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"Chip, Chip, Chip Away": Revisiting the *Norton Anthology*'s Canon Essays in the MeToo Era

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Abstract

Through a postcolonial feminist lens, this paper examines the literary canon: its evolution, pedagogic purposes, and the issues of inclusion and exclusion subtending it. Scrutinising canon formation via excerpts from the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, we expose the blind spots of the canon and their consequences. The article critiques Global North paradigms of knowledge and the epistemic violence inherent in excluding minoritised voices and forms of knowledge. We argue that literary study can be a form of subjugation because of the narratives it prioritises and marginalises. Drawing on key texts from Matthew Arnold, Terry Eagleton, Gauri Viswanathan, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Franco Moretti, and Sara Ahmed, our analysis situates the discussion within the broader context of coloniality and its lingering impact on knowledge production and representation. In showing alternative forms of knowledge – from Gandhi and al-Ghazâlî's critiques of Western reason to intersectional feminist analyses – we highlight the need to interrogate capitalist and colonial ideologies, and advocate for inclusive modes of epistemic representation. By interrogating the power dynamics that underpin the canon, our paper calls for a

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reevaluation of the literary canon to better reflect diverse voices and experiences, particularly those from the Global South.

Keywords

canon – decolonisation – feminism – postcolonialism – curriculum

1 Introduction

In spring 2022, a *Telegraph* article entitled "Jane Austen dropped from university's English course to 'decolonise the curriculum'" (Simpson 2022, n.p.) fuelled a steady flame of moral panic. The University of Stirling's decision to replace an Austen novel with another by Toni Morrison on its Special Authors module was framed within the 'culture wars.' The subsequent hysteria, which spread to outlets like the *Daily Mail* and *GB News*, ignored the original article's recognition that the module in question "changes focus on an annual basis" and that the department "has not critiqued Austen" (Simpson 2022, n.p.). Stories like this one have become increasingly common in recent years. Indeed, the subject of the canon inspires strong emotions in the public sphere. Let's consider how scholars conceptualise the literary canon. In his *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Chris Baldick offers this classic definition:

> A body of writings recognized by authority. Those books of holy scripture which religious leaders accept as genuine are canonical, as are those books of a literary author which scholars regard as authentic. The canon of a national literature is a body of writings especially approved by critics or anthologists and deemed suitable for academic study.
>
> BALDICK 2001, 33

Baldick uses his liturgical analogy to show that the 'canon' comprises a body of literary texts that are privileged above others and considered *the* works of literature that ought to be taught in any given culture.

The assumptions inherent in canon formation have real-world consequences. As the Pakistani author Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi memorably writes in an essay about linguistic and literary colonialism, it is a case of "first the canon and then the cannons" (2022, 85). Accordingly, our article examines the literary canon – its evolution, pedagogic purposes, and rationale for inclusion or exclusion – through a postcolonial feminist lens. Scrutinising canon

formation using excerpts from the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, we analyse the unexamined assumptions of the canon. The paper thus interrogates Global North paradigms of knowledge and the epistemic violence inherent in excluding minoritised voices and worldviews. We predominantly rely on the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* because of the volume's pedagogic significance. This textbook serves as the primary introduction to literary and cultural theory for countless students around the world. In its third and most recent edition (2018), the editors, Vincent B. Leitch et al., claim it has been revised to encompass "new selections from non-western theory" (2018, blurb). Even so, this effort is limited to modern and contemporary theorists and writings, neglecting earlier contributions. Leitch and his colleagues also concentrate on the Western academy, apart from a few tokenistic exceptions which are heavily flagged in the book's introduction (2018, xxxvii). We draw on key texts in the anthology written by Matthew Arnold, Terry Eagleton, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Franco Moretti. To this theoretically canonical mix, we add Gauri Viswanathan and Sara Ahmed, among others: postcolonial or decolonial theorists notably absent from the anthology. Our analysis situates discussions of canonicity within the broader context of colonialism and its lingering impact on knowledge production and representation. We argue that literary study can be a form of subjugation and control because of the narratives it prioritises and marginalises. In showing alternative forms of knowledge – from M. K. Gandhi's and al-Ghazâlî's contestations of Western reason to intersectional feminist analyses – we highlight the need to counter capitalist and colonial ideologies, and advocate for inclusive modes of epistemic representation (2000).

Our intervention addresses the critical question of whose voices are represented within the canon, and the sociocultural role the canon plays. By interrogating the power relations that underpin curricular choices and advocating for a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to literary studies, this work contributes to the ongoing discourse on decoloniality, epistemic justice, and Global North–Global South relationality. In the latter half of this article, we extend a metaphor by Sara Ahmed of chipping away at the canon like whittling stone to argue that only with this work of undoing can we create the space for a representative range of stories to emerge.

Critiques of the academic canon emphasise its exclusionary nature and messy enmeshment with colonial and Eurocentric legacies. Scholars argue that the traditional canon often marginalises non-Western epistemologies, presenting Western knowledge as universally valid while sidelining other perspectives (Monque 2021, 128–29; Sanchez 2018, 3–5). Decolonial approaches challenge this hierarchy, calling for an "epistemic disobedience" that

actively includes diverse, subordinated knowledge systems while crossing boundaries of exclusion and minoritisation (Mignolo 2000, xxi; Zidani 2021, 971–73). By prioritising Western narratives, conventional curricula neglect critical inquiries into Indigenous, minority, and international perspectives, framing them as peripheral (Bhambra et al. 2018, 1–9). In rethinking the curriculum, dissenters propose not just a reconsideration of content but a transformative shift in pedagogy that embraces pluralism and inclusivity, advocating for students to engage with texts in both their structural and historical contexts (Monque 2021, 135–39). As Andrew Sanchez (2018, 3–4) points out, decolonising the curriculum involves examining not only what is included in the canon but also the power dynamics of identity and national affiliations that influence how we interpret and value knowledge.

Cognisant of these developments, this article will introduce and explore three interrelated concepts: what literature is; the role of literary criticism; and what constitutes a literary canon. It will also briefly consider the history of English Literature as an academic discipline. We will focus on two different approaches to the 'function of criticism' and the 'canon' by analysing extracts by Matthew Arnold and Terry Eagleton included in the *Norton Anthology*, followed by an examination of contrasting theories by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o – who sought to centre the Global South via a rejection of the English language in his work – and Franco Moretti from the same volume, along with other voices from elsewhere. In doing so, we want to probe the canonical and, in many ways, valuable textbook on theory and criticism for some of its blind spots and in-/exclusions.

The canon is designed with a pedagogic purpose in mind. Since it impacts literary study, this high-profile body of work is shaped by those who decide what people should study: critics, editors (including anthology editors), exam boards, government, educationalists, museum curators, and funding bodies. Sometimes the general public appreciates a book so much that it becomes canonical. Contrapuntal examples include Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (2014/1794), *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (2016/1813), and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (2002/1960). Although popular among general readers, these novels have come to be understood as essential texts within literary studies. That they resonate with a wide readership while also offering critical heft for academic exploration secures their place in the canon. Yet the (in)constancy of the canon is an interesting puzzle. For defenders of tradition, the canon is a fixed body of works that must be preserved in its existing condition. However, this fixity is far from the truth. While there is a tendency to see the canon as an immutable body of works, the canon does change over time. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for instance, used to be seen as

a minor work – more interesting because of the light it shed on major (male) Romantic writers, such as Shelley and Byron, than for its own content. Yet, after the rise of second-wave feminism from the 1960s onwards, it became a canonical work that appeared on syllabuses and was much discussed in academic spaces.

For decades, debates about opening up a still overwhelmingly Western, male-dominated canon have raged on elite campuses. Columbia University's Butler Library has been the subject of precisely such debate. Etched across the face of the main undergraduate library are the following names: "Homer. Herodotus. Sophocles. Plato. Aristotle. Demosthenes. Cicero" (Wolfe and Ries 2019, n.p.). These are of course all male writers who occupy a central place in the Western canon. In 1989, a group of students placed their own banner across the library. Their version, which read "Sappho, Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Brontë, Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf" (Wolfe and Ries 2019, n.p.) was immediately taken down by campus security. In 2019, however, Columbia University Libraries supported a student-led project to place a banner directly above the original names for the entirety of the fall semester. The banner read: "Toni Morrison, Diana Chang, Zora Neale Hurston, Ntozake Shange, Maya Angelou, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gloria E Anzaldúa and A. Revathi" (Wolfe and Ries 2019, n.p.). The desire to expand the canon is not a new one and nor is its ever-changing nature – as noted above – an innovation, regardless of how right-wing claims about 'wokeness' want to present their novelty. Such claims are connected to provocation, power, control, and the fraught history of the concept of a canon itself.

Why does it matter who is represented within the canon? The canon's role in society and culture is to determine which literary works are deemed worthy of study, funding, and preservation. It establishes markers of taste, constructing a supposedly meritocratic framework that categorises texts as poor, middling, or of a high quality. Canons often confer a sense of nationhood through the promotion of national literature and heritage, as seen in the foundation of English literary studies in colonial India (Viswanathan 1989). They can also promote specific ideologies; for instance, Gauri Viswanathan focuses on colonial ideology, while Terry Eagleton – along with Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, among others – argues that the canon reproduces bourgeois ideology. Eagleton contends that literature serves as a means of social control, fostering acquiescence among the working classes. Consequently, the history of English literature as a discipline is deeply intertwined with the histories of colonialism and the subjugation of the working class. While Viswanathan's critique exposes the canon as a technology of control,

other scholars have interrogated the global capitalistic education system at large and presented proposals for remaking humanities education to recover the true critical ethos of the humanities. Relying on the case studies of technical education in India and the No Child Left Behind programme in the United States, Martha Nussbaum warns that these initiatives' focus leaves education reduced to a tool for economic productivity. This threatens "values precious for the future of democracy," which principles, she argues, "in an era of religious and economic anxiety, are in danger of getting lost" (2010, 6). This analysis especially resonates at the time of writing in the mid-2020s, during the even more religiously and economically anxious time of the second Trump presidency and the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, Iran, and Lebanon. Nussbaum stresses that the reduction of the imagination and associated critical faculties to "useless paraphernalia" (2010, 134) and the resultant stripping of arts and humanities elements from curricula is a dangerous trend. We cannot limit an arts education to the canon if we are to fully accommodate this education's mind-broadening potential. Here the framework Gayatri Spivak constructs for decolonising the globalised education project to make room for plural epistemes is useful. In *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), Spivak advocates that learning should "do violence to the epistemological difference and rem[ind] that this is what education 'is'" (2012, 10). In the process, she deems it crucial to design a new "aesthetic education" grounded in the humanities that incorporates "careful consideration of social context" (2012, 10) at all levels. Such a process, and the violence it entails, necessarily involves undoing the canon in favour of a more inclusive curriculum.

On the positive side, the canon offers a shorthand for recognising important works of art. With limited time and a proliferation of new books, having recommendations is invaluable. The canon serves as a map for navigating the thick undergrowth of the world-literary scene. It also has a less favourable aspect: it can be very exclusionary, particularly towards those who face social barriers in making their voices heard – such as women, racialised people, LGBTQ+ individuals, the working class, and other subalterns. As a result, writers from such backgrounds often find themselves confined to the literary margins or, worse, entirely forgotten.

2 Canonised: Matthew Arnold

Due to its primacy, we want to examine the role of the *Norton Anthology* in the formation of the literary canon. For its publisher, the anthology is a rare

gem that single-handedly (Sinykin 2023, 172) saved the company and safeguarded its existence as an exceptional publishing house: an employee-owned operation that is, against market logic, "neither a conglomerate nor a nonprofit but that rarest of birds: a large independent house that publishes literary fiction and poetry (2023, 169). Dan Sinykin perceptively observes how, not unlike the rest of the industry, Norton was also disproportionately white and an "old boys club" (2023, 176) for much of its existence (2023, 170–181). The company's attempts at multiculturalism in the 1990s saw it diversifying staff and author lists, as well as introducing the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. However, these innovations did not substantially alter the conservatism for which Norton anthologies were coming under fire at the time. Anshuman Mondal noted in a 2025 plenary lecture that to date Norton give their anthology editors assistants to help navigate the faultlines between liberal and conservative political standpoints, indicating that the entire editorial process is one of accommodations and negotiations (2025a, n.p.; see also Mondal 2025b, 188–92). For volumes as prominent as Norton's – books that can sustain a whole publishing house with their guaranteed college sales – it is necessary to scrutinise the logic underlying their existence. To understand the roots of the volume's influence, both the *Norton Anthology* and we ourselves first travel back in history to the foundational figure who shaped the canon as we know it today (Guillory 2023, 148–49). Cultural critic and school inspector Matthew Arnold exerted key influence on the teaching of English literature in Britain and on establishing the canon. In Arnold's essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," excerpted in the *Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, he writes that it is the job of the critic "to see the object as in itself it really is" and "to establish an order of ideas […] to make the best ideas prevail' (2018/1864, 686). For Arnold, criticism is tied to objectivity, positivism, and the processes of ordering and hierarchisation. He also holds lofty ideas about literature's supposed connection with empathy having the potential to make the critic a good *man*. This is a gendered assumption, and in this regard, consider Arnold's reference to the tragic case of an illegitimate girl who was strangled to death near the workhouse where she lived with her mother (2018/1864, 695). Arnold spills not inconsiderable ink wincing at the girl's surname "Wragg" and the "grimness, bareness, and hideousness" of her surroundings (2018/1864, 695). This class prejudice against a single-parent family means that the gendered violence meted out on her is relegated to a short hand-wringing exclamation at the end of a sentence about "the strangled illegitimate child!" James Seaton observes that what Arnold emphasises here is the flat affect and uninterest of the journalist towards this human story (1996, 3). Nonetheless, the classist and sexist tone apparent in the extract

contradicts Arnold's belief in the moral perfectibility that the analysis of literature could confer. Arnold later writes:

> It is noticeable that the word *curiosity*, which in other languages is used in a good sense, to mean, as a high and fine quality of man's nature, just this disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake, – it is noticeable, I say, that this word has in our language no sense of the kind, no sense but a rather bad and disparaging one. But criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality. It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever.
>
> ARNOLD 2018/1864, 691; emphasis in original

This stress on curiosity as the critic's defining trait is worth unpacking. Theodor Adorno describes the essay as a form that allows for the evaluation of subjects from multiple perspectives. The essay, Adorno contends, can dispute prevailing ideas, and engage in a dialectical thinking that facilitates the exploration of complexities (1958). The essayist's curiosity involves keeping faith with forms of knowledge that may seem trivial but turn out not to be. Humanity can be revealed in apparently insignificant details. As Arundhati Roy (1997) suggests (though Arnold would disagree with her broader politics), dignity and hope reside in small things and the insights they yield. This concept chimes with the curiosity that drives readers through novels about fictional characters.

Arnold places stress on a seemingly oxymoronic confluence of the mind's "free play" upon a multitude of subjects, and a sense of "disinterest" (2018/1864, 691). Disinterestedness connotes impartiality: an unbiased, apolitical approach to texts. He highlights the significance of seeking "the best that is known and thought in the world" (2018/1864, 691), a phrase that has itself almost been canonised. Towards the end of the essay, Arnold reconceptualises this idea, stating that the quest should be to "establish a current of fresh and true ideas." He acknowledges that "England is not all the world" (2018/1864, 701) and therefore urges critics to "dwell much on foreign thought" (2018/1864, 701–702). The imperative is admirable, even if by "foreign" he primarily references thought from other European cultures. This standpoint is particularly evident in his description of Europe as "one great confederation" (2018/1864, 702), a remark that lands intriguingly in the context of contemporary post-Brexit public discourse. Arnold's advocacy for a curiosity-driven

approach to criticism challenges the insularity of traditional literary perspectives. Contemporary scholars can adapt it to engage more deeply with global intellectual traditions, responding to the need for a range of voices in a cultural topography scarred by divisions.

However, as has been clear since at least the days of Michel Foucault and early postcolonial theorists such as Edward W. Said, nothing can purport to be entirely disinterested or apolitical. In Foucault's power/knowledge nexus, knowledge is always an exercise of power; and power, always a function of knowledge (Foucault 1980, 183–189). Postcolonial critiques of Arnold point to the tensions between his anti-capitalist ideals and imperialist commitments. Said dubs Arnold's approach "grandly unthinking" for the way it reinforces rather than questions the colonial structures of his time (Said 1993). Raymond Williams criticises Arnold's inattention to the imperialism and colonialism in which culture was deeply entrenched, despite the Victorian critic's otherwise laudable attempt to develop a theory of culture (Williams 1983, 110–29). More recent work sees scholars argue that Arnold's cultural theories, especially in *Culture and Anarchy* (2009/1869) and *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), are imbued with the imperialist perspectives of Victorian anthropology, for instance presenting the Irish 'Celt' from a racialised outlook that serves British colonial interests (Boynton 2013, 149). Most postcolonial evaluations regard his work as ultimately compromised by its imperialist agenda, which undermines the progressive possibilities his exploration of English exploration initially promises (Boynton 151, 2013).

Indeed, this problem extends beyond just Arnold. Even the history of the teaching of English literature is deeply political. Worth mentioning here is Thomas Macaulay's oft-quoted 1835 "Minute on Indian Education." A proponent of English education in India, Macaulay emphatically identified the goal of such education as creating "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (2016/1835, n.p.). That Macaulay saw education as a tool of control is apparent. Furthermore, the study of an apparently ineffable English literature was linked to control, because the discipline originated in the "laboratory" of colonial India, as Viswanathan observes in *Masks of Conquest* (1989, 8) – a book which will be discussed later in this article. It is useful, however, to first examine Marxist conceptions of the canon.

3 Literature as Canon Fodder: Terry Eagleton

Marxist critic Terry Eagleton highlights the bidirectional, mutually-constitutive relationship between politics and art or literature, highlighting the importance of economics and suggesting that social class determines thought. In the first of his two anthologised excerpts," Eagleton identifies this approach as having the advantage of explaining literary works more fully, situating texts within their historical contexts. Marxist criticism, he says, doesn't just relate to content (whether or not texts mention the working class), but also to form, genre, and connotations. Eagleton, as such, politicises these stylistic considerations and tries to jettison the myth of cultural transcendence and the idea of literature as morally enriching – notions that were held dear by Arnold.

Eagleton relies on the Marxist usage of the term 'ideology,' beginning his essay "The Rise of English" by asserting that "to speak of 'literature and ideology' as two separate phenomena which can be interrelated is [...] in one sense quite unnecessary. Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, *is* an ideology" (2018/1983, 2015; emphasis in original). But what is ideology? The Norton anthology's footnote summarises it as "a system of specific class beliefs, images, values, and practices that functions to reproduce the dominant social order" (Leitch 2018, 2015). Marxists like Eagleton believe that the economic base ultimately determines everything else in society. This base consists of material goods, money, objects, the relations of production, and the stage of development of productive forces. On the economic base stands the society's *superstructure* – its "art, law, politics, religion" (1976, 14) according to Eagleton. The superstructure encompasses ideology, which includes political and ideological institutions, social relations, and ideas; it also embodies culture, art, and literature, as well as the collective hopes, dreams, and character of a people. The superstructure works to stabilise the dynamic economic base by presenting temporary political beliefs as eternal truths or universals.

> Returning to the canon, Eagleton explicitly challenges Arnold's view of great works and disinterested critics:
>
> As religion progressively ceases to provide the *social 'cement'*, affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be *welded* together, 'English' is *constructed* as a subject to carry this ideological burden from the Victorian period onwards. The key figure here is Matthew Arnold, always preternaturally sensitive to the needs of

> his social class, and engagingly candid about being so. The urgent social need, as Arnold recognizes, is to 'Hellenize' or cultivate the philistine middle class, who have proved unable to underpin their political and economic power with a suitably rich and subtle ideology. (2018/1983, 2016; emphasis added)

Far from being disinterested, Eagleton claims that Arnold and the literary critic more broadly are highly ideological and self-serving, looking to persuade the masses of the working class to support their middle-class worldview and economic pre-eminence. Eagleton fuses building trade diction with literary study to discuss how Arnold's notion of culture allows "social 'cement'" to migrate from the waning authority of the religious canon to the emerging authority of the literary one. We will return to this concrete, materialist imagery later on while discussing Ahmed.

In his book *Ideology*, Eagleton compares ideology to fiction in some detail. Just like fiction, ideology may contain true elements, in order to ground it in "realism" (1991, 22). However, Eagleton is no cultural relativist, and importantly asserts that, while they may contain a kernel of truth, many ideologies also include entirely false propositions, such as "blacks are inferior to whites" (2018/1983, 2018). Both ideology and fiction are sometimes held to be neither true nor false; and fiction, like ideology, is often "implausible, distorting, oversimplifying." While The *New Statesman* describes Eagleton as "a splendid polemicist," his writing, too, can be regarded as being ideological. He controversially attacks postmodernism and poststructuralism, putting them in the same basket as the free market liberalism he rightly deplores (1991, 17–18). His can be a relentlessly single-issue view of literature that, as the Norton editor notes, "lack[s] nuance" (2018/1983, 2014). Even when he admits a flaw in Marxists' ideology, it is one that calls attention to the justice of their cause. He points out that famous left-wing slogan "Workers of the world, unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains" is wrong, because workers could lose their lives under a repressive regime (1991, 26). This is an admission of error that only goes to prove the broader point, showing Eagleton's rigid though witty style of argument. He leaves little room for the recipients of dominant ideologies to question or resist them. Despite his disclaimers, in this model art fits too neatly and supinely into the superstructure and society's ideologies. Eagleton's work is not ideological in the sense of trying to blind people to relations of production, but instead espouses what Williams (1977, 123–127) would call an "emergent ideology" of the working class.

If Eagleton's attention to economic realities is crucial, he ignores much of the cultural concerns of postcolonialism, deriding the discipline as

obscurantist and self-hating (1999, n.p.). In a biting critique of Spivak, he excoriates postcolonial critics for attempting to "culturalise away" (1999, n.p.) political realities. Though he deems Spivak the least offensive of the postcolonialists because of what he sees as her relative attention to real-world concerns, he still argues that her work alienates readers due to her status as an academic "insider" (1999, n.p.). For Eagleton, "[t]he relations between North and South are not primarily about discourse, language or identity but about armaments, commodities, exploitation, migrant labour, debt and drugs" (1999, n.p.). This justification allows him to dismiss postcolonialist concerns entirely, and yet his analysis of (neo)colonial relations is sketchy at best.

In her pioneering book *Masks of Conquest*, Viswanathan tacitly challenges Eagleton's assumption that English Literature was introduced as an educational discipline in order to keep the working class in line. Instead, she argues that the subject was closely linked to colonialism, replacing religion as a less controversial mode of control. The study of English literary culture was, she claims, instituted in Indian schools and universities before it became an established discipline in Britain. This goes against Eagleton's point that English Literature was inaugurated as a pedagogical tool in the "Mechanics' Institutes, working men's colleges and extension lecturing circuits." He argues that the subject was "the poor man's Classics" (2018/1983, 2019), and that its purpose was to inculcate quietism and to quell working-class rebellion against the upper and middle classes. By contrast, Viswanathan proves that "the discipline of English came into its own in an age of colonialism," when its growth was intertwined with "the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England" (1989, 2). She credits scholars like Eagleton and Baldick for briefly recognising the role of Empire by linking the Indian civil service examinations to English studies. However, Viswanathan argues that this "token acknowledgment" overlooks the deeper imbrication of imperialism in literary culture:

> The amazingly young history of English literature as a subject of study (it is less than a hundred and fifty years old) is frequently noted, but less appreciated is the irony that English literature appeared as a subject in the curriculum of the colonies long before it was institutionalised in the home country. (1989, 2–3)

Placed in its historical and broader geo-political context, literary study reveals a more controlling and less idealistic purpose than the noble critical endeavour Arnold espoused, adding another layer to Eagleton's Marxist interpretation.

Although Viswanathan does not use the term, the inauguration of English as a discipline is an example of what another Viswanathan – the Indian social scientist Shiv Visvanathan (no relation) – calls a lack of "cognitive justice" (2009, n.p.). Like Michel Foucault's "subjugated knowledge" but in a broader decolonial framework (1980, 82), Visvanathan's concept of cognitive injustice helps to connect the practices of the canon – especially its cultivation of knowledge hierarchies – with asymmetries in other disciplines. Many different forms of knowledge seen as inferior by the colonisers are granted no future. They are condemned as lacking aesthetics, ethics, scientific credibility, or rationalism, fit only for appropriation or expungement. As Visvanathan puts it, "ethnicities and local cultures were to be homogenized through the school, marginalized in the reservation, or museumized if disappearing" (1997, 129). Literary study, then, serves as just one tool of control and subjugation among the many that were, and are, wielded against racialised people.

The enshrinement of English Literature as a prominent compulsory subject in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) examinations is also indicative of exclusionary practices. Sumita Mukherjee has argued that though ICS exams were meant to appear inclusive, they skewed hard towards selecting British administrators for the colony. Indeed, in 1864, when the first Indian passed the fiendishly difficult examinations set for him, the Raj promptly "changed some of the qualification criteria, reducing the marks available for Indian Classical Languages and decreasing the maximum age, to prevent further Indians from joining the Superior Service" (2011, 14). Even though colonial education policy was assumed to encourage the learning of English language and literature in India, "the number of educated Indians was very small, especially in proportion to the whole population; the 1881 Census found that only one out of every 3600 people belonged to the "native intelligentsia" (2011, 13). Partha Chatterjee earlier observed that Indians who wanted to participate in governance had to achieve mastery over English to assimilate into colonial epistemology and language, while their cultural and vernacular knowledge was relegated to the private sphere (1993, 6). Meanwhile, Thomas Metcalf has shown how colonial governance structures like the ICS relied on discourses of similarity and difference that allowed the British to justify exclusion while selectively including some Anglicised elites (1995, 66–71). These historical facts add further credence to the argument that the purpose of literary education pertained more to control than to any desire to create a native intelligentsia that could self-govern. Literature served the goals of the Empire rather than some higher moral calling.

4 Fire the Canon! Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

In "On the Abolition of the English Department" (1968), which is collected in the *Norton Anthology*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owur-Anyumba discuss the pernicious effects of an African educational system that "carr[ies] the contours of an English heritage," to use Kamau Brathwaite's phrase (1984, 8). Ngũgĩ and his colleagues think through a cultural and psychological suffocation by the English literary tradition in an African context. The late Kenyan academic and novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o made a well-publicised decision in 1977 to give up publishing novels in English and instead to write in Gikuyu, one of the major languages in Kenya. In his most famous non-fiction book *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ is scathing about African Anglophone writers whom he sees as having betrayed their mother tongues by deciding to write in English (1986). This 'betrayal' is a complicated discussion that has preoccupied (post)colonial writers for at least a century and a half. We will return to other, more recent voices on the topic, particularly that of Aamir Mufti, later on.

Ngũgĩ et al.'s "On the Abolition of the English Department" is, in many ways, a precursor of today's Decolonise the Curriculum movement, which seeks to ensure that university and school syllabi are diverse and reflect the devastating violence of colonialism and neocolonialism. Ngũgĩ et al.'s position paper questions whether one should eschew English and other European languages or remould them. The authors come down towards the second side – they don't want to jettison literature entirely, but to deprivilege European languages within a broader and more textured African context. Clause 9 of "On the Abolition of the English Department" highlights an insightful aspect of Ngũgĩ et al.'s argument, namely that their focus is not solely on colonialism and "the West," but on establishing connections and (af)filiations which go beyond this. For example, there are forms of oppression that predate European colonialism – consider the tensions between Africans and the descendants of Arab colonisers, and the fraught issue of African involvement in slavery. Looking further back, one might point to pre-colonial trade connections, friendships, and even marriages between people from the Indian subcontinent, East Africa (including Kenya), and the Arabian Peninsula. To insist that authors such as Ngũgĩ are always concerned with interrogating Western 'knowledge' would represent a partial reading of their work. In fact, their aim points towards the later project of "provincialising Europe," conceptualised by Chakrabarty (2007). At this juncture it is worth quoting clause 14:

> Europe has influenced Africa, especially through English and French cultures. [...] We see no reason why English literature should have priority over and above other European literatures where we are concerned. The Russian novel of the nineteenth century should and must be taught. Selections from American, German, and other European literatures should also be introduced. In other words English writings will be taught in their European context and only for their relevance to the East African perspective.
>
> NGŨGĨ ET AL. 2018/1968, 1915

The argument Ngũgĩ et al. make here is in service of decentring English literature in Africa. They are not dismissing this literature but rather challenging the supremacy of English and French cultures. Their call is for a broader literary curriculum that includes Russian, American, German, and other European literatures. Meanwhile English texts will be retained, but only in the context of Europe and as regards their salience to East African readers. Beyond these European languages, "Swahili, Arabic, and Asian literatures constitute [...] an important source, especially here in East Africa." Yet "the third and the most significant" current is "the African tradition, a tradition as active and alive as ever" (1913). This is an effort to break the cultural hegemony of English – and to a lesser extent, French – culture over Africa.

As mentioned, since Ngũgĩ et al.'s late 1960s paper, other arguments have emerged, including from Ngũgĩ himself (Ngũgĩ 2012, 27–43) about the shift of English from a national language to a language that belongs to multiple nations who have transformed and absorbed it in their own ways. The widespread use of English may have been the direct result of the colonial project, but the way it has been taken up across the world indicates transformations at work. To pretend that vernacular languages are free of colonial influence is a mistake too. As Aamir Mufti has argued at length, the colonial process has affected even vernacular languages. About 'nativist' language debates presenting a rosy view of vernacular languages in South Asia, he writes that the vernacular is "itself implicated in a colonial genealogy and cannot sustain its claim to an 'authentic' position uncontaminated by the colonial process" (2016, 150). As such, any discussion about English is necessarily complicated.

The hope for Ngũgĩ and his colleagues in 1968 is to remove the outsized influence English Literature has because of the history of colonialism and the cultural hegemony of English in Africa. This demand is better seen as a move to *centre* Africa in African discourse – the decentring of English is only a consequence of this move. It should be considered reasonable and

appropriate, after all, to expect Africa to hold a primary place in an African country. Relatedly, in other contexts, an expansion of English literature and its study might better reflect the contemporary place of English as a global language in various forms often grouped together in the term Englishes or englishes. Forward-thinking literary departments think through these changes amid their own evolution. At our institution, the University of York, for instance, the department was given the appellation "Department of English and Related Literature" after much debate in order to create space for other writing too, including non-European literatures. The editors of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* inform readers that due to the intervention of this university memorandum, Ngũgĩ's own department was in 1973 renamed the Department of Literature (Leitch 2018, 1910). Expansionist projects (such as pan-African, pan-Asian, or other transnational movements) contain within them the ability to extend methods of critical and literary analysis to other literary contexts, without taking away from the essence of literary studies.

5 Loose Canon: Franco Moretti

In "Conjectures on World Literature," Franco Moretti avers that there needs to be a change in methodology when it comes to how we study literature. Close reading, he argues, has its limitations because academic readers only analyse texts that are seen as important or canonical. This reveals an ingrained elitism, since "you invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter" (2000, 57, emphasis in original). Distant reading, by contrast, emboldens scholars to take on far larger research questions and data sets. In the methodological book *Distant Reading* (2013), Moretti calls for an unlearning of how to read texts. Close reading, the *sine qua non* of English literary studies, is rejected for what he calls distant reading. This is a computerised way of examining enormous numbers of texts, scrutinising them through a zoomed-out lens for broad patterns, trends, innovations, and reversals. Here distance, he asserts, "is *a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems" (2000, 57, emphasis in original). This shift in perspective, moving from individual texts to larger patterns, opens up possibilities for understanding global literary production.

Moretti's methodology is designed to be particularly useful for those interested in researching "world literature," since both the method of distant reading and the non-canonical objects of study "go against the grain of

[Western] national historiography" (Moretti 2000, 61). In *Graphs, Maps, and Trees* (2018/2007), from which Moretti's *Norton* chapter is extracted, Moretti speaks up for "everyday" rather than "exceptional" literature, which is more representative of society as a whole. This unsettles a primary assumption behind the canon: the idea of Great Men (sometimes Great Women) producing Great Works. Moretti writes:

> A canon of two hundred novels, for instance, sounds very large for nineteenth-century Britain (and is much larger than the current one), but is still less than one per cent of the novels that were actually published: twenty thousand, thirty, more, no one really knows – and close reading won't help here, a novel a day every day of the year would take a century or so [...] And it's not even a matter of time, but of method: a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it isn't a sum of individual cases: it's a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole – and the graphs that follow are one way to begin doing this. (2018/2007, 2255)

Here he presents great works of literature merely as tiny nodes within a vast network, "tiny dots" (2259) of light in the limitless constellation of books being produced. As with star-gazing, his approach has the effect of making one feel small. Additionally, it reifies the practice of finding shared characteristics between texts based only on chronology, in such a way that outliers can only be ignored or deleted.

Moretti's distant reading method revolves around computational modelling. It intends to draw connections between literary studies, the politics of publishing, and pertinent social issues. The undertaking offers a broad – a *distant* and *distancing* – picture of authorship and literary production, which is of interest not only to researchers in literary studies but those working in sociology, politics and publishing. James F. English and Ted Underwood argue that literary analysis has "always meant operating in a specially constructed and privileged space" (2016, 277). The distant learning project aims to rethink this "privileged space" of the canon and the study of literature by adopting a qualitative methodology of content analysis often used in the social sciences, and approaching the field of literature from a macro, rather than a micro, perspective. One distinct disadvantage of a totalising system which opposes close-reading methods is that textual complexity can be overlooked. Much of the field of postcolonial studies, particularly Bhabha's (1994, 85–92) reading of colonial ambivalence and Said's contrapuntal interpretations of prominent

texts by such authors as Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte, relies on close-up details. It is through textual analysis that Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), draws attention to overlooked aspects of canonical works, including the spectre of colonialism that lurks in the backdrop of these texts. Like his intellectual forebear the historian Fernand Braudel, Moretti is preoccupied by literature's longue durée. Through his quasi-scientific graphs, he tries to show the cyclical nature of genre development, gender balance, and so forth.

Moretti's deprivileging approach could be beneficial for the study of popular fiction. Tzvetan Todorov (1939–2017), a structuralist featured in the *Norton Anthology* whose research focused on form, argued that such a study is important because it sheds light on the workings of genre. So-called low art, Todorov submits, conforms more closely than high art to a genre's rules. For example, transgression of conventions is regarded as problematic in what Moretti calls the "super-niches of detective fiction" (2259), for example). Meanwhile, Dennis Porter is interested in popular fiction because it reveals the workings of ideology. According to Porter, such literature plays a role in establishing what we perceive as real. As such, literature – especially that which lays claims to verisimilitude, like crime writing – is overtly ideological.

With this is mind, it is worth challenging Moretti's aim to create "[a] more rational literary history." "That is the idea" (2018/2007, 2255), he declares, but it is a Eurocentric idea, notwithstanding Moretti's claims to world literary-critical credentials. We think of M. K. Gandhi, who warned against scientific reason untrammelled by faith or spirituality. Gandhi argued that "[r]ationalists are admirable beings, rationalism is a hideous monster when it claims for itself omnipotence. [...] I plead not for the suppression of reason, but for a due recognition of that in us which sanctifies reason" (1959: 172). The Hindu ideas that Gandhi brought to bear in his questioning of Western reason – the doctrines of *ahimsa* (non-violence), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and vegetarianism, for example – challenged Enlightenment reason by illustrating that the 'truth' of Western reason is perceived differently from a global majority standpoint. This line of thought was not unique to Gandhi; indeed, many European schools of thought – including, most obviously, the Romantics; but even some Enlightenment thinkers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Joseph Priestley – had also called for the unity of reason with spirituality. Twelfth-century Muslim philosopher al-Ghazâlî, too, had espoused the unity of reason and religion. In his book, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, he argued that inspiration and revelation should act as the intellect's support whenever a problem arises to which rationalism alone cannot provide an answer. Equally, al-Ghazâlî (2000) also thought of logic as a critical tool for explaining faith.

Maurizio Ascari, while enumerating the benefits of distant reading as a methodology, notes several problems that occur when applying it in practice. He states: "what worries me is Moretti's tendency to regard distant reading as objective, within the framework of a purportedly scientific approach to the humanities" (2014, 2). Notwithstanding Moretti's disclaimers, distant reading, like close reading, is still a subjective process as researchers choose what to focus on and how to interpret the data that they produce. In the *Norton* excerpt, Moretti writes: "We must do better" (2018/2007, 2269). Yet, despite the perfectibility of morals Arnold thought examination of literature could bring and the scientific spirit extolled here by Moretti, Moretti has had an academic MeToo case. There are three allegations of sexual assault against him, though no charges have been brought (Hsu and Stone 2017, n.p.). One is from the late 1980s, where a graduate student recounted feeling uncomfortable with Moretti's 'pushy' sexual behaviour. In the 1990s, another student who held a party said she had to release her dog on Moretti to stop him pestering her. Finally, in the 2000s the distant reading pioneer lost a job opportunity at Johns Hopkins for unwanted physical contact with a student at that university. Just as Moretti makes literary texts seem like minute specks within the galaxy of distant reading, in his academic MeToo cases, the allegations suggest he made women feel small within some of the most revered halls of learning in the US. In an essay about these events, Lauren Klein unpicks the chauvinist underpinnings of distant learning, declaring the field "unwelcoming to women" (2018, n.p.) due to its rhetorical positioning and inattention to gendered concerns. She reads what she construes as Moretti's misconduct through the aperture of Sara Ahmed's analysis of sexual harassment in universities and structural inequities. Gender remains an area of inequality in higher education, particularly when it comes to the sexual harassment of young female students by older male academics. In 2016, Ahmed resigned her professorship at Goldsmiths, University of London, over this thorny issue. Rather than seeing her move as passive – resigning and therefore being resigned to the status quo – she framed it as "an act of feminist protest" (Ahmed 2016, n.p.) against "normalized and generalized" (2016, n.p.) sexual misconduct in higher education, when it is a remarkably widespread and disturbing institutional problem. Ahmed argues that speaking out against the issue and building up an archive of evidence is of the utmost importance.[1] Our next and concluding section extends Klein's analysis, using the same theorist

1 Ahmed's position that sexual harassment is endemic in academia was soon fortified by the case of media studies lecturer Lee Salter who was convicted of beating, stamping on, and throwing salt at his student girlfriend, Allison Smith (Pells 2016, n.p.). Despite this criminal

Ahmed, a queer woman of colour, while incorporating this discussion of the canon.

6 Can(n't)on: Sara Ahmed

Women, especially women of colour, are often excluded from traditional interpretations of the canon. What follows aims to disrupt this. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed writes about what she calls the politics of citation. She recounts an anecdote of studying cultural theory, presumably at university, where she came to learn that this term 'theory' denotes "a rather narrow body of work" (2017, 8). She uses the metaphor of a linked chain to show how work becomes viewed as theory because it cites other work that is also regarded as theory, in a self-perpetuating process. Switching metaphors, she moves to an image of housing not unlike Eagleton's (discussed on pp. 10–11), writing that "Citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings." But if one clings to the citational bricks of stale, male, and pale philosophers, Ahmed believes that they are closer to the construction material of straw: "lighter materials that, when put together, still create a shelter but a shelter that leaves you more vulnerable" (2017, 17). Rather than allowing critics to huff and puff and blow her house down, in *Living a Feminist Life* Ahmed has taken the decision not to cite white men. This makes her feel exposed, she writes, but it is worth it to open up the citational environment to women and racialised people.

Decolonising the curriculum in the literary discipline has much to do with decolonising the canon. What is at stake, we might hope, is the decolonisation of the university, as defined for example by Achille Mbembe in a series of lectures (2015): the reformation of its spaces, the collaborative development of new pedagogies and new forms of knowledge, the abandonment of the neoliberal model in favour of a university and a curriculum genuinely welcoming to all. This is a say that education needs to decolonise rather than just diversify. Critical Race Theory shows that racism is not an aberration but pervades every aspect of society; we are all implicated in it and need to be critically self-reflexive. Education is a part of the problem and the solution. While it can contribute to mind control, if done right, pedagogy can help with decolonising minds.

behaviour, Salter's employer, the University of Sussex, did not see fit to suspend him from work until the media storm apparently forced the institution's hand (Le Duc 2016, n.p.).

Ahmed herself has this to say about the canon:

> I do not mean classics in the sense of canonical texts. Of course, some texts become canonical, and we need to question how these histories happen, how selections are made; we need to ask who or what does not survive these selections. But the texts that reach us, that make a connection, are not necessarily the ones that are taught in the academy, or that make it to the official classics edition. [...] The canon is like a wall: we have to chip, chip, chip away at it. (2017, 275)

Expanding from the foundations of her own building metaphor, Ahmed suggests the goal is to wear down the canon in a way that appears destructive but is actually generative. This is not about destroying the canon but pushing against anything that forms a barrier obstructing access to those texts "that make a connection" (Ahmed 2017, 17). Via Ahmed's metaphor of chipping at stone for a more diverse story to emerge, we call for a re-evaluation of the literary canon to reflect and encourage a broader range of experiences. Chipping away also turns the master's tools against the master, redirecting the slow erosion of cultural microaggressions towards canonical power itself. A wider range of stories, experiences, and voices should come from subjugated and underrepresented communities in the Global South, as part of a process of decolonising the canon, and the curriculum. Ahmed's proposed accretions to the canon aim, then, to encourage links, just as the purpose of her "killjoy" figure – the feminist perceived as nullifying happiness – is to allow for an inclusive joy or *jouissance*.

Ahmed's idea tessellates productively with the work of contemporary decolonial thinkers including Anibal Quijano, Walter Minolo, and Gurminder Bhambra, revealing how knowledge secures and sustains dominant epistemologies, reinforcing hegemonic ways of thinking. To continue both Eagleton's and Ahmed's masonry metaphors, dominant knowledge cements the very walls it purports to build upon. Quijano (2000) identifies racial and epistemic structures, while Mignolo maps their persistence and advocates rupture (2000) and Bhambra (2014) demonstrates their ongoing reproduction in contemporary academia. Like these three thinkers, who address the formation and dissemination of knowledge as problematic and colonial in nature, Ahmed's contention affirms decolonial aims in seeking to overturn exclusionary knowledge systems and amplify silenced voices. That said, while decolonial scholars often press for a systemic rupture and delinking, here Ahmed emphasises a strategic, regenerative chipping away both within and against the canon to open up communication and access rather than

obliterate institutional structures. Taken together, though, all four researchers invite readers to imagine cracks not as damage but as channels for more pluralistic futures of knowledge.

7 Conclusion

In wrapping up, it is pertinent to look at the disciplinary function of the canon itself. Identifying discipline as a technology of power, Foucault regards such technologies of power as forces that determine the "conduct of individuals" and subject them to "certain ends or domination" (1980, 1). Ahmed extends this argument by claiming that even emotions, such as happiness, function as techniques of governance – orienting people towards particular modes of behaviour while dissuading others (2010, 158). The canon plays a similar role, allowing for the representation of some at the expense of others, and compelling these others to regulate themselves. Expanding the canon by softening its social cement to break the walls which encircle it, thus ushering in texts with which these others could connect: this is a hopeful, egalitarian construction project.

As we have seen, historical figures like Arnold celebrated the canon as a repository of "the best that has been thought and said," a notion that presents literature as a civilising force. Yet, as Eagleton notes, such romanticised views conceal the ideological undertow that sustains exclusionary practices and reinforces hegemonic power structures. Eagleton exposes the canon's role in legitimising a narrow set of cultural narratives, thereby isolating dissenting voices and barring alternative epistemologies. Yet, his own narrow focus on class at the expense of race, culture, and gender is in turn exposed by Viswanathan (and Visvanathan). Ngũgĩ et al. further complicate the picture by arguing that the canon is not merely a passive archive but an active instrument of epistemic colonisation in African countries even after colonialism has officially ended. They contest a canon that privileges Western modes of thought and silences Global South voices. In this light, the canon can be seen as both a marker of cultural authority and a mechanism of exclusion – a dual role that has necessitated this critical interrogation. Finally, despite the promise of his "distant reading" approach, Moretti's reliance on quantitative abstraction can be criticised for reducing the rich, contextual complexities of literary traditions to mere data points. This is an approach that risks obscuring the very nuances and lived realities which are essential for dismantling canonical hierarchies.

The colonial and monolithic construction of knowledge has created an intellectual and cultural need to restructure this framework to incorporate multiple forms of knowledge and cacophonous voices. By breaking down the calcified walls of canonical authority and welcoming texts produced and consumed by members of historically marginalised communities, critics can begin to challenge the epistemic violence perpetrated by traditional curricular frameworks. This reimagining of the canon seeks to reorient literary study towards the pluralistic realities of our globalised world. Since literary study has functioned as a form of subjugation by privileging certain narratives over others, making the canon more capacious offers a critical opportunity to reconfigure how knowledge is produced, validated, and taught. Our call to reevaluate the canon is thus both a repudiation of entrenched ideologies and an invitation to enter a more inclusive and just intellectual landscape.

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