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Mice, Slurs and Freedom Fries

American Tensions between Teaching the Literary Canon and the Need for a National Narrative in an Era of Book Bans

Anna Ferrari

Sapienza University of Rome
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1369-9557
Email: anna.ferrari@uniroma1.it

Abstract

In the last few years, the phenomenon of policing what should be read and how has occupied a prominent space in the American public debate. Books by authors like Toni Morrison and Art Spiegelman have been erased from school curricula and removed from public libraries. An effort at policing literature is also recognizable on the progressive side: works like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* have been removed from school curricula due to the repeated use of the N-word. These events can be identified as being part of a struggle about building a comforting national American narrative. The article deals with the intersecting dynamics of policing narratives and the strife to build a reassuring (in all the different, respective acceptations of the word) national American narrative, focusing on how different incarnations of censorship (sometimes involving the same works) concern the building of an unsettling counterpublic seeking to subvert the publicly accepted discourse about race, gender and sexual orientation.

Keywords

Book Bans, American Myth, Toni Morrison, Huckleberry Finn, Trauma

It's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.
(George Carlin)

In the American cultural landscape, the years that followed the election of Donald Trump have heightened tensions that had been simmering in the country but have reached the surface as a consequence of the recent political polarization. Literature and education are areas in which these dynamics are particularly evident. In the years following 2016, language and literature have reached the eye of a complex cultural storm, where the question of which texts are available to which audiences and in which spaces, from school classes to libraries, has developed in different directions. This issue, generally labeled in the press as "book banning," has for the most part been carried out in legislative form in states with a Republican majority. Understandably, the removal of texts from public institutions such as libraries and schools has attracted the media's attention, especially because it also involved influential, award-winning works such as *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison and *Maus* (1986) by Art Spiegelman (see Garcia). These bans have been sparked by a largely recognized attempt on the part of Republican politicians, most notably but not exclusively Governors Ron DeSantis in Florida and Glenn Youngkin in Virginia, to influence the way American history and culture are taught, particularly as it pertains to the oppression endured by minorities. However, more progressive efforts to control the circulation of culture have followed similar dynamics. While usually presented by those in power (politically, entrepreneurially, culturally) as a way of protecting vulnerable portions of society from harmful or offensive content, shielding people from specific texts has the effect of limiting the knowledge those people can access. The commonalities between conservative and liberal interventions aimed at regimenting literary texts and their circulation are most evident in the fact that they have, at times, targeted the same works, including classics such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) (see O' Kane; Flood).

As a consequence, the phenomenon of policing what should be read and how, through either banning or editing, has come to occupy a prominent role in the American public debate.

In what follows, I analyze the dynamics underlying the challenges to some hyper-canonized texts, aimed at either removing them from the school libraries of several American states or editing them to appease modern sensibilities. By discussing points of contact and contrast among these books, I argue that, despite being moved by largely different motives, censorial attempts share the effect of reducing young readers' possibility to access important parts of American culture. I present efforts to police canonical works of fiction as a manifestation of the increasing tension between the need to protect the dominant, reassuring American national narrative, and to subvert it to restore the voice of marginalized groups. In so doing, I highlight two inseparable aspects of hyper-canonical literary texts: that they have historically been key in shaping the image that America has – and wants to project – of itself, and that the elements upholding their canonization are often the same as those that currently upset progressive audiences.

Myth and Fantasy

While it may be considered as overly broad, a key concept for my argument is the notion that storytelling has played and continues to play a crucial role in shaping American identity. The American myth, the American dream, and American exceptionalism are closely interrelated notions, with a common denominator, I argue, in the act of narrating. In their history of American literature, Richard Ruland and Malcom Bradbury remark that the original idea of America "first came into existence out of writing" (4), thus out of a form of narration. Analogously, Kurt Andersen argues that myth and fantasy have been key in determining how America has seen itself since the very beginning. Andersen observes:

> from the start, our ultra-individualism was attached to epic dreams, sometimes epic fantasies – every American one of God's chosen people building a custom-made utopia, each of us free to reinvent himself by imagination and will. In America those more exciting parts of the Enlightenment idea have swamped the sober, rational, empirical parts.

> Little by little for centuries, then more and more and faster and faster during the last half-century, Americans have given ourselves over to all kinds of magical thinking, anything-goes relativism, and belief in fanciful explanation, small and large fantasies that console or thrill or terrify us. (5)

These "small and large fantasies" have contributed to shaping the myth of American exceptionalism, a self-projected image that is particularly consequential for the understanding of the darkest pages of American history. Lauren Berlant draws a similar connection when she argues that "nations provoke fantasy" (1) and that the forms of "the experience of identity […] are always 'collective' and political" (2-3). Berlant defines the intersection of the juridical, territorial, genetic, linguistic and experiential elements which make up America as the "National Symbolic" (5), a "national fantasy" shaped through "the images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness" (5). Culture and literature contribute to consolidating such fantasies but, as Jonathan Arac remarks,

> literary culture and national culture may be seriously at odds, and they harmonize only when the nation is given a meaning more psychological than religious or political. This psychological understanding of the nation, in turn, has granted America the spiritual legitimacy of literature, while subordinating literature to an America so conceived as to disarm political criticism. (17)

When literature and history intertwine to shape fantasies around national identity, these fantasies (and, indirectly, fictional and historical narratives) often contribute to a utopian, mythical idea of America, one that is difficult, when not dangerous, to challenge with counter-narratives.[1]

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[1] Hodgson observes that "much of the history Americans are taught in schools […] is not so very different from Parson Weems's discredited but beloved story about George Washington and his father's cherry tree. That is no accident. Americans have felt so proud of their nation's achievements that they have wanted to socialize their children, and their

The myth surrounding the idea of America carries unavoidable political implications. As John Archer suggests, "[b]y their very nature, myths are frequently, and in large measure, political [...] the crucial role of myth is often to sustain the relationship between the citizen, the broader culture, and social and political institutions" (8). To effectively fulfil their role, therefore, myths must be optimistic. This is particularly true in the case of the American Dream, a myth that has not been available to everybody in the same way. Godfrey Hodgson points to the idea of America being "morally exceptional" (10) as an important aspect of American exceptionalism, but disparities in rights and opportunities have pervaded American history, particularly in relation to race. These disparities can be exemplified, according to Toni Morrison, by the continuing overlooking of the influence of Africans and African Americans on American history, literature and culture. Morrison explains:

> For some time now I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as "knowledge." This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular "Americanness" that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. (141)

The close relationship between knowledge as described by Morrison and a particular idea of Americanness lies at the core of the American national myth. In this context, any narrative that challenges established knowledge

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immigrants' children, with that national pride" (14).

risks being received as a threat to the perceived essence of American identity.

By and large, this comforting vision of American identity was developed to exclude – and by excluding – any group that was considered as "other," not only based on race and ethnicity but also, among other things, gender and sexual orientation. Unsurprisingly, then, in the American educational system the need for a comforting national narrative aligns closely with the implied audience that such narrative aims to comfort: Americans who belong to the hegemonic group. The act of teaching the history of slavery and African American racial oppression, for instance, is usually challenged with the argument that such topics would make students uncomfortable (Kernahan) – that is, white students. These attacks, which are closely tied to the issue of book banning, are part and parcel of the fight against Critical Race Theory (CRT), a phrase that originated in legal studies in the 1970s but in recent years was coopted by conservative politicians and broadcasters to loosely refer to contents in the school syllabus that look critically at race history and culture in America.[2] John Guillory acknowledges that in the American cultural system "the far larger role belongs to the school itself, which regulates access to literary production by regulating access to literacy [...] The literary syllabus is the institutional form by means of which this knowledge is disseminated" (ix). It is logical, then, to infer that the "active exclusion" (9) of certain texts and subjects severely affects the dissemination of knowledge. In some American states, these texts and subjects once characterized as 'other' are not taught as "non-canonical" (9) but removed altogether from the syllabus. The presence, perspective and experience of non-normative groups are perceived as problematic and, therefore, challenged by political institutions. In service of "an imaginary cultural unity never actually coincident with the [American] culture" itself (38), the level of comfort of students of color, or of queer students, does not seem to be regarded with as much concern.

Literature arguably has the ability to express the struggle of human experience even more powerfully than history books. Henry Louis Gates

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[2] See "Basic Tenets of Critical race Theory." <https://www.britannica.com/topic/critical-race-theory/Basic-tenets-of-critical-race-theory>.

writes that "the study of the humanities is the study of the possibilities of human life in culture" (*Loose Canons* 114). Particularly when it comes to the history of minorities, storytelling can have the collateral but crucial effect of creating a deeper, more personal form of understanding which undoubtedly plays a role in the educational sphere: "the teaching of literature is the teaching of values; not inherently, no, but contingently, yes" (35). Simply put, art and literature provide the empathy that could be lacking in a more "denatured and dry" (Fishkin, "Teaching Mark Twain" 34) historical display of the facts: according to Shelley Fisher Fishkin, with history "you can keep your distance from it if you choose [...] Novelists, like surgeons, cut straight to the heart. But unlike surgeons, they don't sew up the wound. They leave it open to heal or fester, depending on the septic level of the reader's own environment" (34). Works of fiction can portray facts from a different perspective and even act as living documents of their time. Hence, they can provide a counter-narrative to the generally accepted, comforting national myth. Based on this premise, I discuss some literary works that have shaped what Michael Warner calls "counterpublics" (56) in tension with the main national narrative and are, therefore, banned from school libraries in several American states (see Meehan et al.).

Obscenity: *Beloved* and *Maus*

According to PEN America, Toni Morrison was one of the most banned writers of the 2022/23 school year. PEN's list includes more than one work by the Nobel Prize-winning author, but it was the removal from school curricula of her 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* that caused the most uproar in the press. The book has been banned in Kentucky (see "Joint Letter") and in 2021 was at the center of a controversy in Virginia, where then-gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin put out an ad featuring a mother who had tried to get *Beloved* banned from her son's high school. The accusations made toward Morrison's novel have to do with the presence of explicit subjects such as violence, racism and sexuality. But *Beloved* is primarily a haunting portrayal of the experience and trauma of slavery: KC Davis called it "an overt and passionate quest to fill a gap

neglected by historians, to record the everyday lives of the 'disremembered and unaccounted for'" (274), while Pamela Barnett described it as being "haunted by history, memory, and a specter that embodies both" (418). The act of offering a counter-narrative to dominant representations of slavery is therefore perceived as more subversive than any explicit representation of sexual acts.

Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*, which recounts the author's father's experiences during the Holocaust, shares with *Beloved* the portrayal of a traumatic historical event from an individual and family perspective. Both works deal with the themes of memory and trauma, and with the personal repercussions of historical collective tragedies. *Maus* and *Beloved* also both portray the killing of a child: in Morrison's novel, Sethe cuts her daughter's throat to spare her the horrors of slavery, while Spiegelman's aunt poisons his older brother to save him from Auschwitz. *Maus* has been banned by a county school board in Tennessee (see Andrew) and, surprisingly, obscenity is among the reasons provided for its removal. The accusation relies on one image, in which Spiegelman portrays his mother from overhead while she lays in the tub after having committed suicide, the outline of her breasts visible. That this detail, in a work about the Holocaust, is the element deemed disturbing seems at the very least paradoxical.

The fact that Morrison's and Spiegelman's texts portray some of the greatest horrors in human history but are removed from curricula and public libraries for trivial reasons, such as nudity and language (see Waxman), suggests that the content of these works is what is actually deemed inappropriate to be taught in schools. In the case of *Beloved*, those who favor the ban are more likely disturbed by Morrison's harsh portrayal of slavery than by the inclusion of sexual content.[3] Scholar Emily Knox told *Time* that, when it comes to the history of race in America and specifically the trauma of slavery, Morrison's books "do not sugarcoat or use euphemisms. And that is what people actually have trouble with" (qtd. in Waxman). The novel embodies the phenomenon that Cathy Caruth described as "the oscillation

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[3] Barnett observes that "Morrison revises the conventional slave narrative by insisting on the primacy of sexual assault over other experiences of brutality. Beloved embodies the recurrent experience of a past that the community of women in the novel wants to forget" (420).

between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (7). Spiegelman similarly focuses on personal and collective forms of trauma: his father's experience at Auschwitz, his own second-degree trauma – what Marianne Hirsch calls "post-memory" (8) – as the child of a camp survivor, and the familial tragedy of his mother's suicide. As is often the case with print censorship, obscenity reveals itself a convenient excuse to police the access to uncomfortable books: the pretense of protecting children is a powerful alibi that can easily shut down any pushback.

Touching the Classics

One striking aspect of the current wave of book banning is that it also involves texts that have been part of the syllabus for decades without stirring controversy. The two most prominent examples are Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Both books belong to the canon of American literature and are among what Chinua Achebe has called "permanent literature" (15). In recent years, however, their presence in school curricula has been challenged. A school district in Minnesota, for example, removed them from the curriculum to shield students from the language deployed by the authors, specifically the repeated use of the N-word. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been challenged in different states, including Mississippi, California and Virginia (see Phillips). Set in 1930s Alabama, Lee's novel includes offensive language, mostly racial slurs. Since its publication in 1960, the book has been featured in school curricula as a text with an anti-racist message. The fact that the plot revolves around children has furthered its popularity, as it allows for a discussion of complex, painful and violent subjects (and the teachings that should originate from them) to be more easily accessible to young readers. Apart from the 1962 film version, the novel's relevance to present-day America has been confirmed by Aaron Sorkin's 2018 stage adaptation. However, when he brought the play back on Broadway in 2021, after the interruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Sorkin made some changes to the script, prompted by the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the Black Lives Matter protests (see Ford).

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has encountered a similar destiny. Many of the school districts that banned *To Kill a Mockingbird* banned Twain's novel as well due to the presence of racial slurs (see Lock). However, Jonathan Arac describes the novel as an allegorical link between literature and "fundamental national historical experiences" (18) and a preeminent example of "hypercanonization" (14), that is, a work of literature that monopolizes the American cultural landscape and that expresses at the same time tradition and innovation (24-25).[4] *Huckleberry Finn* is largely considered the most prominent American novel about slavery in the syllabus, and its content has long been considered anti-racist. It would be easy to interpret the motivations behind the removal of these two books as a desire to avoid any mention of slavery in the classroom, but the situation is more nuanced. In fact, the teaching of both *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* has often been challenged by progressives and people of color, mostly due to the repeated use of the N-word and the perceived effects its reading would have in the classroom (see Balingit).

Fishkin, a preeminent Twain scholar, has defended the inclusion of the N-word as an important part of the learning experience:

> Sanitizing the language which aided and abetted white America's denial of the humanity of black Americans from the nation's founding doesn't change that history [...] Facing that history in all its offensiveness is crucial to understanding it and transcending it, and literature is uniquely positioned to help us do that. ("Take the N-Word out of *Huck Finn*?" n. pag.)

Several literary critics also challenged the representation of black characters in these texts. Ralph Ellison, who famously discussed the representation of Jim in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," argued that

> Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and

[4] Ako-Adjei evokes a similar idea when she talks about the "immutable place on school curriculums" of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (185).

> human capacity – and Twain's complexity – emerge. Yet it is his source in this same tradition which creates that ambivalence between his identification as an adult and parent and his "boyish" naïveté, and which by contrast makes Huck, with his street-sparrow sophistication, seem more adult. (92)

His perspective is echoed, among others, by Elaine and Henry Mensh, who explain:

> Huck, a poor boy from a then-maligned ethnic group, could – with his quick wits, daring improvisations, and ceaseless searching – rise quickly to become America's child. But Jim – with traits that invert Huck's – could never transcend in a reader's imagination the 'place' that, at the time Huck Finn was published, the society had preordained for African-American adults. (105)

The complex repercussions of the representation of black characters also affect *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Naa Baako Ako-Adjei argues that the popularity of Lee's novel is due to the possibility for white readers to identify with the white savior trope, most notably in the scene in which black people applaud Atticus Finch in the courtroom (185). Sorkin chose not to include this scene in his play because

> that is probably the favorite scene of zero people who aren't white [. . .] Those people in the balcony should be rioting in the streets [. . .] but instead they're standing up, docile, in respect and gratitude to the white liberal [. . .] That's the liberal fantasy, that oppressed people will look at me and say, "Thank you for being one of the good ones." ("The Scene Sorkin" 1:55-2:06)

Dynamics such as this seem to influence parents' decisions to challenge the teaching of these novels more than the mere presence of racial slurs: the word "fantasy" used by Sorkin is indicative of what is really challenged by the introduction of non-hegemonic perspectives in national narratives. The comforting, resolved feeling that Lee's courtroom scene brings to a narrative about race (a subject hardly resolved now, and certainly not resolved in the

early 1960s) trivializes a painful aspect of American history and culture to offer instead a reassuring fantasy. To challenge and deconstruct the tropes that feed and perpetuate this fantasy seems more substantial than to challenge the presence of slurs: the N-word can be repeatedly found in *Beloved* as well, just like the swastika can be found in *Maus*. It is difficult to imagine, however, that a black or Jewish parent would ask for Morrison's or Spiegelman's works not to be taught in schools.

When it comes to *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the issue of banning is a double-edged sword. The subject of language, for instance, can be interpreted as both a legitimate concern by black parents and a pretext, much like the violence and nudity in *Beloved* and *Maus*, by conservative parties who would rather avoid an uncomfortable discussion of race. The fact that these two classics, penned by white authors, are narrated from the point of view of children is also relevant: on the one hand, it helps present events as traumatic as slavery and segregation to young students, since the narrator's innocent gaze works as a filter and shields readers from the story's most disturbing aspects. On the other hand, the adoption of an inevitably simpler and reassuring tone makes it more difficult to convey nuance: everything is right or wrong, black or white. This dichotomy lends itself, in Ako-Adjei's words, to the construction of the myth of white innocence (198). Ako-Adjei argues that, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, racism is outlined in a distinctly Manichean way, mostly through the grotesque portrayal of the character of Bob Ewell. Lee's novel, she explains,

> gives voice to the collective and peculiar American delusion that racism in the United States wasn't really about the systematic use of terror, or the threat of terror, on black people in order to maintain white supremacy, but that racism and racist violence, were perpetrated by a negligible number of Americans who were not dissimilar from Bob Ewell. (185)

The fact that Lee shows racism as something to be found in monsters rather than in ordinary people makes her, to use Achebe's famous definition, a "purveyor of comforting myths" (16). Conversely, Fishkin identifies *Huckleberry Finn*'s greatness in the fact that

> it requires teachers and students to examine what's wrong with a society that gives the most admirable person in it – the slave Jim – the same rights as pigs and chickens. This forces readers to question why so many people who thought of themselves as "good" – religious, upstanding, well-meaning – supported the indefensible status quo as long as they did. ("Take the N-Word out of *Huck Finn*?" n. pag.)

The implications of reading the novel from this perspective are arguably much more subversive.

As Guillory observed, "canonicity is not a property of the work itself but of its transmission, its relation to other works in a collocation of works – the syllabus in its institutional locus, the school" (55). The transmission and canonization of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is thus largely due, as Ako-Adjei argues, to its "sentimentalized account of America's racist history" (200) and more palatable portrayal of the segregated South, to which its child narrator has certainly further contributed.[5] The foregrounding of a romanticized narrative of youth over racial violence in the era of slavery has similarly rooted the success of Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* in the possibility that it offered to consolidate what Eve Sedgwick defines as the white reader's "privilege of unknowing" (23). To deconstruct all the elements that participate in these dynamics means to challenge the hyper-canonization of these works and the national myth they have come to symbolize.[6]

Don't Mention It. No, Really

In American culture, the concept of a national myth is always political. Hodgson writes that "exceptionalism, it would seem, is not so much a

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[5] Ako-Adjei highlights this dynamic observing that "a book on racism in the segregated South seems more concerned with a sentimental recounting of childhood than it does with a realistic account of racism during Jim Crow" (197).

[6] In her book *Was Huck Black?*, Fishkin argues the importance of including "the role previously neglected African-American voices played in shaping Mark Twain's art in *Huckleberry Finn*. Given that book's centrality in our culture, the points I make implicitly illuminate, as well, how African-American voices have shaped our sense of what is distinctively 'American' about American literature" (9).

disinterested view of the American patriotism [...] American history has been encrusted with accretions of self-congratulatory myth" (14). Starting from the 1980s, he argues, "a new insistence that America be admired, almost worshiped" (xii) arose, and an object of worship cannot, by definition, be questioned. In a country in which school boards are an expression of political power, then, to challenge a reassuring national myth in the classroom is in and of itself somewhat heretical. If popular consciousness is identified, as argued by Bruce Kuklick, through an analysis of popular writing such as editorials, best sellers, pulp fiction, political speeches (443), then the current challenges to the teaching of some canonical works of literature must be understood as a manifestation of the tension between the inevitable evolution of American culture and society and the unwillingness to deconstruct the comforting narrative built around American history and culture. The latter has generated a political rhetoric where the protection (or the appearance of protection) of American values is the primary factor dominating the debate on national identity. Attempts to influence what is taught in schools, particularly in flagrant examples such as Governor DeSantis in Florida (the state at the top of every book-ban list), include a performative aspect that is evocative of the "Freedom Fries" movement of the early 2000s (Edwards 270). This time, instead of putting a popular dish in the middle of a foreign policy controversy, popular culture in general is at the core of the debate: one of the quintessentially American characters, Mickey Mouse, suddenly found himself in the middle of a policy controversy when Disney opposed the Don't Say Gay bill sponsored by DeSantis. The legislation had the intention of doing with gender identity and sexual orientation something similar to what has been done in matters of race, in which, as Morrison noted, "silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse" (142). The strategy seems to be to avoid any discussion of uncomfortable subjects. And it is expanding to affect any entity deemed a threat to the national myth.

In the American broader cultural landscape, it's impossible not to notice that the attempts to influence the circulation of language and knowledge have gone beyond the school system. Classic films have been called into question. Novels have undergone a process of editing to take out language

considered offensive to contemporary sensibilities. What happened with Roald Dahl's books is particularly significant. These texts, aimed at children, have been reworked by Puffin in order to remove terms such as "fat" (Alter and Harris), an effort justified with the argument that children would then repeat the offensive term (a similar reason was presented in the case of the N-word in Twain and Lee) (see Lock). Other parts of Dahl's books were "updated," for instance erasing gender references about the Oompa-Loompas in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), and turning mothers and fathers into "parents" in order to accommodate a more inclusive notion of family and gender roles (Cumming et al.).

Works by authors like Dahl inevitably include elements considered inappropriate by today's standards.[7] This is why, for example, in the 1970s Dahl himself changed the portrayal of the Oompa-Loompas to erase its racist implications, making them an imaginary people from Oompaland instead of pygmies from Africa (Baxter 542). There is a difference, however, between an author deciding to update their own work and a third party making the decision – one that in the case of publishers is usually the result of a business strategy. It is also worth noticing that there is a difference between Puffin's editing of Dahl's books and Sorkin's adaptation of Lee's work. An adaptation presupposes a new reading of a text, often in the light of contemporary historical events. It is something different to operate a change on the source text in order to make it more palatable for modern sensibilities. To limit access to an influential text expressing outdated values, be it with editing or by banning it from the syllabus, has cultural repercussions as readers are kept from seeing it for what it is: a document.[8] And documents can, and should, be read and taught with context, perspective and awareness.

That classics are now at the center of political controversies exposes the relationship between the teaching of art and literature and the notion of

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7 Another example is represented by the anti-Semitic tropes in *The Witches* (1983): see Dubno.

8 Lionel Trilling, the critic perhaps most responsible for the hypercanonization of *Huckleberry Finn*, described Twain's novel as "one of the central documents of American culture" (101).

national identity. The socio-cultural influence of literature is not mutually exclusive with its aesthetic value. In any national culture, the canon tells a people who they are, by both portraying the values and themes that shaped them through history and excluding other, contrasting values and topics. Gates describes the canon as "the 'essence' of tradition, indeed, as the marrow of tradition: the connection between the texts of the canon is meant to reveal the tradition's inherent, or veiled, logic, its internal rationale" (*Loose Canons* 32). He also highlights the connection between a literary education and Americanness: "universal education in this country was justified by the argument that schooling made good citizens, good American citizens; and when American literature started to be taught in our schools, part of the aim was to show what it was to be an American" (34). Hence, the intersection of literature, fantasy and nationalism in American culture is quite powerful.

Expanding and Multiplying

In 1993, Allen Carey-Webb observed that

> since no text by a black – or any other minority group member for that matter – has yet to make it to the list of most frequently taught works, *Huckleberry Finn* has a peculiar visibility. The novel remains the only one in the common 'canon' to treat slavery, to represent a black dialect, and to have a significant role for an African American character. (23)

While this is changing, the special prominence of Twain's novel has had enduring consequences as, for a long time, its troubling representation of slavery and Black people has been the only one acknowledged. Granted that the syllabus has gotten more diverse in the past few decades, Carey-Webb's argument is still relevant. Firstly, the fact that literature is under attack from the institutions reminds us of the importance of diversity in the canon. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, myths and traditions are as slowly shaped as they are deconstructed. A few years of a more diverse syllabus are not enough to balance the cultural impact of Jim being for

such a long time the only African American character with a significant role within the standards of the American canon.

The predominant whiteness of canonical authors grants tropes like the "white savior" a bigger impact – what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the danger of the single story."[9] In school curricula, the problem is not as much the importance given to Lee's writing about segregation, as the absence, for instance, of James Baldwin's. In challenging the American myth, the solution is not to remove controversial texts from the canon, but to use them as an opportunity to analyze American culture and history. Fishkin has devoted a significant amount of her writing on *Huckleberry Finn* to the implications of teaching a novel that occupies such a complicated position in American literature:

> If we lived in a world in which racism had been eliminated generations before, teaching *Huck Finn* would be a piece of cake. Unfortunately that's not the world we live in. The difficulties we have teaching this book reflect the difficulties we continue to confront in our classrooms and our nation. As educators, it is incumbent upon us to teach our students to decode irony, to understand history, and to be repulsed by racism and bigotry wherever they find it. ("Teaching Mark Twain" 34)

Huckleberry Finn can be a masterpiece *and* have a complex history when it comes to race.[10] The analysis of both those aspects feels necessary.

When it comes to updating the role of canonical literature in the curriculum, the solution seems twofold. On the one hand, it is necessary to keep expanding the number of readings and, consequently, of narrative voices. On the other, according to Morrison, it is important to expand the act of reading itself:

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9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>.

10 Stephen Railton highlights the importance of the contradictions of Twain's novel: "since it is racist as well as about racism, in itself it is part of the problem. The vexed aptness of *Huck Finn* is that it makes the problem immediate, personal, emotionally compelling. At its worst, it insinuates the legacy of racism. At its best, though, it convinces us – the way novels convince, through our feelings – how much we stand to gain by trying to solve the problem" (393).

> If we supplement our reading of *Huckleberry Finn*, expand it – release it from its clutch of sentimental nostrums about lighting out to the territory, river gods, and the fundamental innocence of Americanness – to incorporate its contestatory, combative critique of antebellum America, it seems to be another, fuller novel. It becomes a more beautifully complicated work that sheds much light on some of the problems it has accumulated through traditional readings too shy to linger over the implications of the Africanist presence at its center. We understand that, at a certain level, the critique of class and race is there, although disguised or enhanced by humor and naiveté. (156)

The possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations in a single text should be considered one of the features of great literature. In Twain's novel, Elaine and Harry Mensh acknowledge, aside from the traditional, infantilizing interpretation of Jim, another reading "which holds that Jim adopts a survival strategy devised by the slaves: deliberately mirroring the stereotypes in white minds, he feigns the traits attributed to him" (13). This interpretation has been recently taken on by Percival Everett, whose novel *James* (2024) offers a rewriting of Twain's classic precisely along these lines. It is easy to speculate whether Everett was prompted to write *James* by the banning efforts of these recent years, particularly considering the crucial significance he gives to language and reading in the book. Regardless, in his review of Everett's novel in *The New York Times*, Dwight Garner writes that *James* "should come bundled with Twain's novel" ("Huck Finn Is a Masterpiece"). A paired reading of the two books would certainly provide an enriched perspective on one of the most significant topoi in America's consciousness.

Instead, national myths rely on the dominance of a single narrative and, thus, of a single interpretation. Hodgson defines "dangerous" the unrealistic features of exceptionalism, as they lead to "hubristic assumptions of the American destiny" (16). While he develops his argument with reference to narratives about the Iraq war as an example of actions that shape the future, the efforts to ban or alter literary texts highlights the linkages between the past and the present: a distorted understanding of American history cannot but cause a distorted understanding of the country's identity. As Brian Finney remarks about *Beloved*, it "is about a haunting that won't go away. Only by returning to the past can the present lead on to the future"

(25). A return to the past can lead anywhere only through an analysis of its nuances and contradictions, not clinging to an idealized, pre-established, comforting interpretation.

John Alberti observes that "in the end, the controversy over *Huckleberry Finn* or any other text is not finally an interpretive argument, but a debate over what education should be" (934). I would bring his point one step forward, by drawing attention to the (convenient?) absence of one, fundamental factor from both sides of the book-banning debate: teaching. Every argument about the harm that readers (especially young readers) would encounter in the interaction with a work of literature that includes unsettling themes seems to neglect the idea that students are not left to deal with the text by themselves. The mediation provided by the teacher, their role in expanding the knowledge and the nuances present in literary works is crucial: Fishkin writes that *Huckleberry Finn* must be presented "in a larger historical and literary context – one that includes the history of American racism and the literary productions of African American writers" ("Teaching Mark Twain" 32). With a novel like this, she argues,

> a philosophy of 'the text and nothing but the text' is irresponsible and counterproductive when it comes to bringing this book into today's classroom. If we want to teach *Huck Finn*, we have to be willing to teach other works before it and alongside it. Am I saying that if we want to teach this text responsibly, we have to redo the entire American literature syllabus in secondary school and college classrooms? Yes. Sometimes a work of art can be a lens through which a moment in history is refracted with unprecedented clarity and brilliance. ("The Challenge of Teaching" 190)

However, in the book ban debates, teachers' essential role as described by Fishkin seems to be non-existent. But there is always a filter inserted between young readers and texts, whether animated by political, economic or academic interests.[11] Teachers providing context and explanations,

11 Gates remarks that "to speak of a curriculum untouched by political concerns is to

expanding the reading of the text and bringing it beyond the comfort zone seem unacknowledged, possibly due to the subversive implications of their work.

Ako-Adjei remarks that the American school system is unprepared to question controversial works like Lee's and the resulting "construction of white innocence" (198). However, either as counter-narratives, documents or both, I would argue that literary works represent an essential tool not only to understand American culture but also American history. Book banning efforts animated by reactionary intents have – rightfully so – received a lot of attention in the public debate. However, the removal of texts for more progressive or politically correct reasons also represents a rejection of the possibilities of teaching, and therefore in a way a rejection of history. Even a text filled with racist tropes has an educating function if it is taught while addressing its contingent historical context. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for instance, was considered for a long time a positive narrative about blackness, an interpretation that is impossible to embrace today. Rather than removing texts from the curriculum when their conventional perception changes for the worse, however, I would argue that it is preferable to teach them along with the controversial dynamics that surrounded their writing and earlier interpretations. This helps challenge cultural assumptions, create more informed readers – hence, more informed *citizens*. Complexity isn't a vice.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Anna Ferrari holds a PhD in American literature from Sapienza, University of Rome and teaches American Literature and English at Sapienza University of Rome and at the University of Florence as an adjunct professor. Her writing has appeared in *Ácoma. Rivista internazionale di Studi Nordamericani*, *Book 2.0*, *JAm It! Journal of American Studies* in Italy, and *The Polyphony*. Among her research interests are AIDS literature, LGBTQ culture, camp, Jewish humor, pop culture, and representation of the urban space.

imagine – as no one does – that education could take place in a vacuum. Stated simply, the thrust of the pieces gathered here is this: Ours is a late-twentieth-century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions – to forge, for once, a civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities – is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture" (*Loose Canons* xv).

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