New Canons: Students Constructing American Literature Courses and Anthologies
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Abstract: This article discusses an assignment in which students design American Literature courses and anthologies, making them active creators, rather than passive consumers, of the American literary canon. I suggest that, by inverting the traditional survey course so that students do not merely encounter the canon, but also have a chance to construct it, instructors can motivate even self-proclaimed non-readers to develop an interest in reading and studying American literature. An assignment centered on student-selected texts can also be a unique educational experience for the instructor, offering valuable ideas about how to teach and conceptualize American literature.

At the community college in Queens, New York, where I teach American Literature: Civil War-Present, literature is not of great interest to most of the students that end up in my classes. Our institution does not offer an English major, and many of my students are interested in Criminal Justice, Nursing, Health Sciences, or Business Administration, our most popular degree programs. On the first day of each semester, I ask students why they are enrolled in my course and, invariably, almost everyone gives one of two reasons: because the class time fit their schedule, or because the student needed to fulfill a Liberal Arts elective requirement, for which the course qualifies. Few, if any, mention interest in literature as a reason for being there; in fact, many say they dislike reading. Given this, one might wonder why we offer American Literature survey courses at a community college where students cannot major in English and often do not consider literary study relevant to their academic and career paths. What do we hope students will take away from a literature survey course, especially when they do not view literature as related to their personal interests or professional goals? In trying to answer these questions, I focused on the fact that, for many students, particularly non-English majors, a literature survey course may be a rare opportunity to engage in intensive and sustained study of a literary field, something which might lead to genuine interest in literature and reading. Although students at my institution are required to take Introduction to Literature, this course functions as an introduction to various literary
genres and conventions—while also doubling as a composition course with a focus on academic writing—and therefore does not always allow for the more sustained, intensive study of literature that a survey course allows for. A course like mine, then, might be one of few opportunities students have to spend a semester closely engaging with, and perhaps learning to find pleasure in, literature—to value it personally, politically, or aesthetically, even if they do not consider it relevant to their professional aspirations.

Viewing the course as a rare opportunity for students who do not spend much of their academic careers reading and studying literature, I wanted to design assignments that might foster students' lasting interest in literature and encourage non-readers to become readers. In considering what assignments might lead to these outcomes, I felt students needed some opportunities to choose what they read in the course, making selections that would be meaningful to them. Thinking about the many students in the class for reasons which had nothing to do with wanting to be there, it seemed a hands-on project constructing American literature—something that would make it difficult for students to assume the passive role of merely consuming American literature—might produce higher levels of engagement with and interest in the field. I decided to invert the traditional survey course (to an extent): instead of spending an entire semester introducing students to the American literary canon, students would have a chance to construct their own American literature courses and anthologies as a final assignment. We would read texts I selected throughout the first three months, and in the final weeks of the course, students would find their own texts to become part of their American Literature classes.

This assignment appealed to me because students would have to actively work with and make choices about literature, rather than passively consuming a set of teacher-required texts. They would also have opportunities to learn about writers and works relevant to their own lives and identities. Generating student interest in literature and getting students to recognize connections between literature and their own lives can be challenging tasks at my campus. As mentioned earlier, most of my students
don't see themselves as readers: when I ask them what they like to read or what the last book they read was, quite a few reply that they have never read an entire book, and many say they only read when they "have to." When I decided to pilot the course/anthology assignment, I started the semester by asking the twenty-one students in the class to name a famous American writer. None of them could do so. When I asked them to name any famous writer, one student hesitantly offered William Shakespeare, a writer the class concluded was too "boring" and distant from their own lives—temporally, culturally, and linguistically—to be of interest. Their answers affirmed my belief that the course and anthology project would be a worthwhile assignment, allowing "non-readers" to encounter some of America's canonical writers and, possibly, respond to and "revise" the American literary canon to make room for works relevant to their own lives and backgrounds.

This article discusses how the assignment of student-constructed courses and anthologies helped non-English majors and self-proclaimed non-readers in a community college American Literature survey course to engage with and develop interest in literature by studying it in ways that made it culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and personally relevant to them. This assignment also helped students who came into the course feeling unfamiliar with and intimated by literary study to eventually become confident enough to critique accepted definitions of American literature and develop their own conceptualizations of the field, many of which challenged the ways it has been represented and constructed by literary scholars and within literary anthologies. In a classroom where all but one of twenty-one students were people of color, and the majority were first-generation Americans, children of immigrants from nations including Guyana, the Dominican Republic, Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, definitions of and approaches to American literature took on new forms when students constructed the field. The texts and approaches students used to create their courses allowed them to find pleasure and meaning in literature, while providing me with a myriad of ideas about how I might construct future courses in ways that would generate more student interest and engagement. I hope my observations might also be useful to others, especially

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those who struggle, as I often do, to get students interested in literature, as well as those interested in the various ways we might teach American literature, especially in classrooms where students come from diverse racial, ethnic, economic, and linguistic backgrounds.

The Assignment

The Course and Anthology assignment asked students to use the knowledge they had gained throughout our course to construct their own versions of an American Literature class (Civil War-Present) and an accompanying set of texts that could be used in such a class. After spending the semester studying a diverse range of American writers, historical eras, and literary and cultural movements, students were given several weeks at the end of the semester, including time for in-class research and reading, to find and read works they might include in their own American Literature courses. They were encouraged to draw upon personal interests and preferences, but also to give careful consideration to literary genres, historical breadth, and cultural diversity. The specific requirements were to use at least three genres, to include two to three of our course readings, and to include at least five texts not included in our course, for a total of no less than seven texts. Students were also expected to make their course reading loads realistic—they could not choose seven works all under twenty pages, for example, as this would not provide enough material for a semester-long course; nor could they choose seven works of several hundred pages each, as these could not be realistically read in one semester. Excepting these requirements, students were free to design their courses and choose texts using any methodology that appealed and made sense to them.

To find texts, students were required to use our campus library and its resources, adding an information literacy component to the assignment. Students were also permitted to search for texts using credible literature websites like Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org) and Academy of American Poets (www.poets.org). They were not allowed to use summaries or reviews of texts to make their selections; rather, they were
expected to read the works they chose (to ensure they did so, I required a written rationale for each work with quotations from the text, and an MLA Works Cited page with full citation information for all selected works). Given the time constraints of the assignment, students necessarily used a number of shorter works, particularly poetry and short stories; however, quite a few students read and included one or more book-length works, as I discuss in more depth later. When students became interested in multiple book-length works but did not have time to read all of them before the project deadline, I suggested reading an excerpt of twenty or thirty pages in order to assess a text's value to one's course (something I encouraged in part because I thought it might motivate students to return to and finish these books in the future). Upon completion of the project, each student handed in a 7-10 page written overview explaining the course design and offering the rationale for each selected text; students also assembled "anthologies" consisting of a copy of each work, or, when more appropriate, a representative selection. In their overviews, students discussed the criteria they used to define American literature and how these were evident in the texts selected. They also explained advantages and disadvantages of structuring courses as they did (thematically, chronologically, generically, etc.), and discussed how their texts were grouped and sequenced.

Class members had many opportunities throughout the semester to consider the various ways an American Literature course might be designed. In fact, preparation for this assignment had been scaffolded into the course since its start. During our first class session, I explained that mine was only one way of teaching an American Literature course. I spoke about an earlier draft of the syllabus in which I had organized the readings chronologically (as do many literary anthologies), and about my later decision to instead organize the course thematically and achronologically. I mentioned other sections of American Literature being offered that semester, taught by colleagues whose syllabi look quite different from mine, in terms of both topics and texts (I also mentioned that one similarity among our courses is that none of us use an anthology, preferring to choose our own texts). We ended that first class session with in-class
writing and discussion about how we might define "America," "American," "literature," and "American literature." From the start of the semester, then, each student was encouraged to inhabit the role of teacher-scholar, considering how we might construct an American Literature course and define American literature as a field. Throughout the term, we returned to these questions with each text we read, making continual additions and adjustments to ideas raised that first day. Students' engagement with these questions was evident in their final projects, particularly the definitions of American literature offered in their course overviews. They gave careful thought to how to describe a vast field in only a few sentences, and their answers are interesting and instructive for teachers considering how they might design American Literature courses and discuss the field with students: one student wrote that American literature should teach us about "the history and progress of America" through "personal perspectives of individual lives, both real and fictive"; another described American literature as "the expression of American lifestyles and cultures through writing"; while another wrote that American literature is "literature that shapes and influences its society." Their definitions of the field suggested that one outcome of the assignment was development of students' abilities to make and critique decisions about what constitutes American literature.

Wanting students to exercise such decision-making was part of my motivation for including "anthologies" as part of the assignment. After considering only a 1-page course reading list to be submitted with each student's written overview, I decided the anthology was a much more effective assignment, requiring students to work closely with texts, physically and editorially, making choices not only about which texts to use, but which passage to use as a representative selection when a work could not be included in the anthology in full. I also wanted students to use the anthology component of the project to consider the role of literary anthologies in constructing definitions of and approaches to American literature. Lockard and Sandell have emphasized the central role anthologies play not only in defining the field, but in shaping American literature courses (227). Although anthology collections have become increasingly diverse over
the past several decades, making room for non-canonical writers and allowing students exposure to a wider range of works and authors, Aull has pointed out that the use of anthologies as classroom texts, whether focused on traditional or non-canonical writers, presents students with a "stable, finite entity called 'American literature'" which fails to teach students about the "messy processes of canon construction and presentation" (498). Seeking to avoid this in my course, students learned about the subjective making of anthologies and their various presentations of American literature by examining a range of anthologies before beginning their own projects. I brought in every anthology of American literature I own, plus others borrowed from colleagues and my campus library, so that the volumes ranged from Norton and Heath anthologies to Marc Shell and Werner Sollors's *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* and Dave Eggers's *Best American Nonrequired Reading*. Considering these anthologies alongside one another, students analyzed their various forms of presentation, their inclusions and exclusions, and their historical and thematic focuses.

Analyzing published anthologies got students excited about how to assemble their own collections. They were eager to differentiate their anthologies from those we had examined and from approaches their classmates were taking. The result was a refreshing range of collections structured and designed in creative, unexpected ways. For example, though even the most diverse or "non-canonical" anthologies of American literature continue to be largely if not entirely English monolingual (with Shell and Sollors's *Multilingual Anthology* serving as one important exception), students' anthologies critiqued and challenged the idea of American literature as English Only by including works written fully or partly in Spanish, Yiddish, and Japanese, as well as in nonstandard and hybrid Englishes including Southern American English, Chinglish, and African American English. Similarly, while many published anthologies are organized chronologically, I was surprised that very few students structured their anthologies this way—especially since it is perhaps the easiest approach, minimizing the need to think critically about how to sequence texts. Instead, student anthologies were organized into units such as "Coming to America"; "Immigration and Cultural Duality"; "Civil Writes";
"Lynching Literature"; "Women in a Patriarchal Society"; "Minorities in the United States"; and "Im(my)igrant Stories." Their creative approaches to designing a literary collection affirmed my sense of the value of the assignment's anthology component.

The Results

The most striking outcome of this assignment was the diversity of students' projects, individually and collectively. Their courses and anthologies represented an incredible range of racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, class, and geographic backgrounds, reflecting students' thoughtful considerations of the many ways we might define "American." Their chosen texts included literature by and about African Americans, Arab Americans, Bengali Americans, Chinese Americans, Greek Americans, Hungarian Americans, Indian Americans, Irish Americans, Italian Americans, Jamaican Americans, Japanese Americans, Jewish Americans, Lithuanian Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Norwegian Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, Polish Americans, and Russian Americans. Their texts also represented many of the nation's regional cultures, with settings moving from urban to suburban and rural spaces, and from locations ranging from California to North Dakota to Arkansas to Appalachia to Mississippi to Georgia to Massachusetts to New York. One student mentioned the difficulty of defining American literature in a nation comprised of so many culturally and geographically disparate states. Others looked beyond US borders, acknowledging the ways American literature—and the US itself—becomes entangled with other nations by including works set partially in Mexico, Norway, Hungary, England, India, Russia, Afghanistan, and Syria. Students' suggestions that American literature can be studied both regionally and transnationally are useful reminders for instructors. Their chosen topics and themes were also wide-ranging and potentially useful to instructors; these included linguistic discrimination, the right to education, working-class struggles, citizenship and naturalization, cultural assimilation, class inequalities, racism, colorism, arranged marriage and romantic love, sexuality, gender roles, feminism, self versus society, social and political progress,
cultural revolution, mental health and illness, ideals of beauty and the body, family formations, intergenerational progress, and the modernization of America. Perhaps most surprising and instructive to me was the diversity of genres used: while the assignment required use of three different genres, most students used many more, including genres not traditionally defined as "literature" but which they sought to prove could be considered as such. Though the most popular genres chosen were poetry, short stories, and novels—perhaps because we studied these genres most throughout the course, suggesting how instructors may influence students' perceptions of what American literature "is"—students also included drama, speeches, memoirs and autobiographies, scholarship, spoken word, rap and folk music, graphic novels, films, comic books, and advertisements. A few courses had sections on subgenres such as magical realism, satire, and science fiction. The generic diversity and multimodality of students' projects challenged me to consider how instructors might re-define "literature" to include a wider range of genres and more types of texts, as I discuss in more depth later.

The diversity of students' choices, particularly their representations of diverse racial, ethnic, economic, and linguistic backgrounds, was, in large part, related to the diverse backgrounds of the students themselves. As course units such as "Im(my)igrant Stories" suggest, students chose texts reflective of their personal and familial identities and experiences. Their choices were often motivated by desire to see their own racial, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds represented as part of American literature and, by extension, America itself. Students sought out writers and works which allowed them to construct categories they could be part of. As one student commented on her inclusion of works by mixed-race authors, "these stories are significant because they show how [different] cultures meet in the middle and create people like me." Students found personal resonance not only in the stories told in their texts, but also the languages and vernaculars used to tell them. Linguistic diversity, rather than standard English, was positioned as a defining feature of American literature by a number of these students, many of whom speak multiple languages of which English is not the first. One student
critiqued American literary scholar Morris Dickstein's definition of American literature as "the body of written works produced in the English language in the United States" by noting that American literature has been written in Spanish, French, Indian, Arabic, Chinese, and German. Emphasizing that "not everyone who is in America can speak English well," this student offered an alternative definition of American literature not tied to expectations of English language usage; instead, he writes, American literature can be "written in any language," and is not defined by use of English but by "works about an American experience."

Another student stated, "For some people to consider a work American Literature it must be written in Standard English, but throughout this course we will see many well-known and well-written stories and essays that do not use perfect English but 'broken' English." For students raised in homes and neighborhoods where standard English is not the dominant language or dialect, works written in nonstandard Englishes and languages other than English had more aesthetic appeal and political significance. The extent to which students' definitions of—and interest in—the field were shaped by their identities as immigrants, first-generation Americans, multilingual speakers, and people of color suggests that teachers of American literature might maximize student engagement by making their courses reflective of the populations they teach.

The engagement with literature the assignment facilitated, largely because students had opportunities to work with texts of their choosing, was particularly apparent in the critical thinking students employed in deciding how texts could be sequenced and how literary and historical periods in US—and international—history could be studied alongside one another. Students discussed how literary, cultural, and political eras including Modernism, Realism, the Harlem Renaissance, the jazz music era, the Beat Generation, the McCarthy era, the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the rise of feminism could be studied in relation to one another.

Similarly, several students elucidated the links between America's history and the histories of other nations by making events such as Ireland's nineteenth-century potato famine, the Holocaust, and the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan part of their
courses. As one student noted, again suggesting the idea of American literature as transnational, "my texts show that there are parts of American history... [that] didn't happen on American soil." Pairings and groupings of texts reflected the same critical and creative thinking students used to link historical events and eras. One student paired Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A'Changin" with Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, using the former to contextualize generational conflicts portrayed in the latter. Another wanted students to comparatively analyze Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" and Margaret Walker's "For Malcolm X." One course paired Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* with Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, so students could consider two genres depicting the dream of home ownership for families in economically depressed neighborhoods. A student interested in the "Roaring 20s" compared F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, arguing that the different regional settings and racial and economic backgrounds of characters in the two texts present us with very different versions of life in America in the 1920s, complicating representations of the time period as one of prosperity for all Americans. Similarly, another student constructed a unit out of three works illustrating how the "American Dream" is imagined differently by Americans living in poverty than by middle- and upper-class Americans, an idea that inspired me to include more discussion of socioeconomic class and income inequality in future American Literature courses.

The assignment enabled each student to adopt not only the role of teacher-scholar, but also of editor, addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion which brought to life the processes of canon construction. Students recognized that their anthologies were subjectively produced, shaped by their own backgrounds and interests as well as factors including the texts they were (and were not) able to find or access and were (and were not) exposed to through our course and other courses. A student who designed a multi-ethnic US literatures course wrote, "by using this [approach], the obvious disadvantage I faced was choosing the ethnic groups. I was stumped upon which ethnic groups do I include and... not include. Was it even possible for me to
include every group I wanted to and would I be able to find texts written by members of
certain ethnic groups[?]" This student is aware of the inclusions and exclusions he must
make as "editor" of his collection, as well as how others' inclusions and exclusions
already predetermine his choices to some extent, as evidenced by his questioning
whether there will be published works by writers of certain ethnic backgrounds.

Similarly, other students spoke about what is absent from American literature,
limiting the types of writers and experiences they could represent in their courses. One
student, herself the children of immigrants, wrote that she wished American immigration
stories included more "scenes set in the nation of origin" and more representations of
those who resist "abandoning their past lives" in order to assimilate in America. Others
picked up on how some writers are continually included in literary anthologies while
others are overlooked. A student who wanted to include biographical information about
each author in his written overview noted that "while it was easy to gather information
on authors like Jhumpa Lahiri and Langston Hughes, it was impossible to find much
biographic information on authors such as Juan Olivarez." Students also pointed out
that authors now part of the American canon were once rejected by publishers and/or
mainstream audiences, discussing this as it applies to Mark Twain, Shirley Jackson,
and Jack Kerouac. Students were interested in how writers do and do not
move from the margins to the canons of American literature, and how literary and cultural tastes
change over time, both fruitful topics for discussing canon construction in American
Literature courses.

In explaining their editorial choices, many students emphasized the significance
of giving certain writers, texts, and languages more representation in American
literature. Students who, at the start of the semester, seemed uncertain of how to define
American literature—even uncertain about whether they had ever read any American
literature—now offered convincing rationales for their selections. They also spoke about
texts they had excluded, explaining why these did not make the cut. While published
anthologies tend to highlight their newest additions, these students were attentive to
what remained unrepresented in their collections. The same was true of their choices
about textual excerpts—several students did the difficult editorial work of selecting chapters or sections from book-length works they did not want to assign in full, offering thoughtful rationales for why they had decided on chosen excerpts, while also explaining how excerpts limit understanding of a text as a whole. On the other hand, some students included works that they argued could not be excerpted and needed to be read in full. In fact, several students made the decision to cover fewer texts throughout their courses so they could include more book-length works. The same group of students that, at the start of term, had expressed little interest in reading, some claiming not to have read a book in years (or ever), now included books several hundred pages long in their courses, with several arguing that certain texts cannot be reduced to an excerpt. Having designed the assignment with the goal of getting non-English majors and "non-readers" interested in literature, I was particularly excited about students' decisions to use book-length works and their recognition of the value of reading a book from cover to cover.

Another exciting outcome of the assignment was that students used their courses to question how race has been categorized and defined in American literature and culture. A student who included work by Langston Hughes explained that while Hughes is typically categorized as an African American writer and Harlem Renaissance figure, he is also of Native American and white origins. The student's observation speaks to the developing field of mixed-race literature, another interesting area of American literary studies that teachers might explore with students. Other students complicated the category of "white American," emphasizing that while white privilege has always structured American life, many white-skinned Americans face discrimination because of ethnicity, religion, or linguistic background. One student argued that "ethnic outsiders" in America include not only those excluded on the basis of race, but also because of "language and accent bias." Students' attentiveness to Greek, Polish, Russian, Italian, and Jewish American literature, and their inclusion of texts from these fields in course units on discrimination, xenophobia, and inequality, indicated a desire to complicate the often homogenously understood category of whiteness. Their selections encouraged
me to include more discussions in future courses about how we homogenize and invisibilize whiteness in US culture and literature (I also adopted for my own courses two works that students introduced me to, one by an Italian American writer and another by a Jewish American writer).

Similar to their challenging accepted racial categorizations, students also sought to complicate the category of literature, questioning what exactly literature is by using multiple artistic forms and creative modes in their courses. Their selections encouraged me to make my courses more multimodal and to be more open to how we might define "texts" in literature courses. The appendix below lists the songs, films, spoken word performances, comics, and other multimedia works students used. Students articulated thoughtful, compelling, and specific reasons for studying these texts alongside literary works. A number of students argued that films and songs serve as vehicles through which literature is made more relatable, interesting, and accessible. Several suggested that song lyrics can generate students’ interest in and understanding of poetry. One student mentioned the importance of film as a way of "spreading American Literature to a wider audience," adding that while Americans today are less likely to read books than watch movies, many read books in anticipation of, or after seeing, a film adaptation of a literary work (recent films including The Great Gatsby, The Help, and Gone Girl are all testaments to his point). Another suggested, similarly, that the making of a text into a film for mainstream audiences is itself a sign of having achieved canonicity, an interesting approach to how we might define the literary canon and discuss it with students. Students’ choices to use films, songs, and other artistic works were, in general, not ways of avoiding the study of literature, but rather, means for studying it in more depth, from new angles and perspectives. Some students included film versions of literary works that they considered strong or creative adaptations, discussing the page-to-stage transitions in their overviews and explaining why they wanted students to watch the film after reading the literary work. One student even critiqued my decision to show the class a 2008 version of A Raisin in the Sun (dir. Kenny Leon; starring Sean Combs), calling this a poor and anachronistic adaptation of Hansberry’s play. Instead, he
included the 1961 version (dir. Daniel Petrie; starring Sidney Portier) in his course. The careful consideration students gave to how films, songs, and other artistic works can be used to generate interest in literature begs the question of whether the field of American Literature might be broadened to include a wider range of "texts" and more discussion of how literature works in complement with other artistic and creative forms to tell the (hi)stories of America and its people.

Despite the remarkable diversity of students' choices, it was interesting that certain writers and works appeared again and again. Perhaps because we studied Langston Hughes twice during the semester (we read "Let America be America Again" and discussed Hansberry's use of Hughes in *A Raisin in the Sun*), many students included work by Hughes in their courses, suggesting how instructors, even unintentionally, impress ideas about canonicity and "major writers" upon their students. Similarly, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* were included in many students' courses because students had read these works in high school. Aull, who also has students create American literature anthologies, notes a similar tendency—one group of anthologists in her class even created a unit entitled "Classics from Classes," which included, not surprisingly, *The Great Gatsby* (510). One of my students noted that she used *The Great Gatsby* in her course because it had been assigned to her in both high school and college courses, with its repeated use by teachers seeming to affirm its literary value in her mind. The continual appearance of certain texts speaks to the role instructors play in the circulation and canonization of literary works, something that prompted me to give more thought to issues of exposure and over-exposure when selecting course texts. That many students used works they read in high school also speaks to the need to provide college students, including non-English majors, with continued opportunities to study literature, including in courses beyond Introduction to Literature. Several students who included *The Great Gatsby* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* explained that they did so because they wanted to include a novel, but had not read one, aside from the two assigned in
our course, since being assigned Fitzgerald or Lee in a high school English class. In introductory-level college literature courses, instructors often necessarily use shorter works—short stories, poetry, essays, and excerpts—while survey courses and other literature electives may more easily allow for inclusion of novels and other book-length works, offering students important opportunities to read and engage with longer works of literature.

Much more so than traditional essays or exams, the American Literature Course and Anthology assignment was successful in generating student interest and engagement in literature. When the typical survey course was turned on its head so that students had to construct their own canons, they rose to the occasion, with self-proclaimed non-readers becoming not just readers, but also teachers, editors, and scholars, motivated by the opportunity to discover and learn about texts, writers, and histories that were of interest to them. Students were not the only beneficiaries, however: the assignment also taught me multitudes about how I might re-structure my courses in order to generate more interest in literature among students, particularly non-English majors. Because students' projects offered me a range of ideas about texts I might include in future courses, the appendix below offers a non-exhaustive list of the works students used. Their choices illustrate the value, for students and teachers alike, of having students contribute texts of their own choosing, especially in classrooms where students come from a diverse range of racial, ethnic, cultural, class, and linguistic backgrounds.

Notes

1. With permission from the authors, I quote from student work throughout this essay. I extend my gratitude to my students for their willingness to let me share their words and ideas.
Appendix: Selected Texts Used in Student Courses

**Novels:**
- Corban Addison, *A Walk Across the Sun*
- Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*
- Charles Bukowski, *Ham on Rye*
- Abraham Cahan, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*
- Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*
- Sandra Cisneros, *The House On Mango Street*
- Pat Conroy, *The Great Santini*
- Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*
- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
- Joseph Heller, *Catch 22*
- Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*
- Ellen Hopkins, *Impulse*
- Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*
- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*
- Fae Myenne Ng, *Bone*
- Ole Edvart Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*
- J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*
- Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*
- John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*
- Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*
- Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*
- Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*

**Poetry:**
- Jimmy Santiago Baca, "Immigrants in Our Own Land"
Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art"
Emily Dickinson, "Much madness is divinest sense"
Emily Dickinson, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant"
Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken"
Martin Espada, "Tony Went to the Bodega"
Maria Mazziotti Gillan, "Public School #18 Paterson, New Jersey"
Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"
Joy Harjo, "Remember"
Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again"
Langston Hughes, "Madam's Calling Cards"
Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son"
Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"
Claude McKay, "Dawn in New York"
Claude McKay, "Harlem Shadows"
Harryette Mullen, "Elliptical"
Juan Olivarez, "American Dream"
Sylvia Plath, "Daddy"
Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West"
Margaret Walker, "For Malcolm X"
Walt Whitman, "I Hear America Singing"
Walt Whitman, "O Captain! My Captain!"

**Short Stories:**
Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour"
Chitra Divakaruni, "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs"
F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button"
Jessica Hagedorn, "The Blossoming of Bongbong"
O. Henry, "The Gift of the Magi"
Langston Hughes, "Thank You Ma'am"
Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery"
Jhumpa Lahiri, "The Third and Final Continent"
Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*
Jack Trammell, "The Thing You Want"
Anzia Yezierska, "Children of Loneliness"

**Drama:**
Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*
Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*
Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
Bernard Pomerance, *The Elephant Man*
Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*
August Wilson, *Fences*

**Autobiography/Memoir:**
Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
Livia Bitton-Jackson, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing up in The Holocaust*
James McBride, *The Color of Water*
Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*

**Non-Fiction:**
Moustafa Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem: Being Young and Arab in America*
W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
Kevin Flynn and Jim Dwyer, *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers*

**Essays and Letters:**
Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me"
Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
Amy Tan, "Mother Tongue"

**Speeches:**
Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream"

**Comic Books and Graphic Novels:**
Marvel Comics, *A Moment of Silence: Saluting the Heroes of September 11*
Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*

**Songs:**
Black Eyed Peas, "Where Is The Love?"
Michael Considine, "Spancil Hill"
Neil Diamond, "America"
Bob Dylan, "The Times They Are A-Changing"
Eminem, "I'm Not Afraid"
Eminem, "White America"
Lauryn Hill, "The History of Iniquity"
Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit"
Immortal Technique, "The Fourth Branch"
Immortal Technique, "Leaving the Past"
Kid Rock, "Amen"
Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, "Same Love"
Tupac Shakur, "Changes"
Tupac Shakur, "Panther Power"
Kanye West, "New Slaves"

**Spoken Word:**
Neil Hilborn, "OCD"
Smokey Robinson, "A Black American"

Films:
Milos Forman (Dir.), One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
Paul Haggis (Dir.), Crash
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