

To listen with decolonial ears: Hein Willemse, hidden histories, and the politics of disruptive intervention

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In this article, we canvass some of the ideas around Hein Willemse's focus on hidden histories, conscious oppositionality, and literature that falls outside the canon, which began to coalesce following contemporary calls for decolonial approaches in the (South) African academy. While the decolonial turn has focused attention on shared histories within Global South contexts, it is through Willemse's postcolonial teachings that we first came to understand the importance and meaning of reclaiming the lost African ontological space. This article is, therefore, located in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship in the sense that it is not driven by a particular method but rather by questions that emerged from larger social contexts. We draw on Willemse's visionary understanding of the importance of hidden histories and what it might mean to listen with postcolonial and/or decolonial ears. This, amongst other things, requires an acute awareness of history, heritage, and legacies both in society and in the academy. We incorporate a random selection of his work to unpack how his disruptive intervention serves to reformulate the idea of Afrikaans and Afrikaans literature in ways that are more inclusive of those silenced by the apartheid project, including Africa and the Global South at large. **Keywords:** decolonial listening, "buitekanoniserings", postcoloniality, conscious oppositionality.

Trammakassie for Hein Willemse¹

I (v. c. m.) will never forget the day Hein Willemse, my new boss at that stage, asked me, "viola, what are you doing?" I was confused. As he had my work schedule in front of him, he obviously knew exactly what I was doing and so, of course, I conveyed my confusion. He explained: "I notice that you are administratively quite busy and you have a teaching load that speaks to academia, but where are your publications?" Willemse was the first person

to directly confront me with the academic notion of “publish or perish”. He encouraged me to reduce the “busy work” that is academia adjacent, complete my PhD, and make work of publishing. Every day, for my entire time in the Department of Afrikaans under his leadership, he would stop by my office and we would go have lunch at one of the restaurants on campus. It was during these informal lunches where his unobtrusive mentorship really shined. He would listen to my many stories of my hometown, Eersterust, and my musings on issues of identity at the cusp of a changing South Africa and engage me with his experiences of being a struggle warrior under apartheid and his ideas on what the changing South African context might mean for Afrikaans. Willemse’s guidance was not restricted to a dialogue sans context. He would also give me drafts of his work to read and seek my input. His legendary way with words assisted me when I struggled to articulate my thoughts and he would nudge me towards authors and conferences that could assist in broadening my academic vocabulary and hone my presentation skills. In this sense, he allowed my confidence to flourish and lived his philosophy of establishing a critical mindset in developing scholars.

Professor Hein Willemse has shaped my (H. M. K.) academic and professional career in obvious but implicit ways. On a concrete level, my first official position in academia was in 2003 as assistant-lecturer in the Department of Afrikaans at the University of Pretoria, under the leadership of Willemse as Head of Department. Significantly, I was hired to teach “Language, culture and communication” (LCC) modules, to my mind one of Willemse’s great contributions to disrupting the scope of the Department of Afrikaans at that moment in time. On a deeper level, however, I have been privileged to be a mentee of his in many ways, firstly as his honours student, and then during my master’s and doctoral studies. Willemse always encouraged me to own my growth as a developing scholar, although much of it was achieved through his mentorship. Perhaps the most seminal mentee opportunity he gave me was as part of the administrative editorial team of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* when he was editor-in-chief. Under the editorial leadership of Willemse, *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* underwent a transformation that broadened its perspective and encapsulated much of Willemse’s contribution, and approach, to academia, pedagogy, and knowledge articulation. It is now clear to me that, at the time, I did not comprehend the magnitude and the pioneering impact of this transformation. I am still discovering what Willemse guided me towards in his soft-spoken way, but also through his listening, more than two decades after our first encounters.

bell hooks (204) writes that “Stuart Hall talks about the need for a ‘politics of articulation.’ He [Hall] and Eddie have engaged in dialogue with me in a deeply soulful way, hearing my struggle for words. It is this dialogue between comrades that is a gesture of love; I am grateful”. We agree with hooks. We are grateful.

Introduction

In commemorating the intellectual life-world of a distinguished academic one could very well ask “What evidence counts?” in tracing their legacy. In this article, we do not proffer a close analysis of Willemse’s entire oeuvre, or even his individual works, but rather, much like Willemse in his 2007 monograph, *Aan die ander kant: Swart Afrikaanse skrywers in die Afrikaanse letterkunde* (On the other side: Black Afrikaans writers in Afrikaans literature), we are more interested in situating his work, and our interpretation thereof, within, and from, the vantage point of a broader socio-intellectual perspective. Our contribution is by no means exhaustive, and some might argue that it is not even really representative, of Willemse’s impressive and diverse literary and intellectual oeuvre. Such representativeness, however, is not our intention. This contribution is focussed instead on the academic and intellectual spirit Willemse embodies, which resonated for us from our initial engagements with him as outlined in our “Trammakassie” section, and which we found to be prevalent in his work and approach to teaching and learning throughout. In so doing, we deliberately chose to focus on a selection of Willemse’s works. As such, we embrace a convivial epistemology in which we recognise and make provision for the reality of being incomplete. As Nyamnjoh (“Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality” 262) argues, “incompleteness is the normal order of things, natural or otherwise, [and] conviviality invites us to celebrate and preserve incompleteness and mitigate the delusions of grandeur that come with ambitions and claims of completeness”. In this sense, our contribution also resonates with Willemse’s own words:

’n Oeuvre-studie of ’n monografie soos hierdie is wesenlik ’n strukturele vervalsing wanneer dit die illusie van voltooidheid of totaliteit wil skep. Dit kan hoogstens ’n voltooidheid wees wat berus op kunsmatige isolasie. Daarom is die isolering van die kategorie vir ondersoek van soveel belang vir Jameson [...] (Ander kant 19)

An oeuvre-study, or monograph, like this is, in essence, a structural falsification when it wants to portray the illusion of completeness or totality. It can, at most, be a completeness rested on artificial isolation. This is why the isolation of the category of exploration is of such importance to Jameson [...]

Nyamnjoh (“Incompleteness” 262) notes that conviviality encourages us to recognise our own incompleteness and challenges us to be open-minded and open-ended in our claims and articulations of identities, being, and belonging. Conviviality, he argues, encourages us to reach out, encounter, and explore ways of enhancing or complementing ourselves with the added possibilities of potency brought our way by the incompleteness of others. Willemse is the embodiment of such epistemological conviviality, which we argue here constitutes an act of decolonial listening. We are both living testament to Willemse’s conviviality and the impact of his ability to listen with decolonial ears. He was the first person to act as a mentor for both of us. His approach to mentoring, research, and teaching instilled in us a sense of agency and of purpose, and his willingness to allow us space to develop teaching syllabi

and debate viewpoints with us unobtrusively skilled us in the competencies necessary to shape our own lives and, hopefully, contribute meaningfully to the lives of others. Although we had both, with his encouragement, since moved on from Afrikaans literature and linguistics, this worldview with which he empowered us stayed. It is from this standpoint, then, that we approach this article.

To this end, in commemorating Willemse's impact we deliberately chose to move our focus beyond the simplistic, and sometimes tokenistic, strategy of affording voice to addressing how voice can be made to matter. As Roy (1) points out, "There is really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard". As such, we focus here on what we refer to as "decolonial listening". Decolonial listening is a way to perceive, and attend, to the alternative voices silenced by the modernity project (Vázquez). In this article, we argue that Willemse's radical approach to research, pedagogy, and intellectualism, "entails the art of listening combined with the practice of theorising in the service of expanding who belongs to the public" (Clarke 275). His work, we will demonstrate, echoes with the voices of the deliberately silenced and those purposefully unheard by the literary centre. This, in our view, constitutes an act of decolonial listening. We will examine the kind of knowledge(s) articulated and contested by Willemse and, in particular, the kind of habitus that Willemse has argued must proceed from a commitment to the sort of knowledge he champions. In this sense, we will loosely map the contours of Willemse's visionary understanding of the importance of hidden histories and what it might mean to listen with postcolonial and/or decolonial ears. In so doing, we embrace a non-linear understanding of reading, writing, and critiquing. Hence works are not necessarily discussed in order of publication but rather in line with our discovery process and in line with the arguments we wish to advance. This article, therefore, invokes Stuart Hall's "politics of articulation" as a starting point to ground our arguments about Willemse's oppositional intellectuality. Following this, we reflect on Willemse's approach to pedagogy and scholarship. Here, our focus is on a selection of Willemse's works as they relate to postcoloniality, decoloniality, and Afrocentricity. The article concludes with an overview of Willemse's contributions in integrating a discussion on hegemony, power, and the importance of claiming voice, especially from the margin.

Willemse's "politics of articulation"

We use Stuart Hall's "politics of articulation" concept to argue that Willemse's work can be seen as an intervention, a "message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as site of resistance" (hooks 209). Slack (112) notes that "[s]trategically, articulation provides a mechanism for shaping intervention within a particular social formation, conjuncture or context [...] it is with and through articulation that we engage the concrete in order to change it, that is, to rearticulate it". Willemse's intellectual and creative oeuvre, it can be

argued, is geared towards new thinking and rearticulating the literary canon, specifically as it relates to our understandings of Afrikaans and what it means to be Afrikaans in contemporary South Africa. While his entire oeuvre is arguably geared towards such rearticulation, he formally mapped the route towards institutional change and broadening the Afrikaans—and concomitantly then also the African—archive in his inaugural lecture given at the University of Pretoria in 2001. This lecture was later revised as a publication entitled “Om ruim in Afrika te leef” (To live abundantly in Africa). Herein, Willemse (17) elaborates the need to strive for:

’n ruimer kurrikulumbeskouing, ’n ruimer Afrikaansheid, maar ook ’n ruimer Suid-Afrikaansheid. Die grootste uitdaging in die ontplooiing van ’n Departement Afrikaans in ons tydsgewrig is om weg te beweeg van ’n verkalkte letterkundige praktyk [...] Dit beteken naas gevestigde praktyke ’n doelbewuste skakeling met ander Suid-Afrikaanse, Afrika en internasionale tradisies; ’n verbreding van ons navorsingspraktyke om byvoorbeeld ’n slag weer krities na ons geïnstusionaliseerde literêre modelle, benaderings en ingesteldheid te kyk; om erns te maak met die eise van ons eietydse kulturele praktyke.

a more accommodating view of the curriculum, an expansive Afrikaans-ness, but also a more accommodating South-Africanness. The biggest challenge in the establishment of a Department of Afrikaans in our current context is to move away from outdated literary practices [...] This means a deliberate linking of established practises with other South African, African and international traditions; a broadening of our research practises into, for example, critically looking at our institutionalised literary models, approaches and attitudes; to seriously engage with the demands of our contemporary cultural practices.

Willemse then proceeds to articulate what essentially came to be seen as his practice of embodied pedagogy and the work of translation. He outlines a seven-point approach to opening up the research, teaching, and practice of an Afrikaans that has the “ability to hear the other, to feel with the other and above all to doubt” (Willemse, “Jakes Gerwel (1946–2012)” 126). We paraphrase:

- Honing a spirit of conscious oppositionality in emerging scholars and students as a pathway to disrupting the confines of Afrikaans literature.
- Negating essentialist approaches to an Afrikaans canon, towards a more encompassing perspective that views literature and its canon as a historically constructed entity.
- Critically reflecting on the canon and taking serious efforts to broaden the archive through inclusion, rather than flatten it through continuing practices of exclusion. Here, he is particularly interested in including textual approaches to, for example, television and the internet.
- Consciously undermining the ethnic character of Afrikaans.
- Broadening the scope of Afrikaans literature requires an active and cooperative role in relation to Southern African literatures and languages.

- In conjunction with the foregoing, Departments of Afrikaans must also endeavour towards the inclusion of Afrikaans in a broader African context.
- Finally, and equally importantly, globalisation requires that Departments of Afrikaans must explore the development of literatures from similar contexts (Willemse, “Ruim” 18–21).

From the above, it is clear that Willemse’s postcolonial approach to teaching, research, and mentoring emphasises and embraces conscious oppositionality, Africanity, and Global South knowledge. In line with other postcolonial scholars of his time, Willemse refers to his approach as “oppositional criticism” (*Ander kant* 13). His arguments above also serve to steer scholarship towards enhanced sensitivity to complex African life-worlds and the ever-shifting disguises of power in them. Read from a contemporary standpoint, Willemse, without expressly stating it, is in effect arguing here towards Afrocentricity and for the decolonisation of Departments of Afrikaans and the teaching and research of Afrikaans in institutions of higher learning. His inaugural lecture can be read as a clarion call to revisit the subject of study, the body of evidence, the analytical frameworks and theoretical perspectives, and academic cultures, if Afrikaans is to be wrested from the cage of narrow nationalism and colonial mindsets. Decolonisation is often perceived as a means to uncover the histories of the colonised and bring their stories to the awareness of the mainstream. To “decolonize the mind”, in this respect, can be conceptualised as the process of understanding one’s history to understand the present.

The colonial mindset, it can be argued, produces, and is the product of, what Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to as a “single story”. She states:

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is “nkali.” It’s a noun that loosely translates to ‘to be greater than another.’ Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

Willemse’s approach to research, teaching, and mentoring emphasises giving space and listening to the historically silenced voices as a gateway to expanding the archive and uncovering other knowledge and ways of knowing. From a contemporary decolonial perspective, this is an act of epistemic disobedience. There is a need for African scholars to uncover hidden histories about colonialism and its impact and develop a critical understanding of it. Afrocentricity in this respect argues for shifting the focus from the coloniser to the colonised, arguing that “all discourse about African people should be grounded in the centrality of Africans in their own narratives” (Asante).

Willemse (“Towards the fullness of the Afrikaans language” n. p.) is acutely aware of this, noting in relation to his discipline of choice that:

For the current generation of South Africans, much of this history has been forgotten or simply never taught in school, college or university. The only version of the history of the Afrikaans language that has ever been taught in schools or propagated through popular media is the Afrikaner nationalist version of it, which started with the *Genootskap vir Regte Afrikaanders*. Why, for instance, do we continue to think of 14 August as the only date associated with the early history of Afrikaans? In the nationalist version of history, the indigenous people, the slaves and the poor were sidelined, and their role and place in the development of it, minimised [...] We need to resurrect the history of Afrikaans forcefully—through accumulative acts—as one of intermingling, creolization and the speech of people of various backgrounds, be they indigenous or settler, slave or master, black or white.

For Willemse, this undiscussed past of Afrikaans literatures and communication simultaneously underscores the need for structural and systemic changes in our institutions of higher learning. In this respect, his explication of canonisation, and what he refers to as “*buitekanoniserings*”, which can be loosely translated as that which falls outside the traditional canon, serves as an important marker for his decolonised approach to literature in South Africa’s fragmented society:

Kanoniserings en sy dialektiese teenhanger, buitekanoniserings, is nie eng literêre verskynsels nie, en berus tot ’n groot mate op die uitoefening van sosiale en politieke mag [...] Die skool (of die afwesigheid van die skool) speel ’n belangrike rol in die ontwikkeling van die kanon. Die skool (of die universiteit) vervul nie net ’n kuratoriese funksie nie, maar filtreer ook die produksie en verwerwing van kennis (en gevolglik ook hegemone sosiale en kulturele waardes). Dit is in die skool dat ’n bepaalde soort kennis—die kennis van hoe en wat om te lees en te skryf—oorgedra en gevestig word. Die gevestigde kanon is ’n duidelike voorbeeld van die oorheersing van die dominante of hegemone samelewingswaardes [...]

Canonisation and its dialectic opposite “*buitekanoniserings*” are not strictly literary phenomena and rest to a large extent on the practise of social and political power [...] The school (or the absence of a school) plays an important role in the development of the canon. The school (or university) does not only fulfil a curatory role, but also filters the production and acquisition of knowledge (and therefore also hegemonic social and cultural values). It is in school that a certain type of knowledge—the knowledge of who and what to read and write—is being taught and established. The established canon is a clear example of the power and influence of the dominant or hegemonic societal values. (Willemse, “n Inleiding tot buitekanonieke Afrikaanse kulturele praktyke” 87)

Read in conjunction with his inaugural lecture, Willemse’s argument here effectively illustrates that scholars, students, intellectuals, and indeed the theorists that are shaping the decolonial discourse in the South African context need to examine our own formative histories and political and cultural ideologies. This is a much needed intellectual exercise to determine

how we may be locked into the very systems of power we are attempting to get out of. This is necessary as we often exercise power in, and through, the very institutions, cultural relations, and practices of the systems of which we are critical. For Opara (n. p.), “[p]ower is fundamental to colonialism, neo-colonialism, and coloniality. Critical introspection as to how individuals as part of institutions, as well as the institutions themselves, produce, re-produce, maintain, and benefit from intersectional systems of oppression within a colonial framework is necessary for decolonization to be realized.” Yet, as we will demonstrate below, Willemse reminds us that we are not powerless in the face of institutional systems that prescribe our path and that are definitely not designed in our favour (De La Tierra 368). Instead, what can be gleaned from his work is that through learning a discipline, a code of behaviour, and even the master’s tongue, “we are in positions to create change [...] to be mentors, to select materials and teaching methods, to actively participate in and affect the discourse of academia [...] we can be subversive within the system [...] we have to remember we have the right to be here” (368).

Against this backdrop, Willemse’s inaugural lecture can be seen as a “disruptive intervention” that fundamentally changed the trajectory of the Department of Afrikaans at the University of Pretoria. His subsequent work affirmed his intellectual standpoint as a maverick academic. To illustrate what we mean by this, we move to our reflections on Willemse’s approach to pedagogy and scholarship. Here, we focus on a selection of Willemse’s works as they relate to postcoloniality, decoloniality, and Afrocentricity. We conclude with an overview of Willemse’s contributions in integrating a discussion on hegemony, power, and the importance of claiming voice, especially from the margin.

To read against the grain: Reflections on Willemse’s approach to pedagogy, scholarship, and decolonial listening

In this section, we reflect on Willemse’s academic engagements with the goal of highlighting his radical approach to pedagogy and scholarship, which, in our experience, was geared toward disruption and “brush[ing] history against the grain” (Benjamin 258). For us, there are two seminal texts that embody the type of scholarship that typifies Willemse’s intellectualism: the first is his published inaugural address (cited above) and the second his contribution to Van Coller’s seminal history of Afrikaans literature, *Perspektief & Profiel* where he sets out his understanding of the place of the canon in praxis. This contribution to was first published in 1999 and later republished in the second edition in 2016. The perspectives put forth in *Perspektief & Profiel* find footing in his inaugural suggestion for expanding the Afrikaans archive. We think that both of these are aptly brought together in “The hidden histories of Afrikaans” (2018), where Willemse walks the talk of challenging the canon through respectful listening, amplifying, centring, and passing the microphone to voices deliberately silenced

by the Afrikaner nationalist project. Scaffolded by postcolonial methodologies, Willemse's work embodies a discourse of oppositionality.

In "Hidden histories", Willemse (125) reflects on the multi-faceted history of Afrikaans and focuses on its "counter-history":

In all of this, language historians, nationalist politicians, the media and school curricula have chosen to tell one story, and it was this story that non-Afrikaans speakers—individuals, communities and institutions outside the Afrikaans speech community—have accepted as the only story. Afrikaans became indelibly identified with Afrikaner nationalism—'the oppressor'. In the process, the place and relevance of black Afrikaans speakers have been denied. The constituent sides of the broader Afrikaans speaking community, of black Afrikaans speaking people in particular, today's numerical majority, have been silenced effectively. As young Black Consciousness-inspired academics we understood that a different story needed to be told. At the very least, one that tells of a more encompassing history, a history that explored the life and culture of those marginalised, i.e. the neglected histories, language, literature and culture of black Afrikaans speakers.

In contrast to conceptualisations of Afrikaans as the language of oppressors and racists, and in contrast to its more "known"—or normative—history, Willemse and his peers emphasise the fact that "the language also bears the imprint of a fierce tradition of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, of an all-embracing humanism and anti-apartheid activism" ("Hidden histories" 116). This focus on, and exploration of, hidden histories and counter-narratives is a recurring focus in Willemse's scholarship and our appraisal reveals that this golden thread traces through his body of work as well as his research practices and pedagogy. On a topical level, Willemse's work focuses on authors and works of literature which upend, negate, or question hegemonic ideas about Afrikaans, its origin, and its history and which oftentimes propose new thinking and uncovering the untold part of its history. In practice, Willemse's intellectual project is also representative of such a counter-discursive body of work, activating these "hidden histories" and embodying the counter-discursive philosophy he proposes, speaking from the margin, as it were.

Traces of Willemse's commitment to disrupt the accepted status quo and rupture the comfortable ignorance of the centre are already discernible in his contribution to *Perspektief & Profiel*. Willemse's chapter is titled: "'n Inleiding tot buitekanonieke Afrikaanse kulturele praktyke" (An introduction to Afrikaans cultural practices that fall outside of the canon), so that, even in arguably one of the most prominent, normative, historical accounts used by scholars of Afrikaans literature, Willemse's contribution represents the counter-narrative. The opening sentence of this chapter, i.e. "[d]ie insluiting van dié hoofstuk in *Perspektief & Profiel* is 'n paradoks" (the inclusion of this chapter in *Perspektief & Profiel* is a paradox), is more than telling and already hints at the epistemic disobedience evident in Willemse's contribution. By Willemse's own account, *Perspektief & Profiel* defines the centrum of Afrikaans literature, which contrasts explicitly with his contribution's overt focus on the margin. According to him, the paradox embodied in his contribution is aligned with growing resolutions

that the canon of Afrikaans literature be critically evaluated and increasing insistence from various stakeholder groups that the Afrikaans canon can only be defined when a multitude of genres, approaches, and voices are taken into account. Willemse focuses on three “spheres” which have, historically, been marginalised in the construction of the Afrikaans literary canon, namely the literature of marginal social groupings, popular culture, and the Afrikaans oral tradition. In this respect, Willemse’s work connects with the 20th century trend to reassess the literary canon which included not only an emphasis on amplifying silenced voices but also expanding our ideas of what is considered to be literature.

With this contribution in *Perspektief & Profiel*, Willemse manages to insert a counter-narrative of the development of the Afrikaans language and literature into a volume that is historically known for defining the canon. This is significant because, as Willemse (“Inleiding” 73) writes, the term “canon”, much like the term “dominant culture”, can be directly linked to social control and the power of cultural production and re-production. Thus, by stepping outside the canon, Willemse’s contribution to this edition of *Perspektief & Profiel* disrupts not only traditional perceptions of the canon but also of power and the positions of power from which certain types of knowledge are constructed, or articulated. For Willemse, as will be demonstrated below, expanding the canon is not merely an act of appending (in the case of Afrikaans) non-white voices as a counter-balance to the perceived whiteness of Afrikaans literature. It also includes a concerted effort to restore, in their rightful place, the originators of stories that had become fixed in the canon via white voices.

Willemse’s oppositional criticism is exemplified and operationalised in *Aan die ander kant*. Here, his efforts to restore originators of stories—and thereby broaden the Afrikaans literary archive—are introduced in practice. *Aan die ander kant* presents a selection of Willemse’s critical analyses of the tensions between the canon and *buitekanon* spanning more than two decades. Herein, Willemse challenges the notion of the Afrikaans literary canon, arguing that what has been offered thus far is, in fact, a homogenised body of work which impacts upon power relationships as it relates to inclusion, production, and distribution (*Ander kant* 11). Willemse’s *Aan die ander kant* is disruptive intervention in practice. It not only interrogates the implicit bias in the traditional Afrikaans literary canon; it also simultaneously provides a critical corrective through deliberately centring authors of colour and texts from non-traditional literary spaces. Firstly, Willemse unapologetically shines the spotlight only on texts, and authors, that have not yet been subjected to critical cultural analysis, and, secondly, he includes texts from magazines and newspapers, thus, texts that fall outside of traditional conceptions of the canon. Willemse, for example, focuses on columnist Piet Uithalder, playwright Paul Roubaix, and author Arthur Fula. The tenets of his approach and choice of subject matter, as it is revealed in his early work included in *Aan die ander kant*, can be identified in his subsequent work as well.

In “Tokkelossie, ‘n Boesman, outa Hendrik’ en ontkenende close readings” (Tikoloshe, “a Bushman, outa Hendrik” and denialist close readings), Willemse continues his search for the lost African ontological space. Whereas *Aan die ander kant* focused on broadening the Afrikaans literary canon through inclusion of marginalised voices of colour, this research focuses on recovering the voices of the deliberately silenced. According to Willemse, the figure of “Tokkelossie” in various texts and Eugène Marais’s *Dwaalstories* were initially acknowledged as originating from the Khoi, San, and other first nations. He posits that there is sufficient proof that these narrators created their stories in the creole language that would later be known as Afrikaans. During the twentieth century, however, their ownership became a point of dispute, and the origin stories were given a more European slant. In Spivak’s work, this is seen as a discursive strategy, known as “othering” which, as noted by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (96), “include the assumption of authority, ‘voice’ and control of the ‘word’, that is, seizure and control of the means of interpretation and communication. In many post-colonial texts this is done by means of ‘rewriting’ of canonical stories”. hooks (208) writes in this respect that:

Often this speech about the ‘Other’ annihilates, erases: ‘no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk.’

Willemse argues about Afrikaans that, in the absence of an established and extensive Afrikaans literature tradition, cultural activists appropriated old, indigenous oral narrations to create such a tradition. He notes that, originally, the contributions of these first nations were acknowledged because Afrikaner-identity, at that stage, was more fluid and Afrikaans, as a language, was still considered a creole language. However, as the nationalist project gained traction and the literary “canon” began playing an active part in establishing nationalist ideals, it no longer served the project to acknowledge the contributions of Khoi-, San-, Sotho-, Tswana-, Xhosa-, and Zulu-narrations and oral traditions. As such, Willemse questions the body of “scholarly literature, mostly close readings [...] which diminishes the role of the initial performer in favour of [in this case Eugène N.] Marais’ writerly aesthetics” (“Tokkelossie” 57). He takes issue with interpretations which explicitly deny Hendrik’s role as creator of the original performances and argues that his role should be acknowledged and reinstated. In this scholarly work, he interrogates power relations as it relates to ownership and, more specifically, the restoration and recognition of original storytellers. Moreover, what comes to the fore here is Willemse’s emphasis on oral history and traditions and the consequent reinterpretation of the idea of writing as the singular artistic, or literary, form. He questions close readings which deny the origin of certain stories, works which, in essence, appropriates by rewriting or denying the original history.

In decolonial terms, it could be said that Willemse is drawing attention to the coloniality of being. His work is about recognising knowledge, previously ignored under colonialism, which considered it to be “too savage and primitive to share a table with European colonial enlightenment and often misrepresented in the postcolonial era by ill-adapted curricula, epistemologies, and theories, and by many an academic and scholar whose intellectual clocks are set to the rhythm of transatlantic scholarly canons, practices, and standards of value in knowledge production and consumption” (Nyamnjoh, “Decolonizing the University in Africa” 3). On the one hand, Willemse’s analysis of the methodology of close reading and his unpacking of the connections between stories “sanitised for European eyes” with their Khoer or San originators underscores the importance of oral history and emphasises how a detailed, contextualised, historical view can provide a more rich and varied history of Afrikaans literature. On the other hand, and importantly for this discussion, it raises critical issues about important structures such as power, trust, cultural competence, respectful and legitimate research practice, and recognition of individuals and communities. It emphasises the need for alternative approaches which are culturally appropriate and geared towards recovering hidden histories. Said differently, it makes the case for disruptive intervention. Power enables some to define individuals and situations from a particular lens.

As Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (73) observe, “All representations may be mediated, but the simple assertions of [postcolonial scholar Edward Said’s] Orientalism remain: that power determines which representations may be accepted as ‘true’, that Orientalist texts owe their alleged ‘truthfulness’ to their location in the discourse, and that this situation is one that emerges out of, and confirms, a global structure of imperial domination”. In other words, operating from the context of a single story can prevent us from a more complex, nuanced view of a situation (see Adichie, n. p.). What Willemse’s careful uncovering of the origins of these stories demonstrates is the need for a nuanced understanding of, in this case, Afrikaans in local, regional, and global contexts. Here again, Willemse’s take on the Afrikaans canon and broadening the archive proves instructive. Like Rutledge, Willemse argues for the inclusion of oral histories in the canon. Rutledge notes that “narrative performance has historically played such a crucial role in human culture [...] this is an area in which present-day canons could be greatly expanded” (qtd in Bates n. p.). Willemse’s proposition for hybrid forms as a way to undermine a homogenised and essentialist view of Afrikaans literature is apropos. He suggests that hybrid forms which make a concerted effort to include, register, and interpret silenced, or marginalised, voices can expand the Afrikaans literary canon. He uses the example of pairing Henrik, an oral creator, in combination with authors, such as Marais, to write up these oral histories and acknowledges how this enriches Afrikaans literature. For Willemse (“Tokkelossie” 63), the symbiotic relationship between the storyteller/narrator, listener, and the scribe can lead to the recognition of the oral artistry of these native storytellers/narrators.

Willemse expands on the above in his review article entitled “Aantekening by drie klein geskiedenisne.” In this article he describes “counter-discursive texts written against specific hegemonic practices” through a focus on three disparate texts, namely *Koos Malgas, Sculptor of the Owl House* (Julia Malgas and Jeni Couzyn, 2008), *The Black Countess* (R. E. van der Ross, 2008), and *Die verhaal van Elandskloof* (Tobie Wiese assisted by Ricky Goedeman, 2009). For Willemse (“Aantekening” 150), the similarities displayed in these texts include “co-operation between authors, the margin as a site of resistance, the fragmented documentation of marginalised lives, the formation and re-formation of identities and the tensions around the expressions of ‘truth’”. He writes that, despite the counter-discursive nature of the texts, they are not explicitly a study of the subaltern, counter-hegemonic or an expression of the postcolonial. They are, however, histories of marginality, of sub-ordinate classes, women, workers, and the excluded, what Willemse (“Aantekening” 156) calls “histories from below”, where the voices of the marginalised are brought back to the fore. What these works bring is the possibility of acknowledging these small narratives and re-telling them as they oppose the idea of grand narratives: stories, rather than a single story.

In this sense, these voices serve as an alternative to the hegemonic colonial texts that worked to suppress and even annihilate their existence. This ties to Spivak’s notion of the subaltern and voice. In originating her theory of the subaltern, Spivak notes, as one goal, the possibility of alternative voices being recoverable within discourses which seem on the surface to be simplistic colonial texts. In other words, through an implicit acknowledgement of coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo n. p.), the idea here was to reclaim the voices of those who have been silenced by the assumptions of Western academia. For decolonial scholars, coloniality speaks to the issues of location and the locus of enunciation. Grosfoguel (211–23) articulates that knowledge is situated and the location of the enunciator is geopolitically and historically important. This idea is unpacked in Willemse’s analysis of Adam Small’s *The Orange Earth*.

In “Outobiografie en herinnering as verset in Adam Small se *The Orange Earth*”, Willemse shows how Adam Small deconstructed the coloniser/colonised relationship through creating a “counternarrative of a marginalised life” under the political system of apartheid. The play which, according to Willemse (“Orange Earth” 70), is presented “essentially as a play of ideas”, problematises the relationship between those classified as coloured and white Afrikaans-speaking people, as well as presenting a counter-narrative of the effects and aftermath of apartheid. In the analysis, Willemse highlights how Small constructs counter-narratives of belonging, persistence, cultural relationships, patriotism, and even violence and how all of these can be interlinked by Afrikaans. Willemse interprets Small’s use of English as one of the mechanisms creating this counter-narrative “on cultural disaffection and political disillusion [...] his ‘cry for citizenship’” (“Orange Earth” 70). Small’s growing disillusionment with the normative connotations of Afrikaans leads him to rather express himself in English despite his strong association with the Afrikaans language, creating a counter-narrative to Afrikaans identity, as it

were. Moreover, by Small's own admission, the text is semi-autobiographical, another trope Willemse writes about when he considers counter-narratives. In emphasising the autobiographical nature of Small's text, Willemse touches on the role of personal, or individual, memory in creating narratives that counter those of "official memory" and, in so doing, also problematises a singular perception of what "truth" entails. Small, in his autobiographical approach, presents himself as an oppositional intellectual ("Orange Earth" 71). In this regard, Willemse quotes Said (141), who writes that, "The intellectual's role is to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity and counterdiscourse that will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep". For Willemse, Small's text presents an autobiographical text in which the underlying appeal is for a reimagined Afrikaans community, in opposition to the orthodox nature of apartheid, and even for a patriotism based on new grounds ("Orange Earth" 81).

The foregoing focus on authors who write against the establishment is also present in Willemse's other academic projects, for example, his analysis of the oeuvre of André P. Brink. He writes of how Brink's central impulse was to re-interpret the "old" and to challenge, or re-formulate, existing boundaries ("André P. Brink se bevrydende woord en dissidensie" 211), an impulse that resonates with Willemse's call for conscious oppositionality. For Willemse (213), in a context where Afrikaner-examples of resistance against apartheid were few and unknown, authors like Brink and Breyten Breytenbach opened up a world which made it possible for that generation of apartheid to interact with their lifeworld in a more nuanced way. It created the possibility that "not all Afrikaners are oppressors, not all Afrikaners supported apartheid, not all Afrikaners turned their backs on black people". Like Small, Brink contributes to an oppositional Afrikaans in that he gives shape to a critical, engaged Afrikaans by creating an intellectual space in which it is possible to be anti-apartheid, in Afrikaans (213). Brink (203), for example, writes that, "I come from a literature that still has many new words to learn: and with each new word new possibilities enter the realm of the imagination and extend the prison-house of our language. They offer us new means of contesting—of responding to—the challenges of the real". In this way, Willemse theorises, Brink can also be viewed as an "oppositional intellectual". So, what Brink does is to activate a counter-narrative of what it might mean to be Afrikaans, or how Afrikaans literature extends beyond the narrow interpretations of what is classified as the canon ("André P. Brink" 213).

In this discussion, we briefly touched on some of Willemse's work to substantiate the arguments we present. As mentioned earlier, this is by no means an exhaustive overview. Some of the authors or works not under purview here, but recognised by Willemse, include Arthur Fula, Karel Schoeman, Peter Abrahams, Jakes Gerwel, Willie Adams, and S. V. Petersen. As alluded to earlier, Willemse's oppositional criticism also manifested in his transformation of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*. As editor of the journal, Willemse advocated hard to open up the scope and coverage of the journal through collapsing geographic

boundaries to include voices from outside South Africa and the Afrikaans community and also to include a wider range of topics. Clearly, Willemse's continuous interrogation of the Afrikaans literary canon, his centring of authors of colour in Afrikaans literature, and his recovering of the voices of those deliberately silenced by the colonial project is expansive. The importance of Willemse's intellectual standpoint is perhaps best captured by hooks's (207) understanding of the margin as "that space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor [...] And one can only say no, speak the voice of resistance, because there exists a counter-language. While it may resemble the colonizer's tongue, it has undergone a transformation, it has been irrevocably changed".

Conclusion

Willemse's scholarship has influenced the way we, as his mentees, read texts; the way we understand national and transnational histories; and the way we understand the political implications of our own knowledge as scholars. In his obituary for Jakes Gerwel, Willemse writes that "Jakes taught his students to read against the grain, against the dominant position of power [...] I was to learn that comprehending the 'relative'—the ability to hear the other, to feel with the other and above all to doubt—makes us more human" ("Jakes Gerwel" 126). We have outlined how Willemse embodied this ability to 'be relative' in his research, pedagogy, and mentorship. In doing so, we identified several emerging themes in Willemse's work as they relate to postcoloniality, decolonial listening, and what it might mean to live abundantly in Africa. These include a focus on literature and histories that fall outside of the normative canon; a negation of the one-dimensional interpretation of the development of Afrikaans and, specifically, Afrikaans literature; a focus on the articulation of counter-memories and the story-ing of history; a focus on hybrid forms; and a general negation of power relationships as it relates to ownership, restoration, and the recognition of original storytellers.

Willemse's relational approach stands out in an era where colonial logics continue to resonate through contemporary listening practices all over the world. This coloniality of knowledge continues to shape what is perceived to be "valid" knowledge worthy of inclusion as well as which knowledge should be relegated to the margins or even outside the canon. A vital feature of the postcolonial theory which undergirds Willemse's scholarship is the reality that not everyone has "the privilege of speaking" and not everyone has "access to hearing" (Wright 71). As is evident from his seminal explication of how to broaden the scope of our research, teaching, and learning outlined above, Willemse's sound scholarship is therefore instructive in demonstrating how decolonial acts of listening can challenge colonial logics of differential humanness, rather than allowing our research and teaching to reinscribe this. He does this through continued concerted efforts to reclaim and centre the voices of the marginalised.

Notes

- I. *Trammakassie*, also sometimes spelled “*tramakassie*”, is derived from the Indonesian phrase *terima kasih* and is a concept expressing deep gratefulness (Jantjies n. p.). Shortly after joining the Department of Afrikaans at the University of Pretoria, Willemse introduced the Trammakassie Award for a UP staff member who contributed meaningfully to the activities of the Department of Afrikaans. We were both, at various points, proud recipients of said award.

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