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Academic Libraries and the Remaking of the Canon: Implications for Collection Development Librarians

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Introduction

An issue of central importance for academic librarians of the future will be how to perform successful collection development in a time of narrow budgets and a rapidly expanding universe of information. For librarians in the humanities, in particular, the issue of how to decide what to collect is even more fraught with tensions in a multicultural era in which conventional standards used to evaluate materials have been radically contested and in which the very existence of the canon, or any type of core collection, has been called into question. It will be important to the local culture of the college or university and the broader society as a whole for librarians to become more aware of their part in the process of canon-formation and the social construction of knowledge and for us to take into consideration the difficulty of balancing the needs of present and future scholars. This article will look at how the canon has been problematized by postmodern critics, how this will affect collection development decisions, what librarians can do to address some of these issues and, finally, how electronic resources and hypertext are changing the role of the collection development librarian of the future.

First of all, it is important to understand what the argument is about and how the word “canon” is being used in these arguments. Originally, the “canon” signified the books of the Bible officially sanctioned by church authorities, while everything falling outside that list was deemed apocryphal. Later, the word “canon” was used to denote the verified works of a particular author. In its most recent manifestation, “canon” is used to refer to those texts which are passed on from generation to generation as being worthy of study, reflection, and admiration, those works which are believed in some way to be inherently superior to others. Of course, from the very start, the canon has been the site of much conflict and constant flux. It has never been a static, unchanging pantheon. On the contrary, each generation of writers and critics has developed its own set of standards and has revised and added to the canon that was handed down to it.

Librarians and the Canon

Librarians in the United States have long had an interest and involvement in the evolution of canons. Beginning with the establishment of the Great Books program at the University of Chicago, for instance, libraries soon became the sites of “great books” discussion groups (Quinn, 1). In the early 1930s, college libraries began to make efforts to establish definitive core collection lists, such as Shaw's *A List of Books for College Libraries*, and after World War II the ALA published its widely used *Books for College Libraries*. The compilers of these lists operated under the assumption that it was indeed possible to identify a “core” collection. One of the projects claimed, for example, that it “was based on the premise that there is a body of knowledge—the classics, the important scholarly titles, and the definitive works on all subjects of interest to any undergraduate community—which should be in any college library.’”

Thus, in the past (and for traditionalists in the present, as exemplified by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*), the theoretical underpinnings of the canon arose from the assumption that the value of a literary work could be determined via some sort of absolute and objective criteria, though these criteria were not necessarily made explicit. Matters of taste and theories of value were believed to be based not on a relativistic but on an objective system. If these criteria were articulated, what would they have been? Traditionally, the “best” works in the canon have been defined as having a kind of aesthetic beauty, timelessness, and universality. Literary works of superior quality were considered rich and intricate enough to sustain multiple readings; in other words, critics, readers, and other writers would be likely to continue to find new information about and new aspects of the material, which would remain fresh and original no matter how many times it had been read. Another traditional standard has been that the vision or message of the work apply equally to contemporary times as to the period in which it was first written, that the topic of the work not be too ephemeral or narrowly restricted to the culture of its time but that it transcend its own conditions and bring pleasure and enlightenment to people regardless of time period, gender or culture.

Those who would challenge the canon say that these criteria serve the interests of the dominant culture rather than being created out of some objective, nonpartisan perspective. Critics claim that the familiar orthodoxy that the best works, like cream, naturally rise to the top is not true and that the process is not so benign as that. African-American and feminist scholars have observed that what is defined as “universal” simply reflects the point of view of the gatekeepers of culture. One of the problems with the conventional canon, as observed by its critics, is that the standards used to define excellence may be qualities that primarily bolster the dominant paradigm and support those in power. For example, why should “universality” be a criterion for excellence, when what seems “universal” to a 30-year-old woman from New York will probably not seem “universal” to a 50-year-old man from Sri Lanka? Another criterion commonly used to define aesthetic excellence is “complexity”—but again, why should this be taken for granted as a standard of greatness? Perhaps in some cultures lucidity and simplicity are valued over complexity and difficulty. In other words, we cannot ever be sure that our aesthetic criteria hold true in any absolute, definitive way.

As Brian Quinn puts it, “Aesthetic judgements are always relative to culture. The notion of a universally valid set of aesthetic criteria is not possible, because aesthetics are ultimately based on social consensus” (7). Thus, contrary to the notion that there is a monolithic set of standards we can turn to for ideological support, it is clear that canons are determined by many subjective and contradictory standards of value and value systems.

As a matter of fact, some critics of the canon would claim that canons are nothing more than “‘ideological banners for social groups,’” that canons are created, promoted, and maintained by certain groups in order to justify their particular set of values, to enforce the entrenched hegemony and values of the mainstream culture and to suppress the voices of others (Quinn, 5). The people who are in a position to create canons include those such as editors and publishers (who determine what makes it into print in the first place), professors (who decide what to include on academic syllabi), and librarians (who have a role in deciding what makes it into the library’s collections), and these people tend to already be members of economically and politically advantaged groups. As some librarians have pointed out, “‘the sources libraries collect represent and reflect the political and economic biases of the system’” (Manoff, 8). In addition, this process does seem to perpetuate a sort of vicious circle: “texts are in print because they are canonical, a non-canonical text is not kept in print and therefore does not stand a chance of wider readership and the possibility of attaining canonical status” (Heinzkill, 55) Thus, contrary to the assumption of the past that the best works rise to the top based solely on their own merits, many critics now realize that the creation of the canon is very much a socially mediated process.

While there is growing recognition of the fact that there can be no one monolithic canon, there will always be a canon, or multiple canons, due to the fact that there is only limited time in the academic calendar year for students and professors to read certain works. Just as there are only a certain number of years in a person’s lifetime to read books, and therefore, a great number will have to be excluded (this

is the entire point of canons), so do budgets and shelves have only a certain amount of space on them for growth of new collections and collection development librarians need to have this as the overarching frame of reference informing their collections policies. Thus, a canon of some sort is inevitable, and can be useful and necessary, because of the impossibility of any one library comprehensively collecting all works of interest produced by the society which it serves and supports.

Ancient and medieval libraries, on the other hand, did not have to concern themselves as much with selectivity, since the number of books in existence was within the scope of the libraries' collecting abilities. As William S. Monroe notes, "[w]hen books had to be copied by hand, one had to be glad for anything one could acquire. Even the largest libraries in the 12 th century might have only 600 volumes" (106). However, libraries after the time of Gutenberg have fought an uphill battle in trying to be anything close to comprehensive. The question for the academic librarian, then, becomes one of priorities and purposes. What is the essential purpose of collection development? Is it to collect all works, good or bad, within a certain timeframe? Is it to mirror the dominant culture's image of itself? Is it to collect only those works on the syllabi or those requested by faculty? Or is it to collect things that fall outside the mainstream, that may resist canonization right now but that may be of interest to future scholars?

Collection Development and the Canon

In light of the fact that we cannot collect everything due to limited budgets and the overwhelming glut of published materials, the primary dilemma for the collection development librarian is summed up in the question: "for whose society should we collect?"

As Quinn and other librarians and scholars have pointed out, for anyone to attempt to identify potential future members of the canon is a bit like gambling with unknown commodities. Is collection development really just blind speculation about future relevance, or are there standards and criteria that librarians can apply to collection development in order to have greater certainty that what they are collecting will be worthy of preservation? In a sense this question goes beyond the scope of this presentation, as literary critics and scholars spend their careers trying to define criteria for aesthetic excellence.

So then, what is a librarian to do? As Brian Quinn has pointed out, there have been very few concrete, specific proposals in the library literature for how librarians are actually supposed to deal with the implications of the canon debate (2). Quinn is one of the few librarians writing on this subject who offers concrete ways in which librarians can enhance the traditional canon and expand it to include alternative and non-Western canons. He mentions a number of different ways in which academic librarians can contribute actively to an expansion of the canon, as follows. First of all, librarians can research works that fall outside the curriculum or syllabi (or that are out-of-print) and work on acquiring them and distributing information about them via a newsletter or listserv. Second, they can subscribe to journals that review non-canonical materials. Third, they can develop a method of alternately acquiring canonical and non-canonical works and then shelve them next to one another so that users browsing through the library will see them together. Fourth, librarians can focus their efforts on collecting works that fall outside of conventional genres, such as nonacademic prose, travel and nature writings, graphic novels, creative nonfiction, letters, diaries, detective novels, science fiction, crime fiction and other narratives. As Paul Metz and Bela Foltin point out, many worthwhile works fall outside neat disciplinary boundaries: "In considering such materials, selectors should ask themselves whether their policies would support the acquisition of T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* or George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* if these unquestioned masterpieces describing war and the politics of war were written today" (36-7).

A fifth idea is that an international cooperative lending plan could be developed so that libraries could share non-Western resources. Sixth, librarians can make efforts to collect unorthodox interpretations of canonical works, because after all, as Quinn remarks, "reading new works is not the same as arriving at new readings" (4) Seventh, librarians can collect works that are about the canon

debate itself, making sure to include as many perspectives as possible. Eighth, librarians should collect works from non-Western canons but at the same time we should be careful to select the best translations of these works, as a bad translation can make a huge difference in how a work is appreciated, and we should also be careful not to apply Western standards to non-Western works. Finally, librarians can collect critical analyses of popular culture in order to address postmodern interest in such materials and to redress the conventional bias towards “high culture” that the canon has been accused of in the past.

Digital Resources

Another way this dilemma could be alleviated to some extent is via technological advancements in providing digital access to resources. A move towards “connection development” in addition to traditional collection development might be a feasible way to deal with the challenges of selection. Indeed, electronic resources are beginning to appeal more and more to humanist scholars. It is certainly clear that digital resources are used in a very different way than print-bound books. The lack of success of the e-book, for instance, due to the fact that no one wants to lug about an electronic device to the beach or curl up with one in bed and read screen after screen of print, points to the fact that more in-depth, sequential, narrative reading is better done on paper. The type of research, however, that scholars do when they are just looking for relatively short sections of text or bits of information, is certainly more successful in an electronic environment where the information can be marked up in SGML or XML so that information retrieval can occur much more rapidly, concordances can be created much more easily, and other types of linguistic analysis can be performed that could not have been performed so easily in the past.

Collection development librarians will play an important role in determining which digital or online resources to collect, which, in a sense, will become “canonical”. Will the digital version of the Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, become the canonical standard for electronic lexicographical resources for the coming age or will some new dictionary usurp its time-honored place in the academy? Will new authors working in a hypertext medium displace authors of print-bound novels and will multimedia e-books pose a threat to print-bound books? With shrinking budgets and limited shelf space, if producers can make a case for a reduction in costs with digital media, perhaps that is the way to go. If not, and Borges' idea of the “infinite library” remains an unfulfilled fantasy, collection development librarians will continue to play an important role in selecting the best and most important resources for their users, both electronic and print. As William S. Monroe puts it, “[a]s users are faced with a more and more bewildering array of resources, the role of the librarian becomes even more crucial, whether at the reference desk, in interlibrary loan, or in this new type of selection” (113). Thus, it will remain the job of the collection development librarian to determine which items the library still needs to actually own in print and which items can be accessed digitally.

Obviously, no library can or ever could (except in the Middle Ages perhaps) collect and own everything needed or desired by its users. Even the largest university libraries with the largest budgets, such as Yale and Harvard, have to deal with this problem. Perhaps with the advent of more electronic databases, full-text online journals and books, and document delivery services via email and fax, libraries will be able to focus more on collecting marginal or less mainstream materials in print. Computerized delivery, as with the Xerox DocuTech printers, may make “just-in-case” collection development less necessary, as users could simply download and print out books or articles on demand. As a result, it is not too idealistic to imagine that, for example, since the OED can be accessed online or on CD-ROM and therefore requires zero feet of shelf space, that that portion of space could go towards housing books that otherwise might not have been acquired. Of course, this does not take into account the fact that digital resources are equally if not, in some cases, more expensive than their print counterparts. However, as technology continues to advance and be refined (and this advancement is likely to be exponential in the future), perhaps the cost of digital resources will decline as they become more popular and widespread, much as the cost of personal computers has declined and an unprecedented number of middle-class households now own their own desktop systems. Therefore, it is to be hoped, and perhaps not too

fanciful to imagine, that a similar phenomenon will occur with digital resources, making room for the acquisition of more non-canonical, cutting-edge, or rare materials.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is an inherent aspect of canons that they will always be in flux, that they will never be fixed, permanent, or unchanging, though this is an illusion that librarians and scholars of the past labored under. Collection development strategies must take this into account and librarians must negotiate the complex dilemmas and problems of canonicity and canon-formation from an informed standpoint, realizing that each decision they make has and will have a significant effect on the development of the culture, not only within the academic institution in which they work but on the larger society as a whole. One of the main dilemmas of collection development is whether or not to privilege local needs of present users over the interests of future scholars. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know what will become canonical in the future. There is no guarantee that what is currently considered canonical will be so in the future. And there may be materials that are falling by the wayside now that could have become very important to the culture in the future if they had been collected and preserved in the nation's research libraries. The issue of canon-formation is thus of paramount importance to academic librarians, especially those in collection development in the humanities, where there is much less consensus about what qualities go into making a "good" book that is worth preserving.

Librarians must be familiar with the various sides of the debate revolving around the canon. This debate has been going on now for many years, and has been discussed in the popular press as well as more academic venues, though it has not received much attention in the library literature. Librarians as well as teachers of English studies should be aware of and participate in the discussion of what the purpose of humanities is, whether it is "to hand down great works, to criticize, to turn out writers, to understand cultural politics, to discover how language works, to be rhetorically knowledgeable" or something else (Heinzkill, 60).

There are many ways in which academic librarians can meet the challenges posed by a redefinition of the canon. Some of the suggestions discussed include the following: researching out-of-print or non-canonical works, collecting works that fall outside of traditional genres or that are cross-disciplinary, forming an international cooperative lending plan or consortia with other libraries to cover different areas of underrepresented literatures, collecting variant interpretations of canonical works, collecting works that are about the canon itself, keeping up with trends and becoming familiar with new schools of thought and aesthetics and with new contenders for the canon, and collecting critical analyses of popular culture and works from non-Western canons. In addition, collection development librarians could take as their model Charles Abbott, who established one of the best special collections in modernist literature in the country on a very limited budget. Finally, digitization of research collections and resources has the potential to make room on the shelves and in the budgets of the nation's research libraries for the acquisition of greater amounts of non-canonical works.

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