A Classroom Stuck in Time: The Theoretical Ambitions of Curriculum and the Reality of Classroom Practice

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Abstract

A Classroom Stuck in Time: The Theoretical Ambitions of Curriculum and the Reality of Classroom Practice

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2015

This master’s thesis explores the diversity of full-length texts taught in the American literature courses at one New Jersey high school. Chapter one begins with an overview of American literature anthologies and covers the integration of more diverse texts throughout the 1960s and beyond.

Chapter two offers summary and analysis of the case study conducted for this paper. The case study includes interviews and surveys of teachers as well as student surveys and analysis of documents, such as the course curriculum and the state standards.

Analysis of the data reveals that while the curriculum advocates for diversity in race and gender, there is little diversity in the texts taught in the American literature courses at this high school. Further analysis of teachers’ responses and other evidence gathered indicates that the reasons for this are varied and complex. A significant effort would have to be made by administrators and teachers to more closely align the goals of inclusion and diversity in the curriculum to actual practice in the classroom. Chapter three explores the difficulties and possibilities in this endeavor.
A Classroom Stuck in Time: The Theoretical Ambitions of Curriculum and the Reality of Classroom Practice

by

Rebecca McGrath

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A CLASSROOM STUCK IN TIME:
THE THEORETICAL AMBITIONS OF CURRICULUM AND THE REALITY OF
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"In these pages we see repeated the process of self-discovery, of affirmation in coming out of the closet, the search for a definition of our identity within the family and our community, the search for answers, for meaning in our personal struggles, and the commitment to a political struggle to end all forms of oppression...When we write or speak about these changes we establish our experiences as valid and real, we begin to analyze, and that analysis gives us the necessary perspective to place our lives in a context where we know what to do next.”

Mariana Romo-Carmona, *Compañeras*

“A living literature is always in process of change.”

T.S. Eliot, “American Literature and the American Language”

Global Women Writers: The one undergraduate college course I will always remember. I took it because it fulfilled three requirements and therefore was credit gold in college currency. I never would have predicted that it would change my life.

Before that course, I was an excellent English student. I consistently earned high grades, completely all the assigned reading, and diligently memorized the universal themes and symbols my teacher pointed out. But literature was never more than that to me. Like it is for many of our students, English was simply a subject, albeit one I was particularly good at. But Global Women Writers changed that for me. I saw for the first time complex, strong, nuanced, and interesting female characters in the literature we read. I studied, questioned, and idolized female writers from all over the world. As a quiet
young woman, I relished how powerful these writers voices were, how they could use language to ignite emotions I never knew existed within me. I saw the power of stories and language to help me come to terms with myself, the world, and my position in it.

That was 12 years ago. I am now an English teacher at Westfield High School in NJ. After six years of teaching a course called Exploring American Voices Through Language and Literature at this high school, I find myself longing for my years of studying literature in university. After my interest in global women's literature was sparked, I found I had an insatiable appetite for modern, interesting, controversial texts written by or about women; that interest remains today. But teaching the American Literature class at the high school level has forced me to revert to my own high school days. Constrained by a curriculum, a list of approved books, and the status quo of other teachers' syllabi, my pedagogical canon has remained rather stagnant. Many of the texts I teach are ones I studied when I was in high school. It seems that while the canon of texts taught on the university level shifted to encompass more modern, diversified literature, the high school canon has remained the same.

If the high school canon has remained largely the same since I went to high school, are there students who remain left out of literature experience, as I once felt? Emily Styles, and many educational theorists, argues that dialectic and engaged learning happens when we are confronted both with what confirms and rejects our sense of the world. In her 1988 essay, “Curriculum through Windows and Mirrors,” Styles argues that for some students, the curriculum serves as a mirror, a frame of reference which reflects that student’s world back to him. For other students, however, they see the curriculum
through a window, a frame of reference which constantly asks them to see the world through someone else’s point of view, as I felt when I read only texts written by white men when I was in high school. Styles explains through the age-old but still meaningful lens-gendered reading:

White males find, in the house of curriculum, many mirrors to look in, and few windows which frame others' lives. Women and men of color, on the other hand, find almost no mirrors of themselves in the house of curriculum; for them it is often all windows. White males are thereby encouraged to be solipsistic, and the rest of us to feel uncertain that we truly exist. In Western education, the gendered perspective of the white male has presented itself as "universal" for so long that the limitations of this curriculum are often still invisible.

In my experience as a student and teacher of American Literature, the white, male experience has been accepted as the “universal” experience. Recently, I asked my student to read Emily Style’s essay. After reading, I instructed senior students to create a list of the texts they had studied in the past. They were to put each text in a category of either window or mirror. To my surprise, some students stopped the activity after a few minutes to tell me that they “couldn’t think of any mirrors.” In the past four years of studying literature, several female students and one homomsexual male student reflected that they had not read any literature that acted as a mirror for them. All of the full-length texts they remembered reading involved a white, male, heterosexual protagonist and all were written by white, male writers. Although these few students could only recollect reading literature that acted as a window into another world, the majority of my class had only
read literature that held a mirror up to their own world. To counter this bias in the curriculum, Styles argues that students must read both windows and mirrors for a "balanced, ecological sense of their place(s) in the world."

My students’ “place in the world” is a tricky one, which I will expand on further in the next section. My students live in an area of the country in which several high schools are intensely segregated. In fact, New Jersey in particular suffers from this problem. As a report by the Rutgers Institute on Law and Policy states, “the nation’s leading researcher on school segregation, Professor Gary Orfield, co-director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, has regularly labeled New Jersey’s schools as ‘hyper-segregated’” (Rutgers Report). The 2010 U.S. census reports that Westfield was 88% white, while the high school in Plainfield, only a few miles away, is less than 1% white. The median family income in Westfield is $150,797 while in Plainfield it is $58,942.

In such a severely segregated town, bordered by other segregated towns, I am afraid that I am perpetuating this myopic view of the world by assigning the same “universal” texts that reflect the stories of white, male protagonists. In their book Postmodern Education: Politics, Culture, and Social Criticism, professors Aronowitz and Giroux argue for greater representation in the texts taught in school. They state:

Central to affirming the voices of [minority] students is the use of texts that come out of an experience that they can relate to and engage critically. Such texts allow these particular students to connect with them in the contexts of their own histories and traditions. Such texts also provide another language and voice by
which other students can understand how differences are constructed, for better or worse, within the dominant curriculum. Similarly, different texts offer all students forms of counter-memory that make visible what is often unrepresentable in many English classrooms. (101-102)

My students, even more so than other less segregated towns, desperately need to look through more windows than the white, male perspective. Texts outside of the “dominant curriculum” help to resist the dominant narrative, “offer all students forms of counter-memory” and “make visible what is often unrepresentable.”

English has the power to help our students think critically about the world around them. Are we failing our students in this endeavor if we do not give them opportunities to question their own assumptions, analyze the world through eyes other than their own, and truly listen to others? To “examine society,” as James Baldwin calls us to do in his “A Talk to Teachers,” is not only the purpose of education; it is the responsibility of education. Our perception of the world is with us all the time, it is the filter we use to judge what we hear, see, read, and feel. Too often, and I fear this especially for my school that is overwhelmingly white and upper class, we see other people and issues through the framework of what Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie calls, a “single story.” The single story simplifies a world, including people and issues, that in reality are highly complex, nuanced, and undefinable, keeping us from truly examining society. But the ability to step out of the single story - to consider other people’s perceptions through a window, to truly listen and understand a viewpoint that is entirely different from our own reality, and to also at some point see our own selves reflected back at us - creates a
conversation. Rather than talk about literature, we are able to engage with it. In their world of school, in which 88% of everyone is white, we must reconsider our pedagogical canon of literature if it contains predominantly white, male authors and characters.

It seems, in fact, that universities have done just that. In college, I questioned the white, male canon of literature I had studied as a high school student as I read extraordinary contemporary literature written by and about women. I became a feminist in college. I examined and questioned (and continue to question) the world around me, particularly as it relates to women’s issues. But we cannot entrust this to a liberal arts education in college. High school English teachers understand the power of literature; after all, they are lovers of the written word themselves. Therefore, it is our obligation to question if the literature we are teaching is affecting our students in any significant, real, and lasting way. We all want to help our students see that literature can enable them to examine society and question the world around them. But sometimes this goal is muddled in the world of standards, testing, and curricula. Teachers must balance these two ideas: what needs to be covered and why. And it is very, very easy for one of these to lose out to the other.

The questions I have posed in this section prompted me to begin thinking about the American literature canon at the school where I teach. I will look closely at this case study in chapter two. But before that, it is important to address what I mean by a pedagogical literature canon, and how that canon has come to be.
Chapter 1

Overview of American Literature Anthologies in the Classroom

Beginning in the 1970s, scholars of American literature have sought to illuminate once lost or undiscovered important literary works by female and minority writers (Showalter xiii). Although women and minorities have made significant contributions to American literature well before the 1970s, an overview of the history of U.S. literary criticism and anthologies highlights the ways in which these disenfranchised populations have been edited out of the country’s literary history.

Collections of distinctly American writing, purposefully set apart from British literature, In his book, *Canons by Consensus: Critical Trends and American Literature Anthologies*, Joseph Csicsila outlines the evolution of the American literature anthology. In the late 19th century, when American students studied literature, it was often of British origin. American writing was still in its infancy when compared to Britain, and a serious study of the material was not offered at many colleges (Vanderbilt). Csicsila names several events that helped precipitate a new interest in American literature. In 1883, the MLA was formed, and in 1884 the association published its first manual. Several important American writers passed away around this time, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harriet Beecher Stowe, allowing a generation of readers to fully take into account the lifetime of these writers (Vanderbilt). In 1872, John Seely Hart’s *Manual of American Literature* was published, developing the foundation for future American literature anthologies, and Princeton offered the first college course in American literature (Evelyn Bibb qtd. in Csicsila).
Csicsila writes that, according to early American literary critics such as Moses Coit Tyler, American literature “became a means for study rather than the subject of study” (3). American literature was a “portal to the American mind and spirit” that “reflected and preserved the nation’s fundamental characteristics and thought” (Csicsila 3). During the early 20th century, Fred Lewis Pattee’s *Century Readings for a Course in American Literature* (1919) was the most popular anthology in college classrooms. An excerpt from Pattee’s anthology further emphasizes this connection between American writing and American identity:

More and more clearly it is seen now that the American soul, the American conception of democracy, -Americanism, should be made prominent in our school curriculums, as a guard against the rising spirit of experimental lawlessness which has followed the great war, and as a guide to the generation now molding for the future.

Alan C. Golding echoes this idea in his “History of American Poetry Anthologies,” stating that early American literature anthologies sought to promote nationalism, patriotism, and a sense of pride in cultural identity.

Women have notably participated in the nation’s literary history as critics, editors, and writers, but their importance in history has largely been left out. Early American literary critics, like Moses Coit Tyler (1879) and Fred Lewis Pattee (1919), emphasized themes of cultural identity and concerned themselves with preserving “the nation’s fundamental characteristics and thought” (Tyler preface). However, while they purported to highlight literature that reflected “the American soul” (Pattee), these editors
consistently edited out the importance of women writers in anthologies. In his 1879
collection titled *A History of American Literature*, Moses Coit Tyler, a professor at the
University of Michigan at the time, included the works of mostly white, male writers and
very few women or minorities. He wrote in his preface that he he thanked “men of
letters” and “working-brothers” for help editing (Tyler). Ellen Mackay Hutchinson
collected the 1888 collection titled *Library of American Literature*, but her gender was
(and continues to be) concealed as E.M. Hutchinson (Showalter x-xi). Despite the
contributions of Louise Pound and Mary Austin, the editors of *The Cambridge History of
American Literature* in 1917 wrote that their goal was to “enlarge the spirit of American
literary criticism and render it more energetic and masculine” (Showalter xi). In 1948,
*The Literary History of the United States* was edited by fifty five men and one woman
(Showalter xi). The editors of *The Literary History of the United States* “identified
democracy, mobility, progress, and independence as the essential characteristics of ‘the
American way of life.’ Seeking great writers who embodied these themes, they found
very few women, and even fewer African-Americans” (Showalter 367).

Women and minorities were left out of early American anthologies in the late
19th and early 20th century, despite their literary contributions. The mid-20th century
brought another change to American anthologies that further left out these populations.
Anthologies became more concentrated, featuring excerpts and examples of fewer
writers. Foerster’s *Eight American Writers* (1963) is the most extreme example of this,
presenting the writing of only eight American writers such as Poe, Melville, and
Whitman (Csicsila). Various other anthologies followed suit, favoring a collection of a
small number of writers (Harris 114). James Lynch and Bertrand Evans' 1961 study also reveals that American anthologies of this time period reduced the number of selections and showed little variety in selections amongst different publishers. Less variety of writers means even less exposure of women and minorities, as anthologies began to reflect a core set of essential writing versus a larger overview it represented in the past.

In the 1970s, women gained a sense of freedom in their way of writing. Elaine Showalter writes in *A Jury of her Peers: Celebrating American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Anne Proulx* that in the 1970s, “No longer would women writers have to censor themselves in order to avoid offending traditional conventions of femininity” (443). During this decade, feminism “filtered into virtually every area of U.S. life” (Hogeland 1). Significant feminist writers finally gained more widespread public attention with works such as Adrienne Rich’s *The Will to Change*, Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* and Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Powerful* (Showalter 441). Women began creating American anthologies that focused on the female voice, such as Toni Cade Bambara’s *Black Woman* (1970) and Nina Baym’s *Women’s Fiction* (1878), and they began writing feminist literary criticism, such as Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) (Showalter 441-443).

The 1980s brought the most significant change in the culture wars, which was reflected in American anthologies. During the latter part of the 20th century, inclusiveness started to become more of a priority for anthology editors, especially in the wake of the recent feminist writing and criticism surfacing (Csicsila 22). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* was published in 1985.
fiction write Ursula K. LeGuin wrote that she read it “cover to cover. It was a bible for me. It taught me that I didn’t have to write like an honorary man anymore, that I could write like a woman and feel liberated in doing so” (LeGuin qtd. in White). Feminist writers incorporated themes of hybridity, multiculturalism, borders, and bilingualism. Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands: La Frontera (1987) and This Bridge Called my Back (1981), Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street (1984), Amy Tan’s Joy Luck Club (1989), and Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine (1984) are only a few examples of the many women who wrote about feminism and multicultural themes during the 1980s. Although it was not recognized by The New York Times Book Review American Literary Awards, to the protest of writers and critics such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, Beloved (1987) by Toni Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 (Showalter 493). She was the second American woman and first African American to win this prize (Showalter 494).

This inclusiveness in American anthologies brought heated debates about the curriculum at universities and the extent to which they should be amended to include more diversity. Critics of a more inclusive pedagogical canon argued that it threatened the cohesive American character. In The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages, Harold Bloom argues that “We are destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards in the humanities and social sciences, in the name of social justice.” Despite critics, multiculturalism has made its way into the university curriculum. There has been a radical transformation in the texts used on the university level, as more diverse authors are added into the pedagogical canon (Alberti). In the high school classroom, however, much less of a radical transformation can be seen. Arthur Applebee’s 1988 study of texts
taught in high schools, compared to Anderson’s 1963 study, found only a marginal increase in the number of texts written by women (17% to 19%), an increase in the number of American authors, and a continued narrowing (as Csicsila found in the 1960s) of the texts taught. Applebee found that of the 11,579 titles reported to have been studied in the 488 schools he surveyed, 98% were by white authors. The seven most frequently used anthologies reveal an increase in the amount of women and nonwhite authors, when compared to Lynch and Evans’ 1963 study. However, while the anthologies represent progress in terms of greater diversity in the canon of American literature in terms of shorter texts such as poems, the longer selections still represent a narrow vision of U.S. literature, with women and minorities poorly represented (Applebee). The anchor texts teachers in the survey reported teaching, mostly novels and plays, also remained largely white, male authors. The anchor texts did not reflect the increased diversity present in the selection of shorter texts such as poetry, which revealed an inclusion of more women and minorities. Langston Hughes was by and far the most popular inclusion (Applebee).

Informed from over a hundred years of American literature collections, the American high school syllabus has developed its own canon, or collection of approved texts deemed worthy of teaching and studying, which I will call the pedagogical canon. In the next section of research, I will look specifically at one high school’s American literature course to further examine the pedagogical canon of texts being used there. This research has been influenced by John Guillory’s idea of the canon that he describes in his book, *Cultural Capital*. Guillory argues that the canon is not a list of texts set in stone. Rather, Guillory emphasizes the way in which the school syllabus creates the canon. He
states, "An individual’s judgment that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgment is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the reproduction of the work, its continual reproduction to generations of readers" (Cultural Capital 28). In his “Glossary of Literary Terms,” M.H. Abrams seconds this idea that the canon is created by “the widespread assignment of an author or text in school and college curricula (20). Many scholars agree with the idea that the canon is a social construct which can change depending on context (Benton 271). In Literary Theory: An Introduction, Terry Eagleton agrees with this notion. He writes:

The so-called ‘literary canon,’ the unquestioned ‘great tradition’ of the national literature, has to be recognized as a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time. There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. ‘Value’ is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria in the light of given purposes. (10-11)

The secondary English canon was “fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time” (Eagleton). Texts that were important to study when I was in high school are not necessarily the most important texts for today’s students. But the high school pedagogical canon struggles to see the “value” of texts as a transitive term, as Eagleton describes it. In many ways, the values and texts that were important in early U.S. education are still taught in secondary school today. But if the pedagogical canon is
a “construct” and no text is simply valuable in itself, then we must reconsider preserving a “canon” through the decades as the world around us changes.

Early education in America was a class-based, teacher-centered education system which was the mark of an upper class upbringing. An understanding of Latin and the classics was evidence of class standing, and left something for the lower and middle class to aspire to (Doyle). Has the secondary pedagogical canon changed with the changing times? The pedagogical canon I will examine in this study is the collection of assigned texts in the American Literature courses at one NJ high school.

In my examination of why certain texts make up this school’s American literature canon, I will explore what makes certain texts most likely to be taught. Wendell V. Harris, author of “Canonicity” and professor of English at Penn State University, theorizes about the reasons why certain texts enter the pedagogical canon:

The historical resonance of a text…the possible multiplication of its significances…the degree to which it finds fortunate sponsorship…and the degree to which it proves malleable…all these interact to determine how much interest the text can sustain over how long a period. (Harris 112)

Harris’s four points offer valid reasons why a text is included in the high school canon of American literature, which in turn affects which texts become accepted into American culture as “classics.” Again, Eagleton’s idea of a text’s value changing depending on a number of variables, rather than remaining the same value over all time and circumstances, is reflected. However, Harris and Eagleton descriptions about what make a text canonical do not reveal all the nuances that make up a teacher’s decision to teach a
particular text. Essentially, this decision, which is affected by numerous variables that I will examine in the next chapter, creates the pedagogical canon. The text teachers choose create their own canon, and thus is it vital to examine how the choice to teach a text is made, and in turn how that affects canon formation.

Before I examine the specific choices teachers made that create the pedagogical canon of American literature at one school, it is important to examine the recent changes that have occurred in canon formation on the university and high school level. Anthologies in the late 20th century have begun to reflect an increased inclusiveness (Csicsila). Harris has found that “Recent textbook anthologies have fattened noticeably in their editors’ attempts to represent greater cultural diversity” (118). Entire departments have been created at universities for students to major in women’s studies, African American studies, border literature, and Chicano(a) studies. However, study after study indicates that these changes have not trickled down into the high school classroom (Anderson 1963, Applebee 1992). Arthur Applebee’s 1993 study found that while some minority writers have been added to the high school canon, only 8% of works studied in high school are by minority writers, and only 16% female writers. Lydia Brauer and Caroline T. Clark report that “the range of literature taught in American secondary schools has changed little over the last century, persisting as ‘a curriculum dominated by familiar selections drawn primarily from a white, male, Anglo Saxon tradition’” (Applebee qtd. in Brauer).

Applebee’s survey also found that Shakespeare was predominantly the most popular author taught in high school literature courses. Shakespeare is deeply entrenched
into the pedagogical canon of the secondary English classroom. Even the United States’s new standards, The Common Core, which list required skills, *not texts*, have perpetuated this fixed notion of a canonical text. Here is a rationale directly quoted from the Common Core Standards:

> Because the standards are the roadmap for successful classrooms, and recognizing that teachers, school districts, and states need to decide on the journey to the destination, they intentionally do not include a required reading list.

At the outset, the Common Core appears to advocate for a fluid canon set by the individual school or teacher. The standards use a metaphor of a roadmap. The state decides on the destination, and leaves it up to teachers to decide how best to get students there. However, this stance is contradicted in the next paragraph:

> The standards include certain critical types of content for all students, including classic myths and stories from around the world, foundational U.S. documents, seminal works of American literature, and the writings of Shakespeare. The standards appropriately defer the majority of decisions about what and how to teach to states, districts, schools, and teachers.

The standards “defer the majority of decisions,” not all decisions, to teachers regarding the “journey to the destination.” The Common Core Standards list of “critical types of content” affects pedagogical canon formation. Despite the previous statement that the standards do not “include a required reading list,” the standards clearly list particular texts here that must be studied in grades 11 and 12: “classic myths and stories from around the world, foundational U.S. documents, seminal works of American literature,
and the writings of Shakespeare.” It is important to note the language used in these standards. Myths must be “classic,” U.S. documents should be “foundational,” American literature must be “seminal” and anything by Shakespeare is acceptable. Classic, foundational, seminal texts can also be called canonical. An additional standard states that students must “demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature” and “Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.” Again, the term “foundational” is used here, and the term “early” is also added. This is also the third time Shakespeare is listed in specific standards. He is the only author listed in the standards. The three quoted standards above are the only ones in the Common Core document that make qualifications about the type of literature teachers should teach in 11th and 12th grade. While the document purported to refrain from giving teachers reading list, the Common Core Standards in fact do perpetuate a fixed idea of the pedagogical canon: that important texts are classic, foundational, seminal, early, and by Shakespeare. Nowhere do the standards say anything about contemporary or diverse texts.

The problem with this idea is that calling texts “classic” or “foundational” perpetuates the idea that the value of a text is fixed in time. As found in the preceding historical overview, the canon is not a fixed list of texts, and that is the problem in assuming that Shakespeare and other classic or foundational writers should be required texts in all American 11th and 12th grade English classrooms. Requiring a nationwide set of standards that perpetuates the teaching of the traditional, canonical literature asserts the idea that the canon is fixed, rather than fluid, and does not encourage teachers to teach
contemporary or diverse texts that may not have been seen as “classic” in the past. As Wendell V. Harris states, “we risk intellectual stagnation if we do not champion new selections based on new criteria” (118). We also risk continuing to allow our students to function in a segregated bubble of suburbia, unexposed to alternative realities only a few miles away. As the world changes, as universities progress and adapt, why has the high school canon of American literature largely remained fixed? In this study, I will investigate whether the shift toward more diverse literature that Csicsila states occurred in the 1980s and 1990s in American literature anthologies (22) and universities has been reflected in the high school curricula of Westfield High School, investigating how students and teacher react to American literature they have studied and taught, and what the future of the pedagogical American literature canon may hold.

As educators, we have a responsibility when we teach to ask: Why? Why do I teach and assign this text? What is the purpose? What is the outcome? If you believe “literature is worth studying, rather than simply enjoying...then you need to ask yourself what relevance it has in the contemporary world” (Walder 190). The secondary English classroom is a powerful environment. It is the first time students are confronted with challenging text that they do not read simply for enjoyment. The power of the secondary English classroom is left untapped if it remains stuck in time.
Chapter 2
Case Study Methods

Despite much scholarship arguing for multicultural, multimodal texts in high school English classrooms, in practice, the English classroom appears stuck in time, focused on a fixed idea of the American literary canon. Research and scholarly discussion has done little to significantly change the syllabi in the high school English class. To unpack this question, I have conducted a case study of the course called Exploring American Voices Through Language and Literature. This course is most often called American literature, which is what I will refer to it as in the following case study.

In this study, I sought answers to the following questions:

1. Which texts do teachers assign in American literature?
2. How/why do teachers decide to teach these texts?
3. To what extent do the students engage with and respond to these texts?
4. What isn’t there a greater diversity of culture and gender in the American literature courses?

I have chosen to examine the junior level American Literature course for many reasons. The first and most important reason is the content matter. American Literature is rich and diverse, and arguably impossible to teach in one year. Therefore, by the texts they choose, teachers of this course make important decisions every year about how they are going to introduce and define the American identity. The board-approved curriculum for the course does emphasize inclusiveness and multiculturalism. I would like to see if the aims of the curriculum are realized in the reality of the courses.
Second, senior year focuses on global literature. For many juniors, unless they major in English, this is their last exposure to a class focused on American literature. The myths, narratives, history, and cultural assumptions created in their junior year course may never be challenged if they are not exposed to a variety of viewpoints now. The nationalistic anthologies of early American literature, the effects of which are still present in the canon of American literature today, tell a story of heroes, triumphs, and conquests. In 1935, W.E.B Du Bois wrote that “One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over.... The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and an example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth” (Du Bois qtd. in Williams 10-11). Despite the negative connotation it might garner from some, revisionist history is “the lifeblood of historical scholarship,” as the 14,000 members of the American Historical Association would attest (McPherson). The president of the Association, James McPherson, wrote in 2003 that “Interpretations of the past are subject to change in response to new evidence, new questions asked of the evidence, new perspectives gained by the passage of time. There is no single, eternal, and immutable ‘truth’ about past events and their meaning.” The 1980 text *A People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn and the 1995 text *Lies my Teacher Told Me* by James W. Loewen present revised histories of the United States by focusing on the experiences of underrepresented populations, such as Native Americans. As author Chimamanda Adichie tells us in her 2009 TED Talk, “Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely
different story.” Just as U.S. history can and must change depending on “new evidence, new questions asked of the evidence, new perspectives gained by the passage of time” (McPherson), so must an understanding of the nation’s literature.

I referenced earlier Alan C. Golding’s “History of American Poetry Anthologies,” which found early American anthologies of literature sought to “promote nationalism, patriotism, and a sense of pride in cultural identity.” Nationalism was one of the original purposes of early American literature anthologies. It is evident that there remains a fear about incorporating negative aspects of history into American schooling. James Baldwin was alarmed by this in 1963 when he wrote in his “Talk to Teachers”:

What is upsetting the country is a sense of its own identity. If, for example, one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools...you’d be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history...What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one’s heroic ancestors. (“Talk to Teachers”)

The resistance to revisionism holds true today. In 2003, President Bush accused critics of the Iraq war of “practicing ‘revisionist history’” (McPherson). In 2015 Oklahoma and Georgia proposed bills to stop the teaching of Advanced Placement U.S. History. Georgia state Senator William Ligon argued that the new AP framework, “looks at America through the lens of race, gender, and class identity” (Ligon qtd. in Turner). He preferred the old framework which he thought “emphasized American exceptionalism” (Turner). Senator Ligon’s argument about what the focus of AP history should be in 2015 echoes Golding’s 1984 research about early American anthologies. This fear of teaching “the warts and all” of American literature, as one teacher in my school described a curriculum
that reflects America’s weaknesses as well as strengths, risks reducing cultural identity to “myths” rather than reality in all its complexities.

As I plan my curricula, I think: Am I perpetuating a series of myths packaged as history and literature? Do these myths simplify the complexity of the nation and her people? Thus this research investigating the texts and why will help me as I go forward with teaching this course. In addition, I hope to share this research with my colleagues with the goal of having serious and lasting implications in the high school where I teach.

I approach this study with a desire to understand the relationship between practice and theory, which seems to be in conflict in the respect to secondary school curricula. It seems that the discussion of traditional and canonical versus multicultural and modern has hit a roadblock. The multicultural, liberatory, and feminist theory that was so important during the canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s has not convinced many English teachers in the high school level of the importance to teach texts that are diverse in terms of gender and race. Why is that?

To investigate this question of why there is not a more diverse representation of race and gender in the American literature courses, I surveyed 181 eighteen year old seniors in March 2015 at Westfield High School about their American literature courses in the 2013-2014 school year. I visited thirteen senior English classrooms with a cart of ipads. I directed students to an IRB approved web-based survey I had created. I was unable to personally visit six of the 19 total classes surveyed, but I explained the process to the teacher and she/he directed the students to the website. Once there, students were brought to the implied consent page. If they confirmed they were over eighteen, they
would be brought to the online Google Forms survey I created. The survey consisted of thirteen questions and took about 15 minutes to complete. I surveyed students eighteen years and older to avoid the difficulties of obtaining parental consent for over one hundred students I did not personally teacher. The survey asked senior students about their junior year English class. By referring to classes students were in the previous year, I hoped to reduce any negative reaction students might feel towards their current classes.

I also surveyed eight teachers who currently teach American literature at the high school. While all eight teachers teach American literature, their classes vary in terms of level. One teacher surveyed teaches an American literature class that is paired with a history class and is called American Studies. Another teacher surveyed has two American literature classes called Applications, for students who need more skill development before moving to a college preparatory class next year. Three of the teachers surveyed teach honors level American Literature. Two teachers surveyed have in-class support for their American literature classes. This means they have a maximum of ten students with IEPs and they co-teach the course with a special education teacher. One teacher has three ICS classes and another teacher has two. One teacher teaches in a wing of the school called Project ‘79, which is intended for students with high ability but who struggle with personal or family problems at home. The remaining six American literature classes are called college preparatory. I asked all of the teachers to report about their current American literature classes this year. I directed teachers to the same website as the students, where they clicked on the appropriate implied consent form for teachers. The survey consisted of seventeen questions.
Respondents did not have to answer every question on the survey, therefore some numbers for the total response of answers to a particular question on the student survey may be lower than 181, and lower than than eight for the teacher survey. In respect to the questions about text selection on the teacher survey, I also included the texts that I taught this year in my American literature course, *Reservation Blues*, *Into the Wild*, and *The Great Gatsby*.

In addition to the anonymous surveys, I interviewed nine teachers who either currently teach American literature at the high school or have taught it in the recent past. Two teachers who did not take the survey because they do not currently teach American literature, agreed to the interview. They taught American literature over five years ago. I chose to interview these two teachers because they are the most veteran teachers on the staff and they offered more institutional memory than other teachers. I had some difficulty with implementing my research plan as, unfortunately, March 2015 was when the PARCC tests were first introduced to our high school. The new test reduced the amount of time teachers had in the classroom with students, and put added demand on teachers to administer the tests during the day. This increased teacher stress and decreased teacher availability. Two teachers managed to arrange their schedules to meet with me in person and I wrote down their verbal responses. But seven of the nine teachers interviewed wrote out their responses to the interview questions because it proved nearly impossible to find a time for these seven teachers to meet in person, and as a teacher myself, I was very conscious of not pressuring them. Therefore, their responses were written down and emailed to me. This meant that I could not ask followup questions or
ask for elaboration. I also could not be seen as implying any empathy or agreement with the teachers’ responses. In addition to the student and teacher surveys and the teacher interviews, I also analyzed two documents: the book room inventory list and the school’s American literature curriculum which was last updated a year earlier in 2014 to align with the Common Core State Standards. However, this update only changed the standards on the curriculum. The content of the curriculum did not change with the most recent revisions. The curriculum, except for the most recent standards, was written in 2010.

Summary of Results

Westfield is a 300 year old town on a hill, with a picturesque Presbyterian church and steeple watching over a historical downtown main street full of boutique shops and cafes. As previously stated, Westfield is predominantly an affluent, white community. According to data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the demographics of the high school reflects the community, as many families opt to send their children to the public schools. In the 2012-2013 school year, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that the enrollment for the high school was as follows: White: 1,608, Black: 79, Hispanic: 59, Asian/Pacific Islander: 114. Westfield’s high taxes help to ensure that homeowners are mostly middle to upper class, with 1.3% of the high school students receiving free lunch, and only 1% receiving free or reduced-cost lunch (National Center Educational Statistics). And the easy access to a train station in town
that goes directly to NY Penn Station attracts workers from Wall Street or other areas of Manhattan who prefer to live in the suburbs.

Westfield stands in stark contrast to the nearby town of Plainfield. But even more contrasted are the high schools, only three miles apart from each other, but living entirely different realities. Plainfield, settled by Quakers in 1684, is more urban than Westfield. Plainfield is home to several manufacturing and printing plants, and was once home to four movie theatres, a hospital, and popular parks (Dreier). During the Great Migration, Plainfield was a popular choice over Westfield for African-Americans. Poor conditions in the ghetto on the west side of town, where African-Americans lived divided from white residents on the east side of town, and systemic racism and brutality from the police force, resulted in a rebellion against the police force in 1967 (Dreier). Most white families either moved to the north east end of the town and sent their kids to private school or left town altogether (Browne). Many African-Americans who had come to the town for the industry lost their jobs and could not afford to move. Today, students at Plainfield High School suffer from a higher poverty rate, lower test scores, and lower acceptance rate into college, than their counterparts at Westfield High School. The most recent demographics I could locate for Plainfield High school were reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics for the 2011-2012 school year. During this year, the enrollment for the high school was as follows: White: .6%, Black: 53.1%, Hispanic: 45.9%, and Asian: .2%.

The historic neighboring towns of Westfield and Plainfield remain hyper-segregated. To what extent is this hyper-segregation, of 88% white students and an
even greater percentage of white teachers, reflected in the literature taught in its American literature courses? In addition, to race, I wanted to see to the extent to which gender diversity is represented in the courses. On the anonymous survey, I asked every teacher of American literature to list the texts they taught or will teach this year (see table 1 for a list of the most commonly taught texts this year). I compared the list of most commonly taught texts to the percentage of students who named the specific text when asked, “What is the most memorable piece of literature you studied last year?” (see table 1). This was an open-ended, optional question on the student survey. I chose the term “memorable” because I wanted to know which texts stayed with students a full year later. To find a text memorable, students must have been engaged with it when the teaching of the text, at least enough for that particular text to hold a place in their memory well into the next year at school. The term “memorable” may or may not hold a positive connotation for the students.

Table 1

Most commonly taught texts by teachers and texts students found “memorable”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five most commonly taught texts in American Literature courses at WHS</th>
<th>% of teachers who assign this text (9 total - 8 teachers surveyed, and including the texts I taught/will teach this year)</th>
<th>% of students who found this text memorable last year (147 students answered this question)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| *The Great Gatsby*  
F. Scott Fitzgerald | 100% (all teachers) | 42% |
| *The Crucible*  
Arthur Miller | 77% (7 out of 9) | 8% |
| *Into the Wild*  
Jon Krakauer | 66% (6 out of 9) | 22% |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Teacher Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Death of a Salesman</em></td>
<td>44% (4 out of 9)</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur Miller</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Things They Carried</em></td>
<td>44% (4 out of 9)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom O'Brien</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to list the major texts they taught, teachers overwhelmingly listed *The Great Gatsby*, nine teachers taught it this year. Several teachers also stated that *Gatsby* is their favorite novel to teach, citing reasons such as the complex language, positive student response, familiarity with the text, and, in the words of one teacher, its “rich themes, literary devices, and poignant passages.” This novel is also extremely well-received by students, as 42% of all students surveyed listed this novel as “the most memorable piece of literature” they studied last year. When asked why this novel was the most memorable, most students said it was the content of the novel that made it so compelling - most notably, they said it was the storyline, themes, and symbols. The second most common reason students found this novel memorable turned out to be a tie between two categories of student responses. Students either said they found the novel memorable because the movie came out recently or because it is an “American classic,” in the words of one student. The last two reasons students cited for finding the novel memorable was Fitzgerald’s writing style, and the method in which their teachers taught the novel. Specifically, one student wrote that s/he “actually understood what was going on in the book,” citing reasons such as the writing style, the extensive amount of time spent on the novel, and the use of the movie to support understanding. It is important to note that the 2013 movie of *The Great Gatsby* with Leonardo DiCaprio was released only...
one year before these students enrolled in their American literature courses, so the memory and hype of the release was very fresh in their minds as they embarked on a study of the novel. While 7% indicated that they found the novel memorable explicitly because of the movie, the impact of the movie is difficult to measure fully. In addition, I interpret the movie functioning to further confirm the extent to which this novel is a “classic” and important piece of American literature.

The second and third most taught texts in the American literature course are the play *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller and the nonfiction text, *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer. Seven out of nine teachers have taught these texts this school year. These texts are received quite differently by students, however. Although immensely popular to teachers, only 8% of students rated *The Crucible* as memorable one year after studying it. Arthur Miller continues to be very well-represented in this pedagogical canon of American literature, as his play *Death of a Salesman* is the third most commonly taught text. At least four teachers study this text with their American literature classes. This play is even less well-received by the students, as only two found this text memorable. One stated it was “a classic” and another stated that it “was relatable considering all of us who are about to go through college and into the real world and have fears of not being successful.”

The second most memorable text, according to students, is the second most popular text taught by teachers: *Into the Wild* (1996) by Jon Krakauer. This text is taught by five of the American literature teachers and is one of the few contemporary texts taught. Twenty-two percent of students thought this text was memorable one year after
reading it. The fact that this percentage is significantly lower than the percentage of students who found *The Great Gatsby* memorable, could also be due to the fact that fewer classes read *Into the Wild* as compared to *The Great Gatsby*. However, if I account for the fact that fewer classes read *Into the Wild*, it is still important to note that even with these mathematical adjustments, students did not find it as memorable as *The Great Gatsby*.

Three of the four most commonly taught texts were published within a twenty year period, between 1935 and 1953, with the exception of *Into the Wild*, which was published in 1996. *Into the Wild*, like *The Great Gatsby*, increased in popularity when a movie based on the text was released in 2007. In fact, it wasn’t until the movie release that the text was added to the Westfield book room. As with *The Great Gatsby*, many students were already aware of the plot of *Into the Wild* due to the success and hype of the movie with several famous actors: Emile Hirsch, Vince Vaughn, and Kristen Stewart.

Tied for third place as most popular novel to teach is *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O’Brien, with four teachers teaching this text. Like *Into the Wild*, this is one of the more contemporary texts available to teach, as it was published in 1990, only six years before *Into the Wild*. Other efforts to add contemporary texts to the curricula have not been nearly as successful as these two texts, which are now just as widely taught at the high school as many older, classic texts that are popular in American literature courses. Three recently added texts that are not as widely taught will be examined later. Ten students surveyed found *The Things They Carried* memorable, but again, this text is not as widely taught as *The Great Gatsby*, so not as many students have been exposed to it.
The survey asked teachers to “list the major texts” they taught or will teach this year. Most teachers listed novels that they teach in their entirety; however, some teachers wrote that they used excerpts from certain authors, but they still considered these excerpts on the same level as other full-length “major texts” they assign. The two most popular writers that teachers state they excerpt are Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Eight of the ten teachers reported they taught Thoreau as a major text and seven taught Emerson. Often, these texts are used in the Transcendentalism unit to supplement *Into the Wild*. Some teachers use Thoreau’s *Walden* or Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* as major texts and do not pair them with anything, but most teachers just use selected essays or excerpts.

The next most commonly taught texts are taught by only a few teachers (see table 2). Three teachers assign the following texts: *The Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass, *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Two teachers assign *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Reservation Blues* by Sherman Alexie, and *Fences* by August Wilson, and only one teacher assigns *Native Son* by Richard Wright and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Ann Jacobs. It is important to note that the top five most commonly taught texts are all written by white men, feature white, male protagonists, and lack any significant diversity. The six less commonly taught texts, however, all reveal some diversity, either in the author, subject matter, or protagonist. Each of these eight less commonly taught texts feature either a non-white or non-male author, and/or a non-white, non-male main character. Despite the racial and class diversity displayed in
these texts, there is still a lack of female authors. Only two of these eight texts were written by women.

Table 2

Full-length texts that reflect some diversity in terms or author and/or protagonist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass</th>
<th>Memoir by an African-American man</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frederick Douglass</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(taught by three teachers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Glass Menagerie”</td>
<td>White male gay author, but text still has several important female characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee Williams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(taught by three teachers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their Eyes Were Watching God</td>
<td>African-American female author, African-American male and female characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zora Neale Hurston</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(taught by three teachers)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scarlet Letter</td>
<td>Important female character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathaniel Hawthorne</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(taught by two teachers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservation Blues</td>
<td>Native American male author, several important female characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherman Alexie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(taught by two teachers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fences</td>
<td>African-American male author, African-American male and female main characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August Wilson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(taught by two teachers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Son</td>
<td>African-American male author, African-American characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Wright</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(taught by one teacher)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</td>
<td>Memoir by an African-American woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriet Ann Jacobs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(taught by one teacher)</td>
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However, it is a very small number of teachers who assign the above texts. The results are alarming (see tables 3 and 4), especially the percentages of teachers who
assign full-length texts written by female authors. Only two out of the nine teachers taught a full-length text by a female author (see table 4). One teacher has taught *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and two teachers have taught *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Table 3

Racial Diversity of Authors in Full-Length Texts
Analysis

The majority of full-length texts taught in the American literature courses at Westfield High School are still written by white men. There has been some success to incorporate African American authors and protagonists in the pedagogical canon as 44% of teachers teach *The Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass* or “Fences” by August Wilson. This is still an alarmingly short list of important African American authors. There is a significant lack of female or multicultural voices besides African American men. Hispanic Americans, the nation’s largest racial minority (2013 U.S. Census), are not
represented in any of the full length texts taught. Native Americans are represented in one full length text taught only by only two teachers. Of all the texts that represent some racial or gender diversity, only *Reservation Blues (1995)* by Sherman Alexie can be considered somewhat contemporary. There were no full-length texts taught this year written by women after 1940. Why is there such a stunning lack of diversity in the authorship of the texts being taught?

To answer this question, it is important to explain what texts are available for teachers, including the logistics of the book room and how particular texts are requested from the room. When teachers at Westfield High School contemplates particular text, they must first consider if the school owns enough copies of the text for the total number of students who would need it. According to the master schedule of classes at the high school, four teachers have two classes of American literature and two teachers have three classes. The maximum number of students in a class is 28. This means that some teachers need almost 90 copies of every text they would like to teach it. This forces many teachers to be flexible about when or if they teach a particular text. This is especially problematic when so many teachers use the same texts, such as *The Great Gatsby* or “The Crucible.”

To ensure fairness and efficiency when teachers request texts, the book room closet is maintained by one teacher during his 43 minute duty period. When a teacher requests a particular text to teach, the book room manager must first find out whether that text is available or is being taught by other teachers, whether there are enough copies for all the teacher’s classes, and whether those copies are all in acceptable condition. When the teacher is done with the texts, the room manager must again go through the process of
assessing each text's condition and organizing their storage in the closet. While he does not keep the book room off limits from teachers, they still must request access if they want to see any texts for themselves. Typically, teachers never see the inside of this room.

How do teachers know which texts are available in the book room? There is an inventory of the texts that is available upon request from this teacher. The inventory includes texts that are in the book room at the time; however, not all books in the book room have been *board approved*. This is an important distinction. After researching the approval process for adding new texts to the curriculum, it isn't clear to me whether there ever was a process for board-approving texts before 2012. It appears, therefore, that the majority of the texts in the book room have been grandfathered in as approved texts after the board approval process was formalized in 2012. This is not surprising given the wide acceptance of most of these texts as classics. For example, texts that seem to have never gone through the approval process but are nonetheless widely taught in the American literature classes include *The Great Gatsby*, "Death of a Salesman," and "The Crucible." It is highly unlikely that at this point, a parent would contest the teaching of one of these texts in American literature. However, all new texts that are added to the book room, which are more likely to feature more diversity in gender and race, must undergo a rigorous vetting process. This has created stagnancy in the book room inventory. The white, male texts of the canon of the past are grandfathered in, while all new texts that have the potential of introducing race, gender, class, sexuality diversity into the classroom, must be scrutinized. It appears that this change, the addition of a vetting
process for adding new texts, was introduced in 2012 following a series of parental complaints.

In 2012, a small group of parents contested a text that was taught as required reading freshman year: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie. Two sets of this novel were originally purchased in 2009 and continued to be used in at least two freshman classes, taught by one freshman English teacher, until 2012. It was at this time that an additional teacher, new to the school, chose to also incorporate this novel into her syllabus. One parent wrote a letter to the Board of Education, complaining that the book contained “sensitive material” including “masturbation amongst other explicit sexual references,” and that it encouraged “pornography, racism, religious irreverence, and strong language (including the ‘f—‘ and ‘n—‘ words)” (Mauer qtd. in Byrnes). This complaint sparked heated public and private debates within the district among board members, parents, teachers, and students. It also forced the board of education to publicly announce its approval process for new texts. The board of education, unable to formally verbalize the vetting process for new texts during the February 8th 2012 meeting about this particular text, faced criticism for their lack of transparency (Byrnes “New Addition to Curriculum”). By February 28th 2012, however, the board was able to clearly state this policy to the public. Board member Ann Cary summarized the board approval process: “First, a teacher brings a book to the attention of colleagues. A committee of teachers is then formed. Each member of the committee reads the book, discusses it and votes on whether to approve it. Books must be unanimously approved by these committees in order to be added to the curriculum reading list”
(Byrnes “Westfield BOE Backs”). Cary went on to state that in the case of this particular book, although the vetting process was followed, it was never added to the official book room inventory. Therefore, Cary announced that the “Curriculum Committee requested that at least four teachers be present on future vetting committees and that the supervisor of the language arts department determine the best timing for an updated list each year” (Byrnes “Westfield BOE Backs”). The small number of parents upset over *The Absolutely True Diary*, and the subsequent public fight over what should be allowed in terms of literature in the classroom, led to this announcement at the February 28th, 2015 Board of Education meeting. These series of events significantly changed the process of adding new texts at Westfield High School. Teachers, administrators, and school personnel intimidated by the uproar over this text are increasingly careful about adding any new texts to the curricula. The unintended consequence of this series of events is that very few texts have been added to the curricula since 2012. The majority of the texts taught (see table 1) are canonical and uncontroversial.

As this research is being conducted in the year of 2015, the process of adding new texts to the book room is this: one teacher must write a formal rationale as to why the particular text should be taught and how it will align with the curriculum. Then, four other teachers must read the text in its entirety, agree with the rationale, and sign a form attesting to this. The Supervisor of English must also sign off, and the Board of Education has the final approval. Two teachers remarked in their interviews that even when new texts are added, it is difficult to tell which ones will become commonly taught texts. They are wary about adding a new text to the curricula, only to find that no one else
wants to teach it. There is potential that this process wastes teacher time and school money, since some texts which have been recently added are sitting in the book room unused after they have been vetted as approved texts. This includes Truman Capote’s 1965 nonfiction text *In Cold Blood*, Julia Alvarez’s 1991 novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, and Amy Tan’s 1993 novel *The Joy Luck Club*. These texts are all recent additions that are not often taught in the American literature courses. In some instances, the teachers who completed the vetting process for these texts and taught them in their classroom has left the school district. Other times, a teacher vets a book, teaches it for a year or two, and stops using it. This occurred with Sherman Alexie novel from 1995, *Reservation Blues*, which was recently added to the book room. Only two teachers taught this novel in their American literature classes this year. A third teacher taught this novel last year, but indicated that she will not use it again because it was a “bad experience.” Most recent texts that have been vetted and added to the book room have not been successful in more than a handful of classrooms. The only two somewhat recently added texts that have seen success in the American literature classrooms are *Into the Wild* and *The Things They Carried*.

The three aforementioned recently added texts by Julia Alvarez, Amy Tan, and Sherman Alexie have not been nearly as popular to teach as *Into the Wild* or *The Things They Carried*. The three former texts all have several features in common that the two latter texts do not. First, Alvarez, Tan, and Alexie are not white men. Julia Alvarez is of Dominican descent and her novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* is about the struggle of four sisters from the Dominican Republic who move to America. Amy Tan is
of Chinese descent and her novel *The Joy Luck Club* is about a group of four women and their families who emigrate from China to America. Sherman Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian who grew up on the Spokane Reservation. His novel *Reservation Blues* is about a group of male and female Indians from separate tribes who form a rock band and struggle to make it big off the reservation. None of these novels are by or about white men, as are the five most commonly taught novels in the American literature courses. Why aren’t these novels used more often? What is it about these novels, other than the diversity of their authors, that keeps them from being taught by more than one teacher for more than one year in the American literature courses at the high school? What is it about *Into the Wild* and *The Things They Carried* that makes so many teachers want to use these texts over and over again?

To answer this question, I examined the data from nine teacher interviews to find out what teachers consider when they select a particular text to teach. The following list of all the answers nine teachers gave is arranged from most frequent answer to the least frequent answer:

1. Covers curriculum and gives an overall sense of American literature
2. Canonical writer or text
3. Student connection to text
4. Length of text
5. Teacher familiarity with text
6. Readability of text (students can read independently)
7. Text complexity (excellent writing that lends itself to analysis in class)
8. Whether texts will appeal to reluctant readers

9. Availability of texts in book room

10. Connection to Common Core Standards

One reason that the aforementioned newly added diverse texts (Alvarez, Tan, Alexie) have not caught on may be because of the length of each text. Two out of the nine teachers interviewed said they consider the length of a text as a vital factor when deciding whether or not to teach it. The five most commonly taught texts in the high school’s American literature courses are all shorter than Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* which is 334 pages, Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* which is 288 pages, and Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* which is 320 pages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Great Gatsby</em></td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Crucible”</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Into the Wild</em></td>
<td>224*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Death of a Salesman”</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Things They Carried</em></td>
<td>273*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While *Into the Wild* and *The Things They Carried* appear to be well over two hundred pages, both books are often not read in the American literature courses in their entirety. Most teachers cut several chapters, which reduces the page length by sometimes 100 pages. This shortens the text significantly. Rarely do teachers assign the full text to
students. The majority of Into the Wild tells the story of Chris McCandless. However, there are three chapters where the author tells his own story about a climbing expedition, and also tells the story of three other men who have ventured into the wild as well. These chapters can easily be cut from the assigned reading without a large impact on the narrative of Chris McCandless. The Things They Carried is a series of vignettes. Each chapter can serve as a short story and therefore can be read and analyzed without necessarily reading the chapters before and after it. Therefore, teachers tend to cut chapters they find unnecessary. In comparison to the five most commonly taught texts, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, The Joy Luck Club, or Reservation Blues are almost double the length of the other texts. In a class that only meets for 43 minutes a day, and must cover all of American literature, it is difficult to entice students to read a full-length text that is over three hundred pages and stay interested discussing it for the time it takes to cover the material. Unlike the university level, students cannot be trusted to read an assigned text by a given time. The reading must be broken down into nightly assignments, and teachers must pay careful consideration to students’ workload in other classes, religious holidays, snow days, state testing, and other disruptions to the daily plan. If a teacher assigned fifteen pages of a three hundred page book each night, it would take four weeks of assigned reading homework every night to complete the novel. However, it is unreasonable to assign fifteen pages of reading every night for four weeks straight: There are supplemental readings, essays, projects, and tests to be assigned that would take time away from reading time. State tests, religious holidays, school assemblies, and various other events would stretch this ideal four week schedule out
further. Essentially, a text that is near three hundred pages would take more than a month to complete, maybe two. Discussing one text for two months might test the patience of most high school students if they don’t find the text important.

If these texts where shorter, I am still not convinced more teachers would assign them. At least five teachers cited a text’s “readable” or “accessibility” as an important consideration when choosing a text to teach. Three teachers said they found that many of the texts written by women, such as Beloved and Their Eyes Were Watching God, both texts that are available in the book room but are not widely taught or not taught at all, were not as easily “accessible” as the other more commonly taught texts. “They’re great texts, but they’re not great to teach,” one teacher stated. She said that elements such as non-chronological plot structure, magical realism, different dialects, and regionalism make it difficult for the kids to understand the texts. One teacher lamented, “Toni Morrison, our kids can’t read that.” Another teacher wished for a text by a female author that had the same level of engagement that The Great Gatsby has for her kids. She said, “Easy to read, plot line moves around at a good pace...I can’t think of a book by a female author or a book told from a female perspective that has that same engagement. I don’t know if I’ve been exposed to a text like that. It’s annoying because I feel like we’re missing something.” Both of these quoted teachers recognized the absence of female voices in their American literature classes, but were resistant to including a text by or about a woman that pushed the boundaries of the texts their students were used to. Another teacher stated, “I’m trying to rack my brain for literature like that. I took classes like that in university. I think there is a push, but it’s slow moving...If we want to break
out of this mold and have more female voices, we need more contemporary voices. The level of engagement with female texts is low - Bradstreet, Dickinson, Gilman. When choosing between Dickinson and Whitman, students choose Whitman.” One teacher expressed frustration at the lack of a “female *Gatsby.*” If she could find this, she would teach it she said.

Only two teachers stated that they consider gender when they select texts to teach. However, they stated that they must consider gender because they have predominantly male classes. Both of them teach or have taught in-class support, a basic level college preparatory English course that is co-taught by an English teacher and a special education teacher. The special education teacher may have up to ten students with IEPs in this class, leaving room for eighteen students without IEPs. Unfortunately, sometimes students without IEPs are placed into classes like these based on the idea that this class will have more support than another college preparatory class. Based on this harmful premise, some ICS classes are populated not only by students with IEPs, but also by struggling students without IEPs. Incidentally, this tends to tilt the population of ICS classes towards the male majority. Male students in lower level English courses and female students in high level courses seems to be an increasing trend in our high school English classes. Many female students move up to honors or advanced placement English courses. The English 4 advanced placement classes regularly have almost all female students. This year, one AP class has an entire roster of all female students. Both of these American literature in-class support teachers lamented that it is easier to get female students on board with
almost any type of literature. If she assigns it, female students will read it.

Unfortunately, this is sometimes not the case with their male students. One of the teachers interviewed says she finds herself having to design lessons and assign texts that will appeal to these reluctant male readers. One teacher stated, “I think about my class breakdown in terms of gender. It’s a lot easier to get girls engaged in a wide variety of material than boys. So I cater to boys because it’s harder to get them engaged. What I teach and focus on tends to be catered to males.” Incorporating more female voices is a passion of hers, but not a necessity for her classes, she stated.

Another teacher said, “My classes almost always have more boys than girls. A lot of boys who are reluctant to read in class will read a sports website religiously. Girls are able to read about a different perspective than their own and connect than my male students.” While two teachers discussed how they consider the large male population in their classes when they select texts, no current teacher of American literature stated in their interview that they consider a balance of gender or race when they select texts. However, the two veteran teachers I interviewed, who no longer teach American literature, expressed this sentiment. One said, “I also feel that texts reflecting more than just dead while males should be a central part of the curriculum. I believe that the study of literature demands some attention to the development of that literature and a cultural sensibility over time, warts and all.” The other veteran teacher stated that she thinks “a lot about age/gender of the protagonist to balance male and female, older and younger.”
The data reveal an over-emphasis in the American literature courses of the eurocentric, white male perspective. Teachers state they want a text that is accessible and engaging for students, which in turn means a text that is in line with the dominant narrative of white, European male writing. “Accessibility” and “readability” are two concerns that seem to be limiting teachers’ use of more diverse texts. There is an additional layer that adds to this emphasis of male texts: canonicity. In their surveys, both teachers and students expressed concern that texts studied in American literature should be classic or canonical. At least six teachers (67% of those interviewed) stated that they consider which texts are classic or canonical when they considered what to teach. Many students stated that they found *The Great Gatsby* so memorable because it was a “classic.” One teacher said that she surveyed her sophomore students and asked them which texts are important for her to teach next year. Her students overwhelmingly voted in favor of Shakespeare. She said, “Our population wants those canonical texts...Strong English students tend to worship the canon. If you get it, it’s like you’re special.” For many of these students, raised in an upper class neighborhood, knowledge of classic literature is what John Guillory calls “cultural capital.” Lisa Delpit’s *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* and Carl Jago’s *With Rigor for All: Teaching the Classics to Contemporary Students* also offer this idea that the canon acts as a form of capital for social mobility. A knowledge of the classics is sometimes seen as a reflection of one’s class. While students may be unable to articulate the importance of texts such as *The Great Gatsby*, they feel strongly that they should know it because it is a classic. Similarly, teachers
seem to agree with this idea that classics must be studied. This is one of the most common reasons why teachers select certain texts, and there are several explanations that support this commitment. The first reason, which one teacher explained in the previous example, is that students feel that they need to study the classics. Even though they may not enjoy it at the time, as one teacher stated, "they grow to appreciate the ideas." Like eating their vegetables, students want to read classics because they believe it is good for them.

Another common reason teachers stated they teach classic literature is because it is what is expected by other teachers in the department. As one teacher who taught American literature last year stated, "There was sort of a consensus agreed to and imparted by my colleagues: it was always 'ARE you doing Zora Neale Hurston?' and 'WHEN are you doing Gatsby?' I am not sure who set these expectations, but they are there." I saw this emphasis on and appreciation of canonical literature through the survey results as well. Seven of the eight teachers said that teaching classic literature was "very important" or "important" to them. At least three established teachers who have been at the school for over ten years state that the list of available texts is "extensive," with "many great books to chose from," and "many different selections and great intellectual freedom." While almost all of the teachers appreciate the texts available, a few still expressed a frustration with the lack of female voice in the texts in particular. One young teacher said that while she studied more multicultural texts in college, she felt she had to teach the classic literature that everyone else taught when she was first hired. She reflected on the fact that every new teacher has a mentor, a
much more experienced teacher in the department, who usually guides that teacher in her selection of which texts to teach that year. As a new teacher, she was steered towards the classic texts that her mentor teacher taught. Thus, despite her familiarity with different texts, she continued to teach the most commonly taught texts in the department. Additionally, even if new teachers are not encouraged to teach canonical texts, they are not in a position to introduce new texts. First, it is difficult for them to organize the necessary group of at least four other teachers to vet a new book because they have yet to establish collegial relationships. They also have little time on their hands to handle such a task, as they are confronted with the demands of a new teaching job. Thus, as new teachers enter the school system, they are indoctrinated into the routine of teaching the five most commonly taught American literature texts.

As teachers balance increasing demands such as new standards and state testing, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to devote time to adding new texts to the curricula. Seasoned teachers are more likely than new teachers to have the time to devote to the process of adding new texts. Once teachers are experienced, however, they have an archive of material for the classic texts they have been teaching over the year. As stated earlier, adding a new text to the book room, as can be surmised from the board’s new policy, takes time. One teacher noted that she would be greatly interested in adding more diverse, contemporary texts into her syllabus. Texts have been added in the past, she recalled, that are not accepted as classical or canonical. “We pulled Into the Wild” she noted, “Would everyone agree that’s classic literature that should be included in the canon? No.” She said, “If I had lots of time to read,
research, and find these texts I think I would. It's so much easier to go with what you have and know.” Another teacher said she “experimented with new texts to fill gaps in the curriculum,” but that, “honestly, it’s tough to introduce new texts. It’s been especially difficult, with new state guidelines, to find the time to pilot new material.

Increasingly, we have had less and less class time with SGOs, PARCC, kids pulled out of classes, field trips, AP classes.” A third teacher stated that the “lack of time to read the text and plan a unit if the biggest deterrent.”

However, by far the most frequent factor teachers consider when selecting a text to teach is whether that text fits into the curriculum, i.e. the extent to which a text fits into the overall story of American literature. Almost all of the nine teachers surveyed indicated the importance of this factor. When asked what factors they consider when selecting a text, they gave responses like, “presents a real overview of the scope of American literature,” “exposure to as many American writers a possible,” “texts that have been influential and important in the development of literature or have become cultural touchstones,” “historical focus,” “cultural relevance and value,” “what it means to be American...what it means to be a member of a particular culture or to be affected by it.” The degree to which a text presents aspects of American culture is a common important factor to American literature teachers. This concern is also expressed in the board-approved curriculum for this course, titled “English III: Exploring American Voices through Language and Literature.” This curriculum was most recently updated in 2010. The opening statement of the document is title
"Rationale, Description, and Purpose." The last section of the opening paragraphs read:

Through formal study of an ever-expanding, inclusive canon of American literature, incorporating a variety of genres and perspectives, students develop an awareness of the diversity of the American experience and respect for the human voice in its many rich and varied expressions...the course emphasizes the value and power of individuality and honors the diversity of race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, experience and ideology that characterizes American culture.

Although several teachers indicated that there is a consensus of implied canonical texts that new teachers feel compelled to follow, the curriculum seems to dictate for something different altogether. The curriculum uses the terms "ever-expanding" and "inclusive" to describe the canon of texts that should be taught, and states that the course should "emphasize" and "honor" "the diversity of race, class, gender, ethnicity, [and] religion." A summary of the five most common texts taught in this course would indicate that the ideals expressed in the curriculum are not the primary focus for teachers when they select texts to teach. In fact, there is very little diversity in race and gender, making the pedagogical canon that teachers follow in this school not very inclusive or ever-expanding.

The introduction to this curriculum goes on to specify genres that should be studied in this course:
Encompassing the cultural richness of the American experience, the course includes the study of Native American works, Puritan literature, revolutionary voices, abolitionist rhetoric, slave narratives, transcendental philosophy, Gothic tales, regional literature, and the energetic range of 20th and 21st century expressions of the experiences of immigrants, soldiers, flappers, wanderers, protestors and ordinary citizens.

Based on the teacher survey, the following genres are covered by at least one teacher:

1. Native American works (*Reservation Blues*)
2. Puritan literature (Hawthorne’s stories about Puritans, Jonathan Edwards’s sermons)
3. Revolutionary voices (Writings of Benjamin Franklin and other founding fathers)
4. Abolitionist rhetoric and slave narratives (*Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*)
5. Transcendental philosophy (*Emerson, Thoreau, Into the Wild*)
6. Soldier narratives (*The Things They Carried*)

Two realizations jumped out at me when I examined the data gathered from teachers as compared to the curriculum. Not one teacher taught a major text that, as the curriculum states the course should include, “the experiences of immigrants.” In fact, there are only three books available for this purpose on the book room. They include *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, which as previously stated is difficult to teach for a variety of reasons, *Bread Givers* by Anzia Yezierska, and *Animal Dreams*.
by Barbara Kingsolver. All three texts are each almost 400 pages long. No one has taught these texts this year or in recent history of the course. Immigration is not only mentioned in the introduction of the curriculum. It is also listed with specific essential questions in the “Content, Scope, and Sequence” section:

How has immigration defined and redefined the American culture?

a. How has American culture and society both embraced and resisted immigrants?

b. To what extent have immigrants assimilated into the ritual of the American consensus while still preserving aspects of their own culture?

While the curriculum asks teachers to cover America’s history through literature by and about Native Americans, slaves, African-Americans, and immigrants, it does not mentioned the female voice. In the list of genres in the introduction, it does state that this course should study an “energetic range of 20th and 21st century expressions of the experiences of” several groups of people, and listed here is with “wanderers, protesters and ordinary citizens” is also “flappers.” The only texts that might expose students to this term is *The Great Gatsby*, which is hardly the best example of an expression of the female voice in American literature. Nowhere else in this curriculum are women mentioned. The only essential question in the “Content, Scope, and Sequence” that might address women is embedded within the American Dream unit:

What role has the American Dream played in our culture?

a. What function has it served in our society?

b. Has the dream been realized, deferred, or silenced?
c. How do race, ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation affect the ability of the individual to realize his or her American Dream?

d. Has the American Dream changed?

Despite teaching this course for many years, it wasn’t until I thoroughly examined the curriculum that I realized the absence of the female voice. Section b of this essential question might invite teachers to explore how the gender affects one’s ability to realize his or her American Dream, but it certainly makes it clear that this is not a core concept in the curriculum. The most common texts taught to portray the American dream are *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman*. Neither of these texts address how race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation affect the American dream. In fact, this is also the only mention of sexual orientation in the data gathered from the curriculum, teachers’ surveys and interviews, and students’ surveys. There is not one text taught or available in the book room, except for perhaps *Leaves of Grass*, that addresses sexual orientation.

A teacher who wishes to use the writings of important female American writers would have to find a way to squeeze it into one of the genres outlined - slavery, Native American, Puritan, Transcendentalism. While the course curriculum has clearly has made an effort to be multicultural, which is reflected in the texts available in the book room, the curriculum has not changed to incorporate more women. It is no wonder that there are few books to choose from in the book room that teachers might use to discuss expressions of the female voice in American literature.
Out of the 39 available texts for this course, only 30% of the texts were written by women. Only 12% of the texts available were written by female authors of Native American, Hispanic, Asian-American, or African-American descent. Few of these available texts fit the criteria teachers outlined for how they select texts to teach. The available texts written by women are often long, difficult to read, and incorporate elements of postmodernism that students struggle to grasp.

With increasing demands being placed on teachers, such as increasing class size, PARCC testing, SGOs, and new state standards, and little rise in salary and no increase in planning or prep time, teachers feel they have to squeeze even more from the same sponge. There is little incentive to incorporate new texts in the syllabi. In fact, the fight over *The Absolutely True Diary of the Part-Time Indian* brought to light just how strongly some parents will react to the teaching of new texts. However, it is refreshing to see that almost all of the freshman classes now teach this novel. Ironically, the fight over the text, which played out in many public forums such as *The Westfield Patch*, seems to have ignited students’ desire to read the text and increased the buy-in factor. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a highly readable, interesting novel. It exposes students in an east coast suburban town to what life is like on an Indian reservation in Washington state. To understand the novel, they are forced to confront the history of the country from an alternative perspective than what they are used to. The novel lends itself to rich discussion in the classroom, as much of Sherman Alexie’s writing tends to do, about the power of language, education, stereotypes, and hope.
It is for these reasons I have chosen to teach another Alexie novel, *Reservation Blues*, each year in my American literature course. *Reservation Blues*, however, is over 300 pages long. It reads like a remix: jazz, storytelling, religion, myths, race, gender, magic, reality, and time bend and intersect throughout. This is a very difficult book for most juniors and does not meet most of the criteria that teachers consider when selecting a text. Not surprisingly, only one other teacher assigned this text this year, and she used it with her honors class. This is a liberatory text that “talks back” to the dominant narrative of Native Americans.

Overall, the findings of this case study reveal a severe absence of female authors and protagonists in the full-length texts assigning to students in the American literature courses. After white male authors, African American men as the next most represented population in the literature students read. Additionally, there is an alarmingly low rate of representation of men or women from different races or cultural backgrounds apart from the white, Eurocentric perspective. It is clear that the reasons for this lack of representation are complicated and not easily solved. However, it is necessary to push back against these obstacles if we hope to truly teach American literature as a course that covers a diversity of race and gender and more accurately reflects the demographics of the country’s people and their literature.
Chapter 3

Beyond the Case Study: Why We Need Liberatory Texts

The data I gathered and analyzed in the case study reveal that there is a clear resistance by both teachers and students to texts that break from dominant Euro-American and European, white, male writing. Texts by writers of color and by women, many of which bell hooks and Paulo Freire would call “liberatory,” are explicitly avoided for a variety of reasons, even though they are available in the book room. Through an analysis of the data in the case study, I believe that there are two main reasons why more diverse texts are not being used in the American literature classes.

The first reason I’ve concluded that teachers avoid many of the available diverse texts available in the book room is because they present challenges to young readers because of complex style of writing. Many of the multicultural texts available in the book room, such as Reservation Blues, incorporate elements of postmodernism or magical realism. These are texts that are not told in chronological order, mix history, myth, music, and other genres, and they defy traditional narratives, presenting challenges for students who have not been exposed to this style of writing before and are unsure how to work through it.

The problem is that while teachers avoid difficult texts that incorporate magical realism, postmodern techniques, and different dialects, they are preferencing a linear, narrative style which further privileges the white male perspective. Many multicultural or liberatory texts, such as Reservation Blues, purposefully resist the
writing style of the dominant narrative. Theorists bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldua
(Borderlands: The New Mestiza) address this style of writing and the necessary
difficulties it presents for the reader. in Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking
Black, bell hooks states that “The most important of our work - the work of liberation -
demands of us that we make a new language, that we create the oppositional
discourse, the liberatory voice” (29). However, in the classes at the high school, there
is a clear rejection of or resistance to what hooks would call “new language” or
“oppositional discourse” in American literature. Students, and most likely teachers
who did not study liberatory texts in school, are unfamiliar with these storytelling
techniques, and therefore express resistance to them. hooks knows that her
oppositional discourse can cause resistance, but she embraces that. She states, “It
should be understood that the liberatory voice will necessarily confront, disturb,
demand that listeners even alter ways of hearing and being” (16). Gloria Anzaldua
addresses the necessity of writing against the dominant discourse as well in her text
Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. Theorist Eve Wiederhold states in her
essay about Gloria Anzaldua’s writing that:

Innovative style poses a challenge to comprehensive, coherent articulations of
what writing is or should be...Asking readers to attend to the “the text” and the
cultural strategies that direct how texts should be read effectively unsettles an
entire structure that informs conventional understandings of how writing bears
upon knowledge, reality, meaning, and communication. (Wiederhold qtd. in
Keating 110)
Whether the style of writing in the text is called feminist, hybrid, liberatory, or ‘innovative,’ asking students to read them with the same conventional strategies these use for texts written in the dominant narrative is problematic. In our efforts to make texts accessible and engaging, to aid in our students enjoyment and understanding of all the assigned reading, it seems we have avoided texts that ‘confront, disturb, demand’ our students ‘alter ways of hearing and being,’ especially those that have this effect on our male students. Teachers recognize that reading liberatory texts is challenging for privileged students, who in this case are white male students, as they make up the majority of college preparatory level American literature classes.

Based on the previous data, it is clear that we ask some students to look through windows while many of the white male students look through mirrors. Some teachers even stated that in a predominantly male class, this is the easier option. The curriculum makes it clear that this course ‘honors the diversity of race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, experience and ideology that characterizes American culture.’ Do we include more diversity but preserve the narrative style students are used to? This seems to be what teachers are doing when they include texts such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass, published in 1845, or *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Ann Jacobs, published in 1861. Although both texts are about slavery and therefore present challenging topics for discussion, both texts are over 150 years old and are written in the linear, traditional narrative structure of European white males at the time. It was not until the late 20th century that multicultural and feminist writers started to write texts that
resisted traditional narrative structures. Incorporating diverse texts written during the 19th century accomplishes diversity in author or subject matter, but the writing style may still be in the style of the dominant narrative. It is important to include diversity in both subject matter and writing style, as many diverse texts written after the 1960s resist the dominant narrative. Given the lack of exposure our high school students have with these types of texts, and their resistance to a different writing style, it is important to carefully select texts to begin teaching this reading skill. Texts like *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien and *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer do this well. Teachers and students enjoy teaching these texts due to the subject matter (Vietnam War and Transcendental philosophy, respectively) and reasonable difficulty level. However, *Into the Wild* incorporates a nonlinear structure and multiple perspectives. The story goes back and forth through time and tells the story through journal entries, interviews, artifacts, newspaper articles, and selections from other pieces of literature. *The Things They Carried* mixes nonfiction and fiction genres through chapters that retell soldiers’ memories that seem both real and fantastical at various points in the story. O’Brien makes us wonder: What is truth? When teaching these texts, teachers can focus on one or two elements that break from traditional narrative structure. While students initially struggle with these texts, they eventually develop reading skills that enable them to discuss and write about the texts in a thought-provoking manner. If we hope to begin incorporating diverse texts with diverse writing styles, we should look at Krakauer and O’Brien’s texts for clues about how to do this effectively. When choosing texts that represent diversity in author, subject matter, and writing style,
teachers should consciously choose texts that incorporate only a few elements of nontraditional narrative structure, so students can learn reading skills they can apply to this new style of writing gradually.

The second main reason why there is a lack of diverse texts in the American literature courses has its roots in an earlier chapter of this paper, where I argue that women have been historically excluded from American literature anthologies. As I stated earlier, it was not until the 1980s when significant attempts to overwrite the historical absence of the female voice in early American anthologies really had an effect on universities. Teachers who went to university twenty or thirty years ago may not have experienced the increase in multicultural texts in their literature classes. The mentor teachers of today’s secondary classrooms have not been exposed to the same inclusive literary education as their mentees. Additionally, the parents of our students also have not been exposed to the multicultural shift that occurred on the university level after the culture wars of the 1980s. This generational divide separates the school community when it comes to the canon debate: on one side there are experienced teachers who went to university decades ago and older parents and school administrators who may have never taken a multicultural college-level English literature course. This side weighs heavily with experience and age, and thus commands the most power in the school community. On the other side are younger teachers who have experienced the vast and rich world of diverse literature from a variety of gendered and racial perspectives, but are left without a significant voice as they lack experience, seniority, and tenure for the first four years. Thus, they lack
significant power against a system that is rooted in a traditional status quo from the past. Facing a pedagogical canon that is stuck in time, how they can harness the untapped power of their diverse university experience?

There are two significant ways to increase diversity in the secondary classroom while accounting for the difficulties associated with this endeavor. There needs to be a significant effort to reverse the effects of early American anthologies that made the female and minority voice invisible. As discussed in Chapter One, the earliest American anthologies in the late 19th century whitewashed diverse voices from the literary landscape. By focusing on unifying themes such as nationalism and cultural identity, editors of early anthologies did not include dissenting or critical voices. In the mid 20th century, anthologies significantly cut the number of writers they included. This reduced the variety of writers even more, and reduced the representation of American literature to the voices of a small, select group of white men. The increase of feminist and multicultural writing since the 1970s has brought more diverse literature to the forefront, but it has not been enough to reverse these two deliberate actions made by early anthologies to silence dissenting voices and focus on a smaller collection of canonical writers. Therefore, there must be a deliberate inclusion of diverse texts on the secondary level to counteract the multiple forces of historical power, chance, and bureaucracy, that have left diversity out of the secondary classroom in 2015. There must be a significant and deliberate effort to bring diverse voices to the front and center, and there must be an increase in the number of writers students are exposed to during their study of American literature.
One option is to focus less on full-length texts. As evidenced by the survey, most teachers at Westfield arrange their units of study around particular full-length texts, usually novels. This privileging of full-length novels reduces the number of authors and genres a class studies in a given year. The average American literature class reads five novels over the course of the year, giving the class a different perspective only five times in ten months. There is a certain expectation from parents, students, and older colleagues that the class will be focused around the novel. When I finish teaching a novel with my own students, they ask, “What is our next novel?” At Back to School night, parents ask “What novels will the class be studying this year?” However, less focus on full-length novels, and more focus on shorter-length texts such as short stories, poems, articles, essays, and excerpts would enable classes to spend more time on a variety of perspectives, rather than one or two months on one novel, and thus would incorporate more diversity into the syllabus. The difficulty here would be in breaking the status quo which parents, students, and experienced teachers at the school have come to expect. Fortunately, the course curriculum, which is aligned to the state and federal standards, fully supports a shift away from focusing on full-length novels. The curriculum and standards recommend teaching skills rather than teaching texts. Here are three specific objectives from the current American literature curriculum:

1. “Investigate how the literature mirrors the social, cultural, political, moral, religious, philosophical and/or intellectual climate of the time during which it was written.”
2. "Recognize and critique the writer's use of structural techniques and devices in various genres."

3. "Examine and assess an author's ability to convey theme and tone through the study of narrative and poetic devices such as symbolism, characterization, plot, figurative language and setting."

4. "Examine and discuss an author's use of rhetoric such as diction, style and syntax in order to convey theme, tone and point of view."

All of the above standards could effectively be taught through shorter pieces of literature rather than novels. In fact, there is a better chance for all these standards, and more, to be covered if a large number of shorter texts are studied rather than a small number of longer texts. These standards also seem to support the use of nontraditional, diverse texts which would lend themselves to lessons on "how literature mirrors social, cultural, political" issues" as well as "the writer's use of structural techniques," "narrative and poetic devices," and "use of rhetoric."

Although there are many reasons why shorter texts can and should be used in the American literature courses, the novel is still an important aspect of the course. If the novel is to remain a cornerstone of the secondary literature course, and teachers recognize that they cannot continue privileging one type of novel, then more diverse novels need to be added. The reasons outlined in chapter two reveal the difficulties in this endeavor. Taking those difficulties into consideration, teachers should look to introduce novels that:
1. Are significantly shorter than 300 pages
2. Are written by female, multicultural authors
3. Feature female, multicultural protagonists
4. Introduce one or two text features that resist dominant narrative
techniques
5. Align with the curriculum and support the teaching of several of the
standards through a study of the text

It would be a monumental task to not only find a text that fits the above criteria, but
also write a rationale for teaching the text, then arrange for five teachers to read the
entire text and sign off on it, and finally ask the Supervisor of English and the Board
of Education to approve it. English teachers at Westfield have over 100 students in
their classes. In the 2015-2016 school year, an additional class is going to be added to
English teachers’ workload, increasing their rosters by potentially 26 additional
students. With ever-increasing rosters, demands of accountability, and minimal salary
increases, teachers find it difficult to have the time to seek out diverse texts that meet
the above criteria.
Conclusion

While there are many difficulties to incorporating diverse novels, this task is not impossible. However, it requires teachers and administrators to reassess the extent to which the theory of the course, as outlined in the curriculum, aligns with the traditions, as exemplified in the status quo, of the course. My analysis of the American literature courses at Westfield High School reveals that our ideals of diversity and inclusion are currently not the realities of the course. Bringing the ideal closer to the reality would require difficult, but necessary, shifts in thinking. The canon of American literatures is not constant and shifts over time, but teachers maintain a fixed sense of the canon by continuing to teach the same texts they learned when they went to school. Although there are diverse texts that are important to the American literary experience, these texts have been excluded from American literature anthologies and classrooms, thus they have been excluded from entering the canon. Many teachers, especially those who have graduated within the past ten years, recognize the fluid nature of the canon and understand that if we continue to teach certain texts for the sake of tradition, then we are complicit in privileging white male writing.

As new teachers enter the profession, educated after the infusion of multicultural texts into the college curriculum, there will be a greater push to update the secondary English classroom. Already, this change is evident in the curriculum, but it has been a slow trickle from pages of this document to the realities of the classroom. The reasons for this are complex, and many are beyond the teacher’s
control, making it even more difficult to release the secondary school canon from the firm grasp of the past.

But even for the most ambitious and progressive teacher, increasing demands, fear of complaints, and the influence of tradition greatly hinders the desire and ability to better align the course to the curriculum. A school-wide shift in the conception of canonical literature on the practical level would do little to increase diversity if the teachers are not also given the time and resources to incorporate new ways of thinking and reading into their classes.
Bibliography


