowledge an imaginary cultural unity never actually coincident with the culture of the nation-state” (38).

I want to linger a little longer on the question of the relationship imagined between school culture and national culture in the institutional context of programs of English literature/literature in English in the English-speaking world. I am trying to provide a theoretical account as well as a refutation of the widespread tendency to mistake a relatively homogenous transnational school culture for relatively heterogeneous national cultures. I turn my attention to a hypercanonical text in contemporary literary studies (at least in metropolitan universities), Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. Anderson provides an articulate and influential paradigm for understanding the imaginary relationship between literature and nationalism. He *seems* to suggest, or rather has symptomatically been misread to suggest, that the novel, on account of its linear temporality as well as the imagined social totality of its universe, was directly instrumental to the emergence of a nationalist imaginary. This reading of Anderson has occasioned a discursive explosion purporting to locate and/or deconstruct moments of nationalist consolidation in a range of literary narratives. It is easy to misread Anderson since his argument begins with the observation that the rise of modern nation was coterminous with the emergence of the novel and the newspaper: Surely these events must be connected in some essential way—or so it would seem. However, a more careful reading of his argument discloses that effect of nationalist legitimation cannot be understood as a property inherent in the aesthetic of the novel (or the newspaper), but rather, is the product of a certain context of reading, what Guillory would term “a pedagogical imaginary” (see Guillory 28-28). Specific literary works, Guillory contends, must be seen “as the vector of ideological notions which do not inhere in the works themselves but in the context of their institutional presentation, or more simply, in the way in which they are taught” (ix).

As is well known, Anderson suggests that the modern nation required for its imagining radical shifts in the apprehension of both time and space. Prior forms of government (religious communities and dynastic realms) relied on a sacral ontology, a kind of “messianic time,” “a simultaneity of
past and future in an instantaneous past,” “a simultaneity along time” (Anderson 24). By contrast, the modern nation, as a result of the rise of the secular sciences, came to be conceived in “homogenous empty time in which simultaneity is, at it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (24). The modern nation thus came to be conceived as a deep sociological solidity authorized by a conception of the space of the nation as homogenous empty space and the time of the nation as serial calendrical time. The nation, in other words, imagines itself in the singular terms of linear progress across time.

Anderson avers that the novel and the newspaper are instructive for understanding the processes of “national imagining”: “these forms provided the technical means for re-presenting the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (25). The structure of the novel in particular is “a device for the presentation of simultaneity in ‘homogenous empty time’” (25). The temporal logic of the novel is instructive for understanding the emergence of the modern nation for two complementary conceptions: First, the novel conceives individuals as firmly embedded in social totalities. As Anderson puts it: “These societies are sociological entities of such firm and stable reality that their members [. . .] can even be described as passing each other on the street, without ever becoming acquainted, and still be connected” (25). Second, the imagined community of the novel is embedded in the minds of the reader. All the acts within the internal economy of the novel are performed in the same clocked, calendrical time but the actors may be unaware of one another. This disjunction “shows the novelty of this imagined world conjured up by the author in his reader’s minds” (26). My subtle but crucial revision of Anderson would suggest that the act conjuring of the imagined world of the novel is performed not at all by the author, but rather by an imagined community of readers within specific institutional locations.

Tracing the relationship between the form of the nation and the form of the novel, Anderson concludes:

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time [an idea normalized in the novel] is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily up or down history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000-odd fellow-Americans [sic]. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity. (26)

I want to highlight Anderson’s extremely careful turns of phrase as he attempts to articulate some connection between the nation and the novel. That connection is, in the first instance, purely metaphorical. In his first formulation (quoted above), he suggests that the novel and the newspaper provide the technical means for re-presenting the kind of imagined community that is the nation. He does not contend that the novel (or the newspaper) directly embodies a nationalist imaginary. On the contrary, he
seems to be suggesting, in a heavily modified formulation, that the novel provides the context for the constitution of practices of reading that may help us understand the imagined community that is the nation. In his second formulation, Anderson suggests that the temporal and spatial logic of the novel is a *precise analogue* of the idea of the nation. Put otherwise, the novel and the nation are not causally or instrumentally connected: an elaborate process of mediation would be necessary to transform the novel from a precise analogue into a literal embodiment of the imagined community of the nation. I suggest that what intervenes, what mediates, is the institution of the university, specifically English programs in the context of the English-speaking world. It is as a result of the mediation of the English school and its peculiar practices of reading that the novel (and subsequently other literary forms) came to be read and “deconstructed” not a precise analogue for nationalist imagining but as a direct embodiment of nationalism in itself. The point to underscore here is that this process of literary nationalism is fantasmat.

Anderson’s reading of how the newspaper facilitated the process of national imagining provides an illustrative analogue for the mediated nexus between nation and narration that I am trying to emphasis here. The newspaper is defined by certain formal properties that re-present the form of national imagination. The principal formal property is the prominent display of the date in every page of every newspaper, as if the newspaper were meticulously recording, in serial calendrical time, the progressive unfolding of the nation. Nevertheless, it is the fact of mass circulation and not any formal property that is decisive for the conjuration through the medium of the newspaper of the imagined community that is the nation. Anderson emphasizes that the specific content of a newspaper need not be national in order for it to accomplish, in circulation, the task of national imagining.

My revision of Anderson can be defended on historical grounds. In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings offers an account of the processes through which the university was transformed into an imaginary repository of national culture. This account is crucial to any attempt to understand why literary canons today are classified according to “naturalized” national categorizations as well as why contemporary debates regarding these canons are framed as if they were fundamentally about appropriate forms of citizenship. Readings suggests that as an institution of formal learning, the university was thought to attain modernity, when all its activities were “organized in view of a single regulatory idea, which Kant claims must be the concept of reason. Reason, on the one hand, provides the *ratio* for all the disciplines; it is their organizing principle. On the other hand, reason has its own faculty, which Kant names ‘philosophy’” (Readings 15). Readings argues that Kant was nevertheless also keen “to pose the problem of how reason and the state, how knowledge and power, might be unified” (15). Kant attempted to connect reason and the state by imagining an intellectual subject who was capable of both rational thought and republican politics. As Humboldt and Schiller developed the Kantian idea of the university, literature (the realm of imagination) displaced the philosophy
(the realm of reason) as the pre-eminent locality for a nationalist imaginary in the university. In the context of English culture, Readings argues that it was Matthew Arnold who, following Schiller’s example, conceived English Literature in the university as the material realization of ideal English citizenship. Readings seems to believe that English department did in fact embody national culture until the idea of the nation-state was superseded late in the twentieth century by the rise of global capitalism. Refuting that specific conclusion, I have been suggesting, from the outset, that English university programs embody school culture and not national culture in any meaningful sense of that term.

Earlier I described the movement to abolish the English Department at the University of Nairobi in the late sixties and early seventies as at once revolutionary and retrogressive in terms of its aesthetic ideology. I would like to elaborate on this charge against the background of the foregoing theoretical discussion regarding the relationship imagined between democratic citizenship and literary canons. My elaboration will take two forms: First, in my capacity of a product of that revolution, I will attempt a brief biographical critique of the consequences of the abolition the English Department at Nairobi. Second, I will attempt a critical close of logic the underlying the founding document of the Nairobi Revolution. My central claim will be that the ideology of English literature was, paradoxically, a condition of possibility for this important revision and rearticulation of the politics of literature in English in a postcolonial African setting.

At a personal level, I am interested in researching the ideology of literature in English programs in Kenya because such a project marks a return to my intellectual origins. I completed my undergraduate literary education at Literature in English Department of Kenyatta University in the early nineties. Originally established as an offshoot of the Department of Literature at Nairobi, the Literature in English program at Kenyatta retained the conceptual architecture of the Nairobi Revolution even after Ngugi’s imprisonment and exile as well as the purge of radical professors in the eighties by the Kenyan state. My undergraduate education involved—at least in my subsequent memory of it—a rather uncritical acceptance a black aesthetic ideology. A decade later, I retain towards my undergraduate literature pedagogy a strong sense of affiliation but also a strong sense of distance. On the one hand, I continue to admire its commitment to a truly global conception of literature, a cosmopolitan commitment not generally characteristic of Western English programs. On the other hand, I find myself opposed to the Africanist discourse at the heart of my undergraduate education. At one level, then, this essay marks a critical return to a personal archive.

In order to prepare the ground for my biographical critique, I begin with some general remarks on the sociology of university education in postcolonial Kenya. University education in Kenya is a highly restricted affair. During the period of my study, for example, there were four public universities. An overwhelming majority of students in the country drop out of the educational system well before the university level; it would in fact be more accurate to say that a decisive majority of students in the country
do not complete secondary education. A university education in any field is the privilege of a very small minority of the national population and is therefore associated with enormous symbolic as well as economic capital. In demographic terms, the university population in Kenya is disproportionately male. In addition, an inordinately large proportion of the university student population obtain their secondary education in a small number of elite public high schools. As part of official government policy, a few secondary schools in Kenya are designated as “national schools” and provided with educational resources well in excess of what is generally available to the vast majority of schools in the country. This is especially true with regard to greater levels of funding and the provision of trained graduate teachers (who are, acutely, in short supply). Furthermore, high schools designated as “national” are afforded virtually unlimited jurisdiction in selecting the “best and brightest” students from primary schools across the country. Especially in the wake of the International Monetary Fund’s Structural Adjustment Programs implemented in Kenya (as elsewhere in the impoverished and indebted postcolony) in the eighties, these national schools are increasingly prohibitively expensive. In short, there exists in the country a self-consciously elitist education system is rigged massively in favor of a few privileged students in a small number of select schools.

Departments of literature in Kenyan universities, despite their inflated sense of nationalist self-importance, did not, at least during my tenure, seem to enjoy much economic or symbolic capital within the university. A very small minority of the total university enrollment opted to pursue degree programs in literature typically, but not exclusively, as a third or even fourth choice after these students have been unable to obtain admission in more prestigious areas of study, principally law, commerce, economics, architecture, medicine, and so on. These degree programs owed their enormous prestige and popularity to their economic capital or utility. They were thought, not altogether unreasonably, to enhance otherwise gloomy employment prospects within the highly restricted professional-managerial class of an impoverished postcolonial polity in ways that a degree in literature simply did not. Although men tended significantly to outnumber women in terms of overall student population, the vast majority of literature students at the university were women, suggesting perhaps a certain constitutive sexism in the symbolic economy of disciplinary value.

Despite, or perhaps because of, their rather low economic capital within elite postcolonial culture, the departments of literature at Kenyan public universities in the wake of the Nairobi Revolution claim for themselves—one is tempted to say, following Mudimbe, taking fantastic liberties in the process—infinite symbolic capital almost entirely on the basis as their self-image as the preeminent sites for the crystallization of appropriate forms of postcolonial African citizenship. It is no exaggeration to suggest that these departments see themselves, collectively as well as competitively, as the active centers for the production of the real national culture. I have been at pains in the foregoing biographical sociology of the institution of literary education in Kenya to stress the extreme extent to
which these claims to nationalist legitimation are fantasmatic. There is a fundamental lack of correspondence between literary canons of a handful of rather lowly academic departments within elite institutions of higher learning and their putative referent, the practices of everyday postcolonial life.

As I remember it, the Department of Literature at Kenyatta during my years there took as its mandate a tripartite process of nationalist affirmation. In serial calendrical time, this process entailed compulsory ethnicization, compulsory Africanization, and compulsory racialization. I and my 120-odd colleagues were in the first instance “interpellated” or “hailed” as the natural subjects of various ethnic nationalities whose literary heritage included, first and foremost, a rich stock of oral narratives, poems, songs, proverbs, riddles, and so on in our respective vernacular languages. Several courses on the theory and practice of oral literature were mandatory institutional requirements for my degree program. During these courses one would ideally be required to record, transcribe, translate, classify, and critique the oral literature of one’s ethnic community; one would, in short, be interpellated pedagogically as an ethnic national subject. During the tenure of my study, a majority of the graduate theses in the department were devoted to the project of canonizing “our” collective oral literature, indicating, perhaps, the success of the pedagogy of coercive ethnic identification. This turn to a long ethnic tradition as the first order of citizenship is not surprising. Despite its peculiarly modern character, the nation, as Anderson has taught us, depends for its legitimation not its relative youth and vibrancy, but rather, on the hoary discourses of traditionalism and time immemorial.

At a second level, my colleagues and I were interpellated as citizens not so much of the real Kenyan nation as of an imagined African national community never actually realized anywhere. Accordingly, we were required to have studied, by the end of three years of literary education, literature from every geographical region of the African continent: East, West, Central, North, and South. When reading this literature there was never any doubt that we were reading our collective continental literature (whatever the irreducible linguistic and cultural differences actually embedded in these texts) and, in the process, legitimating ourselves as the citizens of an imagined African national community. I need perhaps to emphasize that it was not as if the reality of the Kenya as a nation-state was ignored. In point of fact, Ngugi’s creative texts, to cite the most prominent example, were hypercanonized, within the context of “East African literature,” precisely on account of their perceived instrumentality in imagining an oppositional Kenyan national community. If the postcolonial Kenyan state was thought to have betrayed the real essence of the nation, Ngugi’s texts were taught to us as if they embodied the real essence of Kenyan nationality, the essence to which we owed our ultimate allegiance as ideal citizens.

There was a third and highest level of nationalist interpellation implanted by my undergraduate literary training. This took the form of a utopic nationalism that transcended the imagined pan-African nation,
which is to say, the form of an imagined community of a black nation that incorporated the African diaspora principally in the United States and the Caribbean. An unmistakable evolutionary and incremental logic underwrote the pedagogical imaginary of my undergraduate literary citizenship: it began with the immediately and intimately local and moved progressively—in “homogenous empty time” one might say—to the abstractly and absurdly global. We were first ethnic subjects, then citizens of an actually existing postcolonial nation-state, then citizens of an imaginary pan-African nation, and finally, full-fledged citizens of a utopic black nation. What is was at stake in my undergraduate education, as I now remember it, was nothing less than the invention of a black civilization, an invention that necessarily required that all the individual texts we studied we were read out of context in the instrumental service of a racialized aesthetic. The idea of a black civilization, a unanimist mythology that is a mirror image of the idea of a Western civilization, is perhaps the exemplary invention of the colonial library. My undergraduate training testifies to the fantastic liberties that Mudimbe complains about with regard to the canonization of African literature.

Even more than the pan-African nation, the global black nation was never actually realized anywhere except in the pedagogical imaginary of relatively small English schools in postcolonial Africa. The imagined pan-African nation (a nation whose imagining effaced substantial cultural, historical, and social differences within the African continent) was predicated on a unity of geographical contiguity and proximity. By contrast, the imagined black nation (a nation imagined across a vast and noncontiguous geographical spaces as well as vastly different polities) was predicated on colonial history as well as racialist aesthetics. Appiah defines racialism as “the belief that there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species which allows to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other races” (*In My Father’s House* 13). He goes on to contend, correctly in my view, that racialism is a false doctrine. What united us—students of literature in a specific Kenyan school—and our black brothers and sisters globally was, ultimately, an unsustainable racialist pedagogy.

It is significant that the first course in my undergraduate literary curriculum was “Literary Criticism and Black Aesthetics.” This foundational course proceeded on two incompatible intellectual grounds. The course was driven, in the first instance, by a desire to critique the radically contingent relationship between, on the one hand, race and aesthetics and, on the other hand, aesthetics and imperialism. Concurrent with its critique of the relationship between race and aesthetics, the course was also predicated, in a rather self-contradictory manner, on the notion of a black racial essence as well as a black aesthetic. On account of that black aesthetic, we were taught, for example, invariably to read African American and Afro-Caribbean literature as integral and inevitable parts of our black literary canon. In hindsight, nothing testifies to the power of our successful interpellation as black literary citizens than the fact that
although courses on African American and Afro-Caribbean literatures were offered as electives in our second and third years of study, the overwhelming majority of my colleagues enrolled for them. In comparison, only six of us enrolled for courses in European or North America literature.

The thrust of my biographical critique of the Nairobi Revolution is that an indefensible form of literary nativism undergirded and undermined the movement. This nativism can be traced back to the founding document of the revolution. On 24 October 1968, Henry Owuor-Anyumba, Taban Lo Liyong, and James Ngugi, three pioneering black lecturers at English Department of the University of Nairobi (a department then dominated by a white expatriate professoriate), authored an internal memorandum addressed to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts in which they called for the department to be abolished. Entitled “On the Abolition of the English Department,” this memo set in motion a chain of events that I described earlier as perhaps the most radical contestation of the ideology of English literature to date. As Carol Sicherman has recently argued, “this memo is a founding document of the canon revision endemic in international academia in the later twentieth century” (129). More narrowly, Biodun Jeyifo has described the memo as “inconvertibly the most important document [in] the constitution of African literature as a legitimate academic discipline” (43). My revisionary reading of the revolution is in no way intended to diminish its historical and enduring importance. However, I think it is important to critically examine some of its problematic premises.

As the three authors note, their memo was written as a response to an earlier attempt by the then Head of Department to formulate an English program suitable for a postcolonial polity: “This is a comment on the paper presented by the Acting Head of the English department at the University of Nairobi to the 42nd meeting of Art Faculty Board on 20th September, 1968” (Ngugi et al. 145). One gets a sense of the administrative tenor of the memo by observing the fact that the Nairobi troika insist on repeatedly identifying the Chair using his precise official designation, “Acting Head of the Department of English,” and not his name, James Stewart. Furthermore, despite their revolutionary demands, the authors sign off, as protocol demands, “yours obediently.” Finally, this relatively lengthy administrative correspondence is not characterized by any of the conventional citational practices of a formal academic essay. Consistent with the administrative tenor of their memo, Ngugi and his colleagues acknowledge that the paper they were responding to had raised “important problems,” and suggest that it should become “the subject of more involved debate and discussion preceding the appointment of a committee with specific tasks” (145).

In his paper, Stewart addressed “possible developments within the Arts Faculty and their relationship with the English Department” (qtd. in Ngugi et al. 145). He explored four broad areas: 1) the place of modern languages, especially French, at the University of Nairobi; 2) the place and role of the Department of English; 3) the emergence of a Department of
Linguistics and Languages; and 4) the place of African languages, especially Swahili. He recommended that a Department of Linguistics and Languages, closely affiliated with the English Department, be established. As a “remote possibility,” he also envisaged the creation of a “Department of African Literature, or, alternatively, that of African Literature and Culture” (145). It will be noted that according to Stewart’s logic there is an inevitable and instrumental correspondence between literary expression and racialized civilizations.

The central problematic that Stewart and Ngugi and his colleagues were all confronting was “the role and status of the English Department in an African situation and environment” (Ngugi et. al. 145). One need not pause to add to that the question of so called “African literary value” was being posed in the context a country that had recently emerged from British colonialism and that had constructed for itself, as the primal scene of citizen formation, a nationalist mythology of triumphant anti-colonial violence. Stewart assumes that even in this postcolonial African setting, English literature carries with it the specific weight of an entire civilization, the infinitely universal “civilization of the modern West.” The problem he confronts is the apparent (but only apparent) irreducible discontinuity between Western civilization (as purportedly embodied by traditional English departments in Britain) and the postcolonial African polity (as purportedly embodied by the English departments in Kenya). He proposes the following solution:

The English Department has had a long history at this college and has built up a strong syllabus which, by its study of the historic continuity of a single culture throughout the period of the modern west, makes it an important companion to History and to Philosophy and Religious Studies. However, it is bound to become “less British,” more open to other writing in English (American, Caribbean, African, Commonwealth) and also to continental writing, for comparative purposes. (qtd. in Ngugi et. al. 145)

Stewart’s statement condenses a range of fallacious but widespread assumptions regarding the connection between race, aesthetics, civilizations, nationalities and pedagogies. The role of a university education, the statement assumes, is the production of national subjects on a basis of integrated interdisciplinary syllabi that collectively comprises such totalities as “Western civilization.” The challenge is to make an independent African polity, somehow, a part of this universal civilization, whence the need for the English Department at Nairobi to become “less British” and embrace other literatures in English. English, a specifically colonial linguistic and literary formation, mediates the transition of other cultures—“American, Caribbean and African”—into Western civilization. Let me note, in bemused passing, that, for Stewart, American literature is pointedly not part of Western Civilization; English literature is, first and foremost, the national heritage of Britain. As Ngugi and his colleagues note in a compelling but eventually problematic critique, underlying the Stewart’s logic “is the basic assumption that the English tradition and the emergence of
the modern west is the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage. Africa becomes an extension of the west” (146.)

Ngugi and his colleagues reject the specific conclusions but, crucially, not the founding assumptions at the heart of Stewart literary logic. They do not reject the equation of the culture of university literature classroom with national cultures and/or racialized civilizations. Reproducing without a difference the conceptual architecture of Stewart’s paper even as they contest his specific conclusions, the Nairobi troika contend: “We refuse the primacy of British Literature. The primary duty of any literature department is to illuminate the spirit animating a people, to show how it meets new challenges, and to investigate possible areas of development and involvement” (146). Far from being a refutation, their arguments are a mirror image of Stewart’s with the notable exception of a plaintive and defensive discourse of Africanism. “If there is a need for the ‘study of the historic continuity of a single culture,’” the Nairobi troika ask, mimicking Stewart’s grammar, “why can’t this be African? Why can’t African Literature be at the centre so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it” (146). It is important to emphasize that Stewart did not specifically reject the teaching of African literature at the University of Nairobi. As Ngugi was to later point out, “all sides were agreed on the need to include African, European and other literatures. But what would be at the centre? And what would be on the periphery, so to speak? How would the centre relate to the periphery?” (“The Question of Relevance” 89-90). It is readily apparent that Ngugi and his colleagues share the same aesthetic ideology with Stewart, their ostensible adversary, as counterintuitive and disturbing as the conclusion might seem.

Ngugi and his colleagues asked that the English Department be abolished not because they repudiated the values of Englishness specifically and literariness in general espoused by the Acting Head of the English Department (to use the precise official designation deployed in their memo), but rather, because they rejected the applicability of these European values to what they unselfconsciously defined as an African context. The three authors accept uncritically the argument that the mandate of a university literary education, even in a generally noniterate and nonliterary postcolony, is the production of exemplary national subjects where nationality is defined by an incremental and evolutionary logic in terms of national, continental, and racial civilizations. There is no attempt to acknowledge the specificity and peculiarity of the institutional locus of the university in general and the literary academy in particular. There is no attempt to acknowledge the functioning of the postcolonial university as a means for the unequal distribution of cultural or knowledge capital and as a means, therefore, for the reproduction of unequal social relations.

Ngugi and his colleagues recommend that a Department of African Languages and Literature be established in place of the alien and alienating English Department. The pan-African nationalist mission of this department’s pedagogical imaginary is unmistakable: “The aim, in short, should be to orient ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa in the centre. All other things are to be considered in their
relevance to our situation, and their contribution towards understanding ourselves" (Ngugi et. al. 146). The Nairobi troika’s literary nationalism is driven, ultimately, by a racialist black aesthetic; hence they contend “already African writing, with the sister connections in the Caribbean and Afro-American literatures, has played an important role in the African renaissance” (146). There can be no gainsaying the coercive nature of the Africanist pedagogy being promulgated here. As Angus Calder memorably opined in a generally favorable internal review of the Nairobi Revolution two years after the fact: “[W]hat we now have is a syllabus in Literature which takes the world for its scope, and where, while Student A may if he wishes select options which will give his programme an overwhelmingly Black emphasis, it is impossible for any perverse student to avoid a heavy Black emphasis” (2). In Calder’s estimation—and, one suspects, in the estimation of the Nairobi troika—the connection between being “an African” and studying primarily “African literature” is so automatic that any hint of a contrarian opinion can only be understood in terms of a perversion, a pathology. The principal goal of my essay has been to question the self-evidence of this nativist literary logic.

Elsewhere in his review Calder contends: “In my opinion, any course in Literature in East Africa, at whatever level, should emphasize local material first, African material in general second, Black Diaspora material third, and other literature fourth” (3). In many respects this statement condenses the logic of the Nairobi Revolution; it in fact reproduces literally word for word a pivotal passage from “On the Abolition of the English Department” cited above. It is a statement whose truth-value is thought to be so self-evident as to require no elaboration. In its innumerable recitations, this statement invariably takes the form of a flat assertion that countenances no possibility of refutation. Nevertheless, this statement is rooted in at least two fallacies: 1) that one’s ability effectively to read literary texts depends to a large extent on one’s local knowledge of the real world of such texts; and 2) that students of literature in Africa on account of the mere fact of their being “Africans” have an intimate local knowledge of the African world as well as the black world more generally.

The fallacies I identify above are widespread in contemporary literary studies. They account for the radical opposition between Western and non-Western literature and for the presumption that “Westerners” form the natural reading constituency for “Western Literature.” It was on the basis on this radical opposition that Christopher L. Miller recently suggested that the study of African literature in the West can only be effective if it was supplemented by other disciplines, specifically anthropology. His logic seemed purely pragmatic: Western readers are generally abysmally ignorant about Africa, they are therefore incapable of fully appreciating African art objects. He argues: “Taken at its face value, my hypothesis means simply that any non-African reader (or even an African reader from a different cultural area) seeking to cross the information gap between himself and herself and an African text will probably be obliged to look in the books classified as anthropology” (4). One is troubled by the implication in Miller’s argument that while African literature needs anthropological explanation, American
readers would readily understand “Western literature.” Much in the way that Calder assumes without empirical or logical basis that African literature is local to Africans, Miller assumes, also without local or empirical basis, that Western literature is local to Americans. Miller unwittingly undermines the logic of his own argument by conceding parenthetical that knowledge about Africa may well not be local to all Africans even as he affirms the notion of literary nativism.

Miller’s claims have been challenged by a number of scholars. Mudimbe, for example, has questioned the reliability and suitability of the “anthropological library” given the history of colonial anthropology (The Idea of Africa 183-91). In a more pointed critique, Simon Gikandi has contended that the practice of “using texts and theories borrowed from other disciplines and of deploying these as the mediating categories of African literature, implies that the primary function of literary texts in to provide ‘evidence’ about African words to Western readers” (2). He refutes the series of identitarian fallacies embedded in Miller’s logic: “Miller’s assumption that one’s ‘true’ or ‘inside’ knowledge of an African culture is essential to a proper reading of a literary text produced by specific cultural group seems to be built on the erroneous premise that the value of a literary texts depends on a measure identity between the reader, the internal economy of the text, and the values and practices produced by them” (2). Gikandi presents the intellectual grounds for rejecting all identity driven studies of literature.

At the heart of the new literary nationalism imagined by Ngugi and his colleagues was the project of oral literature, a project that, as suggested previously, turned on the compulsory interpellation of its pedagogical subjects as ethnic African nationals. In the context of a coercive pedagogy, oral literature serves as a means for the interpellation of subjects whose collective African-ness, one is tempted to conclude, is predicated on their naturalized ethnicity. As stated previously, one was to study this literature as part of one’s ethnic identification, one affirmed one’s ethnic affirmation as part of one’s national identification, which in turn led to an affirmation of one’s continental and global black identity. I am not contesting the intellectual validity of the study of oral literature as such; I am dissenting from the ways in which that study was conceived in the service of an invented elite African tradition. Nor am I questioning the enduring reality of complex process of ethnic identification in the postcolonial African polis; I am questioning the desire by the university—the pinnacle of a highly restricted school culture—to legitimate itself instrumentally by using ethnic and/or racial identities. Needless to say, the study of oral literature at the university does not require a nationalist justification, nor is it the special burden of universities in Africa in their capacity as “African universities.” The only justification required for the study of oral literature is that such research programs would enables us, in our capacity as students of literature anywhere, to pose intellectually important questions on such areas as the definition of authorship and the privileged status of writing in contemporary aesthetics. In other words, oral literature is a legitimate as a research program within the context of school culture.
Ngugi and his colleagues articulated an implausible vision of literary citizenship on the basis of an invented African tradition, a tradition invented paradoxically by recourse to the colonial library, specifically the anthropological library. The notion of African literary citizenship they affirmed relied on what Paulin Hountondji, in the context of a decisive refutation of the intellectual premises of ethnophilsophy, has termed “a mystic halo” (xii). Hountondji suggests, correctly in my view, that the first task in any philosophically defensible effort to understand Africa is a systematic demystification. Elaborating in 1996 on the context for his polemical critique in the late sixties of the project of ethnophilsophy, he writes: “There was a need, in order to deal with the complexity of our history, to bring back the scene of that history to its original simplicity: in order to deal with the richness of African traditions, there was need to impoverish resolutely the concept of Africa, to free it from all connotations, ethical, religious, philosophical, political etc. loaded on it by a long anthropological tradition, the most evident effect of which was to close the horizon, to close history prematurely” (33). To adopt Hountondji’s polemic for a different context, my central claim is that English literature—both in its African and Western varieties—has been distorted by a nationalist mystic halo. Accordingly, the first task should be the work of demystification, the work of impoverishing resolutely the concept of English literature and returning it to its true historical context, which I have suggested in this essay is school culture.

NOTES

1. See Lloyd. In an instructive passage addressing Matthew Arnold’s view of culture as an instrument for national reconciliation, he writes: “here it should become clear that comparable problems give rise to a set of contradictions whose resolution is sought in a particular concept of representation which is at once aesthetic and political and which involves crucially the notion of historical development that provides the rationale for both the integrity of the canon and the integration of the State” (139).

2. I do not mean to imply that African literature is not generally studied in Western English programs today. In the wake of the institutionalization of post-colonial theory as a highly specialized aesthetic disposition of English programs in the West, the study of literatures from the postcolony has in some measure been institutionalized. A number of Africanists have been hired by English departments and an elaborate conference and publishing network devoted to African literature has been established. In other words, African literature has acquired a degree of cultural capital in the West. I mean to say, rather, that African literature, even in instances when it is institutionalized, remains marginal in relation to what are perceived to be the traditional English programs, a welcome supplement, perhaps, but not the core of “English literature” as it is currently constituted. Suffice it to note, by way of a highly localized example, that this paper was first written as part of an institutional requirement—a process of aesthetic examination and certification—at the English Department of the University of Michigan during which process...
not one of my ten colleagues studied any African texts at all. More generally, with one other exception, none of my colleagues have felt the need to acquaint themselves with literatures in English from Asia or the Caribbean. My speculation is that my colleagues are allowed not to have an interest in these literatures because they are not understood to be central to American nationality. The point to emphasize here is that this is an institutionally sanctioned account of Americanness and of English literature. In other words, the Department sanctions the production of aesthetic subjects for the most part ignorant of literature from the vast majority of the “English-speaking world.” For an instructive discussion of the marginal place of African literature in the metropolitan university, see Miller, “Literary Studies and African Literature.”

3. Mudimbe provides a succinct summary of the concerns that I am attempting to articulate here: “African literature as a commodity is a recent invention, and authors as well as critics tend to resist this fact. They seem more interested in this literature, not for what it is as a discourse and what in a variety of its events it could mean in a larger context of other local and regional discourses, but rather for its significance as a mirror of something else, say, or instance [sic], Africa’s political struggle, processes of cultural disalienation, or human rights objectives” (“African Literature” 8).

4. For useful critical discussions of the connection imagined between English literature and Englishness, see Doyle and Baldick.

5. The key texts include Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy and Leavis’s English Literature in Our Time and the University and The Great Tradition.

6. My hypothesis is heavily indebted to historical inquiries that have now established that the origins of English literature, as an academic discipline, are to be traced back to colonial India and not Imperial England, and that it was first constituted by colonial officials to reflect in the colony what they imagined English national culture consisted of. See in particular Visnawathan. I want to emphasize the hypothetical and speculative nature of my claims here. Furthermore, let me concede, ahead of time, a certain conceptual limit: My idea of Africa depends on, even as it attempts to refute, a binary opposition between Africa and the West. I do not take into account, for example, the important question of the influence of the Islamic library in Africa. I also do not consider the possibility of indigenous aesthetic practices in Africa.

7. For a description of the concept of “immanent intelligibility” in the sense I am using it here, see ch. 1 of Fish.

8. For an instructive discussion of the notion of “hypercanonicity,” see Arac. His arguments offer an informative parallel for the argument I am making in this paper. He establishes the presentism of the current reading in American high schools of Huckleberry Finn as the canonical text of an anti-racist American nationalistic pedagogy. Such a reading was not available when the novel was first published; it was retrospectively established by readings first articulated in university English programs in the post-Second World War era. The text was subsequently canonized in American high schools as the text for instruction on racial tolerance as well as a certain vision of America’s racial history. In other words—and this is the central claim of my essay—nationalist affirmation is not something inherent in any literary text, but rather is the discursive effect of a certain context of reading.

9. Perhaps the exemplary instance of the kind of intellectual work I have in mind here would be Homi Bhabha’s highly influential essay, “DissemiNation.”
Bhabha contends that nationalism depends on “complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of the people or the nation and makes them the immanent subjects of a range of literary and social narratives” (140). Contrary to Bhabha’s suggestion, I would insist that literary narratives are constitutive of school cultures and not national cultures.

10. A fuller discussion of Kant’s ideas regarding the centrality of reason in the university in found in Readings ch. 4. The text being discussed here is Kant’s The Conflict of Faculties. What is given is a highly abbreviated account of a much more detailed and carefully presented argument. For another discussion of the history of the creation of English literature as the locus of a national culture, see Lloyd.

11. For a discussion of the concept of “interpellation,” or “hailing,” see Althusser’s seminal essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Althusser’s now classic essays remains one of the most comprehensive and persuasive accounts of the functioning of the education system—“educational state apparatus”—as an instrument for social reproduction. “Interpellation” here refers to the process through which subjects are constructed or called into beings as the differentiated citizen-subjects of an exploitative capitalist state.

12. Significantly, the other of the two literature courses that I took in the first semester of my first year at the university was “Literary Language and Presentation.” One course was devoted to standardizing our English, the other to the constitution of a race-inflected aesthetic disposition. Together the two courses comprised the institutional process for the production of a well-educated literary person in postcolonial Africa.

13. Ngugi’s positions are more complex than this limited revisionary account suggests. In his later critical and creative work, he would become sharply critical of the role of the university in the neocolonial exploitation of Kenya. See, for example, his novels Petals of Blood and Devil on the Cross. Additionally, Ngugi’s Afrocentrism is tempered by a contradictory Marxist commitment. In “The Robber and the Robbed,” Ngugi defines literature in terms not of race but imperialism. He suggests that literary value be defined in terms of a global struggle against imperialism and capitalism. According to this argument, there is a fundamental connection between the African proletariat and peasantry and the working people of Asia and Latin America.

14. One needs to take very seriously Calder’s claim that the literature program at Nairobi took “the world as its scope.” A commitment to literary nativism and a commitment to literary globalism simultaneously characterized this program. These two impulses were, somehow, experienced as complementary rather than contradictory. Even though Calder strongly approves of the Africanization of the department, he is also quick to criticize the exclusion of Latin American literature and what he terms “Oriental literature.”

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