Fiction is dangerous because it has the power to modify the principles of individuals and whole societies.


I am sitting in a New Mexico classroom observing a student teacher as she introduces To Kill a Mockingbird to tenth graders: “Now, remember from yesterday’s research on the time period that there might be some language, like the n-word, that could be upsetting to some people.” There follows a weighty pause until a boy says, “I don’t know what the big deal is. It’s just a word.” I look to the cooperating teacher, but he is organizing his desk. I look back at the student teacher, but she is looking down and fumbling with a stack of papers. I look out at the 25 students as they stare at her, awaiting a response. “That’s probably a conversation we should have, but we’re not going to have it right now,” she says as she glances in the direction of the student before transitioning into the day’s lesson on characterization. Involuntarily, I wince and shake my head and, as I do, my eyes meet the eyes of a black student across the room who is watching me. I know I’ve let him down. A week later, same high school, different classroom, I observe another student teacher. This time the book is Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men, and the class is reading it aloud. A student gets to the n-word and stops. “I won’t read that word,” she says. “That’s fine,” the young teacher replies, “just skip over it,” and the class continues.

While these experiences are arguments for culturally responsive teacher education, both exemplify the damage that is done when teachers avoid the difficult conversations about race that canonical texts such as these require. Such missed opportunities are distressingly common and the consequences are institutional and deep. With or without a meaningful conversation about the history of the n-word and the implications of reading a book in school that uses it, the texts we teach have repercussions for students that extend beyond the classroom. We can no longer afford to believe that canonical reading lists are harmless and do not influence how all students value, or fail to value, nonwhite lives.
Whitesplaining the Canon

offspring, the canonical reading lists of high school English departments—was designed for industry and not the developmental needs of children (Jacobs). As it evolved, the canon became a set of norms and values by which literary culture validated social power (Lauter 435) and for the past 50 or so years, high school reading lists have maintained a fairly monogamous relationship with a particular group of power hitters. Despite the integration of more YA literature in the past 20 years, the ten most commonly taught texts are still exclusively by white authors telling stories about white people (Goering and Connors 17). To be fair, the texts most commonly assigned in secondary ELA classrooms (works written by Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, and Twain) (Stotsky et al. 17) are also assigned in the university departments of most English degrees. Racism is built on the institutional presumption of white exceptionalism, and the canon perpetuates this belief. Intentionally or not, the canon communicates that whiteness is a common cultural value. Schooling is never neutral, and it is difficult to teach literature in a value-neutral way (I wouldn’t want to even if I could). However, most curricula is “so focused on white people that children (of all colors) get the impression that the stories that matter, and education as a whole, are not for children of color” (Vilson, qtd. in Anderson).

Non-Ideological Consequences of White Literature

Outside the school walls, there is plenty of evidence that nonwhite perspectives in literature are not valued. In 2015, .03 percent of children’s books published were written by African American authors, and only 11 percent were by and about African Americans, American Indians, Latinos/Latinas, and Asian Pacific Americans combined (Cooperative Children’s Book Center). As the late YA author Walter Dean Myers noted in his New York Times piece on the topic, there are distressing consequences to our whitewashed reading:

As I discovered who I was, a black teenager in a white-dominated world, I saw that these characters, these lives, were not mine. . . . What I wanted, needed really, was to become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that I saw around me. Books did not become my enemies. They were more like friends with whom I no longer felt comfortable. I stopped reading. I stopped going to school. On my 17th birthday, I joined the Army. In retrospect I see that I had lost the potential person I would become.

Myers explores how these consequences extend beyond the classroom:

Where are the future white personnel managers going to get their ideas of people of color? Where are the future white loan officers and future white politicians going to get their knowledge of people of color? Where are black children going to get a sense of who they are and what they can be?

In April 2016, students from Yale’s English department petitioned their predominantly white faculty to alter its core requirements stating that to read only white male authors creates a culture that is hostile to students of color. In her op-ed for the Yale Daily News, senior Adriana Miele argues that English majors need instruction beyond analyzing and close-reading canonical work and should be “taught to question why it is canonical, or the implications of canonical works that actively oppress and marginalize.” The Internet exploded with opinions about the Yale petition. Advocates of the canon proclaimed “the canon is what it is.” Critics of the canon asserted that literature required in 2016 should differ from the requirements of 1916 (Engler). Ultimately, it’s an ideological debate that has non-ideological consequences. As NCTE’s “Resolution on Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline” enumerates, teachers must develop culturally sustaining pedagogical tools to dismantle the alarming national trend that funnels a disproportionate number of students of color out of public schools. Furthermore, as representatives of the state, educators have an obligation to stop racism with whatever means available; the texts ELA teachers assign is an obvious and powerful place to begin.

We Need More Than Diverse Texts

Our discipline cannot redress the predominantly white perspective represented in ELA reading lists by simply adding diversity—an ahistorical bandage that obfuscates more than it reveals. In her research of its usage, Ellen Berrey concludes that diversity talk is watered down code used to avoid making changes in racist behaviors and policies: “It lets white people off the hook from doing something about our own culpability in the
problem.” One of the key problems with the idea of integrating diverse texts into the classroom is that it is built upon the premise that there is a supposed neutral space from which one must diversify, that our departments must add “color” and “variety” to this established neutral space that is white, heterosexual, middle class, and male (Bhanot). In a public school system in which, for the first time in US history, over half of its students are from ethnic and racial minorities (Boser), we must do more than diversify curriculum; we must decolonize it. This change is necessary because, as YA author Daniel José Older explains, “lack of racial diversity (in literature) is a symptom. The underlying illness is institutional racism. It walks hand in hand with sexism, cissexism, homophobia, and classism. To go beyond this same conversation we keep having, again and again, beyond tokens and quick fixes, requires us to look the illness in the face and destroy it.”

There are too many examples, like my experience above, of ELA teachers who have failed to examine the racist language and limited portrayals of people of color in canonical texts. Decolonizing the discipline would allow us to teach texts that more accurately represent our communities while providing opportunities for students to empathize across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and language. To give up English as it has been taught for more than 50 years—as a course in Euro-American studies—means we must replace canonical works with books that humanize people of color. These titles can be as challenging as any canonical literature, but they must be written by and about people of color such as Alexie, Silko, Erdrich, Harjo, Momaday, Lahiri, Hong Kingston, Mukherjee, Hosseini, Murakami, Alvarez, Díaz, Allende, Cisneros, Galeano, Borges, Marquez, Baldwin, Morrison, Walker, DuBois, Douglass, Angelou, Wright, Hurston, Ellison, Giovanni, among many others. This will require a flexibility and an awareness that is not usually part of most English departments. As suggested by Miele above, it will also ask a teacher workforce that is 82 percent white (Boser) to examine the implications of teaching books that exclude, stereotype, and demean people of color and examine why these texts are deemed canonical in the first place.

Decolonization Is Human Rights Work

In 2015, the NCTE/CCCC Black Caucus published the “NCTE Statement Affirming #BlackLivesMatter” in response to recent incidences of police brutality and the killings of people of color throughout the country, including children such as Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin. In this statement, the authors share a belief that English has the ability to “offer triage” to injustice by reversing “narratives of racism” and the subsequent oppressions and “ideological lynchings” embedded in classrooms. The authors call for a “revolution in curricula” as one way to do so. Although text selection is not mentioned, decolonizing the canon would, as the authors propose, reverse the “prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and bias” that is embedded within the ELA curriculum while teaching students “deeper compassion, elevated sympathies, and greater acceptance” for people of color.

If what we read forms group identity and defines common values, and if what we read excludes stories by and about people of color, then is it no surprise that as a culture we do not identify with or value the bodies and minds of people of color. I realize that this is not directly causal, but I do wonder if George Zimmerman had read books by and about black people in high school that Trayvon Martin might still be alive. Or, if the jurors on this case had done so, that maybe there would have been a conviction. However, we know that reading creates empathy and that most citizens sit through four years of high school English. If nothing else, canonical reading is a missed opportunity to build understanding of a nonwhite perspective, and the implications of this lack of understanding may extend into their workplace, their housing opportunities, and into their basic civil rights.

I know this feels personal. What are we if not our books? Math has its equations; social studies has its wars; science has its own method; and up until now, we have had our canon. The titles are identified as prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and bias” that is embedded within the ELA curriculum while teaching students “deeper compassion, elevated sympathies, and greater acceptance” for people of color.

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and I suspect we have a bit of an identity crisis for this reason. But, we can stop trying to compensate for this and reframe it as our unique strength instead. We are not like any other discipline, and if we embrace the opportunity this offers, ELA has the power to disrupt perceptions and build relationships more than any other content area. I realize old habits die hard, that teachers generally teach as they were taught, and that for many the canon preserves valuable cultural knowledge. However, our discipline can be more engaging and reach more of our students if we give up the illusion that canonical books are our content. Like the success of ethnic studies programs around the country (NCTE), a decolonized, representative English curriculum has the potential to increase student empowerment and graduation rates while building cross-cultural empathy and respect. It might even save lives.

Works Cited


