ARTICLES

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Pop Culture Canon: Promoting Student Access and Autonomy Through Non-Traditional Texts

The Pop Culture Canon as Inclusivity

When I stand at the front of a classroom and introduce myself to my students each new academic term, they are always surprised to hear that I am a scholar of *Batman* rather than Shakespeare. I do enjoy some of his works, but I am all the more interested in the living breathing mythology of *Batman* that has asserted itself in American culture. Although the study of American popular culture has become more widely accepted, the stigma attached to "lower literature" has yet to disappear. It seems to have become ingrained in higher education. The confused and almost betrayed expressions on their faces bring into memory the squinting eyes and furrowed brows of concerned classmates and professors who questioned my decision to write my master's thesis on Dante's *Inferno* in conversation with *Over the Garden Wall*[1], a children's cartoon. The most common student response to this information mimics the comments I've heard throughout my graduate study from many peers and some instructors. I have become accustomed to the typical questions and comments: "You aren't getting a degree in *that,*" "What a waste of time and money," "Why not study something practical/employable/marketable?"

It has never occurred to me that the study of stories that are consumed by massive audiences, often from childhood and continuing on throughout adolescence and adulthood, was impractical. The stories which are taught to entire communities are no longer told around a burning fire, passed down from elders. These non-traditional literary mediums makeup th*e new oral tradition*. However, it is immediately apparent that the great literary canon and academia's love affair with it are prominent factors in shaping the practice of excluding entire groups of texts. The great literary canon may be one of the most successful gatekeepers in our educational systems, especially where higher learning is concerned. Adherence to the praise and study of the canon and the exclusion of "lower" work prevents true diversity in any literature classroom. The canon is not sufficiently representative of the diversity of the twenty-first-century student populace. It does not only alienate and remove certain genres, writers, and mediums from academia, but does much to

[1] *Over the Garden Wall* was the first mini-series produced by Cartoon Network. Its story borrows heavily from Dante's work, employing a spiritual odyssey of moral redemption.

alienate and exclude the students who are meant to study from the canon. They are taught that *these* texts are to be hailed as the standard for great literature. By showing a largely homogenized set of texts as what all great writing must aspire to be, the canon simultaneously demonstrates to our students that any sort of texts, narratives, genres, and writers that are not displayed or represented by the canon are not great writing. Non-canonical literature is portrayed as unacademic, low-brow, low-class, and unworthy of study. I reject this notion completely. The study of non-traditional texts and the pop culture canon work to build a bridge between students and literature, while allowing students to interact with and create their own canons of great works. This opportunity accomplishes two great things: firstly, students are encouraged to engage intimately with these texts, considering their own relationship with the texts that they study in a formal space and the texts that are excluded from formal educational spaces. In this way, the pop culture canon affords students the opportunity to reassess and to critique the traditional canon. Secondly, the study of the pop culture canon creates spaces of inclusivity across genre, culture, time, and identities. This is accomplished as students develop, edit, and interrogate the canon based on their own criteria. Rather than accepting what has been declared as great literature, students are tasked with determining which literature belongs in the canon of popular culture.

The pop culture canon consists of non-traditional texts. It is comprised of graphic novels, film, cartoons, videogames, music, songs, and traditional forms of fiction that have been written by groups which have been ignored by the traditional canon. The nature of this canon allows for more sufficient representation of the students who will be exposed to it. As the racial, economic, and gendered barriers of higher learning that once excluded most Americans from the college campus have been slowly dismantled over the last several decades, the student population has become increasingly diverse. The reality of diversity means that our campuses are filled with students from varying backgrounds. Many of these students will have made their way through K-12 without being exposed to literature that represents their own experiences or, perhaps worse, that have had their experiences prescribed to them as a limited and repeated selection of minority texts that have been deemed sufficient enough to sit beside a Eurocentric canon. I understand that it is important for students to be introduced to stories that are unfamiliar to them. There should be an exploration of narratives that will immerse young scholars in a world or a perspective that is vastly different from their own. While there is great value in exposing young scholars to varied experiences through literature, there is also a need to expose students to literature that offers some representation of the students' experiences. Carolyn Cocca describes the importance of representation in her work *Superwomen* as she writes:

> While you do not have to have a perfect demographic match with a character to identify with her or him, seeing someone who looks like you can have a positive impact on self-esteem and seeing no one who looks like you can have a negative impact on self-esteem. You are more likely to imagine yourself as a hero if you see yourself represented as a hero. Marginalized groups have been forced to "cross-identify" with those different from them while dominant groups have not. (Cocca 3)

Cocca's work speaks on representation in visual mediums such as the graphic novel. While this is the case, Cocca's argument for representation and its potential impact is certainly applicable in

conversation with the pop culture canon. Arguably, we as instructors are not looking to teach students to value themselves. Self-worth is not blatantly written into the curriculum. Cocca's message may be dismissed in this context. However, I caution that this is a mistake. If we are truly training scholars and professionals, how can we do so under a curriculum that either removes them from the conversation of scholarly study or affixes them to a limited and specific role?

Again, this form of exclusion drives a narrative that only specific *types* of stories are worthy of study. Sadly, those are often Western-centric, composed of mostly male writers and woefully underrepresented members of numerous groups of readers and writers. Issues of race, ethnicity, disability, neurodiversity, gender identity, sexual orientation, economic, and class status are not represented widely enough and in those rare instances are represented by writers who are not members of these underrepresented groups. This leaves the underrepresented to become stereotypical plot devices or, very bluntly, literary props. I would not claim that there no texts within popular culture that make these same mistakes; however, I do assert that the nature of the pop culture canon allows for the inclusion of more diverse writers and affords much more opportunity for the study of narratives about underrepresented groups that have been provided by its identifying members. This is one method by which we can combat and correct the issues of underrepresentation and negative representation that Cocca describes. We may not consciously set out with the goal of teaching our students to value themselves when we put together our reading lists, but we are very loudly sending the message that *academia* does not value them when those lists are exclusionary. If their cultures and experiences are missing from the canon on the grounds that they are not worthy of study, then those cultures and experiences are being actively invalidated. Simultaneously, validation and acknowledgment belong to a select few. The most common narratives taught, re-taught, and hailed as great literature focus on similar subjects. This further enforces a homogenous status-quo in the classroom.

Unlike the traditional canon, the pop culture canon allows simultaneously for more variety *and* more scrutiny, as it is subject to frequent change. The case must be made for the addition and removal of texts from this canon as it is growing and changing frequently, unlike the traditional canon, which remains stagnant. The inherent subjectivity of this canon also promotes critical thought and analysis. When confronting the pop culture canon, students are being asked to consider what makes literature great and how a canon is to be formed. Consideration must be given to time, space, and culture. What are the great works of that students' culture? Is there a canon of works that best demonstrates masterful writing in a specific decade and, if so, then what are the prominent mediums of that decade? Constructing their own canons demands that students confront the literature that they have been exposed to both inside the classroom and beyond its contained environment. Thinking much smaller and remaining within the classroom, the implementation of the pop culture canon has proven itself to be a valuable tool for helping students interact with literature in a meaningful and critical manner.

All institutions are composed of varying demographics. Throughout my career as an educator, I have consistently served institutions primarily attended by students from underserved

and marginalized groups. Often, my students describe their previous experiences interacting with literature and writing as unpleasant, uncomfortable, or in some cases extremely sparse. I was taken aback by the number of students who told me that they had not been made to read the full length of a novel. The task itself seemed equally unpleasant and uncomfortable. My demands that they interact with the text are also met with panic. Gone are the days of simple memorization and summarization. In my nearly five years of experience teaching undergraduate courses on composition and literature, the issue of confronting *any* literature at all rears its head as a daunting and overwhelming beast, leaving many students who had never been given the opportunity to put the proper skills into practice paralyzed. The study of popular[2] texts can serve as a bridge between the students and the unfamiliarity of traditional literature.

Leigh A. Hall's study, "How Popular Culture Texts Inform and Shape Students' Discussions of Social Studies Texts," explores the pairing of popular culture with the study of traditional academic texts. Leigh writes, "In school and at home, youths often engage with an array of pop culture texts for pleasure or to gain information that addresses issues important to them (. . .) Their experiences with pop culture texts also support their development as literate individuals [and help] them better understand themselves" (297). Leigh's work describes the use of popular culture aiding middle school students with diving into the critical analysis of academic or "social texts" (297). Leigh's chosen study group may be younger than the typical undergraduate student, but the concept employed here is similar. There is a connection being made between the familiar and the unfamiliar and popular texts are what allow the connections to be made. It should be noted, that in addition to this great benefit, that pop culture texts can absolutely stand on their own and need not aid in the introduction to more traditional modes. I have implemented the use of popular texts to this purpose in undergraduate literature and composition courses to great success. Exploring its use in the latter, I have found that encouraging students to revisit popular texts from their youth has been a wonderful tool for introducing them to the concept of literary analysis and the practice of critical thinking. Students are not as removed from literary analysis as they may believe themselves to be. I have made a habit of telling my students, half-jokingly, that they first became literary analysts when they sat around the table in their middle school cafeteria arguing furiously over the ethical dilemmas of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (as one example). This work of animation is a popular text that deals very intimately with issues of environmentalism, fascism, ethnic cleansing, class struggle, personal trauma and a myriad of other very complicated themes, and its target audience is small children. As my students continue to age, I am sure that my half-joke will as well. I will have to replace *Avatar* with something more relevant as time goes on, but for now the half-joke is working.

[2] The term "popular" in this instance refers to works within the pop culture canon. Graphic novels, cartoons, videogames, television series, films, music/lyrics, and other mediums are included in this description.

Animating the Classroom: *Hey Arnold!* as Analytical Exercise

In the practice of using popular texts in the undergraduate classroom, I find that it is most helpful in building skills of analysis and critical thinking. I have repeatedly found success in using popular texts to introduce students to a variety of literary elements, genres, and themes. One exercise which I have used consistently is to introduce students to character study via what is admittedly one of my favorite popular works, *Hey Arnold!* The show is viewed in class and a group discussion follows. The show's short episodic stories require that students focus on a very contained narrative. There isn't any room for making broad strokes; they work with very little and thus must be extremely specific. For example, one of the series' few twenty-two minute-[3] stories, "Helga on the Couch" focuses solely on the show's bully, Helga Pataki. Her prominence in the series and the release of a Helga-centric episode furl the debate on her position as a possible secondary protagonist rather than an antagonist to young Arnold. True to form, this character study seeks to explore Helga's mindset and dive deeper into the reasoning behind her decision to lash out and ridicule her classmates, often in violent, borderline abusive manners. This behavior includes physical abuse in some instances. This is accomplished through the use of a simple setting: Helga is placed into therapy and the episode almost entirely exists as the actual therapy session. This is a very contained narrative in a series that succeeds in creating isolated stories that can be viewed in any order.

Student reaction to this popular text varies, and the subject matter is upsetting for some. What is consistent, however, is that the students actively and thoroughly offer their analysis and critique of the work. Comments are made on plot, setting, character, and even performance. One student expressed that she noticed that therapy was treated with extreme aversion, taking note of Helga's teachers being fearful that the school psychiatrist may be observing their behavior. When discussing Helga's violent behavior, another student offered a critique of a scene in which Helga's parents are told that their daughter will be required to attend therapy sessions. She is met with anger and ordered to sit in the family trophy room to discuss it. As they broke down the scene the student noted, "That all important conversations happen in the trophy room. The family revolves around competition and winning. [Helga's father] is more concerned with image than he is for his daughter's mental health." The group discussions show a clear understanding of the task of thinking critically rather than offering summary. Through this activity, the students learn to engage with literature, to *read* actively, and to express their findings. I find that using these smaller texts allows for a group-based analysis in real-time. That is to say that students are all interacting with the text in class rather than reading off on their own. Obviously, independent work and reading are still valuable parts of their education, but these activities create a space of social learning. Although I have yet to pinpoint the reason, it has been my experience that many more students are willing to participate in the dissection of episodic texts. It may be due to their familiarity with shows like *Hey Arnold*. Whereas I may often find myself staring at the same hands

[3] Like many cartoons of the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s, *Hey Arnold!'s* typical running time of twenty-two minutes included two distinct eleven-minute stories. On occasion, "special" episodes would devote the full running time to a singular story; i.e. "Arnold's Christmas" (1996)

that would typically participate, during these exercises I am instead left to juggle furiously eager students. Again, the subject matter in these works is often very personal and polarizing. I would suggest, with any work, that we as educators prepare our students to engage with difficult topics of discussion.

Popular texts can be studied independently of traditional texts both at an introductory level and in a very advanced mode. Simultaneously, popular texts may be paired with traditional texts. When teaching courses on the graphic novel, I will often pair each graphic novel with one or two short stories with which the graphic novel may share some connection. Initially, I had begun to do this in order to make it more apparent to the students that a medium that had been seen as frivolous is as relevant and academically valuable as any traditionally academic text. For example, when exploring J.H Williams III's take on the superhero story, Batwoman*: Hydrology*, students are also made to read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Kate Chopin's, "The Story of an Hour." All three texts explore themes of autonomy, free will, mental health, feminism, and arguably much more. Is William's approach to these issues somehow invalid because his representation of these themes is accompanied by colorful illustrations? It is not surprising that undergraduate students would hold tightly to what they have been taught about distinguishing high literature from its "lowly" counterparts. Helping students to move beyond this ingrained idea is key to allowing the students to have more autonomy as they study and continue to sharpen their skills of critical thinking and argumentation. Students should be encouraged to interact with the popular texts that surround them every day. While I do argue for the diversification of texts, I do acknowledge that several other reformations in higher education are needed in order to achieve true inclusivity. Factors such as grading policies, assessments, student access, and many more elements of learning will also need to be diversified. Still, to diversify texts in both form and genre is a step towards a wider breadth of inclusion and representation. It is with these goals in mind that I work to develop my use of pop culture literature in formal projects.

Student Autonomy: Building New Canons

To encourage the continued exercise of interacting with popular texts, I have developed two projects that require students to engage with popular literature. I refer to one as "The Narrative Project" and the other as "Building the Pop Culture Canon." The building of the pop culture canon is a semester-long affair. Students are asked to curate a list of what they consider to be the great works of their cultures, their time, and their space. The assignment requires that they revisit their list and consider: what constitutes great writing? Are there additional requirements as you move across your list? Can your list be split into multiple great canons? Students are tasked with examining their own criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of works from their literary canon. Students are also asked to review the traditional canon. A great source for in-class debate is the argument for or against the removal of a traditional work from the literary canon. A student may propose that we add one of the works that we have studied together during the term. This exercise of continuously revising the canon allows students to critique and question what they have been taught is the standard of great writing. They must think critically and methodically to both

articulate and apply their own standards. Additionally, this project allows for students to be active observers of the canon. They are able to see what is missing from the canon, to try to understand where the deficit originates, and they are active participants in correcting the diversity deficit. In doing so, students are given more autonomy as they are free to study texts beyond what they have been assigned. They are not simply being given a list of great works; they are made to go out, to find great works, and to share them with their peers.

This student autonomy and active engagement are further reinforced by the narrative project. This is an assignment that asks the students to research a narrative of their choosing. Their options are not limited to the traditional novel. Their narrative may appear in the form of a comic book, cartoon, film, videogame, painting, or any other form of storytelling that may peak their interests. I do ask that students email or meet with me to discuss their selected narrative and, so long as it is not inappropriate, they get the green light and are able to begin their research. While students are free to pursue their research topics, they are given some guidance in that they must make some sort of claim about the cultural and historical significance of their selected narrative. I find that I must always make time in class for the workshopping of the thesis. Students are often accustomed to responding to a question that is posed in the prompt of assignment instructions. In this instance, students are *not* being asked a specific question and are instead instructed to pose their own arguments. Sometimes the freedom of creating their own research topics on any narrative that they'd like can be overwhelming. This must be worked into feeling commonplace. As students progress through their undergraduate studies and move into professional or graduate studies, they will be expected to organize research projects to be the source of their subjects rather than being *given* a subject and commanded to pursue it. The format of this project requires students to build their skills of invention, argumentation, and organization.

The results of this project have made it one of my favorites and, while class prep time is precious, I have not been able to bring myself to stop assigning it. I have seen students engaged passionately with texts that they feel are worthy of academic study and actively make their case. Leaving the medium of text as an open and free choice has resulted in a wide variety of storytelling, but an equally wide variety of *storytellers*. The presentations have been largely memorable. I can recall very fondly a student doing a presentation on the theme song to the PBS show *Arthur*, reggae, and its connection to class struggles in Jamaica. I have had students use interactive texts that required that their peers participate in the presentation of their work. Notably, one student's presentation was on the videogame *Until Dawn*, an interactive storytelling experience in which players' decisions directly impacted the story. Proper demonstration of the game had two different students come and play through the same short segment. Naturally, the results of each playthrough were different. This project gives students an opportunity to learn from one another and to explore their own interests. It has also been a source of new information for me, exposing both the instructor and their students to texts they may have never considered spending any time with otherwise. This diverse exchange of information allows instructors to consider new ways to teach the texts with which they are familiar, as well as new texts that can be taught. Genre and theme may be crucial aspects of building a course curriculum, but they can be approached from a

multitude of avenues. If you are designing your course around Horror Lit for example, you may consider how and where Horror Lit appears outside of the traditional novel. If you are keen to remain in the bindings of books, consider who is writing horror and how that writing changes across culture, time, space, identity. This is applicable across genres.

The broadening of horizons goes both ways, so to speak. I have found that this project has been helpful in keeping my reading lists from becoming stale. I have switched around my popular texts of choice based around some factors of what my students decided to teach. It gives me the opportunity to see what voices are still dominant and which are still being silenced.

Conclusion: Closing the Deficit

The traditional literary canon is an insufficient and exclusionary list of texts. It fails to offer the level of diversity that is appropriate and reflective of the twenty-first-century college classroom. It is an outdated and harmful form of academic gatekeeping that signals the validation of a few select experiences and the invalidation of a multitude of others. The pop culture canon is one possible answer to directly confronting and correcting the diversity deficit of the literary canon. The study of popular culture is picking up. There are more instances of popular culture making appearances in scholarly study. Pop culture pedagogy is still relatively young and warrants far more research. The use of the pop culture canon and the study of popular texts creates moments for true inclusivity and diverse pedagogy. Students are given access to literature that they often lack in their K-12 education and that is often foreign once they begin their college careers. Simultaneously, the implementation of the pop culture canon affords students autonomy that is not available when they are simply prescribed texts. A complete and thorough educational experience must call for student choice, student engagement, and student inclusion. The pop culture canon is one method we may use to promote these invaluable and crucial practices.

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