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ABSTRACT

New fields of English study are developing their own canons, their own majors, and their own departments: Black studies, Caribbean studies, women's studies. Yes, all scholars in English read Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Derek Walcott, but do they read them alike? Are the places of these works in the literary tradition the same for all readers? Indeed, Hurston has a place in three canons, American, African-American, and Feminist. What these developments suggest is that scholars will need more breadth in their understanding of "the" literary canon. However, a course taught at CUNY/Lehman College to minority high school seniors raises issues that put this problem of a literary canon on hold. The course was supposed to give the students practice in independent reading of full-length literary texts; to give them experience of reading some of the works their college classmates had read (or were supposed to have read). Issues of what texts to include in this course and which ones not to became moot, however, because the students seemed to have no appreciation of literature as art, as a way of knowing the world, as a mirror, not held up to nature only but to oneself also. Even at the end of the course, most of the students saw literature as a bunch of books and plays they were supposed to know about for reasons beyond their comprehension. (TB)

INTO THE MAINSTREAM WITHOUT DROWNING

A Paper Presented at the

Annual Convention of the

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Orlando, Florida
November 18, 1994

by
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Of course, we have always been a diverse culture, even before we were willing or able to recognize it. But we shared a belief--or at least professed it--that if we were a people we must be one people only; if there was an American language, it was one language only; if there was an American literature, there was one literary tradition--only. Of course the first students taught by the oldest member of the group before you--whoever that may be--were racially and ethnically mixed, and the group itself, which has journeyed from the Bronx and the near-Bronx to speak to you, might not have been considered "mainstream" a little while ago: we are of Italian, East European Jewish, Irish, and Latino extraction, and our missing member is an African American whose school district, to put it as nicely as possibly, could not get along without her for a few days.

So in what way is there a new world of students, a new world of teachers? And has the mainstream itself changed?

Among teachers newer than I am, some reflect the orientation that has created new fields of English study, each developing its own canon just as English and American literature have, some taught in colleges in their own departments, separating their majors from from traditional English majors more completely than fields of specialization within the English major do: Black Studies, Carribean

Studies, Women's Studies may each include specializations in literature, just as American Studies does. But while American Studies majors study the canonized works of American literature taught and written about by English departments, and while that canon includes works--obviously--by blacks and by women, it is becoming more and more possible for people who have studied literature, enough literature to become teachers of English, to operate out of different literary traditions. Sure, like Australian or Canadian literature--we suspect it's out there, we may even think it likely that there are scholars and teachers who specialize in it, but we don't really pay much attention to it. I don't mean the individual books or authors, I mean the literary tradition, with its own ancestors and influences and icons. I mean that there are or have been graduate students in the Lehman College graduate program in English Education who have come to us having majored in African American literature and Carribean literature, others whose primary literary interest is in what some people call "Anglophone" literature, others whose point of reference is the feminist canon, and still others, or at least one, with a developing interest in gay/lesbian literature for secondary school students. Students with such backgrounds and interests, especially if their educations from the beginning has been in these areas with relatively little exposure to just plain English--together with their colleagues who feel an especial concern for specific groups

of students, be they racial or ethnic, be they different in culture or in sexual orientation--will create a new world of teachers, less homogeneous than in the past, perhaps more difficult for supervisors to program, but all contributing to what promises to be an even broader world of English.

Yes, we all read Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Zora Neale Hurston, Derek Walcott, but do we read them alike? Are their places in literary history the same for all of us? Does their language resonate identically for us all? Indeed, Hurston has a place in three canons: American, African American, Feminist--but when I read Mary Helen Washington discuss male vs female interpretations of voice in Her Eyes Were Watching God and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discuss her work in relation to "the novel of manners of the Harlem Renaissance. . .and the cultural nationalism of the Black Arts movement" (189), and point to the influence of Jane Toomer and the distance from Richard Wright, I am conscious of dipping into traditions unfamiliar to me; when he points out the relationship to Henry James's Portrait of a Lady I am right at home. But maybe I learned more when I was less at home.

What I make of this is that we are all going to need more breadth in our understanding of "the" literary tradition. We may be teaching side by side with those who don't have Louis Gates's breadth of vision but who see literary traditions as competing with one another, forgetting that Richard Wright and Emily Dickinson are each

two-thirds of a dead white male, and that each of us, and our children, deserves to be enriched by works canonized in each tradition and by the insights brought to literature by them all.

That "all" includes the so-called western literary tradition, which, it is clear, will become an ever-widening stream. We should view it not as branching off into separate smaller streams but rather as gaining strength for being fed by many tributaries. But it will still be a canon--a body of works somehow approved for study in certain kinds of courses and considered somehow essential culturally or for literary scholarship.

Let me speak of students: A funded program for minority youth dedicated to provide its students everything they needed to succeed in college, in prestigious college where they would sit side by side with high-achievers among the traditionally prepared (by life as well as by teachers), discovered that while their graduates did well in mathematics and the sciences, they had trouble in English courses. Despite a fine literature curriculum and excellent teaching in their school, the students had read little or even nothing canonical outside of what they studied in class. Here, they partake of the customs of many new students and new teachers: like their parents, they seem as a culture to read less and less than previous generations did. Now, there are plenty of old style students and teachers--they just are not the people I'm talking about.

I am going to talk about those secondary school students, since I was given the chance to teach them as second semester seniors in a course at Lehman College designed for and which they took in addition to their regular English course. It was supposed to make smaller the difference between the old student and the new: To give them practice in independent reading of literature; to give them practice in reading full-length texts; to give them the experience of reading some of the works their college classmates would already have read (at least supposedly); and to give them practice in writing about literature. It was my course--I could teach what I pleased, but I was asked not to duplicate works they were studying that year.

I could feel the Harold Bloom in me rise to do battle with the Nancie Atwell. Let me share with you the course outline for the third and last time I taught the course.

I could explain some of the choices and omissions: what Shakespeare the students had studied, their department chair's desire that they read Camus, the brevity for Dickens of the Dickens, the fact--and I think this is important--that I could get no response to The Scarlet Letter other than the recitation of notes taken the previous year in English class. I had to drop it. Why I think it is important is that these very able young people, these future professionals, perhaps future teachers, had no conception of literature as an art, as a way of knowing the world, as a mirror--not just held up to nature--but for reflection of

and on ones' self and one's self.

I'm talking about the end of the course, not the beginning. My students struggled through some books, maybe enjoyed some of it, maybe learned something about writing about literature, certainly improved their English grades the following year (or so I was told). But most of them still saw literature as a bunch of books and plays they were supposed to know about for reasons beyond their comprehension; some they liked, most they didn't, the stuff will never compete with TV. They were willing, because that their English teachers were trying to help them, but if they didn't think we were all crazy, I don't know what they thought. They were willing, in the hope that like algebra, literature would open some door or another. But not the door in the back of the wardrobe, the door to some office or another.

I don't want to belabor the point: we've had others tell us that literature is dead or at least obsolete as the sun of our cultural solar system. I can't believe that because it runs counter to they way I feel about what's really important in life. But I know that our work is cut out for us. We have to find a way to help the tremendous number of kids who will be our college students, teachers, leaders first respond to literature as readers, help them feel its importance, and then worry about what's in what canon. Otherwise, teachers' voices may wake them to this or that version of the mainstream, but they'll drown.

Oh yes--that last paper they wrote. It was almost universally full of bits and snatches of things I had said. The kids still felt that that's where to look for what it was right to feel. And to my surprise, it wasn't James Baldwin, who had been nurtured in their own high school, who was their favorite. It was Dickens: it was the idea, in Hard Times, of educating the imagination.