

“The Insincere Embrace” – Canons and the Market

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Not too long ago the American Canon debate framed the discourses of every English department. It was a dispute between disciplines and subjects, and between cultures. We do not really hear much about the canon anymore, but this is hardly because the battle has been fought and the issues have all been settled. I would like to bring it up again in connection with recent developments in our university systems, with particular attention to literary and cultural studies. For if the battle over cultural legacies in the United States academe has been toned down, another battle is being fought, namely between the market and the idea of education. The canon debate and trends of syllabi and course marketing are connected, and in somewhat sinister ways. As we are entering a new era in Norwegian and American universities and colleges, with smaller, faster and more efficiency- and progress-oriented courses and with departments out-bidding each other in the race for inter-disciplinary funding, let us not forget that a significant part of this has to do with making our educational system compatible with and competitive on a bigger market. As higher learning institutions willingly or unwillingly adapt to models of the “new” university, it may be worthwhile taking a second look at the canon debate as it unfolded in the United States. There may be some lessons to be had from that spectacle. Below I want to briefly sketch the origin and course of the canon debate in the United States, and then turn to some of the consequences the debate has had.

The real problem with a canon is not so much that it excludes some things while including others. It is more the reciprocal relationship

embedded in the connotations of the word, those of “rule” and “measure” respectively. Do you “measure” a text according to the “rule” by which texts are measured, or do you “rule” according to how one “measures?” Of course, the norms by which both activities are carried out stem from the same source. The canon is a powerful tool in the service of whatever ideology prevails at a given time. Its self-reflecting dynamics are such that they bolster hegemony and always seek to contain the centrifugal forces that are continuously at work, no matter what the context is.

The canon debate in the United States began in the late 1960s – early 1970s. It was prepared for, however, by decades of speculation as to what American literature should be defined as, a speculation that naturally and significantly overlaps with the rise of American literature in the academic institutions. Related to this are the emergence, the production, and the distribution of literary anthologies. One may want to bear in mind that the word *anthology* was originally used to denote a collection of choice verses. Posing as selections of excellence, the anthology and the canon stare at each other in mutual admiration.

The prevailing view in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century was that American literature really was only a branch of English literature. The American literary works that were preferred were consequently those that most closely adhered to British ideals (Spiller viii). On the list of great literary works at the turn of the twentieth century we find the colonial writers and the founding fathers, New England and New York writers such as Irving, Cooper, Bryant, Emerson, Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell, sometimes Hawthorne gathered into a list of the genteel tradition. Melville, Twain, Whitman were not quite as English, and henceforth often excluded from the list. This tradition was not entirely clear about what it really was trying to express and uphold, or what it should be doing. Of course, American literature was not yet the field of research and object of study it would later become. Indeed, its status as an academic discipline was quite uncertain. This insecurity is illustrated by its late arrival in this country as object of study proper. American literature came to the University of Oslo only in the late 1940s. Sigmund Skard, trained in comparative literature, was then asked to establish something called American literary studies.

As to the American academe, Paul Lauter notes in *Canon and Contexts* that “courses in American literature had seldom been taught in schools

and colleges before the last decade of the 19th century; classroom anthologies and American literature texts began to appear only after the turn of the century" (1991, 27). To show how American literature was perceived around this time, he quotes Henry S. Pancoast, who in 1898 in *An Introduction to American Literature* characterized American literature like this:

American letters, he says, is only the continuation of English literature within the limits of what has become the United States, by people English in their speech, English to a considerable extent by inheritance, and English in the original character of their civilization (quoted in Lauter 1991, 43).

Pancoast demonstrates how American literature had not quite come out from under the cape of its British parents. The question, really, that one needed to answer in order to talk about American literature was the same one Hector Crevecoeur had posed as early as 1782: "What, then, is this new, American man?" What, in other words, is America? In the valedictory address at Yale in the year of the Declaration of Independence Timothy Dwight said he thought that literature should "reflect a people, who have the same religion, the same manners, the same interests, the same language, and the same essential forms and principles of civil government. ... A people, in all respects one ..." (Timothy Dwight, 1776. Quoted in Bruce-Novoa 196). For a long time, this same-ness was perceived as being English-ness rather than a distinct American-ness.

Susan Stewart suggests that if we think of culture "as the production of intelligible form, then literature might be seen not as an exceptional imaginary sphere or an after-the-fact reflection but as an activity central to human making" (12). This is important. The literary canon does not emerge as the result of retrospective reflection. It emerges *simultaneously* with and *in* its own time as the crystallization of those human-making activities that are perceived as most central. Cultures moreover select their self-descriptions according to structures embedded in the socio-political context of their day. For, as literary scholar Wendell Harris reminds us, "the criteria for selecting literary texts are derived not from authority but from chosen functions" (110). I question the dogmatic stance Harris here takes with respect to an absolute division between "authority" and "function." They reflect the uneasy relationship between rule and measure I have mentioned above. He is right, though, in pointing

out that the need for a canon as *representational* and *formative* occurs as response to certain functions. By being a response, it furthermore only takes place in context and almost invariably the functions the canon serves tie in with nation narration.

Literature in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century was responding to the idea that American literature was an English offspring. As the century progressed, however, this changed and the need for a different *kind of response* was growing. Such response, it was felt, should emphasize and express a sense of American-ness independent of its English origin. In the 1920s several factors came together to effect revisions. Cultural and literary modernists challenged the contemporary selection of texts, and rediscovered writers such as Freneau, Thoreau, and Melville, also granting Twain and Whitman more space. This was not only the result of an emphasis on the American-ness of American literary history. It also had to do with new perceptions of masculinity in a fast-changing and modernizing and industrialized American society. Traditional male functions seemed lost in a world that World War I had destabilized and rendered meaningless. Relief was sought in a literature that combined the celebration of self-reliance with the celebration of American-ness. Perhaps even more important was the explicit emphasis which was put on letting American literature reflect the political and social situation both at home and abroad. The effects of a population increasingly consisting of heterogeneous immigrant groups, the powerful position of the United States after World War I, and, finally, the emphasis on Americanization in a tumultuous time all over the world combined to suggest that education and literacy could serve specific purposes and functions.

In the course of only a few years, this impetus would become a uniform and a uniforming strategy. Theo D'Haen describes the process as follows:

The "classic" American literary canon emerged in the 1920s as a result of the same kinds of shifts that are now breaking up this very same canon: demographic, political, and ideological, literary theoretical, and professional. Only then these shifts made not for pluralism or multiculturalism but for centralism and cultural Unitarianism. (236)

The year 1945 saw what was perhaps the most notable result of these currents. This was a report called *General Education in a Free Society*, or the Red Book, that came out of Harvard. It was authored by twelve pro-

fessors under the auspices of the educator, scientist and Manhattan Project (the Nuclear Program) director James B. Conant, and pointed out the direction for how education must function in a society increasingly characterized by diversity. The twelve authors identified two main threats to social stability: Firstly, that of modernity's generally corrosive effect on the traditional venues of formation such as the family, the church, nature, the community. Secondly, the authors identified the potential dangers that unfettered diversity itself could produce in the already neurotic Nuclear age. Against both these threats, the *Red Book* proposed an acculturating curricular scheme. It would take care of education in a citizenship kind of way, separate from the specialization that students were otherwise tracked for. The solution for the humanities was a course of "Great Texts of Literature" that would function as cultural glue with the aim of containing diversity. In his comments on the Harvard Report, Louis Menand remarks that the report and the strategy it advocated were not unique in its kind. Both Chicago and Colombia had already designed similar curricula. However, the *Red Book* was the most important one; it came, after all, out of the flagship of higher learning, Harvard. The two main effects the list of great works had were, firstly, that it singled out within the field of literary studies the works that exhibited that abstract quality of "literary quality" – literature as literature. Secondly, in a broader context the list gave to the universities a cultural glue that reflected what Menand calls the "common assumptions of our way of life, thereby speaking to future citizens" (343).

Thus was witnessed the centralization of the American mind, if you will, which would come to characterize the United States in the 1950s. The "*concordia discurs*," the political consensus of the 50s rested among other things on a sense of idealized American-ness. The "List of Great Literary Works" did not differ much from the canon as it was reformulated in the 1920s, but it specifically aimed at underscoring American-ness: it presented a selection of uplifting reading experiences. D'Haen further notes that it gave people a sense of what it meant to be American:

This "Americanness" was then further defined as an ideal in opposition to what its propounders saw as the massification and commercialization of actual American life and culture. The result was an elite canon holding out the democratic individualism as the ultimate goal for all Americans. Given the abstraction of this ideal condition, differences of class and gender could conveniently be disregarded. (236)

These ideas also placed a corresponding responsibility of correct formation and instruction on teachers and professors. Thus, in 1958 the Modern Language Association's executive secretary noted that the profession itself was instrumental in preparing Americans for the international role the United States was playing. Of course, it is easy to see the close connections between the ideals of formation embedded in the literary canon of the 1950s, and the ideals of the American dream of success and the idea of the Melting Pot. We should note that for all its focus on diversity, the Harvard report did not mention the diversities that run along the lines of gender, race and ethnicity. The only diversity that existed in these authors' minds was that of class. And in focusing on class differences and trying to secure a way of educating all on the same basis (a commendable project in and of itself), the notion of the American meritocracy was born. This model, however, could only function as long as the student body was as uniform as it was up until it all came apart in the 1960s.

The processes of de-colonization of peoples and nations in the late 1940s gave rise to postcolonial movements and theories that had repercussions throughout the world. In the "Preface" to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* Sartre wrote with passion: "Thus the day of magicians and fetishes will end; you will have to fight, or rot in concentration camps. This is the end of the dialectic ..." (30-31). Writings like this resonated with people everywhere, including those who are sometimes referred to as the internally colonized groups in the United States. The Black civil rights movement under Martin Luther King's leadership spurred on other movements waking up from the amnesia of the 1950s. Race, ethnicity and gender became the themes around which the new discourses of political, social and cultural equality – and *difference* – were structured. A fast increasing number of students participated, and they were not the homogenous crowd they used to be. The baby-boomers swarmed onto the campus grounds, demanding that the universities adapt to the real and changing world out there; that they adapt to who they were. The very foundations that the established norm for education – and the canon – rested upon were crumbling.

The two main functions of the literary canon were, firstly, to represent what we may call an aesthetic of American-ness, and, secondly, to provide a common basis for cultural understanding. These two functions could not withstand the pressures from the social and political turmoil.

When the full repercussions of the civil rights movement reached campuses all over the United States, diversity could not be conceptualized in terms of class alone. Black students enrolling in literature classes did not encounter books that seemed to express "common assumptions of our way of life"; there was little in those "common assumptions" that spoke to women and their sense of the future. The cultural glue which the list of great works was supposed to function as made less and less sense. Lauter recalls how students were asking: "Where are the blacks? Where are the women?" and how his workshop on the literary canon at the MLA convention in 1973 was the first of its kind.

The demographic, political, ideological, and professional shifts that had reformed the canon in the 1920s brought consensus. In the 1960s they brought the exact opposite, and thus the American Canon debate as we know it began. In short, what should students read? Since the existing curricula for the most part were made up of what was dubbed "dead, white males," they were, as we know, soon up for replacement. Hemingway, the deadeast and whitest male of all, came under attack for misogyny; Faulkner for slurring his way through the burdened South. Similar cases were being made for others. At one point in the eighties someone, and I think it was John Updike, said that there really was no point anymore being male and white and writing literature.

I am describing the debate in crude terms now. The point that I want to make, though, is how the desire to expel authors like Hemingway and Faulkner from the reading lists illustrates the essence of the debate. To probe and doubt the existing standards was the paradigm. The Vietnam War had made it amply clear that the United States' self-appointed role as world police was up for scrutiny. The civil rights movement had made people aware of the injustices and transgressions minorities of color suffered within the borders of "the greatest democracy in the world." The same movements also inspired women to rebel against the patriarchal paradigms they had been brought up with. All this questioning of virtually every aspect of American life came together in the academic institutions in the canon debate. As mediator of society's values and norms, how could institutions continue to teach false representations of reality? What could Hemingway possibly offer in terms of reflecting meaningfully the reality of young women, or that of young, black men from the Deep South?

To questions such as these some professionals argued that despite the differences and inequalities of the culture, all cultures, but especially one such as the United States, depend upon this kind of "old" cultural glue: a basis that can secure cultural and intellectual continuity and compatibility across the divides of race, gender, ethnicity. Note that by now the category of class has been erased from the agenda. To this critics responded that the very assumption presupposes an evaluation that is steeped in old hegemonic discourses of race and ethnicity and gender. Indeed, those very discourses must be revised and deconstructed.

In 1966 Jacques Derrida came to the United States to give a paper at a conference on structuralism. In the course of the paper he deconstructed structuralism, and the world of literary studies was forever changed. Deconstruction, and in a wider context the post-structuralist theories that displaced structuralism, were what the new times wanted – and needed. In very simple terms the new paradigms went something like this: All structures must at some point collapse because all structures contain unwanted elements that the structure must suppress in order to maintain order. This cannot be sustained indefinitely and the structure falls apart. Western thought moreover works from a center constituted by the word, rationality, and reason, forming an intellectual paradigm that can only be maintained as long as it is not challenged by the unwanted elements. These rationales provided those very unwanted elements with the conceptual tools they were looking for, a theory that tore apart all existing assumptions and concluded that everything is relative – including the subject, to the extent that it was seen to exist at all. Deconstruction was a theory that ultimately questioned the dialectics that upheld the world order.

In the mid-1980s the opposition to the canon became known as multiculturalism, which broadly speaking has to do with the representation of difference. We see how Werner Sollors in 1986 (in "Critique of Pure Pluralism" in Bercovitch's *Reconstructing American Literary History*) talks about "cultural pluralism" (250). The year after, Reed Way Dasenbrock explains in PMLA that he prefers to use the term *multicultural literature* to "include both works that are explicitly about multicultural societies and those that are implicitly multicultural in the sense of inscribing readers from other cultures inside their own textual dynamics" (10). In 1995 David Palimbo-Liu in *The Ethnic Canon* says that multiculturalism

is a “general program of representing the cultures and histories of diverse minorities” (2).

Menand uses an image that very nicely, I think, illustrates how the academe split into the two major positions that would come to frame the canon debate. I quote him at some length:

For multi-culturalists, diversity is a condition to be recognized, encouraged, celebrated ... People are different. So what? Grains of sand are different too. That doesn't mean there's no such thing as a beach. But proponents of “diversity” believe that to say that the differences among readers and writers of literature are less important than the similarities, is tantamount to suppressing the differences. They think that beach-talk is basically a way of keeping the sand in its place. Critics of multiculturalism don't disagree; they just think that belonging to a beach is better for the sand. (336)

We may say, then, that multiculturalism is essentially a way of responding to the fact of diversity. A number of problems in and with the debate arise right here. The polarization into canon versus multiculturalism would seem to assume that canons arise from mono-cultural contexts. That view overlooks the very nature of a canon, as fundamentally a structure that excludes and includes, arising from and within larger and complex structures, multi-faceted or multicultural in some form or other. The canon is, when it comes down to it, merely the vehicle for whatever ideological strategy is at play at a certain point in time and place.

I take some time elaborating on this because by positing itself as the opposite of the canon, multiculturalism tends to ignore the fact that it is itself a strategy. It is born out of different circumstances but harbors within it the same canonical drives as any other strategy. Here multiculturalism as a program walks right into the predicament of deconstruction: all structures – and programs *are* structures – gravitate toward a center of some kind. Multiculturalism is only the current way of responding to what has always been true: we are and have always been different, and we have always belonged to different structures.

Sometime in the early 1990s, perhaps it was with Harold Bloom's nostalgic *The Western Canon*, the heat went out of the debate as it had flourished in the previous decades. The hey-days were the 1970s and 1980s, with E.D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom as the propagators for the canon, echoing James B. Conant's program for a cultural glue to keep all the sand in place. Some of the most marked critics – Paul Lauter, Nina Baym, Sacvan Bercovitch, Werner Sollors, and many others – sort of

won the discussion and went on to anthologize multicultural texts and authors.

If one looks at some randomly picked course descriptions and reading lists one gets a sense of how the debate has affected the study of American literature in English departments. Take for instance this description of "Introduction to the study of American literature," University of California, San Diego:

From within the belly of the beast, this course narrates the complex saga of American literary history. In apprehending this narrative, we consider the uses to which the United States has historically put its literature. We examine how even the most canonical of texts contain radically forgotten histories that we can recover if we know how to look for them. When we turn our attention to texts that did fall out of American literary history, we understand more acutely why the development of the literature of the United States took the form that it did.¹

Or this description of the General Undergraduate Program in literature, at the University of Madison:

The courses must include: three courses on literature written primarily before 1830, at least one of which must be on literature written primarily before 1600; one course in American literature, and one course designated "New Traditions", focusing on the cultural traditions of women, minority ethnic groups, and people of color.²

The revisions spread also to the teaching of American literature outside of the US. The introductory course to American literature at the University of Bergen, for instance, includes the new traditions, and so, one will probably find, do most courses of this kind these days.

Is it then all over? Are colleges and universities now teaching a new selection of texts that account for all the grains of sand? It is hard to say. In the Preface to *The Heath Anthology* Lauter says with what can be heard as a sigh of relief that "this anthology has been long in the making. Indeed, some of the readers of this first edition may not have been born when the idea for it was initially discussed in 1968" (xxx). The statement seems to sum up the trajectory of the debate. Then he quotes Emerson's statement that "the experience of each new age requires a new confes-

1. "Introduction to the study of American literature." Spring 2002. University of California San Diego. <http://literature.ucsd.edu>.

2. "Undergraduate program in literature." Spring 2002. University of Wisconsin, Madison. <http://www.wisc.edu/wiscinfo>.

sion, and the world seems always waiting for its poet" (*ibid.*). I myself read Emerson's words with a certain apprehension. One should perhaps not feel too comfortable with the new scenarios, however pluralistic and diverse they may appear. The new poet may already be among us, and it is that monstrous abstraction Kierkegaard once called the Public, synonymous with the Market. This "poet" makes no confessions.

First of all, the canon debate has not ended. Distant and not so distant echoes of it still underlie many aspects of departmental politics. More importantly, though, it has moved to other spheres of inquiry and to other worlds of activities. It moved, among other places, to the small liberal arts colleges that popped up in the United States as the student market demanded courses that accorded with the "Age of Difference." The canon debate is also significantly a debate over jobs and disciplines. Anthony Easthope pins this down rather nicely when he says: "Between the 1930s and the 1980s modern literary studies was invented, institutionalized in the academy, fell into crisis, and is now being transformed into something else, cultural studies" (5). A thoroughly hybrid discipline, cultural studies can accommodate an endless number of literary, cultural and social concerns and agendas. They all assume their place under the paradigm of multiculturalism. I certainly do not deplore this, since I firmly believe that texts gain from being read against their backgrounds, in fact, they need their backgrounds. But I do not embrace a program that says I *have* to, and uncritically so.

In the late 1980s multiculturalism appeared to be on everyone's lips: African American studies, Chicano studies, women's studies, gay studies, postcolonial studies; all fitted under the new program. If someone chose to write his or her thesis on Emerson or Hawthorne, it would be from an angle that revealed, say, "the subaltern." I am truly convinced that revisions are due, but when something, in this case multiculturalism, becomes everything – aren't we then left with a canon again, except it looks different? As I have said earlier, positing multiculturalism as the canon's opposite is incorrect. For if the canon is a selection of texts thought by some kind of consensus to represent what is true and good in and about the culture, then surely that is essentially what we have now, too. And is it not here that the paradoxical relation between the meanings of canon as rule and measure respectively comes into play? If the "rule" is diversity, then those texts are included that measure up to diversity;

conversely, one "measures" diversity against the rule, which is also diversity. As paradoxical as it may seem in connection with the flexibility and open-ness of present programs, is there not a danger here of consolidation and stagnancy? If diversity becomes the topic of its own discourse, referring to nothing outside itself, does it furthermore not in fact eliminate itself? Menand suggests that this may indeed be the case: "When the whole culture is self-consciously 'diverse' – when college campuses are self-consciously 'diverse' – when television is self-consciously 'diverse' – real diversity has disappeared" (348). There may be a real danger that multiculturalism ultimately, by posing as the non-canon, glosses over the very diversity it seeks to represent. This brings me to a more serious, and what I initially called sinister aspect.

The multicultural theory, or program, however admirable, is too *thin*, to borrow a term from Albert Borgmann. His concern about value pluralism bears rather strikingly on my topic. He observes that "the theoretically tempting solution is to seek some overriding value as a bond of unity. But any such value that respects diversity will be too thin to underwrite loyalty or order, and any value thick enough to assign all others their place in an encompassing scheme will be unacceptably onerous" (146). Multiculturalism can be seen as precisely this kind of a tempting solution to accommodate diversity. This is in no small part because the market insists on it: education is a commodity, students are consumers, and the institutions depend for their lives on winning the battle for those consumers. Colleges and universities have in some instances come to resemble marketplaces more than the edifying place of study they once were. This situation has developed alongside the processes that started the canon debate. For with the demand for multiculturalist criticism and cultural studies, a different train of events was set in motion: namely that of commodification.

Lauter:

In many institutions already in the 70s, and especially in the newer ones, there existed no firmly established, and certainly no agreed-on, tradition of liberal education; thus there reigned a marketplace conception of education, with students as consumers and deans as store managers. We did not then sufficiently understand how that conception also entailed a shift in academic power from faculty to managers, managers whose jobs depended on sustaining not an idea of a university, but a given level of students Full Time Enrollments at a given cost. (1991, 11)

The American canon debate in its instance as a *culture war* moved over to the marketplace where the battle now stands between managers and consumers. The job-market in the academy, overseas as well as here in Europe, is going through one of its rougher periods in history. In times like these it is Kierkegaard's Public (the Market) that rules. And that means downsizing, efficiency, and accommodation – all carried out in a jargon we associate with private enterprise. In criticism, which is what we as literary and cultural studies critics make our living from, the most effective way to meet these demands is through what Daniel O'Hara refers to as *the quick fix*. He defines it like this: "the quick-fix is the fabrication of a distinctive-sounding framework, out of the latest rubble of incompatible multicultural positions. The amorphous 'intersectionality' of race-class-gender subject-position is the current rallying cry. Their sole purpose is to put one's marketable stamp on the object of analysis, whatever it may be: text, film, current event, and so on" (410). Paraphrased into simple terms, the "quick fix" is attractive in teaching institutions because it covers a range that conforms to what the consumers want: *diversity*. Because it enables one teacher to teach across several disciplines it also echoes another current mantra: *cost-saving*.

What, then, does this have to do with the canon debate? Well, for one thing, if the emphasis in the profession is on the "quick fix" it results in *critical* perspectives that are not necessarily serving up the purposes of multiculturalism. It bears repeating here that multiculturalism was initially conceived as a program to account for and represent the diversity out there in the real world. At this point in time these strategies of diversity sometimes come dangerously close to conflating the particular, to blow the sand away entirely. Several critics are deeply concerned with this development, and I am not just referring to the old canon defenders and glue-makers. I want to quote literary critic Rafael Pérez-Torres at some length here, because what he has to say speaks very perceptively to this:

There exists a tendency within academic communities ... to celebrate Chicano culture as a component of a much needed cultural pluralism or an academic diversity. The reception of Chicano issues to the curriculum comes to resemble a blockparty. This liberal position – welcoming, accommodating – is not overtly antagonistic toward a sociohistorical understanding of the literature. It does, however, severely skew the significance of that understanding. ... There are factions within the academic institutions ready to embrace a multiculturalism devoid of historical and cultural specificity in

favor of a celebration of difference and alterity. The rush to embrace Chicano literature is, then, from certain quarters, the results of a desire for correctness. A response of active neglect comes to be replaced by one of almost blind or reverential acceptance ... a distracted (and insincere) embrace. (36)

One effect of the canon debate is a multitude of increasingly narrowly defined research areas. They are constituted by for instance Native-American, Italian-American, African-American studies along with even more specialized fields of nineteenth-century gay literature studies, eighteenth-century female ethnic studies. There is nothing wrong with this in and of itself, but the theory or program that they all are supposed to fit into must by necessity be extremely thin. It may be true that diversity under multiculturalism is now represented on campuses. However, the specifics of that diversity, what Pérez-Torres calls the cultural and historical specificity, are easily abstracted. Borgmann's "thin-ness" thus becomes a kind of abstraction that commodifies the specific into an accommodating and commodified universal. In continuation of this, the marginalization of minority groups through canonical exclusion has taken on the shape of marginalization through abstraction.

The canon debate, once called the culture war, is therefore now fought on a very different arena than where it all began. For, as Borgmann also notes, "it remains that the enemy of e.g. Native American culture is not African-American or Asian-American culture but the culture of high and rising consumption that is gutting and leveling all traditional cultures" (148). If diversity is happily accommodated on the campus, real diversity continues to exist outside the walls of the academy. That diversity has little in common with the image the academy often serves up. Inequality and injustice, indeed exclusion from the American canon in its broadest sense is essentially the same today as when those very same factors gave rise to the debate in the 60s and 70s. In that respect, one could even argue that the canon debate did not change much, and that there is every reason to expect the debate to continue – and even become reinvigorated.

The culture war has relocated to a scene where one might say the insincere market and its forces of commodification and abstraction are waging a war against what Pérez-Torres calls the specificity of culture. It is, in other words, a war against all local culture, since the nature of the beast known as the market is such that it erodes everything that comes in its way. Terry Eagleton describes the phenomenon in the following pointed manner:

Commodification transmutes social reality to a wilderness of mirrors, as one object contemplates the abstract essence of itself in the looking glass of another, and that in another. Commodification traverses with superb indifference the divisions of class, sex and race, of high and low, past and present. (374)

Herein lies a threat also to multiculturalism. Its mark of and claim to difference threatens to be accommodated by the market, the public, and swallowed up in the great abstraction of the aesthetics of our times. Conversely, because multiculturalism strives to absorb all difference into its program, there is a danger that it replicates commodification within its own strategy.

I said initially that the label "culture war" today has different and more sinister connotations than it did during the old "war" between cultural legacies. At stake is not just the specificity of any given local culture and its claim to being represented; rather, it is all culture that is under siege. As we rush to embrace the new university, we ought to keep this in mind. For we could easily get lost in Eagleton's "wilderness of mirrors," that wilderness where "one object contemplates the abstract essence of itself in the looking glass of another." Some would say that we are already there, and that a call for a continued debate is going to be as endlessly deferred as the diversity it accommodates. This position is understandable, but unnecessarily defeatist. It is our responsibility as university and college teachers and scholars to respond to the challenges that the traffic between the canon and the market presents. Our attention must be on devising strategies that can withstand the insincere embrace and its leveling effect for a return to necessary sincerity. Only then can real diversity prevail and the programs that propagate them succeed. The present essay represents an attempt at charting the history of the canon debate as well as describing some of the problems one is and will be faced with in seeking to find a way out of Eagleton's "wilderness of mirrors."

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