

INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING AND REVIVING SUBJECT ENGLISH

The Murder and the Murmur

Pete Bennett, Louise Lambert and Rob Smith

"I wonder, my friend, will you ever return, to help me kick the life back to a dying mutual friend."

(The Proclaimers, Letter From America)

The collaborators in this collection, originally dubbed simply 'the murder of English', have been asked to do something like the lyric above implies: to return with feeling to rejuvenate, redefine, recalibrate and generally rally around a dying mutual friend: in this case that academic staple and incontrovertible 'good thing', English. The case of English, never short of witnesses for prosecution or defence, is a long-term project. Writing in 1993, Nick Peim indicted Subject English, as he called it, for continuing "doggedly to make special claims for itself" while working "against the majority of its students" (Peim, 1994: 5). His thesis was simply that "the identity of English has been and is founded on premises and practices that are not viable" (Peim, 1994: 4). In the intervening years, it's not so much that the 'jury is out' but that no one has the courage to call them back, given the situation has hardly improved for either students or teachers. Peim himself has provided a personal update early in this volume.

Those assembled here were drawn together by a sense of concern, of alarm, but also a sense of something worth saving or at least revising if not reinventing. Some have assembled directly from their classrooms and their day job as English teachers and others of us from roles in Teacher Education, Higher Education and education research, all with an awareness of the problematic that Subject English is and that they were called here to record its demise. This is a state of mind, an attitude, an inclination which makes the majority of the people gathered see themselves, for better or worse, as English teachers even if not as teachers of English. This book is more than a collection of responses to the contemporary state of Subject English. In both the writing and the arrangement, it was and is also a dialogue, a participation, a sharing and a fellowship between many of these teachers, who met online to talk and write together during a time of pandemic dislocation.

The contributors are from all sectors: primary, secondary, further and higher education and from a rich mix of experience and memory of what Subject English has been subject to over time. The sense that Subject English had once been something else offered the possibility that it might be something else again. Getting together with some of the contributors to talk, write and connect with the often fraught, embodied experiences of teaching shaped the early stages of the book. We talked of the tyranny and fear, the violence, coercion and measurement. We listened. In early conversations, we talked about practices in Subject English that don't make sense, for reasons no one could fully understand and in ways that did not work for young people in contemporary classrooms. There was something of a love-hate relationship, an understanding that the unsavoury elements were always hidden in plain sight and were one day going to come back and haunt us. Subject English always also had, like all myths constructed and reconstructed, a "perpetual alibi", always with "an elsewhere at its disposal" (Barthes, 1972: 122). And yet we returned to entertain re-configurings – new realities, new knowledges, new literacies, new relationships: the possibility that literacies can reconfigure the

worlds of young people not only in classrooms but also in families and communities to ask how young people might position themselves differently, to imagine how teachers might position themselves differently within local and global communities and within contemporary environmental, technological and political spaces. Despite the issues of overbearing authority and preposterous, patronising paternalism, we know also that on good days English made us think that the project of education could be constellated around the complex business of being human and being alive. It functions in these contexts like a good old cause, though there are presently prizes available for guessing what the 'cause' was or was for. In this collection, this amorphous, romantic, sometimes sentimental and emotional commitment is expressed in two ways. First, by its inevitable collecting of the set-piece chapter statements which launch within a broad academic, certainly scholarly dispensation, but also through an impressionistic and often poignant alternative history that is provided by *vignettes*, scraps of stories which are also aspects of the project and approach. These readings punctuate the volume while at the same time offering another set of readings both of Subject English and indeed of these accounts of it. The *vignettes* indeed constitute another version of English which is much more than merely the murmur promised by the title, more too than simply a romantic or sentimental journey.

The *vignettes* that punctuate this text are not only reflective moments and pauses between chapters but also demand to be heard; they speak directly to us about the memories and lived experiences and those moments that have left their mark, eliciting responses both emotive and provocative despite their 'snapshot' format. The vignettes were a means to research the lived experiences of Subject English both with the contributors to the book and more widely with those implicated with the subject beyond the chapter contributions. We had many more than we used here, and they illuminated and complicated (in a productive way), and added new and diverse voices to our discussions and the ultimate construction of the book. These tiny evocative accounts punctuate the chapters to tell some small stories of the encounters with teaching and learning within Subject English. Less containable than the organised accounts of the chapters, they rupture the linearity of the book and although bounded within themselves, within the 'vines' from which they are etymologically linked, they also have the potential for new vines of thought, towards new ways of listening. They animate the murders and the murmurs of our chapters in ways that not only provoked our thinking in the process of writing and sharing of the vignettes, but also remind us in their interruptions to pay attention to the sensory, embodied and affective dimensions within moments of the everyday – a temporality both particular and with tendrils across time and space to resonate with readers anew.

Resounding within these chapters and vignettes are the ways in which teaching Subject English itself is a commitment to dialogue that is emergent and temporal, shared ventures with young people, their families and communities, their experiences and desires, their histories, environments and shifting ecologies. Stories, ideas, imagining and desiring for ways of living in a world increasingly under threat. Desire, according to Deleuze (1990), is not a thing but a force with flows and intensities coming together: unlike the linear drive towards mastery, ideas that come in loops and swirls, in murmurs – murmurations – of resistance and possibility. These murmurs emanate from cultural currents that are so deep, relentless and unstoppable. They rise to the surface of these histories, these experiences and these meanings – often buried in our everyday words and language. They are ineradicable by the rational, neo-liberal combine harvester of late capitalist modernity.

That monoculture we see in the rolling fields of our (state) educational system still has weeds growing between the rows and at the margins and seeds years old waiting for their opportunity to germinate.¹

Just like industrial and intensive agriculture, this book is premised on an awareness of how destructive homogenising approaches to English have become. They murder the soil in which they grow. They belong to a view of economy that is (at best) a century-and-a-half old and which depended on unshod children and the dehumanisation of dispossessed, brown-skinned peoples in distant countries of the world. Just as the model of economy ('nation'-centric) bounded by walls, patrolled by uniformed agents of the State, it is ultimately insular and doomed. It may be that English operates, and has always operated, as an ontotheological principle: a matter of belief rather than reasoned argument. Rancière argues that "Reason begins when discourses organized with the goal of being right cease" (1981: 44), which seems unpropitious in a phase when those discourses of being right have been granted through disastrous reforms of GCSE and A level, an almost post-mortal 'second chance' while neatly removing that second chance from the reach of millions of students: *rigour mortis* indeed! Here inequality is reinstated through the bogus return (what other kind is there?) of Michael Young's dystopic sociological satire-turned feasible progressive philosophy 'meritocracy' which Berardi calls "the Trojan Horse of Neo-liberalism" (Berardi, 2019: 213). This sadly is what we have and central to the antagonism of much collected here is its dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. Closer to our argument, and our continued optimism for the English 'thing', is Rancière's insistence on "an equality in act, verified, at each step by those marchers who, in their constant attention to themselves and in their endless revolving around the truth, find the right sentences to make themselves understood by others" (Rancière, 1981: 44). Here is the project of English, the good old cause.

It is certainly true that Subject English is a collection of myths, alibis for that which promised so much to so many and delivered so little to so few. This is somewhat ironic given the fact that Barthes, in his coining of myth as a semiological term, offers up literature and analysis of language as ways of combatting myth, by mythifying it in turn. Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth? All that is needed ... Literature offers some great examples of such artificial mythologies.

(Barthes, 1972: 134)

Rather than fighting back, though, Subject English, as a *marque subject* and *cause celebre*, has been closed down and reopened as a heritage attraction, a museum of its past glories and lasting failings. As such, it has been forced from its position as a focus indeed locus for the general appropriation of language by those who account it their 'way of happening', the means of expressing their multiplicity as 'proper' speech. Rancière writes of a "kind of breaking and entering" which is "a practical refutation of the hierarchical opposition between argued speech and the noisy voice" (Rancière, 2016: 72). He also writes more straightforwardly about the political transition from mutism to speech which "is made using words that aren't yours that already exist, the subversive act being appropriation of those words" (op. cit.: 73). This is the project of English, "the appropriation of speech that allows you to tell your personal experience differently, to subjectify daily experience and phrasing in a language that is no longer the language of everyday life or work" (op. cit.). Subject English finds itself under occupation then in the midst of a crisis at the moment of greatest need.

Beset by a curriculum that rates set-piece feats of knowledge acquisition ('facts, facts, facts!') above critical thought and re-channels Dickensian satire as educational theory, Subject English finds itself bogged down, outflanked and flat-footed at the very moment it might have most to offer. The most recent manifestations of Subject English, the conservative view of English as a museum piece that summons up a chivalrous/pastoral idyll, connects readily with our current post-Brexit context, and so with issues of racial and ethnic identities. Resonating as it does with a wave of new nationalisms, contingent on the fragmentation of globalisation as conceived of in the 1990s and congealing as it does within the stifling orthodoxy of a knowledge-rich curriculum and compliant students who do not speak in corridors, who smile all the time and who most certainly never challenge the omniscience of the teacher, this mythologised version of English is about building walls. It is about trying to keep out the Other, the poor the disenfranchised, the would-be econo-linguistic migrants, whose aim is to sneak into Englishness and take over our jobs, our housing, our country, our language. And like Trump's wall and our more local 'hostile environments' and 'controlling our borders' discourse, this barrier is totally illusory. English, a language living through a billion different interactions on our streets, in letters, through telephone cables, and now, through the internet, flies over that wall as easily as a Grand National winner jumping Beaches Brook. Decolonised English, the miscegenate thoroughbred horse has bolted and is in the home straight. Colonial English, wizened and ghostly, on whom a whole range of fearful traditionalists are betting, fell at an earlier fence and is cantering riderless back towards the starting gate. If, as Franco Berardi has argued, "the consciousness of knowledge is the way to the emancipation of the future", then English has a vital part to play in recovering and reclaiming 'knowledge' from the clutches of the neo-liberal project. Because if knowledge is not about essentialist truth but "rather about the creation of meaning and the invention of technical interfaces projecting meaningfulness into reality" (Berardi, 2019: 198), then we're in the right place at the right time. What we argue has murdered English is exactly the neo-liberal transformation of education "into a space of mere acquisition for specialised knowledge, a space where individualism and competition are cultivated to the detriment of solidarity and consciousness" (Berardi, 2019: 210). With a heavy whiff of Baudrillard, Berardi claims that "here, in the neoliberal transformation of the educational process, lies the ultimate danger of the final desertification of the future of humankind", while the project of English seeks to breed lilacs even in a dead land. Berardi's warning is stark and echoed particularly in the first tranche of responses here, these little deaths:

If the trend towards the separation of technical formation and critical education goes on by the 2nd generation no trace of autonomous self-consciousness will be left in the social brain, the legacy of modern culture will be reduced to vestiges for antique dealers and the general intellect will be forever subjugated.

(Berardi, 2019: 2010–2011)

Berardi explicitly identifies the battleground as the autonomy of knowledge, which he insists is a social rather than philosophical issue: "The next fight will be about the autonomy of knowledge from the epistemological and practical hegemony of the economic paradigm" (op. cit. 203). This is the problem of English beset by the conundrum that "The autonomy of knowledge presupposes the independence of those who animate the general intellect" (op. cit.). The 'general intellect' is the term Marx uses (using these English words) to express the idea of general social knowledge, the knowledge of everyday life, technical and intellectual, which as an "actor of disentanglement"

provides people with agency. Agency is a key element of this collection, which also builds an arena within which key issues can be contested across the sectors. In the title of this collection, 'the murder of English' is linked always to what we also call 'the murmur of English', representing the fact that even bitter experience tends not only to despair but also to connection, fellowship and ultimately community. The philosopher Georges Bataille makes clear the vital importance of this collective context, arguing that "there can be no inner experience without the community of those who live it"(in Mitchell and Winfree, 2009: 6). In their introduction to Bataille's work on communication and community, Mitchell and Winfree draw out the implications of this, arguing that "Inner experience requires a community of lucky beings drawn together, bound together in their excessive movement, in their fall away from themselves"(ibid). This is quite an ask but it is also the epicentre of the potential for a rebirth, or at least reboot of English. Thus we embrace Bataille's sense of community, a community located in an openness and generosity of spirit that "in exceeding therequirements of homogenization, preservation and justification ... falls in love, dies, laughs, cries, mourns, celebrates, suffers" (Mitchell and Winfree, 2009: 6). And this leads us in turn to Fred Moten's notion of 'fellowshipping', which combines this sense of community with an insistence on the significance of language to this commitment, which we share. Moten, a poet and cultural theorist, expressed this most pertinently and powerfully in a sermon as guest preacher for Trinity Church's annual celebration of Dr Martin Luther King Sunday. In Wall Street, New York's emblematic financial centre, Moten makes his case, which is also our case. He starts by revealing, for preaching and indeed writing, that "the deep and simple secret is not talking but listening", confirming also for this book that "we come here to listen to one another" (Moten, 2020). Moreover, he gives thanks for this "beautifully mutual waiting and listening and attending" and again this 'attending' to who you are and what you do is central for us too. Moten tells the story, 40 years old, of his grandfather's passing and how, as a diligent and keen gardener, his grandfather had left a garden full of produce without the family having the capacity to harvest it. Enter Mr and Mrs Brazil and their children who turned up unbeckoned (and local rather than connected to the Motens) and over weeks helped in the 'gathering in'. When Moten's grandmother pressed them to name a price for their labour, Mrs Brazil instead had a further gift delivered in the "glorious black working class vernacular of south-eastern Arkansas" (Moten's native language): "Mother, you don't owe us anything. This is how we fellowship". This *vignette* leads Moten into a brilliant and uplifting treatise on both language and action. This starts with a demolition of the language police (some highly educated people who are in fact ignorant), those whose "knowledge of language has been much impoverished by correction", a theme of our book too. The rest is a call to arms energised by Mrs Brazil's simple act of appropriation. As Moten says: "it wasn't because she mistook the noun 'fellowship' for a verb but rather because she knew because she showed that gathering is what we are and what we do" (Moten, 2020). And this is what we're also principally doing: appropriating, problematising, reclaiming but also considering "what it is to have been or to be collective, gathered..." (op. cit.). This group of writer-practitioners are not bound by a research project or indeed this book, our commitment is ongoing and open-ended like thought itself. And we have found like Moten that "this is as much about unmaking as it is about making: it's about tearing stuff up as well as about harvesting" (op. cit.). As a whole, we are hoping that the book offers resources of hope to English teachers who have been besieged by decades of reductive and constraining policy prescriptions. This necessarily begins with a good deal of 'heart sickness' and anguish at a context in which work with language has become a chore and "the activity of the brain is disjointed from the social existence of the body" (Berardi, 2019: 206). Add to this an obsession with outcomes and a return to the devalued

rhetoric of a meritocracy and there is a kind of perfect storm. Berardi argues that meritocracy is the ultimate cover story, “the hot bed of precariousness fostering competition: when individuals are obliged to fight for survival, intellectual and technical abilities are reduced only to tools for economic confrontation” (Berardi, 2019: 212). Sadly, Berardi concludes, and many of our contributors agree, that “meritocracy is also a stimulus for ignorance” (*ibid*). The limitations of a curriculum predicated on teaching to the test are clear. Berardi reminds us that “as the criteria of evaluation are fixed by those who have power the learner is invited to adopt the evaluation criteria corresponding to the existing powers” (*ibid*). This is the dangerously compromised position many teachers find themselves in, trying to maintain the autonomy of the learning process and accept that the evaluation of our efforts is wholly in another’s hands. But it is worth fighting for by any means available, as this book hopes to demonstrate.

The book is laid out in three sections and, cutting across these, the chapters offer insights from across the ‘phases’ of education: primary, secondary, further education and higher education.

Kirstie Harrington’s chapter opens Part 1 with a student’s angry outburst to set the scene. The opening confronts the reader immediately with a situation that will be familiar to many GCSE English teachers, that in the classroom there is often a gulf between the regional varieties of English used by students and the accuracy and standard forms they have to demonstrate competence in in order to achieve the magic level 4 pass grade. Kirstie’s chapter explores how policy has positioned teachers as mediators of a curriculum that some students find alienating while acknowledging above and beyond this prescription, the dynamism of the English language and the futile attempts of the adult world to nail it down.

In Chapter 2, Georgina Garbett and Nic Worgan look at the same issue of how GCSE English interacts with students’ language identities. Here the authors’ focus is on oracy and its importance in learning English. The chapter presents a dialogue between two experienced GCSE teachers about the removal of speaking and listening as a component of assessment at the GCSE level. The discussion positions speaking and listening as providing a vital bridge between experience/identity and the curriculum, which has sadly, in recent years, been removed. Salya Akhtar has a range of experiences of teaching English from Offender Learning to secondary. In Chapter 3, she draws on this experience to critique the recent policy insistence on a so-called ‘knowledge-rich’ curriculum and the

consequences of this in a high-stakes environment for teaching and learning. The 'knowledge booklets' that have emerged in response to this policy are revealed as narrowing the curriculum and consequently excluding many of the cultural resources students bring with them into the classroom.

Elizabeth Draper and Joanne Bowser-Angermann's chapter once more draws on experience from further education, where English has been a compulsory subject for all 16–18-year-old students focusing on English GCSE 'resits'. Jo's research into students' experience of resits provides evidence for how this 'gateway' subject leaves very little room for significant numbers of students to engage with it meaningfully. The authors lament the failure of the English curriculum to open itself to the diversity of the student body and the wasted opportunity for disenfranchised students that this represents.

In Chapter 5, Louise Wheatcroft tracks the swinging pendulum of policy in English against a backdrop of an accountability and performance agenda. She provides important policy background for the introduction of the Literacy Hour in primary classrooms and charts subsequent developments. For her, hope resides in the continuing research originating outside of government circles that provides important evidence for effective literacy learning and teaching.

Debbie Haynes, in Chapter 6, also draws on her own research. She develops a picture of English teachers as the servants of two masters with contradictory agenda. She explores the huge tension between what English teachers think the subject is for and about and the system they navigate that focuses on assessment, standardisation and measurement. In order to be the best teacher they can be for their pupils, teachers find themselves having to manage this enforced split personality.

In Part 2, contributors relate experiences of struggle but also give us glimpses of excitement and possible reopenings. Heather James, in Chapter 7, makes an impassioned call for a curriculum that does not exclude. Her portrait of Zainab, her descriptive Christmas text and the unexpected appearance of a polar bear poignantly illustrate the challenges faced by a committed teacher constrained by a culturally restrictive curriculum.

Chapter 8 moves the discussion into the HE context. Harvey Jopling-Jones and Michael Jopling provide a cross-generational experience of English at the degree level in a narrowing post-Brexit context in which the subject seems to be struggling to adapt to its own ever-increasing breadth and richness. Beyond the emphasis on the politics of interpretation at the degree level and the need to maintain a sense of textual ambiguity, the cumulative sense is that English needs, in future, to open itself up and allow itself to recognise, resist and challenge the difficulties it faces.

Chapter 9 shifts the reader's gaze onto a new area as Mel Carter charts her changing opinions on the growing phenomenon of home education and the issues it raises for English. Her initial concerns give way to empathy with parents who have opted to take their children out of our current highly regulated and prescribed system of schooling. While undoubtedly demanding, Mel celebrates the project approaches to learning and the reading of whole texts enabled by home education and concludes that self-expression and joy have to be irreducible features of any English curriculum.

In Chapter 10, Steph Perks, Jennifer Wells and Victoria Wright, three English teachers with a background in further education, share their experiences. Their autobiographical contributions explore how English has become a technology for regulating communication, whereas for them it will always be about connecting human experience to the word. Their chapter then shifts to looking at writing in further education classrooms.

Chapter 11 opens in Shaun Allen-Dooley's Primary school classroom during an Ofsted inspection with a teacher asked to identify both their best student and a 'disadvantaged' one. So begins a fascinating trip through differing notions of cultural capital (differing accuracy mainly) and their implications for teachers and pupils alike.

Chapter 12 has Pete Bennett and Howard Scott providing a thoughtful and philosophical contribution to thinking about students' writing while remaining grounded in real classroom practice. The context is a Foundation degree and the main drive is to build students' confidence in their writing, but the discussion soars

and circles round the enormous significance for students of assuming an identity as 'writer' and how to construct that identity means to wrap it around the kernel of who they already are.

In Part 3, contributors look ahead and try to offer hope and insights into new ways of thinking about English. The focus is on the timeless attributes of English, those that connect individual and collective histories to English in ways that telescope time. Chapter 13 develops this theme with Shaun Passey, writing from a VUth form College context, outlining an approach to text that opens up opportunities for multiple readings.

Prompted by the urgency for all of us to make new meanings and connections, to engage with multiple knowledges and different ways of knowing, Chapter 14 is a detailed account from Louise Lambert of what posthuman perspectives offer in English. Posthumanism takes account of human beings and the material world of which they are a part and can enable new and different ways of experiencing and understanding texts. Louise illustrates how a rhizomatic approach to pedagogy can challenge the taken-for-granted and offer opportunities to break out of the strictures of mastery and achievement in order to revitalise the unruly English classroom.

In Chapter 15, Chris Waugh brings an antipodean perspective on Secondary English, which is predicated on autonomy, on shifting the nexus of power and promoting writing and writers rather than chasing targets. This is idealism embodied in current practice.

Chapter 16 explores English through Lefebvrian moments: crystalline episodes of illumination that thread together over years to form an understanding of how English constitutes us: is who we are. Rob Smith provides insights into how these moments – often outside of classrooms – connect affective and intellectual experiences in ways that are intimately entwined in our identities.

The final chapter has Ian Cushing supply essential linguistic understandings around Standard English, its historical provenance and how, in fact, these are intimately connected with historical oppressions such that we need to re-evaluate students'

language rather than dismissing it.

This is the project of the book: to patiently revisit, rethink, and slowly and surely to revive Subject English.

Note

1 As evidenced at the Western front during WWI: the seeds of the common poppy can lie dormant in the soil for decades and still germinate.

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