## Editor's Column

# Provincializing English

WHAT ARE WE TO DO WITH ENGLISH? OF ALL THE MAJOR languages of the world, it causes the most anxiety. Its words seem to want to invade the citadels of other languages, forcing institutions such as the Académie Française to call for barricades against it; in the enclaves of Englishness, a Celtic fringe struggles to hold on to the remnants of the mother tongue; and in most parts of the world those without the ostensibly anointed language often see themselves as permanently locked out of the spring-wells of modernity. Sometimes the global linguistic map appears to be a simple division between those with English and those without it. In the reaches of the former British Empire, a swath of the globe stretching from Vancouver east to the Malay Peninsula, English has come to be seen as an advantage in the competitive world of global politics and trade; in the emerging powers of East Asia, most notably China and South Korea, the consumption of global English is evident in the huge sale of books on English as a second language; in parts of the world traditionally cut off from English, including eastern Europe, the mastery of the language marks the moment of arrival. Most linguistic research on English is carried out in institutions in the Germanic and Nordic zones of northern Europe. In popular books on language and in serious linguistic studies, a powerful myth of English as the global language has taken hold. We are presented not with a world at the end of history but with one in which English sits at the center of a new global community: "English-speaking people and their culture are more widespread in numbers and influence than any civilization the world has ever seen," claims Robert McCrum (257).

However, the time of English is full of anxieties and difficult questions: Why do English-only movements thrive in large parts of

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the United States? Why do successive British governments, irrespective of political ideology, embark on campaigns to halt the downward slide of the language? Why does anglophone Canada live in fear of Canadian French? Why does the Académie Française think that Cardinal Richelieu turns over in his grave every time an English or English-inflected word enters the French vocabulary? And what are the implications of the "rule of English" for the survival and future of other languages, those that have been designated secondary, minor, or less taught? I ask myself these questions regularly for both professional and autobiographical reasons. As the editor of *PMLA*, I have to negotiate the tension between English and the other languages that constitute the MLA; as a so-called postcolonial—a child of empire, as it were—I have to constantly rethink my ambivalent relation to the language, a language that is both mine and someone else's, one that I am simultaneously inside and outside.

## Coming Up for English

My existential situation mirrors that of many speakers of English in the world. I grew up in a society where English was considered both pure and dangerous. English was considered pure because it was assumed to be the language of modernization, a process prized by the newly decolonized; it was also seen as an embodiment of the civilizational mission of colonialism, which my parents, good products of the Scottish Mission in East Africa, deeply desired. Their desire for English had nothing to do with what has come to be known as colonial mimicry, for my parents, like other members of their generation, were proud of their mother tongue and their native culture, but they assumed that the future belonged to a new set of experiences and behaviors that was only available to them through English. This belief was reinforced by the parsimoniousness surrounding the teaching of English in Africa: British colonizers exalted the virtues of their language, but they only provided it to the colonized in small doses. English was held over the heads of the colonized to be worshipped like the biblical golden calf, yet its accessibility was limited by design. Most Africans were educated for only four years, and since the educational system was intended to produce bondmen and bondwomen—hewers of wood and drawers of water—primary education was conducted in the vernacular. English was only available to those who progressed, after tough weeding-out examinations, into the upper grades of elementary school.

A transformative moment in colonial government policies in Kenya, to use one example, was the report *African Education in Kenya*, of 1949, popularly known as the Beecher report. Among the major recommendations of the report was a curriculum that "would concentrate on literacy in the vernacular, simple arithmetic, elementary practical skills and fundamental discipline" (qtd. in Gorman 429). Opposition to the Beecher report—to the withholding of English, as it were—was one of the engines that fired the nationalist movement in colonial Kenya in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The report led to what radical nationalists, many of them veterans of the British campaigns in Palestine and Burma, considered some of the most stringent anti-African public policy in the Kenyan colony. "Mau Mau" guerrillas fighting the colonial government discussed the report in their forest hideouts.[1] Members of the African elite, through their representatives in the colonial legislature, opposed it unanimously. The matter came up for discussion in the House of Commons in London.[2]

The opposition to the withholding of English might appear ironic since nationalism aimed to restore the languages and cultures of the colonized to their rightful place; nationalists, however, seemed to value English as part of their modernizing mandate and to take the virtues of the language for granted. For the

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colonized, having access to English was akin to coming up for air, pulling out from under the weight of colonial governmentality. When Kenya became independent, in 1963, the new government appointed a commission to survey the educational situation in the country. Members of the commission reported that "the great majority" of the witnesses who had appeared before it "wished to see the universal use of English language as the medium of instruction from Primary I." Literary in the vernacular was considered injurious "in the critical years of schooling" (qtd. in Gorman 441–42). The government early endorsed the commission's report, which became the foundation of education in postcolonial Kenya.

And yet when English became available to all, when it was deprived of the aura or authority that its lack had conferred, its dangers became visible, or at least subjects for debate. How could African minds be decolonized if their medium of instruction and writing was the language that had locked them in a savage slot?[3] Another question immediately followed: was creative writing, seen as the most immediate form of self-assertion, possible in the language of the colonizers?

## Linguistic Anxieties

These questions dominated a historic conference of African writers held in 1962 at Makerere University College, Uganda, one of the citadels of English literature in Africa. At the conference, which had been called to celebrate the emergence of a new African literature in English, there was little interest in literatures in African languages.[4] Most of the delegates seemed confident that the identity of an African culture of letters in English was secure. The one exception was Obi Wali, a young Nigerian critic, who argued that an African literature produced in European languages would inevitably lead to a dead end, that the "whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing" was "misdirected" and had "no chance of advancing African literature and culture." Wali's critique of the emerging African literature was built on a linguistic imperative: until African writers and critics accepted the fact that "any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration" (14).

The production of an African literature in English in the two decades following Wali's critique has, of course, proved his prediction wrong. By the end of the 1980s, an African canon of literature in English had emerged and become institutionalized, celebrated globally as a major contribution to literatures in English and to the English language. And yet the language feud refused to go away and often tended to become the axis around which the poetics and politics of African letters revolved. Clearly, when it came to English, more than language choice was at stake. At issue was a wider debate on the possibility and impossibility of producing a literature to celebrate the autonomy of an African self in the language of the colonizing other. Caught between the need to imagine sovereignty and the use of a language that represented its negation, postcolonial writers wrote under the torsion of linguistic anxiety.

We detect this anxiety in Chinua Achebe's "English and the African Writer," a 1965 article written in response to Wali. The gist of Achebe's argument was that in Nigeria, a country where ethnic tensions loomed like dark clouds, English would unify ethnicities and serve as an agent of globalization. English was nothing less than a precondition for a Nigerian national literature:

> A national literature is one that takes the whole nation for its province, and has a realized or potential audience throughout its territory; in other words, a literature that is written in the national language. An ethnic literature is one that is available only to one

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> ethnic group within the nation. If you take Nigeria as an example, the national literature, as I see it, is the literature written in English; and the ethnic literatures are in Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Effik, Edo, Ijaw, and so on. (343)

Achebe asserted that the literature coming out of Africa showcased new voices "speaking of African experience in a world-wide language," and he was not willing to deform the inherited language or to move it in radical directions in order to make it African: "The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language so much that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning an English that is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience" (347).

Coming from Achebe, the desire to retain the identity of English—to resist its creolization—was surprising and seemed at odds with his novelistic projects. When he wrote "English and the African Writer," Achebe had published three of his major novels (*Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God*), works that transformed the nature of English as a literary language by bringing into the linguistic register a distinctively African experience. The English in these novels had certainly been altered. In fact, the alteration of English was a salient feature of the new English literatures that were emerging in Africa after decolonization. Some of the most prominent literary works coming from Africa in the late 1960s and the 1970s—Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, to cite two prominent examples—transformed English as a literary medium. By the time these works were published, Wali's objections to the use of English as the medium of African literature had been buried and forgotten.

Then, sometime in the early 1980s, the English problematic returned with a vengeance, splitting prominent African writers down the middle. First, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o started writing in Kikuyu, initiating what he considered an epistemic break with English as a vehicle of creative writing and even criticism. In a series of essays collected in *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ rejected what he called the "fatalistic logic" that assumed that an African literature could only be produced in European languages (7). For Ngũgĩ the position staked out by Achebe in 1965—that English could bear the burden of the African experience—had failed to recognize how the colonial language functioned to imprison the African mind in the imperium: if the bullet was the means through which the African was physically subjugated, language was "the means of the spiritual subjugation" (9). Where Achebe had adopted English as the mode through which the African could enter concentric circles of ever-expanding meanings while retaining a sense of self, Ngũgĩ saw the language as a vehicle for the most radical form of alienation. In Ngũgĩ's account of a colonial education, the movement into English, with all its cultural goods and privileges, was a move away from selfhood; the mastery of the texts of the English canon took his generation "further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds" (12).

Ironically, both Achebe's endorsement of English as the universal language and Ngũgĩ's critique of it as an agent of linguistic imperialism endowed the language with a singularity and power that it didn't have. These prominent African writers may have disagreed on the function of the language of empire, but they were products of a historical moment in which English had been assumed to be the medium of the transformation of the African into a colonial subject. This was the moment identified and valorized by Thomas Babington Macaulay, one of the leading intellectuals of empire, in his "Minute on Indian Education": "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour,

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but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." Under the Macaulay scheme, English functioned as a mode of what Jacques Lacan would call a desire and a lack (125). English was a desire because it was the precondition for a new subjectivity, for entry into the class of mimic men; it was a lack because the subjectivities it created would always be few in number and imperfect, cut off from the mainstream of society and contained in a subjunctive space in the cultures of Englishness.

Trapped in colonial Englishness, young colonials seemed to have limited options: they could master English and use it to create a literature of their own, or they could make an epistemic break with the language and turn to the mother tongue as a place of reconciliation. However, both responses reflected the confusion between English as a language and Englishness as a way of life. To adopt a Lacanian formulation, young colonials had confused the figure in the mirror—the perfect I—with the distorted self living a life of English fantasy at odds with colonial realities. The colonization of the mind did not arise because of a power inherent in the language; English was not a spell that could change behaviors in places where mother tongues thrived. It only appeared powerful because of its association with compulsory Englishness. How else could one confuse the fiction of the English primer and the lived experience of the colonized? And how could anyone grounded in the vernacular spoken by most of the colonized confuse the world of Jane and John, their happy childhood in Oxford, with the deracinated colonial landscape?[5]

## The Seduction of English

My sense is that this confusion—of the English text and Englishness—still drives most claims made for English as the global language. Indeed, the claims once made for English as a colonial language survive in ongoing debates about the global reach of the language. Under the guise of globalization, English comes to be represented to the world as a diffuse language, but one with a core that needs to be quarantined from the influence of others. Consider the example of Robert Burchfield, editor of *The Oxford English Dictionary* for thirty years and considered by many the custodian of English for most of the second half of the twentieth century. Born on the margins of empire (in Wanganui, New Zealand), Burchfield was credited with opening the dictionary to "world Englishes." He considered English the lingua franca of the world:

> English has also become a lingua franca to the point that any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English. Poverty, famine, and disease are instantly recognized as the cruellest and least excusable form of deprivation. Linguistic deprivation is a less easily noticed condition, but one nevertheless of great significance.
>
> (qtd. in Phillipson 5)[6]

Many of the claims made by Burchfield and others about English as the language of globalization and modernization have been hyperbolic. As Robert Phillipson has argued in *Linguistic Imperialism*, English is not a precondition for modernity and modernization or for a good social life. People who don't have English are not necessarily linguistically deprived.

Phillipson's argument rests on a thesis that, on the surface, appears compelling: "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages." In a situation of linguistic inequality, more resources are allocated to English than to other languages, and English speakers benefit, resulting in what Phillipson calls "linguicism": "Linguicism occurs, for instance, if there is a policy of supporting several languages, but if priority is given in teacher

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training, curriculum development, and school timetables to one language" (47). The flaw in this theory lies not in its logic—there are many situations of linguistic inequality in the world—but in its assumption that one language can have worldwide hegemony. This thesis ends up privileging English, even when it sets out to identify the power or influence of the language. Often the visible power of English, especially in the media, conceals its impoverishment.

In Nigeria, to cite one example, English may be prestigious, and it is indeed the language of a small elite, but it does not pose a clear and present danger to the three dominant languages of the country. Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba thrive as everyday languages and literary languages, continuously spreading on the backs of Nollywood film and other forms of popular entertainment. The major threat to minority languages in Nigeria comes not from English but from these dominant national languages. Although English is spoken by millions of people in India, it is the first language of a minuscule number. While it has official status and is perhaps spoken across more states than Hindi, the other official language of India, English is often a secondary language. It is this secondariness that the proponents of global English and scholars of linguistic imperialism tend to ignore.

The secondariness of a language does not, of course, deprive it of its power and standing. From the beginning of colonial rule in India, as Macaulay's "Minute" illustrates so well, English was associated with a compulsory civilizational authority. In India Macaulay, surrounded by two of the oldest literary languages of the world—Arabic and Sanskrit—had the audacity to proclaim the superiority of the European library:

> I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic.—But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the Oriental plan of education.

Confronted by this situation, colonial elites in India turned their eyes from the languages of the old Mughal courts to the tongue of the colonial garrison, assuming that English was the conduit to the European library and its cultural goods (Kachru).

## The Linguistic Weapon

Still, this preference for the language of colonial governmentality and other forms of power took place among fierce conflicts and contradictions. For one, the mastery of English didn't necessarily lead to the suppression of the mother tongue, which, although not ranked highly in cultural terms, could still be the language of everyday life. The Indians I grew up with in East Africa could speak English and Swahili, but their primary language was Gujarati. As far as the Indians in my hometown were concerned, Gujarati, not English, was the global language, linking them to important trade and cultural networks across India, throughout most of Africa, and in faraway places, such as Fiji.

Moreover, the English that was making its way into the landscape of the colonized was not the one associated with Oxford and the queen. In many parts of Africa, the vanguard of empire, usually in the form of soldiers and missionaries, were Scottish, Welsh, or Irish. The custodians of Englishness in Africa were often Scots or former Scots: William Chambers at Lovedale, South Africa; Rufuel Barlow

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at Tumutumu; Mary Slessor at Calabar; Robert Moffat at Mafeking; and David Livingstone at Blantyre, Malawi, a place named after his home village in Scotland. Many Africans first heard English through the Scottish or Irish sieve, including the Celtic lilt.

The English that took root in the colonial world, from Ireland to New South Wales, was continuously transformed by the other languages that it encountered (Crowley; Dixon). New phonetic structures emerged to account for the tonality of African languages, new vocabularies evolved to carry the weight of Australian experiences, and new rhetorical structures were designed to reflect the power of Caribbean orality. As Wole Soyinka has aptly noted, in its encounter with Africa and Africans, English was forced to take on "unaccustomed roles": "The customary linguistic usage was rejected outright and a new, raw, urgent and revolutionary syntax was given to this medium which had become the greatest single repository of racist concepts." Seen from the perspectives of those on the receiving end of linguistic imperialism, the identity of English changes; the language becomes, not the universal lingua franca, but what Soyinka calls "a strategic linguistic weapon" among many (88).

An effective way of dealing with the anxieties that English generates is to deprive the language of the ecumenical status of the global and to represent it as one language among many, to provincialize it, as it were.[7] Provincialization also moves English from under the spell of global English literature, the one enhanced and circulated by postcolonial writers in the metropolis, a literature that in its haste to lure international audiences sometimes forgets the power of localities. English can be celebrated not as part of a global drive toward monolingualism but as part of the diversity and plurality of world languages. A useful first step is the recognition that there are many varieties of English, each with multiple registers. The variety and multiplicity of English are to be found not in the institutions of literary production and dissemination—the university, the book reviews, and the book prizes—but in the "zone of occult instability" where, as Frantz Fanon aptly put it, "the people dwell" (227). It is here, in the marketplace where English encounters forms of popular writing that are not imprisoned in its rules, that the former language of empire is creolized.

Here is an example from Thomas Iguh's "pamphlet text" *Alice in the Romance of Love*:

FIDELIS. Listen you must tell your parents you will no longer marry Martins and then from there, you'll gather what their reactions will be to our marriage.

ALICE. I'll do so but come up and let's have a kiss for you are the boy I'm destined to marry.

(They kiss themselves for a long time).

FIDELIS. You are really a sweet chatty. Infact I have never had a sweeter moment in my life.

ALICE. Oh I wish we can stay on together as we are now; for I shall start to dream of you the very moment you leave me here.

FIDELIS. But am I sure this old dispute between our respective families which was hatched out of greed by my stupid father will have nothing to do with our love?

ALICE. Not at all. It must never have any thing to do with it.

FIDELIS. I think I should be going by now for it is already dark.

ALICE. What do you go with, should in case you hit those legs of yours against a stone?

FIDELIS. I can't, for as love showed me the way to your house, so also will it take me safely to my house.

ALICE. It is alright; good night.

(FIDELIS leaves).

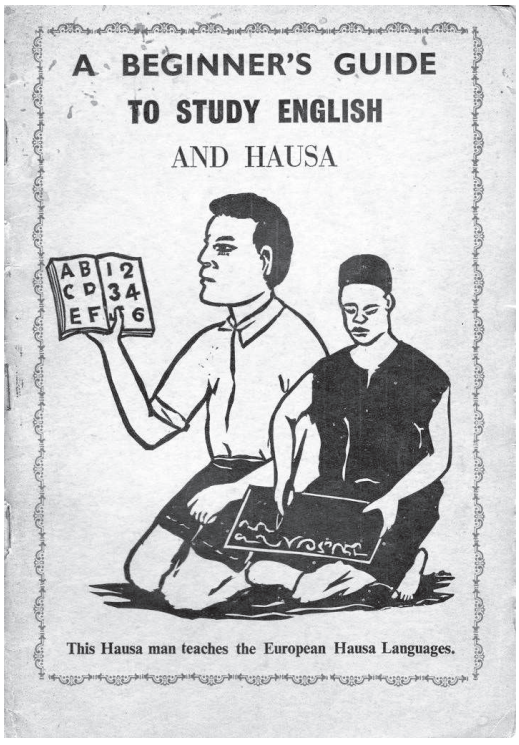
ALICE. Come back darling for I can't afford to let you go without a kiss; (she kisses him again).

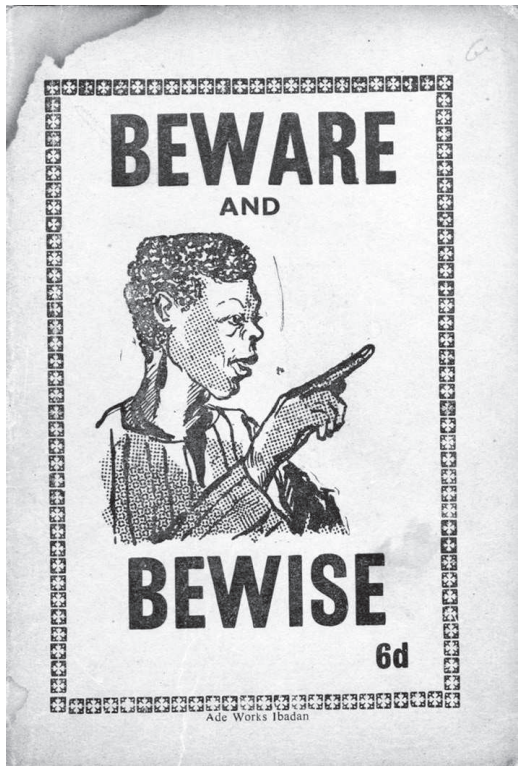
FIDELIS. Sweet heart I shall be here again to see you tomorrow.

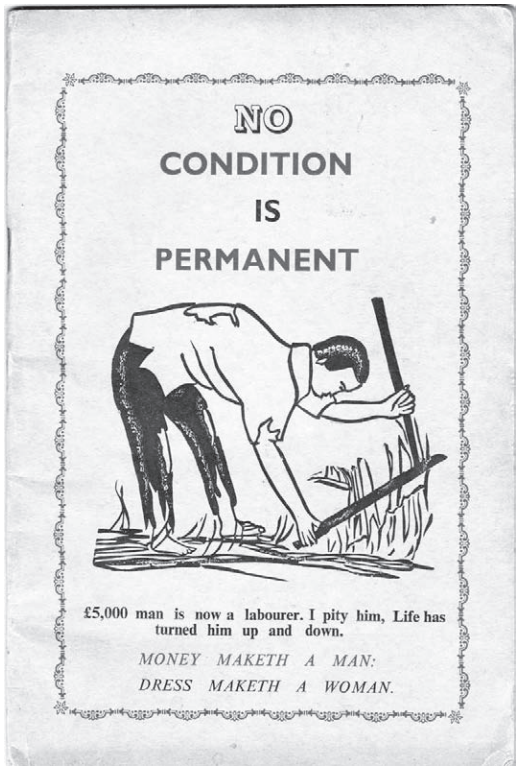
ALICE. Is tomorrow not too far? O! don't you know I find it difficult to control my sentimental emotions when I don't see you for a single hour.

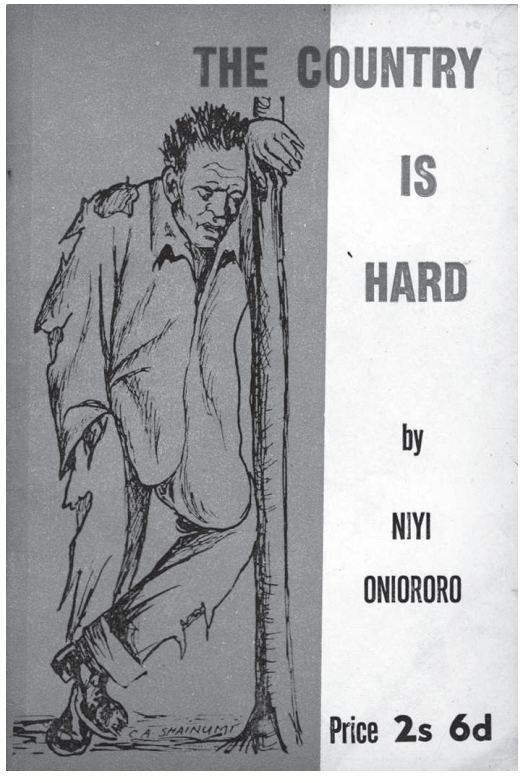
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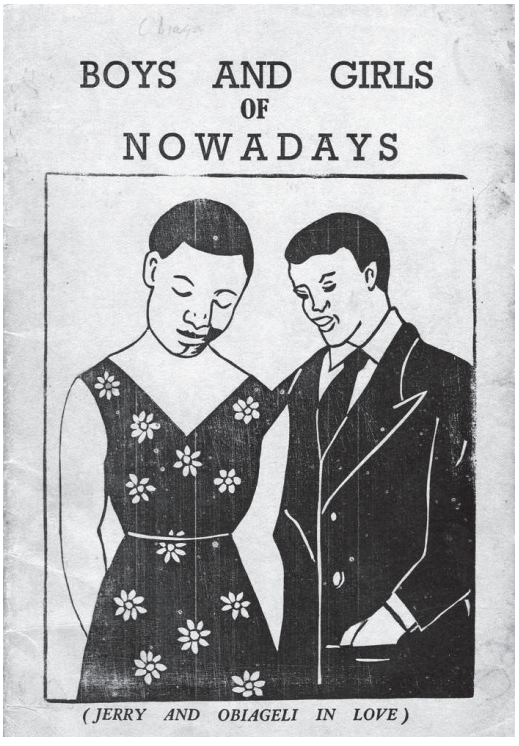



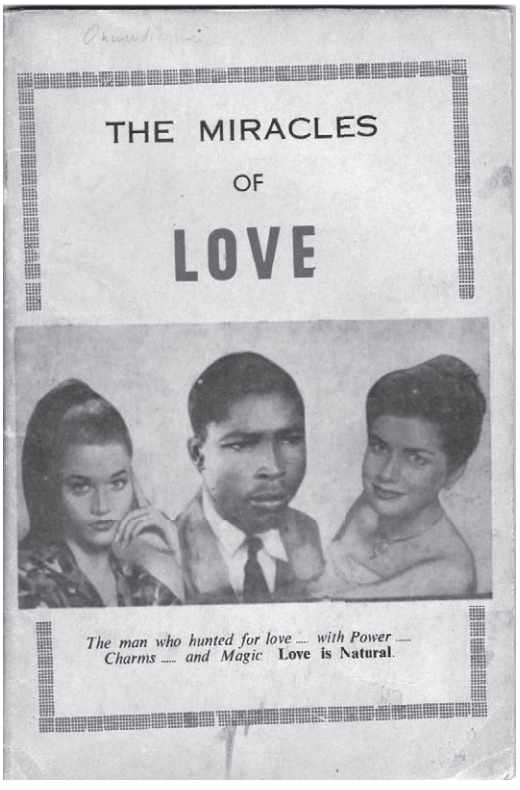




Pamphlets sold in the market of Onitsha, Nigeria, from the collection of Kurt Thometz.

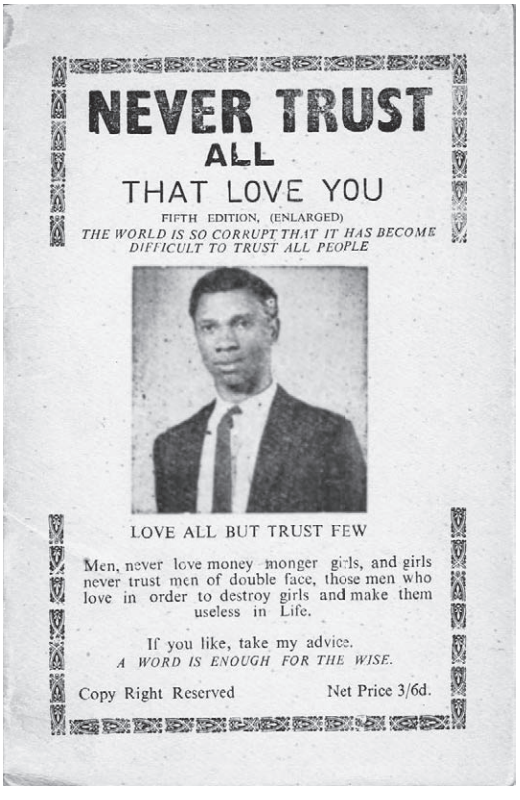
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FIDELIS. Alright darling, but for the memory of this great night, have this ring and wear it always in your fingers.

ALICE. Infact I have now agreed you love me and that being the case, always count me first among those that love you dearly for I don't think any body loves you more than myself. Oh sweet heart hurry out for my dad is coming.

FIDELIS. Alright good night; (he leaves).

ALICE. Don't go please without a kiss for it is one of the pleasures of being in love with some one of the opposite sex. (They kiss themselves again).

FIDELIS. Alright I shall continue to remember you till we see again.

(EXIT FIDELIS)

In this text—as in many others published in the market town of Onitsha, Nigeria—a thriving pamphlet culture takes up Shakespeare and transforms his text into something else.[8] Although we have been here before—the echo of *Romeo and Juliet* is obvious—Shakespeare has been defamiliarized and English has become creolized.

*Simon Gikandi*

## Notes

1. The opposition to the Beecher report was expressed succinctly by the leader of the movement, Dedan Kimathi: "Though I very much feel the need for education, I greatly oppose the Beecher Report and have objected to it being put into practice. . . . I have ordered the destruction of some schools for the demonstration of our objection to Beecher's report" (qtd. in Barnett and Njama 240–41).

2. For these debates, see "Kenya."

3. I borrow the term "savage slot" from Trouillot.

4. An account of the politics of language at the conference can be found in Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising* 5–6.

5. For the role of the colonial primer in the education of young colonials, see Ngũgĩ's memoir, *Dreams in a Time of War* (218–19).

6. There was some indignation when it was discovered after Burchfield's death that he had sought to quarantine English, deleting words he considered alien—seventeen percent of the loanwords and world English terms added by his predecessors—from the second supplement of *The Oxford English Dictionary*. This is how *The Guardian* reported the matter: "An eminent former editor of the Oxford English Dictionary covertly deleted thousands of words because of their foreign origins and bizarrely blamed previous editors, according to claims in a book published this week" (Flood). A more comprehensive report of Burchfield's supposed lexicographic error can be found in Ogilvie.

7. I borrow the terms here from Chakrabarty 42–46.

8. The most comprehensive study of the appropriation of Shakespeare by Nigerian chapbook writers can be found in Obiechina 72–88.

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