Paradigm: "The Canon"

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Summary

"The Canon" has been the subject of intense, longstanding attention and debate in the humanities, particularly in the field of literary studies and the English discipline. The history of the canon paradigm and the related issues of the "Canon Wars" and the "crisis of the humanities" are essential to how the humanities are represented in public discourse. The digitization of texts and other digital humanities methods, projects, and paradigms have pushed upon the boundaries, definition, and scale of the canon, archive, and corpus, presenting new challenges and considerations for large-scale digital projects like WhatEvery1Says (WE1S).

The literary canon is also essential to WE1S because it raises issues regarding corpus and canon representativeness. WE1S will be exploring how mainstream media positions groups relative to the humanities, assessing different metrics of source canonicity, and grappling with how legitimacy is ascribed to certain disciplines, texts, and groups. As WE1S moves forward with its scoping project, a major goal is to define the project's corpus (and the canon from which its corpus is sourced) and provide a scoping statement rationale for this selection process, which will be informed by issues and questions that arise from the canon paradigm. This report provides background on the history and current state of the canon, its context within various research fields, and practical suggestions for how the canon paradigm may inform the strategies, methods, scope, and concerns of the WE1S project.

Overview of the Paradigm

Description

When we speak of the literary canon, we are referring to an authoritative list of works that are considered the most important or influential texts of a given culture, time period, nation, or place. These texts are used as a criterion or standard against which other works are measured. To enter the canon and be considered a canonical work is to gain social, political, cultural, and aesthetic privileges.

In the United States, Canada, and Europe, the canon typically refers to the Western canon and its place within—and relation to—Western culture, norms, values, customs, and belief systems. As John Guillory points out in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, the canon is an imaginary totality of works—no one person can read every canonical work because the canon is constantly shifting as a site of contestation and judgment. "No one has access to the canon as a totality," Guillory

reflects, and the canon "never appears as a complete and uncontested list in any particular time and place."[1] Despite its existence in the imaginary and being constantly in flux, the canon still looms large over questions of authenticity, canonicity, and representativeness. The question of which works are granted canonical status and by what means, the distinction between the canonical and noncanonical, and the dichotomy of selection and exclusion are still evoked in critiques of the humanities, the syllabus revision debate, issues concerning identity politics, and arguments for creating inclusive classrooms.

History and Current State

The formation of the Western canon dates back to early religious texts. "Canon" originally referred to ecclesiastical code of law[2] and came to denote religious texts like the Bible, Torah, and Qu'ran. This set of authoritative religious texts came to be regarded as a canon of scripture.

Debates about the literary canon and its relation to the humanities disciplines came to prominence during the so-called "Canon Wars" of the 1980s and 1990s. The debate focused on the "crisis of the humanities," represented by a significant drop in student enrollment in humanities degree programs and the decreased cultural capital ascribed to the humanities. The Canon Wars attempted to make sense of the delegitimization of the canon and the humanities at large—or in Guillory's words, how "the formation of the literary canon has emerged as an arena of struggle" and a "site of structural fatigue."[3]At the forefront of these debates were discussions about what authors and texts should be taught in the classroom to produce well rounded and properly educated students.

Widely credited as the primary catalyst of the Canon Wars is Allan Bloom's 1987 *The Closing of the American Mind*, which was published as a critique of the contemporary university and the failure of universities to serve the needs of its students. Bloom argues that "great books"—those that are longstanding in the Western literary and philosophical tradition—are being increasingly devalued, resulting in a crisis in the university and American culture at large. Bloom critiques the movement away from canonical, Western texts toward texts that are influenced by social movements and more attuned to issues like multiculturalism and gender. Bloom's text was a major player in the culture wars, placing conservatives and reactionaries who desire a return to the Western canon and traditional values on one side, and liberals and progressives on the other, who instead encourage an "opening" of the canon and a shift toward more inclusive texts and values.

Guillory's *Cultural Capital* remains the most incisive critique of both sides of the canon debate. Guillory argues that literary texts are not representative of minoritized groups, that the process of text selection for syllabi and other applications is a process of selection rather than exclusion, and that canonical texts are not repositories of cultural values. Furthermore, the canonicity of a work is not a property of the work itself, but rather of its transmission and its relation to other works, and this process is a "reproduction not of values, but of *social relations*."[4]Attempts to "open" the canon are futile because canon formation exists within a social totality marked by stratifications of class, gender, race, sexuality, and nationality.[5] In addition to critiquing the assumptions underlying both sides of the debate, Guillory reflects, "The decline of the humanities was

never the result of newer noncanonical courses or texts, but of a large-scale 'capital flight' in the domain of culture."[6] The "crisis of the humanities" is largely driven by a decline in the humanities' cultural capital, especially as universities are increasingly pressured to create skills rather than ideals. The problematic surrounding representation, Guillory argues, should be traded for one focused on the constitution and distribution of social capital.[7]

In Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlet 11, "Canon/Archive: Large-scale Dynamics in the Literary Field," the authors discuss how the Canon Wars remain a specter looming over the selection and inclusion of texts in a corpus and canon that we still can't seem to shake. Although we are past the "Canon Wars," the language of these debates has spilled over into our current cultural moment and the current status of the canon. The "crisis of the humanities" is still frequently invoked, and issues surrounding representativeness—and representation—are still at the forefront of discussions about how to create diverse and inclusive classrooms and whether the intentional formation of anti-canons is a worthwhile project.

The current state of the canon has been renegotiated by digital humanities projects that encourage us to reconsider the traditional boundaries of the published, the archive, the canon, and corpus. As discussed in Pamphlet 11, digital humanities projects and methods—including the digitization of texts—have dramatically altered the previously neatly nested relation of the published, the archive, and the corpus, which decrease in size, respectively.[8] A corpus may now approach the size of a canon (e.g. hundreds or thousands of texts), which disrupts these previously stable boundaries and relationships. This issue of scale led the authors' corpus to exceed the size of a traditional canon, which reproduces some of the same problems of canon formation and selection. [9] The canon is therefore on tenuous ground both theoretically and practically, and this issue of scale presents new challenges of definition.

Research Fields Context

The canon is relevant to the arts and humanities, including literature, drama, philosophy, music, and architecture. It is of particular importance to the field of literary studies and the English discipline. With digital humanities work on the rise, the canon is also important to digital humanities projects and scholarship.

Some of the core questions surrounding the canon and canon formation include: Who should determine what counts as a canonical work? What criteria should drive canon formation? What privileges are conferred upon canonical works in contrast to their non-canonical counterparts? These questions drive pedagogical theory and practice and are therefore important to the field of education. The issues that emerge from the canon paradigm—including which texts should be taught to students and what constitutes a well-rounded literary education—are key considerations that drive syllabus creation and the development of coursework constituting an academic plan of study.

Guillory's theories draw heavily on Pierre Bourdieu's work on the dynamics of power in society. Understood as operating within cultural capital as a system of exchange, the canon is linked to disciplines in the social sciences like sociology and anthropology.

The data generated to support claims of the "crisis of the humanities" is drawn from statistical data, including enrollment numbers in humanities degree programs, percentages of students enrolled in the humanities compared with other disciplines, and the representation of given cultural, ethnic, and gender groups in humanities programs. These figures are also sourced from economic data and statistics to provide insights, for example, into a decline in funding of humanities academic programs and research projects over time, or to compare the salaries of those graduating with humanities degrees versus those in the STEM fields.

Statement of Relevance/Limitations of the Paradigm to the WE1S Scoping Problem

The canon—and the related issue of corpus formation—must continually inform WE1S's work for a variety of reasons. First, the canon paradigm helps us to frame the relationships among the archive, the corpus, the published, and the canon, which will drive corpus selection decisions. Going forward, WE1S will be producing a scoping statement for the WE1S main corpus and sub-corpora. This statement will address the following questions, among others: What corpora are selected? What are the means by which they are selected? What is the rationale behind this selection? What is the relation of the WE1S corpus to the archive and canon?

Other relevant strategies and considerations emerging from the canon paradigm are discussed in detail under the following categories:

- Corpus Selection
- Representativeness
- Canonical Language
- Visualization of Selection Criteria/Metrics

Corpus Selection

Adjacent to the canon paradigm is the corpus selection process. Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlet 8 offers reflections on the archive and corpus that can also be applied to WE1S. As discussed above, digital humanities projects and methods have disrupted the traditional scale and relationships among the published, the archive, the canon, and corpus. Pamphlet 8 explores some of these problems and the challenges in assembling a corpus of 20th-Century novels. Authors Mark Algee-Hewitt and Mark McGurl explain their process of superimposing canonical lists from a variety of sources, beginning with the Modern Library "100 Best Novels of the 20th Century" list, assembled by a rather homogenous publishing board, the Modern Library's "Reader's List," generated by an online voting system, Radcliffe's "Rival 100 Best Novels List," Larry McCaffery's list of great novels in English of the 20th century, the yearly best-selling works of the 20th Century, and lists sourced from the Editorial Board of the journal MELUS (Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States), members of the Postcolonial Studies Association, and the Editorial Board of the Feminist Press.[10] The authors superimposed all of these lists to assemble their corpus. While each selection method and method of list formation is not without its problems and biases (the pamphlet discusses the issues of "found" versus

"made" lists, the volatility of alternate canons, and problems of rank and value), this process of corpus assembly would be a good strategy for WE1S to adopt when explaining and pursuing its scoping project and corpus assembly process. Because we are considering how mainstream media positions students and others from particular groups relative to the humanities—as outlined in the WE1S proposal—the project can explore lists produced by various organizations of "canonical" newspapers, databases, and media outlets (if they exist and are available) and use this process of superimposition for corpus assembly. While the newspaper and database canon will look different from the literary canon, similar principles apply. Lists could be constituted by most frequently read, most widely cited, or most renowned works on either found or made lists. Some of the corpus, of course, should be drawn from postcolonial and gender organizations and outlets.

Looking to the future, Algee-Hewitt and McGurl suggest a powerful measure of representing canonicity through scholarly interest. A potential way to do this, they suggest, would be to generate a list of novels most frequently cited by literary scholars in a representative database like the MLA Bibliography.[11] WE1S may want to consider most cited newspapers and databases broken down by various groups and population demographics (academic scholars and the sources they cite may comprise one group, for example, the general public, another) as a way of addressing media impact and canonicity of sources. It is important to keep in mind that no corpus selection process is not without its conceptual baggage, but providing a rationale for selection will allow WE1S to navigate the challenges inherent to corpus selection.

Representativeness

WE1S aims to explore the following questions: "How do mainstream media position students and others from particular groups relative to the humanities? How do media articles addressed specifically to such groups compare with mainstream media? Moreover, in what ways does public opinion about the very ideal of 'diversity and inclusion' correlate with public opinion about the humanities?"[12] Keeping Guillory's reflection in mind that texts are not representative of given cultural, ethnic, and gender groups, WE1S is aware of—and attuned to—the gap between how groups are discussed in relation to the humanities in media outlets or how media speaks on behalf of groups and how these groups personally relate to the humanities. Guillory's attention to a theory of canon formation that is also a sociology of literacy, teaching, and institutional structures can inform WE1S's attention to these complex circumstances and the importance of situating the project corpus within a larger social totality.

Part of Guillory's focus on the analysis of social capital requires a look at how certain groups relate to the humanities and how these groups are presented in relation to the humanities. WE1S aims to reveal some fresh trends and insights into how the humanities are represented in public discourse, which is important because many articles and pieces that discuss the humanities often focus on its "crisis" and decline, even decades after the Canon Wars. Some recent articles and studies have dug deeper into what exactly we're talking about when we talk about a "crisis of the humanities." These articles have attempted to probe deeper into what is driving the crisis or which groups are most affected by it. Heidi Tworek's article in *The Atlantic*, for example, explores research conducted by scholars like Ben Schmidt on the female flight from the humanities toward

pre-professional careers, which would be supported by Guillory's cultural capital argument. We typically hear of gender inequity in the STEM fields, but this could be an interesting area to explore within the humanities as well. Issues like gender bias also extend to the journalism field, as reflected in male dominance in global media positions, but is also manifested in more subtle ways, like who is quoted or mentioned in news stories.[13] In any case, honing in on more specific trends and figures is an important step toward using more precise language to represent the humanities in public discourse.

Canonical Language

Another issue relating to canonicity is whether WE1S would like to adopt the canonical language that emerged from the Canon Wars, like "the crisis of the humanities" and "the liberal arts decline." WE1S aims to provide fresh themes and perspectives on the humanities, so the project may choose to use this language to clarify these trends and describe them in greater detail, or suggest new language to better represent the current state of the canon and the humanities disciplines.

Visualization of Selection Criteria/Metrics

At the suggestion of co-PI Thomas, WE1S aims to produce graphs and diagrams inspired by those featured in Literary Lab Pamphlet 11. Indebted to Bourdieu's diagram of the literary field, the authors graph the British novelistic field from 1770-1830 along axes like popularity and prestige. Popularity is measured based on number of reprints in the British isles and translations into French and German, and prestige is based on number of mentions as "primary subject author" in the MLA bibliography.[14] WE1S will explore the potential for creating a graph—or series of graphs—that map the project's corpus in relation to a number of selection criteria.

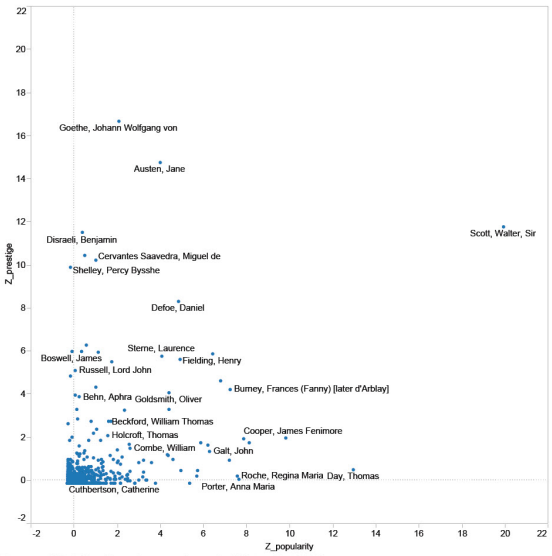

Figure 3.2. The British novelistic field, 1770–1830

Results for the popularity axis are based on the number of reprints (in the British isles) and of translations (into French and German); for the prestige axis, they are based on the number of mentions as "primary subject author" in the MLA Bibliography, and on the length of DNB entries.

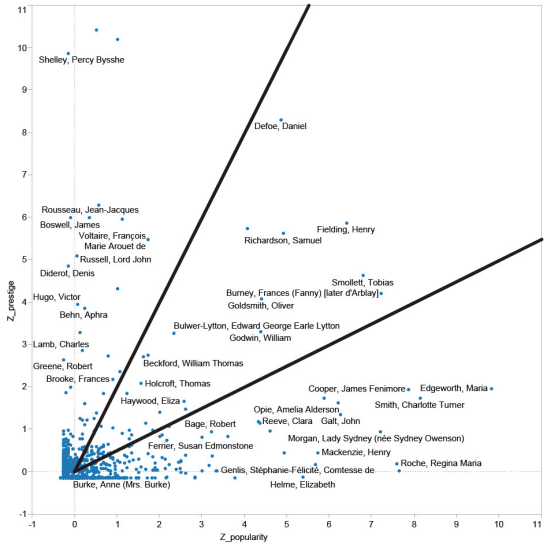

Figure 3.3. The three regions of the British novelistic field, 1770–1830

The three regions of this diagram express variable relationships between popularity and prestige. The area near the vertical axis has prestige scores at least twice as high as the scores for popularity; the area near the horizontal axis is its mirror image, with popularity at least twice as high as prestige; while in the central area the two sets of measurements tend to balance each other.

Conclusion

The canon paradigm provides WE1S with ample considerations going forward with its scoping project. It allows the project to hone in on the corpus selection process and consider how it will navigate the inherent challenges of canon formation and corpus selection. As a project that aims to explore issues of representativeness and group identity, longstanding issues facing the canon, and new issues relating to the canon and corpus emerging from large-scale digital projects, WE1S is uniquely positioned to produce new perspectives on the humanities and its representation in public discourse.

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Bio

Giorgina Paiella is a graduate student in the English department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her interests include DH, literature and technology, AI, robotics, feminist literary theory, literature and the mind, and gender studies, with a particular focus on the intersection of gender and automation and the history of automata.

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[1] Guillory 30.

[2] See OED definition one for “canon.”
[3] Guillory 483.
[4] Guillory 56.
[5] Guillory 59.
[6] Guillory 45
[7] Guillory 82.
[8] Algee-Hewitt et al. 3
[9] Ibid.
[10] Algee-Hewitt and McGurl 8, 15
[11] Algee-Hewitt and McGurl 21.
[12] WE1S Project Proposal Narrative, 17.
[13] See, for example, Adrienne LaFrance’s “I Analyzed a Year of My Reporting for Gender Bias (Again).”
[14] See figures 3.2 and 3.3, page 4