

A Culture of Text: The Canon and the Common Core

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THE WESTERN CANON IS NOT DEAD. In addition to enjoying life at universities, it lives on in secondary classrooms across the country, in students' backpacks, and on lists of core literature published on school district websites. Proponents of the Western canon (or simply "the canon"), however, like Harold Bloom, have claimed that it was on life support. In *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Bloom (1995) argued that the canon had been repeatedly attacked by the ideologies of "The School of Resentment," which he divides into "six branches" of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought: "Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians" (p. 492). Through these lenses, one might view literature—especially the canon—as a cultural product and cultural producer, thus threatening its legitimacy and dominance by positioning it as a relic of history and a force of subjugation. Responding to such ideas, Bloom associates apocalyptic imagery with loss of the canon. There are "letter bombs exploding at universities, fundamentalist Muslim terrorism erupting in New York City, and gunfire drifting across New Haven even as I sit here writing," he says (p. 106). But, more tactfully, Bloom argues throughout *The Western Canon* that the canon should remain important because of its aesthetic superiority and self-evident excellence of having been written by genius authors—who incidentally are almost exclusively White males.

As the centrality of the canon has been questioned in the curricula of English classrooms at universities and secondary schools, critics like Harold Bloom and even Allan Bloom have shuddered to think of its death. Allan Bloom's (1987/2012) *The Closing of The American Mind* worries over the loss of the canon and the traditional values that such texts have instilled in readers' minds. To his chagrin, literature reflecting culturally and ethnically diverse people and authors has slowly prodded its way into the literature curriculum at schools. Still, though, even after the Culture Wars of the '80s and '90s, the canon has remained entrenched in classrooms, in part through what Thomas Popkewitz (1997) would term a "modernist curriculum," in which "schooling defines the boundaries of what is to be known" (p. 149). Accordingly, such a literature curriculum would include "forms of knowledge whose functions are to regulate and discipline the individual" (p. 140) and preserve certain epistemological borders. The individual, subject to normalizing practices, then affirms the legitimacy of texts—"the forms of knowledge"—that constitute the canon. Popkewitz suggests calling traditional conceptions of

curriculum into question by using a “social epistemology [which] enables us to consider how the distinctions and differentiations of schooling construct a normativity whose effects are governing systems of inclusion and exclusion” (p. 155). This “normativity” is the product of regnant discourse, socially and historically constructed, reified in schools and curricula; and it is in need of constant interrogation. In fact, in addition to postmodernist critiques and multiculturalism, there has arisen a new danger—or, conversely, support—for those who carry the canon close to their hearts: namely, the shift in primary and secondary education through the implementation of the Common Core Standards (CCS).

After noting possible effects of the CCS on the canon, I attempt to scrutinize “the governing systems of inclusion and exclusion” (Popkewitz, 1997, p. 155) in literature curricula that regulate the canon; that is to say, I trace the emergence and persistence of the canon in the teaching of literature using an articulation of Michel Foucault’s (1981; 1994a) power relations so as to draw attention to teachers and students as potential subjects of the canon who reify it in literature curricula. I then interrogate the narrowing effects of the canon on students and suggest that understanding Foucault’s (1994a) concept of resistance—a “counter-power” (Pickett, 1996)—may help one intervene in operations of the canon and thereby subtly decenter its normalizing processes in the classroom to produce a more dynamic curriculum. And by examining several studies on the teaching of literature and the canon, I illustrate what acts of resistance might look like and how decentering the traditional practices that structure the canon may be possible even under the CCS.

The Common Core Standards

The implementation of the CCS—which ostensibly aims to better prepare students for college and career through a heavier emphasis on writing and a careful reading of texts (and changes in science and mathematics standards)—offers English teachers an opportunity to rethink their curriculum and the texts that constitute it, so long as they are willing or in a position to take it. This opportunity raises the questions of what a text is and what texts are necessary or the most effective for the goals of the new standards and for an increasingly multicultural country. The CCS Language Arts Standards still require works of American and British literature, as shown by lists of text exemplars found in the Standards’ *Appendix B* (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.) and on state department of education websites (e.g., California Department of Education, 2017; Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2017). Barbara Moss (2013) suggests the possibility that “the text exemplars will become a new canon for literacy instruction, a kind of national reading list,” and that “publishers are already using the books as a template for what to include in their textbooks” (p. 48). Although such lists do not necessarily dictate the texts that English teachers must teach, teachers who perfunctorily accept a new curriculum at their schools without being an active part in its creation will only be ushering in a new dogmatism for a future Harold Bloom to complain about.

Regarding the decisions of which texts to select, the CCS conveniently reduce text selection to the criteria “Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading” (McGraw-Hill Education, n.d.), which can be interpreted quite loosely. Thus, this potential freedom can allow schools to tailor their literature lists to their specific student demographics. It should also be noted that a misconception of the CCS is that the literature curriculum will diminish substantially because it mandates that 70 percent of student reading be nonfiction or informational texts. This

percentage is based on student reading in all courses collectively. According to Common Core State Standards Initiative (2014), “A great deal of informational reading in grades 6–12 must take place in other classes” besides English. As the amount of literature read will not be changing in an English class per se, teachers may be inclined to continue using the familiar texts of the canon out of comfort, tradition, or district textbook adoptions. And so the CCS present a seemingly contradictory stance on the canon: they do not explicitly dictate a national canon; they implicitly do—through the list of text *exemplars* in *Appendix B* and by virtue of the Common Core being a national standard system. A corollary of this could be that either the canon remains dominant or a new canon takes its place, though the former is more likely because new texts are not free; they cost a great deal of money.

Perhaps a reason why the CCS are somewhat ambiguous about the canon is that it is a politically sensitive subject, which is clear from the “Canon Wars” of the ’80s and ’90s (see Benton, 2000). Many people have grown up reading the texts of the canon or watching film adaptations. In fact, the importance of many of the canonical texts has been thoroughly ingrained in the minds of many teachers because the same books they teach are in many cases the same books they read as students in high school. The canon, in other words, perpetuates and reinforces itself through people’s regularized acceptance of it, tacitly enforcing norms of power. In “The Subject and Power,” Michel Foucault (1994a) states that “the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others . . . includes an important element: freedom” (p. 138). The canon not only can work epistemologically on students by shaping their knowledge but can limit students’ “freedom” to move away from it and to think of an alternative, among other social and cultural tethers it creates. Students can become captives of the canon through their own practices without even knowing it. The canon can form preconceived generalizations of language, class, gender, and race that cling in the pockets of students’ minds, defining reality for students before they have a chance to see it for themselves.

The canon’s deep history in the literature curriculum at secondary schools and universities and Harold Bloom’s apocalyptic warnings are ineffectual justifications for keeping the canon, but eliminating the canon for a new one would probably continue *ad infinitum*. Instead of killing the canon, it merely needs to be decentered and exposed to make a more dynamic literature curriculum reflective of students’ diverse values and beliefs; the texts in secondary schools should be thought of as living, multicultural, multimodal, and emancipatory sites of discourse. To do this, English teachers ought to consider what constitutes a “text” (for example, is a videogame a text?) and whether the texts they adopt prepare students for the 21st century, not the 19th. A brief tour of the idea of the canon as a product and producer of culture, and Foucault’s concepts of power relations will shed light on where canonical thinking stands in relation to the Common Core Standards and what to do when restructuring literature curriculum to better engage and relate literature to diverse populations of students.

The Rise of the Canon

That a canon of literature should have ever arisen in the first place is not unexpected, since codified systems of discourse—such as the practice of canonicity and other codes of culture—reinforce themselves through a cycle of power relations that make them difficult to change them or even notice. In “The Order of Discourse,” Foucault (1981) describes the notion that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and

redistributed by a certain number of procedures . . . to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality” (p. 52), integrating ideas and structures smoothly into culture. And it is not necessarily the case that there be a material group of enforcers consciously parsing and selecting aspects of culture. Once certain rituals or behaviors become the norm, they infest every level of society through individuals’ practices. Those most comfortable with these norms may oppose any change to them—especially if they were raised with and in them. If they happen to be in a position of power, they do whatever they can to preserve the status quo by disseminating rules or regulations as far as they possibly can through language. An especially potent way to do this is through texts, hence the canon.

Warding off certain powers and dangers, advocates for the canon who are fortified in their university or political strongholds have created, intentionally and unintentionally, procedures for etching the canon deep into culture through suggested reading lists. In fact, the prototypes of the CCS text exemplars list date back to the late 1800s with the organization of the The Committee of Ten and their decision to normalize “college entrance requirements, with their lists of specifically prescribed texts” (Applebee, 1974, p. 34). Those texts, including texts by Shakespeare and Dickens (still taught today), pushed their way into classrooms as teachers aimed to prepare their students for college. The more certain texts are used, the more they establish their authority in teacher’s practices. They become normal, familiar, and so embedded in people’s behaviors that any challenge to them becomes an affront to tradition. In this case, the tradition is a culture of texts that reaches back over a century.

The notion of canonicity itself is actually much older than the reading lists generated by colleges. Scholes (1998) examines the Greek and Latin origins of the word “canon,” stemming from the Greek word “kanōn”—a cane or stick, which suggests “severity and imposition of power” (p. 105). Scholes then notes the theological adoption of the term when “the rise of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution required a Latin term that could distinguish the accepted or sacred writings from all others” (p. 105). The canon is a secular collection of texts, but a corollary of being based on and even christened a “canon” is “the contentious idea of regarding literary texts as ‘sacred objects’” (Benton, 2000, p. 270). Those attempting to subvert and eviscerate the canon—Bloom’s “School of Resentment”—are seen, not as advancing a different conception of canonicity, but as advancing a heretical counter-canon; they immediately become an “other,” even though redefining the canon or its use is more complex than that spurious, reductionist type of thinking.

The relations of power wrapped around the canon are especially potent and at times elusive because they reside in the education system. Educational institutions could potentially be a place for students to encounter difference, to expand their cultural practices, and to connect personally to knowledge that facilitates their intellectual growth. But “any system of education,” writes Foucault (1981), “is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourse, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry” (p. 64). The novels and stories that students read, in turn, can lead them to develop a preprogrammed and limited worldview. Before students even read texts of the canon, in fact, the selection of those texts was itself an intricate process of power that involved, for example, special committees and school boards adopting texts, English departments designing curricula, or in some cases curriculum specialists and increasingly pervasive textbook publishers hungrily standardizing education for profit. Interestingly, no author, says Foucault, “shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements” (p. 62); in other words, if a new text does not fit into the parameters

of a rubric (one is actually embedded in the CCS for text selection) or other set of rules designed by authorial committees and English departments, it is rejected from the educational sphere.

In Defense of the Canon: Tradition

Thus, as the canon has wormed its way into and around culture through cycles of power, thereby securing itself from certain dangers as typical, innocuous, and even sacred, many of the arguments in its favor predicate themselves on a single slippery concept: tradition. In “The Storm Over the University,” philosopher John Searle (1994) discusses the debates over the canon and writes that supporters of the canon have maintained “it is essential to the liberal education of young men and women in the United States that they should receive some exposure to at least some of the great works in this intellectual tradition” (p. 3). What constitutes a “great work” of literature, however, is in some cases arbitrary. That is to say, many of the texts of the canon ended up there because they were required reading for college entrance exams (Applebee, 1974), or were sold and read over several generations; and then, someone in a position of power decided there was something special about those pieces of literature. These texts are repeatedly anthologized and crystalized in school reading lists while being taught to children, who then teach them to their children. Further, rather than being approached as simply works of literature written by people influenced by their cultures and time periods, they become “great works,” presenting one narrative to be revered, not questioned. Abandoning these works of literature, then, means abandoning a part of one’s past, regardless of any potential positive or negative effects.

Moreover, the notion that there is something “essential to the liberal education” (Searle, 1994, p. 3) of children that exists in a static, closed, marginalizing list—the canon—appears to be a contradiction that only makes sense when masked in tradition. In a country that is growing increasingly less White, positing essential texts that exclude the pasts, cultures, and values of multiple ethnicities shuts out diverse intellectual viewpoints and heritages, carving a path of assimilation for children and giving them a myopic, not liberal, education. Further, Searle (1994) quotes Mary Louise Pratt’s critique of supporters of the canon, specifically the Blooms:

They are fueled not by reverence for the past, but by an aggressive desire to lay hold of the present and future. The B’s [Allan Bloom and Harold Bloom] act as they do not because they are unaware of the cultural and demographic diversification underway in the country; they are utterly aware. That is what they are trying to shape. (pp. 192–193)

This xenophobic characterization of the “B’s” trenchantly illustrates the thread of power that runs through the canon: indoctrination of society through text by institutions and people who have the power to do so. One group’s tradition becomes the welcomed tradition of another, silently erasing differences, leaving behind little opposition.

Further in his article, Searle (1994) offers his own commentary on the canon debate. He says that those who oppose the canon argue that it is “unrepresentative, inherently elitist, and, in a disguised form, political” (p. 10). He goes on to say, “If these arguments were strong ones, you could apply them against physics, chemistry, or mathematics” (p. 10). By saying this, Searle dismisses the arguments shortsightedly. He does, however, raise an interesting point: The literary

canon is not the only canon—math, physics, and science have theirs. And he concedes that experiences of literature “are unlike those of sciences” (p. 8). However, comparing literature—which attempts to characterize diverse and dynamic groups of people and codify stereotypes, behaviors, and linguistic habits—to books of math and science misses the point. Math and science books, on the one hand, aim at objectivity and ordinarily portray no protagonists, heroes, and subjugated classes; literary texts, on the other hand, present a *de facto* subjective story that informs, confirms, or produces readers’ conceptions of other people and reality. That is, literary texts have the power to show readers how to correctly value or incorrectly devalue other people and reality.

The Narrowing Effects of the Canon

Illustrating the idea that works of literature can structure people’s views of other cultures and reality is Bruce Goebel’s (1995) “Expanding the Literary Canon and Reading the Rhetoric of ‘Race.’” He homes in on views of race in literature, saying that “The literary devices that Columbus used reappear in the writings, both fiction and nonfiction, of nearly every 16th–20th century European and every American author who came in contact with and wrote about Native Americans” (p. 45). Born from a subjective account of someone in a position of power—that is, Columbus—racist stereotypes replicated themselves not only through nonfiction, but also fiction. According to Goebel, “Particularly useful examples can be found in William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620–1647*, James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*, and Francis Parkman’s *Oregon Trail*” (1995, p. 45), authors whose names still reside in many anthologies in secondary classrooms. Remarkably, though, that is only one chain in an immense network of overlapping power relations erecting marginalized views of people while, in turn, building itself endlessly, as more people—or children in classrooms who did not choose their texts—consume it and thereby support it.

The authors who misrepresented other people and other cultures may not have intended to spread racism and oppression. However, when dominant groups in society canonize lists of texts, the canon can later function apart from any original intention. The canon can continue to manufacture and disseminate false cultural ideas, which readers then view as true; but such an outcome might no longer be intentional at all. As Foucault (1981) observes in “The Order of Discourse,” “There is scarcely a society without its major narratives, which are recounted, repeated, and varied; formulae, texts, and ritualized sets of discourses which are recited in well-defined circumstances” (p. 56). Narratives are an integral part of any culture because they help to define and preserve the culture; this is where problems of the canon reside when what is being preserved and “recited” marginalizes or essentializes diverse groups of people. And just as these “discourses [narratives] exercise their own control” (p. 56) over themselves, they exert control over their readers who inadvertently generalize what they read to how they view those inside and outside of their culture.

Harold Bloom (1995), on the other hand, argues that the canon, along with canon formation, is not political and does not subjugate anyone; rather, these views have been created because “students of literature have become amateur political scientists, uninformed sociologists, incompetent anthropologists, mediocre philosophers, and overdetermined cultural historians” (p. 487). He insists throughout *The Western Canon* that texts of the canon are simply great aesthetic works: his argument for canon formation is essentially that “one breaks into the canon only by

aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam: mastery of the figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction” (pp. 27–28), which in its vagueness is suspiciously similar to the CCS text selection criteria mentioned earlier: “Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading” (McGraw-Hill Education, n.d.). Both leave out entirely any mention of accurate representations of people or places. Both are fairly sterile. However, Bloom’s intention seems exactly that. If he were to concede that the works of the canon were in some way political—whether positively or negatively—his argument would fall hurriedly on its face. Therefore, he takes the aesthetic stance, which appears at first glance to be an honest justification for the continuation of the canon.

But Bloom’s aesthetic stance seems like more of a red herring than a defense of the canon, which is perhaps why his criticisms of “The School of Resentment” are spurious at best and are rarely elucidated. Bloom (1995) groans, “Some recent partisans of what regards itself as academic radicalism go so far as to suggest that works join the Canon because of successful advertising and propaganda campaigns” (p. 19). He does not address or explicate this, however. In the context of Foucault’s notions of power, that which Bloom insouciantly tosses aside contains truth: The “advertising and propaganda campaigns” have become naturalized systems of power for literature, that is, “ritualized sets of discourses” (Foucault, 1981, p. 56). The books of the canon work as propaganda for themselves as they spread through reading lists, classrooms, and minds (regardless of a publishing company’s marketing strategies, though that does not hurt). Literature as propaganda and as part of a national identity itself is not new. In Ancient Rome, Augustus was well aware of this as Virgil adroitly crafted a story for Rome in his magnum opus: the *Aeneid* (Grebe, 2004). And if the texts of the canon happen to have an aesthetic virtue as well, this same Foucauldian system could help call attention to individuals’ practices that ossify that in culture, too.

Focusing on aesthetics leads Bloom to praise the greatness of the authors of the canon over and over while ignoring the palpable cultural ramifications of a canon. Herbert N. Schneidau (1995) of the University of Arizona says that reading Bloom’s *The Western Canon* is “like watching a dog walk on its hind legs: after a while, you get restless” (p. 129). He also says of Bloom’s curt comments on culture that “it is an anthropological truism to observe that a culture’s preserved fictions, along with its political and historical discourses, form a kind of DNA that allows the culture to replicate itself” (p. 134). Stories, in turn, flood through and affect society quickly, producing culture in an endless cycle, becoming opportunities for growth or stagnation. In fact, even earlier than Virgil, Plato wrote of literature’s ability to influence people’s conceptions of society and culture through imitation, which is why in his utopia of *The Republic* he advocates such strict rules of censorship and indoctrination that would have produced an interesting canon and drones for citizens.

Being the voracious reader he claims to be, the erudite Bloom is nonetheless “utterly aware,” Pratt says (as cited in Searle, 1994, p. 193), of literature’s influence on culture and reality. Resorting to scare tactics, Bloom (1995) makes the following hyperbolic warning: “Without the Canon, we cease to think. You may idealize endlessly about replacing aesthetic standards with ethnocentric and gender considerations, and your social aims may indeed be admirable. Yet only strength can join itself to strength” (p. 39). According to this remark, however, “we cease to think” only the way that Bloom would want us to think—that is, marveling at the canon and preserving its great tradition, perpetuating it for future generations as it shapes their cultural understandings. As Schneidau (1995) says, “It seems merely sound pedagogy to present students with works that will appeal to them and articulate their

selfunderstandings: if these crowd out the Canon to some extent, so be it” (p. 132). If anything, presenting students not only with more diverse texts but with a literature curriculum that can change and respond to students as they change would expand and enhance their thinking.

One cannot discuss the canon’s impact without also discussing its authors. But what influences students is not necessarily the authors as the complex people they were, but what those authors have come to represent and how they function in society. In fact, Bloom (1995) organizes *The Western Canon* by authors, centering the canon on a single name—William Shakespeare—and then branches out to other authors, whom he deifies in a pantheon of writers. Thus, in a way, the canon is not a list of texts, but a list of names serving what Foucault (1994b) calls the author function. According to Foucault, the rise of the author function was a way to legitimize and categorize texts; he notes, “Literary discourses came to be accepted only when endowed with the author function” (p. 382). Or, texts are validated not by their content but by their authors existing in a static idealized plane, and “the author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within society” (p. 382) that in turn shape the perceptions of society through another set of power relations wrapped up in the canon.

Vicky Greenbaum’s (1994) “Expanding the Canon: Shaping Inclusive Reading Lists” elaborates upon the effects of authors in the canon, noting how the authors of texts affect how students read and view literature. Bloom (1995) illustrates clearly and unabashedly that the canon is comprised mostly of White males. So, if the authors whom students read in school are typically White men and if students categorize good texts via the Foucauldian author function, then the “canon and reading lists carry the message that male White voices are the only ones worth hearing,” says Greenbaum (1994, p. 36). This not only creates a shortsighted, inaccurate view of what counts as quality literature; this affects how students value themselves as writers. It affects what narratives inside and outside of school students view as valid. Moreover, this is a toxic way of thinking because students then assume that good work, whether literature or something else, comes almost exclusively from White men.

And with further standardization of education across the country through the CCS, the power relations carving the canon deeper into school and district curricula become increasingly evasive and difficult to expose. Over twenty years before the CCS, when the canon wars were being fought vigorously with pens and paper, Applebee (1992) compared data of literature taught in high schools across the country during the middle of the 20th century to that of the late 1980s. He found a small increase in the number of female authors being taught, but he also found “more consensus about particular texts, and especially about particular authors” (p. 31). Out of the ten most frequently taught titles, there was one novel written by a female: Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Important, even without the standardization reforms of No Child Left Behind or the CCS, the literature taught in secondary schools seemed to have standardized itself through its own system of power relations in which teachers governed themselves in their practices of text selection. Interestingly, Applebee says, “Most teachers in the Center’s surveys reported they had considerable leeway in selecting the literature they taught” (p. 30). Most teachers at public schools today would say they have little freedom in selecting texts because of budget constraints and normalized curricula. And the roots of these curricula run deep in U.S. schools. Robert Scholes (1998) mentions that English literature departments or “the study of imaginative literature,” and concomitant issues surrounding the canon, began to arise in the 19th century (p. 12). Since then, power relations have had time to parse out the non-“great” works of literature, making a stiff list of canonical texts. And the standardization of schools in the ’90s and now the

bars of the “prison cell”—the Common Core—implicitly (or at times explicitly) enforce this list.

Although “teachers and schools have the freedom to develop a canonical list that could include the examples” from *Appendix B* (McGraw-Hill Education, n.d.), this is unlikely in practice. All of the authors of the top 10 texts used in high school classrooms over twenty years ago (see Applebee, 1992, p. 28) can be found in the list of text exemplars in *Appendix B* except for the author of *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.).¹ The CCS also require foundational works of American literature from the 18th through the 20th century. Applebee noted a growing consensus about which authors to teach in the ’80s when teachers thought that they had control over the texts they selected for their students. However, nationalized standards have now limited the freedom of teachers; the canon has garnered even more strength. And, as long as the canon remains unchanged, “‘canonicity’ is likely to elude nonwhite authors and women; they will continue to be at the margins of a culture that is legitimized by its place in the school” (Applebee, 1992, p. 32). Over twenty years after Applebee wrote, there has been little increase in diversification—hence the impetus to expose these power relations and destabilize the centrality of the canon in the English classroom.

Decentering the Canon

Foucault’s (1981; 1994a) notion of power relations helps to reveal the systems that create a literary canon and how the canon, normalized by teachers, then consumes these forces to perpetuate itself, becoming a rallying point for ideologues such as Bloom who utilize superficial justifications. Greenbaum (1994) even highlights an aspect of the power relations behind the canon, stating, “The assumption that there is one standard of excellence in literary reading is inculcated in us from the time we’re taught to distinguish between ‘books we read in English’ and ‘books we read for fun’” (p. 37). Literature by authors who are not taught then takes on the role of the other. One may think that the CCS could either reinforce this idea or help institute a new canon, which again would just produce another dichotomy and an endless cycle of canon wars.

Instead of abandoning the canon, it would be better to decenter the canon and discussions about it to make literature study a more dynamic, fluid, participatory, and multicultural experience for students. That is to say, understanding Foucault’s ideas of power relations can help one to uncover the limits of the canon and in effect decenter the canon in secondary schools through intervening acts of resistance, which may possibly bring about the change that Applebee (1992) suggested in the early ’90s. Foucault (1994a) explains in “The Subject and Power”:

I would like to suggest another way to go further toward a new economy of power relations, a way that is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and one that implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists in taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists in using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of applications and methods used. (p. 128)

In other words, once power relations have been exposed, they can then be disrupted through “forms of resistance,” altering the power relations. But, states Pickett (1996), “Just as Foucault

continually cautioned against seeing power as simply negative in scope, similarly it is important to point out that resistance is not simply an ‘antimatter’ or a negation of power” (p. 459). Rather, acts of resistance operate more as intervening ruptures inside power relations, enabling a degree of change and the possibility of difference.

Foucault’s power relations explain how the canon can sink to the center of literature curricula and then replicate its validity while influencing culture, thereby hiding itself from criticism and change. Modifying the power relations around the canon requires subtle yet powerful acts of resistance to move literature toward a “new economy of power” (Foucault, 1994a, p. 128) in secondary schools. Power relations do not necessarily produce adverse results. Some could do more good than harm and vice versa. It is when they create systems of thought and institutions that marginalize people and ideas that they become harmful and difficult to identify; embedding themselves as a living facet of culture, their marginalizing forces can go unnoticed or can be viewed as innocuous simply because they are a product and producer of culture, maintained and disseminated by individuals. In any case, when using Foucault’s ideas of power relations to discuss the authority of the canon, new power relations will arise because it is impossible to move outside of power. In other words, power relations create new power relations through resistance to previous ones.

It is possible to challenge the canon from a larger, structural angle, but it is better to start at the level of individuals—students and teachers. From a structural angle, one could challenge the canon using an idea that is similar to, but subtly different from, Foucault’s conceptions of power relations: Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of *habitus*. For Foucault (1994a), power relations begin at the level of the subject through “a mode of action upon the actions of others” (p. 138); in other words, self-governing behaviors engender beliefs—about the canon, for instance—moving throughout society and culture. On the other hand, Bourdieu (1990) emphasizes the role of historically established institutions that propagate and regulate behaviors. He posits that “*habitus*—embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product” (p. 56). So, rather than individuals acting on and governing themselves, when people participate in different societal domains or “fields” their “*habitus* tends to generate all the ‘reasonable,’ ‘common-sense,’ behaviours” (p. 55). However, to decenter the canon means starting with a focus on the individual level, since individuals such as teachers and their students are the ones reading the texts and in turn can either validate the texts or commit *acts* of resistance.

The “starting point” (Foucault, 1994a, p. 128) for intervening in the embedded power relations of the canon lies at the local level—in this case, the teacher. Again, the CCS do not explicitly recommend that teachers teach the canon, although they label the canonical texts as exemplars. Therefore, resisting the power relations of the canon does not actually go against these teaching standards; it merely redefines the power relations. For example, some people can easily use power relations to enforce the canon, as Moss (2013) suggests when she says, “The text exemplars [of the CCS] will become a new canon for literacy instruction” (p. 48). The classroom is where the power relations of the canon can be redefined. Switching the canonical texts in classrooms across the country for alternative texts would be a radical change that is nearly impossible, given the force of power relations protecting the canon at this point, not to mention budget constraints and refractory educators. However, changing the way the canonical texts are taught may be a way to intervene in the operations of the canon and diversify literature curricula. Therefore, as Randy Laist (2009) at the University of Connecticut writes in “The Self-Deconstructing Canon,” “The question is not whether the instructor of the course will promote a

canonical block of texts, but the style in which she will do so” (p. 51). So, “style” is one realm of potential of resistance, where teachers—who act at the local level—can promote new power relations and a more culturally diverse curriculum.

So, starting in the classroom, teachers could apply Foucault’s (1994a) “new economy of power relations” (p. 128) to explode the very idea of the canon and produce a continually changing literature curriculum representative of students’ varied backgrounds. Applying Foucault reveals several areas of resistance. First, one typical feature of literature curriculum units is that it centers upon a single text. Students read the text and then participate in a type of summative assessment that supports the text as canon. Or, students read a canonical text with complementary texts, such that the curriculum unit still centers upon a single “anchor” text. If, on the other hand, teachers resist centering a text by examining a compendium of texts, teachers then have the opportunity to diversify their curriculum for their students. The challenge, however, is in which texts to select and how to put them in conversation with one another. But ultimately, teachers should diversify their curriculum to best reflect their students’ backgrounds.

Second, Laist (2009) suggests resisting the deification of authors and exploring the interconnectedness of texts—that is, resisting the view of a text as an isolated work. He says, “In the interest of communicating a more accurate understanding of the pervasive significance of literary influence, a responsible pedagogy should take steps to dispel the *sui generis* assumption of literary genius and emphasize the degree to which literary texts partake in a dense interrelatedness to other texts” (p. 52). When decentering texts in the curriculum by putting them in conversation with other texts, students gain not only a more comprehensive picture of the formation of texts through culture, but an awareness of how texts influence other texts. Countering Bloom, this dispels the “greatness” of canonical authors as writers who produced narratives in a social vacuum, yet more accurately portrays them as writers whose ideas were the collection of various people’s ideas and effects of culture. This resists the idea that “great works” are those written exclusively by White men, which can make room in curricula for works written by diverse writers and even students themselves.

Third, Laist (2009) points out, “Literary history is as revealing for what it does not include as for what it does” (p. 55). Therefore, teachers can expose and redefine existing power relations by placing texts from *different* time periods and genres in conversation with one another. Decentering the canon, Laist finds that “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s famous short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* make excellent companion pieces for interrogating the relationship between women and the canon” (p. 55). In addition, students could produce writing to add perspectives that are not included in the canon, rewriting parts of texts from the point of view of a different character or from the perspective of an author who is intentionally countercultural. This elevates students to the status of author and brings their narratives into the curriculum, thus empowering and valuing students.

Fourth, decentering the canon need not only involve written texts, but can be multimodal. When teaching in an urban high school in California, Ernest Morrell and Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade (2002) “witnessed the impact of hip-hop music and culture on all of our students” (p. 88). That is to say, their students studied Elizabethan poetry while studying hip-hop music. They did not abandon the canon but instead introduced new texts—hip-hop—into the curriculum, texts that related to their students’ diverse backgrounds. This diversification of texts incorporated the ideas and values of students who may have otherwise felt marginalized by the canon, and who may have seen hip-hop as an “other” text or as unworthy or impossible to study. Yet, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade abolished the canonical-uncanonical binary, arguing that “hip-hop can be

used as a bridge linking the seemingly vast span between the streets and the world of academics” (p. 89). Other non-traditional forms of texts that teachers could place in conversation with traditional texts are video games, which could lead students toward questioning the very definition of a text, since video games offer not only narratives but ludic interactions, which are impossible in canonical texts. Either way, with music or video games (film, paintings, and pictures could be brought into the conversation as well) the single authorial voice of the canon begins to crumble and multiple narratives and voices are heard.

Final Thoughts: Towards Difference

There may be multiple ways to intervene into and resist the operations of the canon in the secondary classroom and thereby catalyze new power relations that are less marginalizing; yet what must be underscored is that these changes begin with teachers and their students, not with a universal, generic formula or pre-packed curriculum. Teachers are experts in not just their subjects but in their students’ learning needs. When intervening in the formation of a new canon or the monolithic canon of hucksters like Bloom that excludes minority groups and perpetuates myopic values, teachers should continually ask themselves who their students are and how they can bring their students’ voices into the curriculum. The result would be a literature curriculum that is fluid and changes in response to students. For example, non-traditional texts like hip-hop or video games may find themselves in conversation with future forms of texts as students and society change and become more and more diverse. The canon, as a result, would not die but become subsumed in growing bodies of texts representing multiple perspectives, of which the texts in the current canon would be just one.

The canon has burrowed into culture and curriculum, perpetuating narratives that misrepresent the cultures of non-White people and, more broadly, misrepresent our society, which is more complex and diverse than it portrays. A strong prophylactic for the canon could be the Common Core Standards, which could justify the canon through suggested reading lists, textbook adoptions, inherent normalizing goals, and of course standards that include the teaching of traditional American texts. Students—who have no freedom in selecting these texts—become subjects to texts in educational institutions each day of the school year. Foucault (1994a) underscores the idea that “power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity” (p. 130). Therefore, calling attention to power relations shows how literature curriculum in secondary schools could exclude minority groups and marginalize students whose narratives are unacknowledged or egregiously misrepresented by the canon. Yet, through subtle forms of resistance, new power relations can reshape old ones. Acts of resistance could decenter operations of the canon at the local level of secondary school classrooms, and literature curriculum that focuses on a flinty list of texts could then slowly fade into a more multicultural and multidimensional arena of discourse that embraces change and celebrates difference, for a more equitable society for us and future generations.

Notes

¹ For citation purposes, the list of the top 10 most frequently required text in Applebee (1992) are as in order follows: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Julius Caesar*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Scarlett Letter*, *Of*

Mice and Men, *Hamlet*, *Great Gatsby*, and *Lord of the Flies* (, p. 28). Note that Shakespeare accounts for four of the titles. So, the authors in *Appendix B* include Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Harper Lee, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Steinbeck, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. In *Appendix B* (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.): Shakespeare is on pages 111–122 and 153; Twain is on pages 77–79; Lee is on pages 107–108, Hawthorne is on pages 145–146; Steinbeck is on pages 92 and 105; and Fitzgerald is on page 149.

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