

Representation and Pedagogical Canonicity

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The formation of a literary canon is an inherently political act. Historically, societal power dynamics have determined which works are included and which are excluded. Working to move pedagogical canons away from Eurocentric texts and toward more inclusive, representative, and diverse texts challenges the status quo, and calls the old power structures into question. Because the study of literature presents opportunities to “understand more about the world and those who live in it” (Hateley 77), educators should strive to intentionally expose students to a variety of “representative” texts. The object of teaching literature cannot merely be to nurture critical thinking skills. “Representativeness” acts as an essential aspect of literature, and should be utilized to present many perspectives and experiences to students.

Many of our cultural and political conceptions and expectations come from reading literature. As Erica Hateley writes, teachers, therefore, have the opportunity to “foster a culture of reading as cultural agency” (71), giving students critical thinking tools with which to grapple with complex sociopolitical issues on their own. Quoting Chris Baldick, Hateley reiterates that canon is essentially “a body of writings recognized by authority” (71-72), which gives pedagogical canon peculiar significance in the development of students’ ideas about the world. We must strive to remain conscious of the way canons form and reform, and must not hesitate to engage with canon formation critically. Reading is a “culturally-endorsed strategy of negotiating between self and society” (72), and as such, nothing about the selection of literature for a classroom is apolitical. No surprise, then, that canon formation often becomes contentious among scholars and educators.

While it seems most literary and education scholars acknowledge the relative importance of representative inclusion, some are hesitant to make it a priority, either because they believe the

intentional representation of multi-ethnic literature unnecessarily politicizes literature education or they wish to emphasize literary aesthetic merit over all else. However, I believe literature education to be political by nature, and the inclusion of multi-ethnic and international literature in the classroom contributes greatly to its literary integrity. Continuing to exclude multi-ethnic literature misrepresents the real scope of literature and is harmful to students. Exposure to a variety of “representative” texts is crucial—and intentionally, not incidentally. The object of teaching literature cannot merely be to nurture critical thinking skills. The study of literature presents opportunities to “understand more about the world and those who live in it” (Hateley 77). “Representativeness” acts as an essential aspect of literature, and should be utilized to present many perspectives and experiences to students.

In her article “From ‘Representative’ to Relatable,” Stephanie Stiles asserts that when approaching pedagogical canon formation, one should primarily consider the relatability of the works’ ethical framework; that is, its emotional resonance. When

students are presented with material they find “relatable,” Stiles believes they are more able to engage the text ethically and critically, and argues that this is both more effective and more truthful than choosing literature based on its “representative” value. I disagree and would contend that representation and relatability are not in opposition, but two sides of the same coin. Relatability’s power resides in awakening the reader’s personal sympathy through some level of similarity; the power of representation lies in compounding relatability with dissimilarity, stirring empathy regardless of likeness or unlikeness. Representation does not work against relatability, but functions as an integral part of it. Stiles has valid concerns regarding the problematic nature of literature chosen to “represent” minority voices when it is expected to adequately or even accurately stand in for all within that specific people group; presenting one or two books as “representing” people groups or cultures could come dangerously close to tokenism. However, these concerns can be addressed in a classroom setting. It seems incongruous that while she waxes eloquent on students’ ability to relate to characters in completely dissimilar circumstances and their ability to grasp literary theory, she apparently does not consider them capable of reaching a nuanced understanding of representation. When presenting a representative text to students, one must avoid overburdening it with supposed cultural significance, which may lead to unbalanced emphasis, decontextualization, or plain misreading, but these dangers can be addressed as well.

Some scholars “strongly question how representation in the literary curriculum leads to social justice” (Stiles 496), and assert that reading the literary work of marginalized authors does nothing to actually benefit those they “represent” who suffer marginalization. Though Stiles adds a slight disclaimer that “it could be argued” students may benefit from reading a diverse range of authors, she follows this by stating that reading texts written by authors in marginalized minorities “has little to no material impact on the everyday lives” of others in those minorities (496). I cannot accept this claim, which seems to come from a surprisingly blind position of privilege. She appears to assume that all the readers of these texts will not belong to an ethnic

minority (and that relating to someone who has fewer advantages than oneself does not have the potential for “material impact” on one’s surrounding culture). Not only does she fail to support this statement, she fails to consider the “material impact” reading marginalized authors may have on students who are from underprivileged backgrounds themselves—or what “material impact” the opposite may have, of students of color reading only the work of white authors. In her article, Hateley quotes African-Canadian professor Dr. Njokia Nathani Wane on her personal experience in this area: “Unknown to me, the act of being schooled in the literary canons so valued in Europe caused me to be disassociated from, and devalue the cultural knowledges and wisdom of my ancestors, my community, and my family” (77). For me, as a Hispanic woman who grew up in underprivileged conditions, I can say with conviction reading books by Hispanic authors and women of color have a huge impact on my life. Just knowing of their existence encourages me. As a child, after years of wishing I were blonde and blue-eyed like the heroines in the books I read, the advent of Josefina Montoya, of American Girl fame, was a revelation. I can mark the period of my life when my mother read me the stories about a nine-year-old Mexican girl living in 1824 Santa Fe as the time when I began to feel comfortable in my skin. True, reading about Josefina did not change my outward circumstances, but I will say without reservation that it changed my life for the better.

In addition, reading literature from a variety of ethnic origins *can* “materially impact” the lives of the underprivileged and marginalized by making those in places of relative power and comfort aware of their privilege. Laurie Grobman, in her article “The Value and Valuable Work of Multi-Ethnic Literature,” argues that inclusion of multi-ethnic literature creates a canon that is both “imaginative *and* political,” prompting its readers “to feel *and* to act” (88). Grobman presents a case for “classrooms [as] sites of dialogic struggle with the unfamiliar,” stressing that literature’s value lies in the combination of “aesthetic pleasure and political possibilities” (87). Even Stiles’ arguments in favor of relatability fit remarkably well with Grobman’s insistence that literary artistry and social justice are “interconnected” (82). Stiles

emphasizes how students engaging with literature emotionally prompts “ethical reflection” (Stiles 494), wherein students are “attuned to the moral implications of the text” (488). If that is so, then it would follow that representative texts would further students’ ethical reflection on a variety of subjects that then present opportunities for discussion and heightened awareness of social issues.

For the same reason, the examination of texts included in a canon is perhaps no more important than the conscious criticism of canonicity itself (Hateley 72). Quoting pedagogical activists Aronowitz and Giroux, Hateley reminds us that the canon must “justify itself as representing the elements of our own heritage” (72), and therefore presenting any classroom in the United States with a predominantly Anglo-European canon is in this sense misleading. Some, like Stiles, may wish to avoid confronting political issues when discussing literature, but when it comes down to it, all criteria for literary excellence, even that of relatability, is socially constructed and thus “inescapably political” (Grobman 86). After all, “aesthetic judgments are not made within an individual vacuum but are, rather, intimately connected with dominant cultural standards of value” (Grobman 83). Therefore, we must be careful to avoid reducing minority literature to simple reactions against the dominant culture. In her analysis of Native American writer Craig Womack’s work, “Canonizing Craig Womack: Finding Native Literature’s Place in Indian Country,” Michelle Henry argues, to generalize her slightly more specific case, minority literature in the United States does not function solely or even primarily to subvert “Euroamerican” culture. Rather, it exists, as any “type” of literature exists, as an expression of personal experience and worldview; and as such is valid and worthy of study on its own terms, not just in order to meet a quota.

Henry supports Womack’s assertion that Creek Nation writers do not write to add to the Euroamerican canon, but belong to their own canon, as their experience and cultural tradition and worldview is unique to them. Womack and Henry are adamant that literature should be primarily interpreted through the lens of its own cultural heritage, not the lens of outsiders. Henry points

out that while scholars make much of the influence of “Euroamerica” on Native America, outside of Native American studies, “Euroamerican [culture] is rarely considered as a product of Native American contact” (43). In the classroom, one must be careful not to “other-ize” multi-ethnic literature, with a too categorical distinction between it and “traditional” literature, or to consign it to a “side note or chapter on ‘diversity’” (Henry 37); but keep in mind the cultural origins of a text and endeavor to present it authentically. There need not be an “us and them” mentality in literature; all human beings have experiences and stories worth acknowledgement. When we listen to previously silenced voices, we need to hear them “on their own terms, not just as a reflection of the dominant worldview” (Henry 49). In Grobman’s article, she quotes Christina Crosby, saying that the true value of literature is that it “poses value as a question not an answer” and involves students in “humanistic inquiry” into “the value of the human and human creativity” (87). If that is the case, then it is imperative that educators and literary scholars, as well as anyone who engages with literature, acknowledge the “legitimacy and sovereignty” (Henry 35) of diverse texts. When we do this, we engage in what Grobman calls the “mutually enriching connection between the political and the creative in a process of cultural specificity and cross-cultural negotiation” (83).

To carry the point a bit further, this “enriching connection” would be strengthened even more if world literature were more often included in English literature studies. World literature is still generally underrepresented in Western classrooms (Yiannakis), and translations of non-Classical texts are difficult to obtain. Last year, when I was shopping for a 1914 Japanese novel, assigned in a course on modern East Asia, I searched specifically for the translation on the syllabus, assuming the professor preferred that translator, only to discover it was the only English translation available. We can do better than this. And indeed, I believe translations are on the rise in the recent decades. As our world becomes more and more globalized, the study of international literature should not be confined to universities; every level of literary study would be enriched by the inclusion of the perspectives of multiple nationalities and cultures.

If we can translate Dante and Tolstoy for literary study, what stops us from including literary giants from other cultural traditions? I would echo Hateley, that “texts are not ends in themselves so much as they are invitations” to expand one’s knowledge and appreciation of the world (77). In the classroom, teachers have the opportunity not only to provide students with tools with which to understand themselves and their own spheres, but also to challenge their students to think beyond themselves. There is so much potential for social change in the study of literature.

Regardless of what shapes it, canonization necessitates power structure, which indicates political dynamics and motivations. Working to move pedagogical canons away from Eurocentric interpretation and toward more inclusive, representative, and diverse standards challenges the status quo, and calls the old power structures into question. The world will not end if students read less Shakespeare and more Langston Hughes. Something tells me the Bard will stick around. And in the meantime, more students will see how “beautiful... are the souls of [Hughes’] people.” Including authors and cultural demographics that have historically been excluded grants those voices power, and their contribution to the conversation only benefits literature as a whole. For that reason, minority authors should be read on their own terms, not because it leads to social justice, but because listening to voices previously silenced is in itself an act of social justice.

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