



## Students Creating Canons

Rethinking What (and Who) Constitutes the Canon

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### Introduction: The Canon and the Classroom

It is both comforting and disconcerting that US canon debates are somewhat of the past. Since the late twentieth century, pedagogical presentations of American literature tend to treat the canon as a “selection of values” rather than of authors and texts (Guillory 1993: 88); numerous scholars have underscored classrooms as integral sites for challenging how American literature is defined (Jay 1997; Gere and Shaheen 2001; Christian 2003; Lockard and Sandell 2008); and texts and authors regularly taught have changed and expanded significantly. In fact, classroom anthologies have been recognized as important and often problematic artifacts of national enculturation, beginning as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the *New England Primer* and the *McGuffey Readers*, which celebrated a patriotic, Anglo, male-dominated United States (Lockard and Sandell 2008; Ong 1980; Sullivan 1994). Contemporary efforts have led to changes in survey anthologies, captured obviously in the publication of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* beginning in 1989 and author/text modifications in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* in the 1990s. Scholars have long insisted that canon revision is not a matter of simply “adding” marginalized writers and “stirring” them into an anthology, but rather also challenging and rethinking values and structures that have excluded them (Hames-Garcia 2003; Rosenfeld 2002). It is comforting, then, that there is a contemporary version of American literary study that acknowledges the canon as a made

thing—a thing we construct and reconstruct as we teach it, read it, anthologize it. This version acknowledges the role of privilege and power in canon construction and suggests that students and teachers can be critical actors in its reconstruction.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, a limitation to contemporary discussions of survey anthologies is that they imply that canon revision for the classroom consists of making anthologies more inclusive—not by having students engage anthologizing itself. In so doing, related scholarship, and anthologies themselves like *Norton* and *Heath*,<sup>2</sup> imply that at least for early university courses, students should still be presented with a stable, finite entity called “American literature” (if a more diverse version thereof), selections of which they are invited to critically analyze. As such, the sense that canon debates are over is disconcerting: there remains a firm boundary around what early university students are asked to analyze, and it does not include the messy processes of canon construction and presentation.

In this article, I outline an alternative approach, an approach that engages complexities of canon construction by having students analyze the textual anthology apparatus. What I call the *apparatus*—the anthology preface and section introductions—is a metanarrative of canon and knowledge construction. This approach asks students to analyze these materials and ultimately create their own, inviting them to consider implications of constructing an American canon as well as the rhetorical challenge of defining and justifying it. While students cannot confront the full material conditions of anthology production and distribution in a semester course, this approach offers a rarely documented, beginning way to engage students in canon creation and justification and to resist implying that anthologies are stable, objective compilations of literature. In the three sections below, the first characterizes the anthology apparatus in more detail, the second outlines how canon scholarship has limited approaches to anthologies, and the third offers examples of pedagogical activities and student work.

### **Defining and Using Anthologies by Author/Text Selection**

In the leading survey anthologies, *Heath* and *Norton*, the apparatus outlines the historical context for the anthology edition and its canon. The anthology preface narrates the editors’ and publishers’ story of each anthology and edition; the period introductions narrate the national, historical details that, according to editors chosen for their period expertise, are essential for understanding the literature that follows them. These apparatus materials most obviously function in order to contextualize or otherwise work in the

Table 1. *Apparatus text lengths over time in Norton editions*

Norton Edition	Total no. of words in all prefaces and period overviews
1st	33,653 words
2nd	40,020 words
3rd	40,487 words
4th	50,459 words
5th	55,602 words
6th	58,393 words

Table 2. *Apparatus text lengths over time in Heath editions*

Heath edition	Total no. of words in all prefaces and period overviews
1st	102,771 words
2nd	123,248 words
3rd	128,050 words
4th	141,616 words
5th	141,213 words
6th	160,259 words

service of the literary texts included in the anthology (including to encourage anthology adoption by faculty and departments). They reflect ideas about nation and literature proffered by the anthology, and they reveal editors' assumptions about student readers (e.g., what prior ideas students bring to the anthology). They are written by established members of the field and are original compositions, making the editors' anthology work as much that of author as that of compiler/historiographer. Apparatus texts also have been getting longer with each subsequent anthology edition, suggesting that editors and publishers intend for them to do important work (see tables 1 and 2). They are a reminder that anthologies function as shapers of canons, from narrating particular frames for texts to adjusting the original context and appearance of texts in fonts and formats (Neiderhiser 2010: 16). Yet in contrast to the extensive treatment of the "literary" genres of anthologies, there is little documentation of classroom analysis of the anthology apparatus. In these ways, it poses often overlooked pedagogical opportunities for considering values and practices at work in anthologizing the canon.

There are at least two clear reasons for the absence of apparatus materials in canon discussions: because US canon revision has generally proceeded in the form of adding noncanonical works to the canon or creating separate courses to deal with noncanonical works (Eaton 2001: 306), and — a

reason that supports a rhetorical genre perspective—because pedagogical texts are for informative “reading” rather than the more critical “interpretive” reading of literary materials (Scholes 1985), making apparatus genres appears to *reflect* (versus create) the canon. This distinction suggests that apparatus materials *inform* interpretive reading rather than also undergo it; as *Heath* and *Norton* say, editorial texts place *literary* texts “in relation to the cultural and historical contexts out of which they developed” (Lauter et al. 2009: xxi) and “give students the information needed without imposing an interpretation” (Baym et al. 2007: xxvii). The apparatus texts are not accompanied by essay questions in instructor guides, nor are they otherwise framed as texts for analysis. This clear boundary around what counts as a constitutive, rhetorical text is limiting, especially given the history of the *Norton* and *Heath* anthologies, which individually and comparatively represent sides of ongoing canon debates and are frequently cited as examples of how anthologies can reproduce or change the traditional canon (Bennett 1991; Jay 1991; Arac 2008; Elmer 2008; Lockard and Sandell 2008). Scholarship pertaining to these two anthologies reflects a dominant characterization of anthologies according to author-text selection alone. It rarely addresses apparatus texts, the stories they tell, and the opportunities they carry for developing students’ meta-awareness of canon construction.

Anthology revisions have helped challenge the “common academic experience” that had “exaggerated the degree to which aesthetic standards appear to be ‘universal’” in canon selection (Lauter 1983: xvii). According to anthology scholarship, the principal way for survey anthologies to do so is by changing the options and order of literary texts within them.

For example, in *Reconstructing American Literature*, the 1983 precursor to the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Paul Lauter and his colleagues interrogated how courses revealed that black writers and women writers existed and “were interesting to students, and even valuable to study” (xiii). Lauter justifies diverse literary selection accordingly: “Books—the experiences and people in them—influence consciousness and thus actions in the world” (xv). In his examples, Lauter discusses the intertwined issues of pedagogy and aesthetics, suggesting that we become biased against the people and experiences we don’t commonly see in “classic literature.” The *Heath* team has done important work and been acknowledged repeatedly for expanding the conventional canon. At the same time, for audiences accustomed to a view of canons defined by literary authors/texts, their emphasis risks suggesting that literary texts themselves—through the “experiences and people in them”—are the primary place to examine needed change in

the teaching of literature, even as these editors work within and through the institutionalized expectations of American literature anthologies, including the apparatus texts.

Other scholars acknowledge the important work of survey anthologies, though most also assess anthologies according to their literary authors and texts. Joseph Csicsila's *Canons by Consensus* (1998) suggests that anthology inclusions and exclusions essentially dictate which authors are taught in college classrooms across the country and how. Throughout the dissertation, Csicsila quotes from countless early anthology prefaces in order to highlight values informing anthologies over time. Nevertheless, Csicsila focuses only on author/text selection in his discussion of the impact and classroom use of anthologies.

Kenneth Roemer (1999) offers a critical approach to teaching American literature through anthology tables of contents. He suggests that many important nonliterary aspects of American literature anthologies are overlooked in teaching practices. Roemer's premise is that though the canon has changed a great deal, there is "one disturbing constant . . . ; many students, even some graduate students, seem unaware of how often and how profoundly concepts of American literature have changed" in the past 150 years (1). In response, Roemer has developed courses in which students examine the covers and tables of contents of American literature anthologies from the last two centuries. Students look closely at them for disagreement and change, such as what gender means in America, when American literature began, and disparate views of how American literature should be "told." As do I, Roemer interrogates the functions of nonliterary parts of literature anthologies and invites us to examine not only the tales these features tell but also "the questions [they] ask" (2). Beyond the table of contents, however, Roemer does not analyze the apparatus texts of these anthologies, making his analysis an intriguing addition to anthology discussions but one related to anthologies' literary lineup rather than their pedagogical apparatus.

A compelling exception to the author/text focus is Jim Egan's 1997 article "Analyzing the Apparatus: Teaching American Literature Anthologies as Texts," in which he discusses inviting students to read anthologies using the interpretive practices they use on the literary texts in the anthologies. Egan has students evaluate how anthology editors explain their choices; for example, students consider whether they agree with *Heath's* criteria for selection of literary texts (103). Ultimately, Egan's students form editorial groups and must choose five (of approximately fifteen) American authors they have read in class to represent American literature. These exercises help students

learn the “inevitability of having to make choices when producing materials that represent a culture,” the importance of the presentation of those choices, and how supposedly “nonliterary factors” are implicated in the process of selection (103–4). Egan writes that such exercises “take advantage of an anthology’s shortcomings” (108) and have made students more confident and sophisticated than in those courses in which Egan has not had students read anthologies or engage in such activities with them (103). Egan’s approach is more oriented toward literature selection than mine, but it is a rare and important investigation — with students — of the often overlooked anthology apparatus and how we might not take it for granted.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, Joe Lockard and Jillian Sandell (2008) have provided a compelling historicization of American literature anthologies, labeling the anthology a genre with political and especially racialized and gendered bias as it has developed over time. Lockard and Sandell emphasize the ways that to pick up or to teach with an anthology is to do so with a “political and educational tool” (249) and that if we neglect the politics of editor choices and classroom implementation, we miss an essential part of anthologies. They astutely expose and critique the politics of canonizing and how those politics are embedded in generic features of American literature anthologies, and they move beyond discussions of anthology literary selections alone as they call not only for a change in “table of contents” but a “change of reading practices” (249). Yet they do not address the role or content of the apparatus texts in these anthologies.

Finally, opening the 2008 spring/summer edition of *American Literary History*, Jonathan Arac and Jonathan Elmer stress the important work of anthologies, specifically in the construction of American literary history and historiography. Arac goes so far as to say that “if one wishes to engage in a collaborative project of literary history, one may make a bigger difference faster by working through journals and anthologies than through extended original composition” (8). Yet for Arac, the ways that anthologies and journals can have their impact is in the way they question “what gets included and what is left out” in the literature sections (6). Elmer’s response to Arac speaks more directly to the editorial features of the *Heath*, though he, too, remains focused on literary selection and order. Elmer writes that we should acknowledge the work of anthologists to trouble the distinction between history and historiography; he also suggests that editorial headnotes are “useful” and that the real impact of the anthology is the “implicit historiography involved in selecting some texts and leaving others out” (2008: 12). Elmer’s wording here suggests what I think of as a common perception: the anthology appa-

ratus can be handy, but it is essentially apolitical; the real politics and forces influencing American literary scholarship lie in the selection and placement of “literary” texts. Yet it is precisely the apparatus texts that narrate which new literary texts are included in an anthology edition and why, and from what events and cultures they emerged; it is these texts that delineate the anthology’s version of the American canon.

Anthology apparatus texts themselves largely support this characterization. They suggest that their literature selections are the essential parts of the anthology, and that furthermore, decisions about them need not be questioned. Prefaces, for example, function as a narrative of the ever-better anthology (in that only additions, not exclusions, are cited and always framed as improvements); the decisions are made by “scholars” who “specialize” (Lauter et al. 2009: xxviii) or possess “expertness” (Baym et al. 2007: xviii) in a period or field.<sup>4</sup> These anthology preface expectations, repeated over time, suggest that apparatus narratives are institutionalized, expert, and largely unquestioned.

Similarly, the instructional guides provided for faculty who use the *Heath* and *Norton* anthologies do not mention apparatus texts or their use in classrooms. It is worth noting that many goals articulated in the *Norton* and (more so) the *Heath* instructor guides resonate with an approach in which students create and justify their own canons—and that, nonetheless, the examples and language in the guides still primarily imply that US literature and canon study consists of analysis of literary texts preselected as representative of (parts of) American literature.

For example, most of what the *Heath* and *Norton* instructor guides offer are reading recommendations for particular approaches, for example, by periods or genres in the *Norton* guide, or by artistic conventions or making comparisons/connections in the *Heath* guide. With an important exception in *Heath* that I note in a moment, the guides implicitly suggest that once chosen for the classroom, the recommended approaches remain intact and unquestioned, insofar as the guides do not suggest students should interrogate the grouping or selection of the texts or witness the instructor’s own process of choosing an approach.

The *Heath* instructor guide (Lauter and Coryell 2002) contains an opening section titled “Classroom Issues and Strategies,” which supports a version of the US canon as influenced by literary texts as well as classroom practices and pedagogical texts. This opening section underscores canon revision as a “re-examination of the purposes and practices of literary study” (2) and suggests that one of the instructor guide’s three theoretical assump-

tions is that “classification systems—whether formations of historical periods, cultural movements, or canons of literary value—influence and shape those reading experiences in crucial ways” (4). In support of these ideas for classrooms, the guide even recommends that students help design the syllabus as a way to begin with students’ diverse and unique cultural perspectives rather than with a preformed, single perspective that does not match the students’. This recommendation and rationale are valuable, though the guide does not provide much guidance about how or when to carry out the activity.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the *Heath* guide suggests students should “see themselves as active participants in the process of cultural definition and transformation” but primarily describes that students do so “through their *interpretation of and response to the texts in this anthology*” (4, my emphasis)—with texts here meaning literary texts.

Though less obviously than the *Heath’s* guide, the *Norton’s* instructor guide does at one point encourage faculty to engage students’ questions about what constitutes literature (if not to engage anthologies as re/constructors of it). The opening pages of the *Norton’s* guide describe a tendency that this article also attempts to work against: that “some of us seem to affirm, or rather to concede, that ‘literature’ is whatever gets included in literary anthologies or shelved under that heading in the bookstore at the mall” (Michelson 2007: 4). The guide suggests that professors succumb to this tendency, “perhaps to avoid pedagogical chaos and outbreaks of back-row nihilism, or perhaps out of weariness” (4); it goes on to say that instead, students’ uncertainty “can be an advantage too, if we want students to engage directly with the open question of who and what we are.” The guide’s corresponding pedagogical advice is the following: “Because your students may want to engage such issues [canon and course ideologies], you may find it provident to reopen them regularly during the term. *Why* are we reading this material? Why might a young nation or an established culture yearn for a list of classics, a canon that everybody can agree on and respect? What are the values by which some literary books are valorized and some are not?” (4).

Here the *Norton* instructor guide offers historical events of impact (e.g., effects of the publishing revolution in the 1840s), but these sorts of questions could also be a starting point for considering ongoing values and processes of anthology creation articulated in the anthology’s preface or course syllabus. Much of the language of the *Norton* instructor guide, however, implies that anthologies and syllabi are *reflectors* (versus active constructors) of the US canon; for example, the opening paragraphs suggest that “the value and use of ‘American lit’ as a college subject were questioned vigorously



when the enterprise began in earnest more than a century ago, and every social and political upheaval *has had an impact* on the canon, the syllabus, and the conversations in the classroom” (2; emphasis mine). This language of classroom materials as responsive versus constructive also emerges in the *Norton* prefaces.<sup>6</sup>

On the whole, the *Norton* instructor guide reinforces a model in which faculty consider how to introduce students to an existing body of work in the anthology (from which the faculty have chosen texts and authors from a larger, rather established classroom canon). In the historical period suggestions, for example, Bruce Michelson (2007: 73) primarily includes ways to (1) make comparisons among individual authors or (2) relate literary works to central questions for the course. *Norton's* essay and discussion question material does draw attention twice to editorial headnotes, but they ask students to find examples to support it, or direct students to the headnote (322).

Both instructor guides, especially *Heath's*, suggest that students should be aware of the canon as a changing construct based on readers' assumptions. The *Heath* guide especially underscores that students should consider the construct of the US canon as a complex process in which they participate as readers and thinkers, including through their classroom activities. But both guides' most common phrasing and examples concern expanding the ways that students interpret the literary texts presented to them in the anthology and course, rather than also engage the process of literature selection, justification, and presentation. In a scenario in which many faculty members are trained to teach canon study as the study of preselected literary texts only, it is likely that unless they receive more encouragement and guidance, such familiar approaches can easily persist.

What I contend is that classroom engagement with anthologies need not be limited to author and text selection and interpretation. Student analysis can include the apparatus narratives and their implications; they can include both *framing* and *framed* texts. The oft-lauded skills of critical reading and writing need not only concern conventionally published texts; they can include a much closer examination of the apparatus of anthologies.

### **Creating Canons in the Classroom**

The classroom examples in this section strive to resist the characterization of American literature anthologies according to author-text selection only. An assumption at work in this approach is that, like any text, a pedagogical text—be it an editorial overview or handout or syllabus—helps shape our analytic approach and is not an objective artifact. Scholar-teachers and

editors do generally have more knowledge and experience than students in reading and critiquing US canons. But pedagogical texts are still motivated, rhetorical actions that have alternatives. Students can learn from interpretive, critical examination of them, as they do from other kinds of texts. They can consider the cultural and social implications of the anthology apparatus while also being introduced to its literature. As they do with literature, students can question what perspectives are foregrounded or excluded in the apparatus and about the wider implications thereof, implications that speak to meaning making and institutional processes far beyond individual texts.

In that spirit, I offer examples and considerations of anthology analysis from my own classroom practice. The examples come from a writing-intensive, introductory seminar I taught for mostly first-year students intending to be literature majors. The course was titled “American ConTexts,” and in addition to reading academic articles related to US canon construction, we read and analyzed apparatus and literary selections of the most recent *Heath* and *Norton* anthologies (2009 and 2007 editions, respectively).<sup>7</sup> Following the pedagogical activities I describe, I address two questions relevant for faculty considering this approach: (1) At what stage in students’ learning are they able to analyze apparatus texts? (2) How can teachers use anthologies in more critical, everyday ways?

#### *Apparatus Analysis Activities*

As part of an analytic approach to anthologies, students engaged in three principal activities throughout the American ConTexts course. During the initial weeks of the semester, students compared the canons and editorial packaging of the *Norton* versus *Heath* anthologies. Because these survey anthologies are marketed and reviewed as more traditional (*Norton*) and more revisionist (*Heath*), a comparison between them provided rich opportunity for discussing their simultaneous sameness and difference.

For example, comparing the prefaces of each anthology revealed important differences in narratives of canon construction. The *Norton* preface suggests that it aims to offer an array of American literature *according to* traditional and changing literary concerns (Baym et al. 2007: xix, my emphasis). Statements throughout the preface like this one couch the *Norton* selections as reactive responses to changing curricular and aesthetic interests. These may make the anthology more diverse, but they are not done for the sake of initiating diversity or multiculturalism in American literature classrooms. The following statement, for example, comes from the seventh edition preface: “It is clear that the number and diversity of authors now recognized

as contributors to the totality of American literature have expanded dramatically” (Baym et al. 2007: xxi). The passive constructions and phrasing in this statement makes the canon an entity undoubtedly changing, apart from the anthology, which the anthology then reflects.

*Heath*, on the other hand, specifically asserts a “reformist” objective and foundation; its apparatus suggests it provides a more “multicultural” alternative to previous anthologies such as *Norton* (Lauter et al. 2009: xxxv). The *Heath* preface stresses theirs as a proactive approach, demanding a multicultural representation of American literature through and with their anthology choices—they label the anthology “a symbol and a tool” (Lauter and Novoa 1990; Lauter, Yarborough, and Novoa 1994; Lauter and Leeven 2008). For example, the most recent edition preface opens with the assertion that “we have extended the innovative tradition established by the very first edition of the anthology”; additionally, a “major goal of the *Heath Anthology* has been to broaden our understanding of what constitutes the “literary” (Lauter et al. 2009: xxxv). These statements use active subjects and verbs and suggest that the anthology, in the past and present, *establishes* and *broadens* particular ideas. The preface’s troubling of “American literature” by placing it in quotation marks sets up the *Heath* orientation differently than that of the *Norton* through a subtle but deliberate rhetorical gesture. Asking students to consider the themes and rhetorical choices in the anthology prefaces helps foreground editorial narratives of the role of an anthology in canon construction. According to the examples here, the *Norton* preface suggests that it reflects the canon, which emerges and changes on its own, while the *Heath* prefaces identify the anthology as a venue to incite those changes. In my own class, these kinds of analyses and questions led us as a class to discussions about the role of anthologies, what anthologies suggest is their role, and what students think anthologies’ role *should* be.

There are also clear similarities across the two anthologies that become clear in the apparatuses: the anthologies, for example, are organized and narrated according to almost identical, chronological periods, most of which signal wars (e.g., 1800–65, 1945–present). Each of these periods opens with an editorial narrative of the literary, national history, and the anthologies are distinct in what they emphasize in their narratives about the same periods. For example, for the 1945–present overview, *Heath* contains more references to the Civil Rights movement than does *Norton*, while *Norton* references the Cold War more than does *Heath*. Having students compare the two anthologies can provoke questions concerning what particular narratives include, exclude, and reconstitute about national culture. Likewise, students

can consider relevant questions that concern the contemporary US canon, such as, What event or year should mark the next literary period? (To which most of my students have said September 11, the implications of which — say, versus Hurricane Katrina — we discuss at length.) These considerations help make more visible the subjective choices and changes in American literature over time.

Second, as a kind of intertextual analysis, students analyze anthology editorial overviews alongside their analysis of literary selections. The *Heath* and *Norton* anthologies contain numerous pages of editorial framing texts, in the form of historical overviews, biographical information, and subsections of each that highlight particular social groups or cultural movements. I have students select one of these to read in conjunction with a corresponding literary selection. They consider editors' thematic and rhetorical emphases and how they think the overview might shape the literature and vice versa. For example, one student noted that the "Beginnings to 1700" portion of *Heath* shaped an interpretation of the texts that followed, by settlers, as incomplete — as only part of the story, while indigenous texts were lost or destroyed. Accordingly, reading Columbus's journals as he first saw the far-off islands felt "insufficient," because there was not a corresponding indigenous account of seeing the ships equally far away as they came in. Another student suggested that *Heath's* eighteenth-century overview stressed differences in the education of males and females (males received formal, school training while females received more training in the home) and that was then attuned to the domestic examples and reference points in Elizabeth Ashbridge's writing versus that of Thomas Paine. This activity highlights that literature is presented and packaged according to particular perspectives, and thus that the reception of the same text/s — including their own — might be quite different with a different emphasis. It also highlights the distinct work of anthologies in terms of selection, order, and framing of a US canon. American literature is accordingly cast as something influenced by social, personal, and commercial values, and readers of it as participants in those processes.

Finally, at the end of the course, students create their own anthologies: they select what they determine are representative American literature texts and write editorial prefaces and overviews to them. In order to do so, they must decide what claims they want to make about the meanings of "American," "literature," and "anthology," and how those claims are best captured within the parameters of the assignment. As such, they confront and analyze a variety of rhetorical contexts in which American literature is shaped and presented, and they have to articulate their respective ideas and ratio-

nales. In my experience, students become more and more adept as the semester goes on at thinking about the impact of audience, rhetorical expectations, commercial concerns, and argument through their confrontation with both the more standard “framed” texts as well as the “framing” anthology texts. In this final project, students bring these skills together in order to choose, present, and justify their definition of the American canon (or part of it).

The following is the description of the final assignment that the students received:

In this final assignment, you and three of your peers will assume the role of an editorial team and create your own anthology of American literature. In doing so, you will design the anthology, select 12 (or more) texts that belong in it, and create the editorial “framing” for these texts. As a group, you will design a “cover” (for paper or web interface) and write the preface for the anthology. This preface should be about 1000 words and should map out the premises and stakes for your anthology—it should, in effect, make a thoughtful argument for the role, merits, and limitations of your anthology. As you did individually in your last project, your editorial board will need to determine and in some way articulate your definitions of “American,” “literature,” and “anthology” as a part of your anthology’s argument. As individuals, for four of the texts you have selected, each one of you will write up an editorial introduction to them. These should be no longer than 500 words. You can select your focus for these—they can be biographical, historiographical, sociocultural, rhetorical analytic, or a combination—but whatever you choose, these texts should support the preface’s articulation of the role and importance of an anthology.

Your anthology can be in digital, audio, or paper form. You have many options as to how to approach the parameters of the assignment: you may make an anthology that only represents a particular time period, literary movement, cultural group, or event; you may approach your selection of 12 texts as fully “representative” or as only part of the anthology. You just have to articulate your rationale and your approach.

Because the course had sixteen students, there were four editorial boards. None of the four anthologies were identical, though they had some compelling overlaps. Three of the anthologies, for example, included at least one graphic novel and suggested (in various ways) that they were a part of the definition of “literature” espoused by the anthology and thus had to be included. None of the anthologies only included traditional poetry and prose. Two of the anthologies were organized thematically rather than chronologi-

cally, and one of those two included a section titled “traditionally canonical texts” as one of its five parts. In that distinction, the group wanted to suggest that their anthology categories were dictated by normative social understandings but that traditionally canonical texts were not “better” per se. One group created a children’s anthology, claiming that an anthology’s role according to the editorial board was to provide a representation of texts cherished by the national culture and that this was best captured in texts for the nation’s youngest generation. Another group claimed that the role of an anthology was to represent those texts that appear to have reached the widest mainstream audience, as determined by their commercial success. Another group’s definition of American literature included widely disseminated texts and images, including Coca-Cola’s trademark and a screen shot of the Facebook interface. One group’s preface was a YouTube video that opened with a pastiche of other university students (not in the course) defining the American canon, a preface that showed the personal, cultural, and widely various meanings thereof.

The group that defined American literature as widely disseminated texts and images called theirs a “generation X and Y” anthology: they created a canon they felt represented their generation, born toward the end of the twentieth century. They reasoned that, as they articulate in their preface, “one can think of literature over time as a dialogue among generations, each attempting to explain itself to those preceding it,” and that their anthology was a generational canon they could speak to because of their social lived experiences. They defined literature broadly because of the extreme “advancement of technology” and “massive pop culture consumption” that they felt marked their generation, evidenced by “the sheer volume of icons and mediums of pop culture.” They included four categories in the anthology, one as a nod to the influential literary past, and three contemporary: “classics from classes” (e.g., *The Great Gatsby*); “minority” perspectives (e.g., *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*); critical dilemmas of this age (e.g., the 9/11 Commission Report, Obama’s inaugural address, *Fast Food Nation*); and popular literature (e.g., the Coca-Cola trademark; the screenplay for *Good Will Hunting*). They reason that “the inclusion of multiple forms of literature serves to broaden [a] view of society—of its issues, people, values, and aspirations. By including works that span the range from literary classics to ‘pop fiction,’ as well as government reports, we hope to capture as a theme the most memorable moments of our generation that will serve to inform future generations looking back on this period of history.” They acknowledge exclusions, especially that of many works of value from the past, but they explain

their reasoning and acknowledge that “the exclusion of important works is a necessary evil in any anthology.”

Another group focused their anthology, titled *The Gambling Anthology of American Literature*, on an “expanded” definition of literature and on works of “cultural value.”<sup>8</sup> As they write, “We wanted not only to represent a wide range of ideas, but also a wide range of media. Covering selections from novels, short stories, poems, graphic novels, comic books, film scripts, and drama, *The Gambling Anthology of American Literature* aims to broaden the construct of literature.” As they write, they do so to foreground the notion that “various mediums of expression inherently heighten the ways in which readers relate, understand and interpret a piece.” They note what they mean by “cultural value” in their preface:

To define “cultural value,” we looked at each piece’s relevance to American society at the time that it was written, the overall impact it had on America and its lasting effects years after. However, in this definition we have consequently placed works of more historical and political emphasis beneath those of more cultural emphasis. Therefore, literature about impactful historical and political events, such as the September 11th terrorist attacks, is less likely to be anthologized in our collection.

They note that there are works with great historical, political, and cultural impact, such as Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream,” but they suggest that “though the distinctions are sometimes difficult to detect, we have done our best to keep the focus upon culture.” Finally, they suggest that the anthology “has taken a few chosen risks with the inclusion of works such as *Fantastic Four #1* and a selection from the film *Chinatown*.” They also “have not abandoned traditionally respected works” but they argue they have “placed them under the same scrutiny as that of our selected ‘radical’ works and have found cultural relevance within them.” Finally, they exclude works from the past ten years in their selections, suggesting that “as a culture seems to become clearer and more defined in hindsight, anthologizing the past ten years shall be a project for the Second Edition of *The Gambling Anthology of American Literature* to complete.”

The four prefaces to these anthologies were some of the most thoughtful prose I saw all semester. The students articulated the implications of what they included and *excluded* in reflective and meaningful ways. The process of constructing the anthology facilitated lengthy and often heated discussions within the student groups about what defines (and does not define) “American literature,” including a group in which two students, one of whom

believed graphic novels embodied American literature and the other who was staunchly committed to “classic” nineteenth-century works, had to come to enough of an agreement to produce a single anthology.

No project is without its flaws, and I recognize that, though we discussed the parameters of the project as a class beforehand, the project was designed largely by me, not the students, and that this does not fully push against the parameters and power relations entailed in conventional anthology and course construction. I will continue to refine the project. In the future, for example, I may introduce Joan Brown’s (2010) criteria for canonicity for students’ consideration as they analyze their own and others’ canon selections. Brown identifies and explains both extrinsic and intrinsic factors that influence canon admission. *Extrinsic factors* include tradition and inertia, recognition, importance for groups and individuals, and availability. *Intrinsic factors* are place in literary history, informative content, perceived aesthetic superiority, and ability to move the reader. Brown outlines these criteria for faculty consideration, but I believe her work is useful for classrooms. She effectively casts canonicity as a combination of many practices and processes, only some of which are obvious to students.

Overall, in their work on this project, I watched students thoughtfully engage some of the most critical issues in US reading and writing courses, and that they occupied positions of rhetorical and disciplinary authority. The students’ projects further affirmed my belief that studying, discussing, and creating examples of apparatus materials can foster a level of meta-awareness that encourages teachers and students to consider the implications of the many kinds of texts they read and produce in their courses. It supports the notion that students can both learn from the anthologies and recognize them as motivated, situated compilations that help shape fields and knowledge, and I believe this approach serves them as they confront pedagogical materials in other courses as well. The approach furthermore not only considers *new* activities and artifacts (e.g., a digital anthology, uncirculated texts) but also *re/*considers familiar materials in unfamiliar ways, thereby reinforcing analysis of both the known and unknown as parts of a critical approach to literature.

### *Related Questions*

Before closing, I consider two questions related to the approach I espouse here: (1) At what stage in students’ learning are they able to analyze apparatus texts? (2) How can teachers use anthologies and other classroom materials in more critical, everyday ways?



As is probably clear, I take issue with the tendency of anthologies to position students as coming to them with no prior knowledge and as incapable of analyzing texts that present the values and skills of a field. Such a belief implies that students have not been previously critical of the many cultural texts that surround them and that they have not developed critical reading and writing skills. At the same time, I do understand that students seek and appreciate guidance, and that to some colleagues, my approach to textbooks appears to undermine clear authority and structure that especially new — and often struggling — university students seek.

These are important concerns, but I contend that this approach is not unlike what almost all students have confronted throughout their education, in two principal ways: it primarily asks that students critically read apparatus materials, drawing on critical reading skills they already possess; and it concerns materials with which university students are often already familiar, at least in terms of having confronted them throughout their learning. By the time students enter college-level courses, they have generally used numerous textbooks; they have also often been asked to consider a variety of texts and what authors can do through those texts via their use of language, organization, evidence, and style. It does not follow that students will necessarily feel efficacious in writing apparatus texts, or even in reading them, without practice. Yet the latter requires more of a repositioning of students vis-à-vis textbooks than fostering new skills.

As with any pedagogical approach, each instructor must attend to the specifics of the context and the students, but university students already have critical reading skills they can use to analyze the anthology apparatus. Most university students have been asked to analyze various textual features in various genres: to examine *ethos* in an essay or advertisement, to consider what seems to matter most in a book or textbook chapter. Asking students to apply similar analytic tools to institutionalized, pedagogical genres is not beyond university students' critical capacities, and it is in fact in line with the understanding in American literature that texts are shaped by values and rhetorical choices and that students should be critical and conscientious readers of them. Asking students to consider the rhetorical purposes and ideological effects of both the apparatus and more traditional literary materials reinforces the notion that students can apply their critical questioning across texts they read throughout their lives, including texts that may at first appear outside of the bounds of critique.

Thus, considering students prepared to do apparatus analysis and creation, I want to briefly address some ways faculty can be more conscientious.

tious presenters of anthologies and other pedagogical information. Instructors can draw attention to the parameters of their courses and the anthologies they use in order to help students be conscientious about values and exclusions entailed in any academic course. Written rhetorical choices, such as uses of the first person in course materials (e.g., *I chose this assignment based on the idea that . . .*), can also change the usual discourse of direct instruction to a more self-conscious portrayal of the values and choices involved in pedagogical work.

Given their overlooked nature, handouts, course descriptions, and syllabi are all valuable directions for more meta-awareness of institution and discipline constructions. For example, I have had students analyze my syllabus in the beginning of the semester for how they think it defines “good writing” and “American literature” and what kinds of analysis it privileges. This metaquestioning continues as we bring similar questions to bear on the cover of materials we use, the interface of web materials we access, and the parameters for projects the students complete. Asking students to analyze course materials challenges students to re-view familiar rules and materials in unfamiliar ways, and it is an intellectual exercise that models critical textual awareness. Another site for this analysis could be the introductions and prefaces to editions of “classic” literary texts outside of an anthology: how such introductions characterize surrounding culture and the text’s importance, or whether or not they will change with contemporary evolutions like electronic books. But the more specific content focus of such analyses are endless in number. Given the importance of cultural representation, the depiction of many social groups—dominant and marginalized—merit closer study. Anthology overviews of various periods also send messages about individualism and human responsibility—responsibility (or lack thereof) to other humans, to other nations, to the global world. These messages warrant further exposure and examination. Uniting all of these examples is the attempt to not take for granted choices that frame and dictate what new students and instructors learn, how they learn it, and from whom.

There are also indications that with more digital texts, new kinds of reading and analyzing are possible. For example, textbooks often now have materials online and some entire anthologies are digital; this usually means more text can be included. Other texts that comment on or contribute to American literature, from magazines to blogs to newspapers, are online, opening up opportunities to accessing and analyzing a greater variety of texts as they help shape literary beliefs and values. On that same note, the fact that students confront and produce more text than ever today (e.g., see

Baron 2008; Crystal 2008) opens up opportunities in literature courses for analyzing a greater variety of texts as valuable and relevant. All of these considerations are part of our contemporary conceptualizations of literature and are topics students have helped me to consider in more thoughtful ways.

### **Creating Canons through Texts, Practices, Positions**

This article advocates exploring canon construction in the classroom through analysis of the anthology apparatus. The pedagogical activities described above underscore that canons are constructed not only through non/canonical literary material but through canonical *practices* and *positions*—how those processes and texts are defined, and whether or not readers believe they can question the canons they confront. The students I have described did not need additional critical reading abilities but rather a change in their relationship to anthologies: they had to believe they were in a position to question and even construct them. In analyzing the anthology apparatus, they came to sophisticated insights about canons and anthologies as motivated, complex, and intertextual compilations, and they critically considered ways that anthologies both challenge and reproduce conventional representations of literature.

Roemer opens his “The Tales Tables (of Contents) Tell” (1999: 1) by relating that he was “stunned” by a show of hands in his sophomore American literature class that indicated that more students had read Zora Neale Hurston’s fiction than had read Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays. He takes this to be a clear indication that “certainly times and literary canons have changed.” But he relates his concern of the “one disturbing constant”: that despite more than two decades of canon debates, even advanced students seem unaware of how often and how profoundly concepts of American literature have changed.

Documented scholarly and pedagogical approaches to the *Heath* and *Norton* anthologies suggest that the “disturbing constant” of students’ lack of awareness about changes in disciplinary and cultural paradigms may be in part due to the way that anthologies (and other classroom materials) function in the field of American literature. These anthologies are intended as introductions to the canon; they present a particular canon and particular national, literary contexts in their apparatus texts, but they rarely draw attention to the changing values, assumptions, and exclusions on which they depend. Given these anthology expectations, those of us who research and teach American literature may unwittingly perpetuate disciplinary and classroom expectations in which students, editors, and teachers alike can fail to

attend to the constructedness and implications of creating national and disciplinary narratives about American canons.

Alternatively, June Howard (2001: 2–4) reminds us that in interrogating American cultural texts, it is not enough to say that unfair representation can or should be changed—or even that it has changed. We should ask a more comprehensive analysis question: What were the factors that contributed to these trends and made them possible? My work with students has convinced me that one way we enable limited but authoritative canons is by drawing traditional boundaries around what students critically analyze. In analyzing the anthology apparatus, we push that boundary and engage questions of how canons are anthologized and narrated for dissemination to universities. Such analysis is a way to acknowledge the deeply political, changing nature of presenting American literature, and it underscores the role of multiple texts, writers, and readers that can contribute to its re/construction.

## Notes

The author would like to thank the editors of *Pedagogy* and Paul Lauter for their feedback on earlier versions of this article.

1. Throughout this article, I use the term *American* to refer to the anthologies, history, and literary texts I address, though a more appropriate term could be “what is now the United States,” or “US,” or “US-American,” or otherwise. I also use the label *the canon*, which suggests that there is one recognizable, finite body of culturally legitimated “literary” texts, though I believe a more accurate term would also somehow account for the changing nature of the body of texts reproduced for American literary study as well as the multiple texts, practices, and processes that constitute it. While I want to use the terms that anthologies and classrooms commonly use, I also want to trouble these terms—and, especially, their unqualified use—with periodic quotation marks and with my analysis.
2. Hereafter, I use the abbreviated titles *Heath* and *Norton*, which I have found to be common in conversations with scholars and students. *Heath* itself identifies as such by its fourth edition preface (xxxv), and “*Norton*” as a shorthand title can refer to either the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* or the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, depending on the writer and context (e.g., see Lauter 1983; Shesgreen 2009). I use these shorthand titles for ease as well as to evoke what has become an almost colloquial and personified nature of the anthologies (see Aull 2011).
3. Jim Egan has also taught a similar but revised version of this course more recently, in fall 2009. I am grateful for his enriching conversations over the past three years about his classroom approach.
4. For a fuller discussion of the construction and implications of “editor-expert” positioning vis-à-vis anthologies (and college composition textbooks), see Aull 2011.

5. The *Heath* guide describes that a means of supporting cultural diversity in the classroom is to “look to the students and their own concrete social and cultural experiences to furnish the starting points” (25). According to the guide, “One means of accomplishing this is simply to involve students in the process of syllabus formation, asking them to choose texts for class reading and to prepare texts for class discussion. Indeed, the selection processes used by students are just as relevant to class discussion as the texts eventually chosen” (25–26). These statements end the section titled “Involve Students in the Process of Syllabus Formation,” which contains compelling ideas but not details about how one might implement the approach in the classroom.
6. For example, the preface to the sixth edition of *Norton* explains “that the ‘untraditional’ authors [first included in the *Norton*] have now become part of the American literary canon shows that canons are not fixed, but emerge and change” (Baym et al. 2002: xix). This language represents the canon as an emerging and changing thing, while the *Norton* is a venue to reflect, as opposed to incite, those changes. I return to this point in the next section on classroom activities.
7. I taught this course at the University of Michigan in fall 2009 to a group of sixteen students, most of whom were first-year students. The course description for American ConTexts was as follows:
 

If you grew up in or with an affiliation to the United States, you have probably been asked to read and interpret “American literature” repeatedly. But you may not have been asked as regularly to consider the very definitions and processes that help construct it. In this section of English 124, we will explore the ways that culture/s and society/ies are constructed through American literature, and so we will spend time analyzing both “American” texts as well as the ways they are presented and marketed. We will discuss various ways that “literature” and “American culture” are defined, and we will come up with our own definitions as we explore them. More generally, this course will help you continue to develop as critical readers, thinkers, and writers able to communicate in cultural and academic communities; to that end, we will strive to improve your ability to write clear, organized, engaged essays and to aid your development as a critical interpreter of texts and culture. As a part of this broader goal, one project during the semester asks you to consider a central issue in another discipline of your choice as it emerges over time in academic articles. Some reading and writing practices I consider central to the course include: analyzing language patterns in the texts we read and write; examining the apparatus and framing surrounding those texts and the assumptions embedded therein; considering what audience writers (including ourselves) construct; and being willing to take initiative with one’s writing, including seeking feedback and revising substantially.
8. Though the members of this editorial group succeeded in selecting an intriguing name in *Gambling Anthology*, they did not make their title choice clear in their materials. I did ask them the significance afterward, which was that selecting a particular canon of US literature felt like a gamble: it was not always clear what would be of cultural significance in the future, and it was not always clear why past works gained particular cultural significance. At that point, we were able to discuss the benefits of making this set of meaningful ideas more clear, but the students had not done so in the actual anthology they turned in.

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