

Canons: Damned If You Do and Damned If You Don't: A Response to Adam Kotsko

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AS A MAORI SCHOLAR OF MAORI, PACIFIC AND INDIGENOUS LITERARY AND CULTURAL Studies, I spend a lot of time outside of canons. There are other centres for me, both inside and outside the academy, and I happily occupy those. But for my entire academic career, whether housed in English, Maori Studies, or Indigenous Studies, I am the person (my work is the work, my students are the students) people think of when they sing 'one of these things is not like the others'. You could say my scholarly work is non-canonical. No-one designs an English curriculum and writes in 'Indigenous Literatures' first. No-one designs an Indigenous Studies curriculum by starting with literatures in English.

But is non-canonical the same as anti-canonical?

My first academic position was in a small English department in New Zealand that required all majors to complete two pre-twentieth-century classes. In theory this ensured that all majors—even those whose interests were firmly contemporary—had an understanding of the complex historical and formal elements of the English language literary tradition. Likewise, my own undergraduate major required one 'Shakespeare' class, a minimum number of other 'historical' classes, plus (a vestige of long-ago departmental arrangements) a class in linguistics. In other English departments these requirements are

structured differently, but the idea is still the same. When I arrived at that first job, I railed against the requirement because of what I felt it communicated to students (and academics): pre-twentieth century literature (mostly by straight white middleclass men) is important, and all the rest is optional. No budding Medievalist would be required to take classes outside their areas of interest (including, my more specific concern, classes about literatures of the land, country or region in which they actually lived), while students had to wrangle timetables brimming with early-modern poetry and Victorian novels to fit in Pacific, Indigenous, contemporary, New Zealand, theory-focused and postcolonial classes. (That 'my' classrooms tended to be far more diverse than others did not feel irrelevant. And the higher enrolments in what amounted to compulsory classes were unfairly compared against others as if they were more popular for another reason.) Canons: you're damned if you do.

After a while in the classroom, however, my thinking shifted. When teaching Indigenous or Pacific literatures, you hope that students will have a broad sense of the literary tradition out of which, and back to which, authors write. But my students were surprised that Shakespeare had been writing about race and colonialism, and hadn't heard about the voyages of Indigenous people to eighteenth and nineteenth century London which left imprints on literary production there. Who was Omai? How did *The Tempest* relate to the Pacific? Why did Sia Figiel end her poem with the immortal words 'What the fuck is a daffodil??' I had to start my classes with lectures about European representations of XYZ rather than being able to get straight into XYZ texts on their own terms. It turned out that two randomly-selected pre-twentieth-century courses don't by themselves provide an overview of the whole tradition. My students knew things about various periods, genres or authors but had little sense of connections between them: whether the Bennett sisters appeared before or after Beowulf wasn't something they had the opportunity to consider; they might know Marlowe and Melville but not Milton. If only my students knew 'the canon' (any canon!) so when they came to my class we could start our conversations with a shared understanding of the literary tradition the XYZ writers engage, challenge and extend. And so, you see, canons: you're damned if you don't.

The Western Canon is not the only group of texts that acts—or is made to act—canonically. David Damrosch, writing about trends in postcolonial literary studies which seem at odds with the roots of that field in a critique of the power wielded by canonical formations, proposes three kinds of canon: the hypercanon (celebrities), counter-canon (other writers widely known who are understood to pose alternatives to the hypercanon) and the shadow canon (texts people feel they should be able to say they have read, even though no one actually teaches or

publishes on them).¹ If you search Maori authors in the MLA database, you will find 112 articles about Witi Ihimaera, 92 about Patricia Grace, and 88 about Keri Hulme. Next are Hone Tuwhare and Robert Sullivan at 23. No one else gets more articles than you could count on one hand. In 2015, English departments in New Zealand collectively taught six books of fiction or poetry by four Maori writers. There are six book-length treatments of Maori literatures in English, of which four focus on Ihimaera and Grace. (Damned if you do.) And yet, who would teach and New Zealand literature class that overlooks Ihimaera and Grace? Who would teach Pacific literature without Wendt? (Damned if you don't.) These observations and questions compelled my current book project 'Ghost Writers: the Maori books you've never read.'

Conversations about canons are always about space: how many classes does a student take? How many texts can a class cover? What breadth would adversely affect depth and vice versa? When space is scarce, competition arises which both produces polarisation and works against non-combative (indeed potentially generative) relationships between various entities. And space, in any settler nation, is also about place. The expansion and extension of canons is laudable, urgent work. Kotsko notes the absence of women for much of the St John's College curriculum and the decision of his own institution to include 'contemporary and diverse texts'. And yet, in settler colonies, with historical and ongoing practices of assimilation, we should be cynical, or at least careful, about challenges to the canon that are merely inclusive and, ultimately, still canon-focused. Assimilationist tinkering with the canon is challenged in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, in which literary scholar and writer Craig Womack tips the relationship between American and Native literature upside down: instead of Native lit being a branch or offshoot of the American tree, Womack suggests, it could be the trunk. In Canada, there is an active conversation in higher education about making an Indigenous Studies class compulsory for all students; at my previous job in English at University of Hawai'i-Manoa, we decided to insist through an additional breadth requirement that all majors engage with Indigenous Hawaiian / Pacific texts. On one level these all gesture towards another canon: they tell students (and academics) 'the Western intellectual tradition is not the only one in this place'.

We need canons because without them people like me don't have a structure to push against. Or perhaps more accurately, the structure against which we must push is tangibly present in few forms and, of course, that is precisely how it retains its power. Canons produce a semblance of structure which maps onto the arrangements of power pretty closely. If the centre doesn't have to name itself,

¹ David Damrosch, 'World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age,' in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, edited by Haun Saussy (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 43-53.

perhaps naming (teaching, speaking about, reading) a canon is a way to admit certain texts are not quite the ubiquitous (or apolitical) centre after all? There's a difference between having a shared understanding of the powerful in order to teach (and mobilise) an analysis of power and a situation of 'canon confidential' in which the usual suspects are mysteriously at the centre.

Kotsko characterises post-canon-wars American higher education as 'directionless' or 'content free'. And yet, for the first time in history, students attending university in the US who don't look like the people who wrote most of the texts in the Western canon can engage with the histories, literatures, sciences, perspectives of the Indigenous Americas. And, of course, Black and Asian and Latin@ and all kinds of other Americas. In countries like the US and Australia (and, indeed, my home country of New Zealand) we should be attempting to move towards a professoriate—and curriculum—that both reflects and serves the wider community. As I write, syllabi related to #BlackLivesMatter circulate on Facebook because most universities do not currently provide American students with the ability to contextualise, understand and respond to the urgent issues in their lives and communities. Most Australian university students have no idea who the traditional owners are of the lands on which they study (let alone the intellectual traditions and other significance of the place). The absence of canons (if that is indeed ever possible—perhaps better to say the absence of canons signalled as such) does not necessarily mean 'content-free' any more than the presence of canons signalled as such is a guarantee of 'direction'.

Canons do not produce themselves: they are produced by people. This year, as my position at Macquarie University (Sydney, Australia) draws to a close, I am facing an academic job market in which there are far more advertised positions for Medievalists than for people like me. Commitments to canonical texts in this lean season produce departments in which certain positions need to be filled immediately and others can only be imagined as aspirations for an endlessly-deferred fatter time. Perhaps this is the ultimate logic of canons: inside the academy as well as beyond it, certain texts (re)produce certain worlds. If we are damned either way, maybe it is worth considering an alternative. What courage would it take to imagine that those texts which are presently 'canonical' and 'non-canonical' could have a future relationship that is relational rather than simply competitive or incorporative? How exciting to imagine a future academy—and future classrooms—in which our analysis and experience of power does not pit me against a Chaucerian but has room for both of us and more besides.

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