We Need to Talk About English: On National Literature Surveys and Other Aspects of the Curriculum

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Abstract
This essay argues for reevaluating the national literature survey model in the first year of postsecondary English instruction in Norway and considering alternatives that are more ethical, inclusive and innovative than nation-based surveys. In order to make this argument, the essay discusses the problems with literary nationalism and the kinds of political implications involved in teaching literature as restricted by the figure of the nation. The essay also challenges Norwegian higher education to consider the purposes of the English Program within the modern Norwegian university.

Keywords: national literature survey, global English literature, American literature, literature and pedagogy, American literature in Norway, postsecondary literature instruction

I am a United States citizen who has been teaching at the postsecondary level in Norway for many years. Working at the University of Agder in Kristiansand, I teach in the first-year American literature survey, which is a staple of English programs around the country. I am skeptical about the place of the American literature survey in the curriculum, and I have begun encouraging my students to question its value for them. The matter might come up in a discussion about the institutional history of the American literature survey in Norway, or in relation to some student's complaint about the bulky size of the *Norton anthology of American literature*. Our current Norton model is the Shorter ninth edition, about which many students who have bought it say it is not short enough. But long or short, the *Norton anthology* and the national literature surveys in which they typically feature are overdue for reconsideration.

The questions I pose to students about the value of the American literature survey are partly rhetorical, and partly meant to cultivate a healthy self-awareness about the relation between literature and the figure

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of the nation. The questions are also sincere. Since the texts we read are presented as belonging to and participating in a national culture from which the students in the classroom are excluded, not being American, what is the point? In Norway, the American literature survey does not promote a civic mindedness that proponents of the literature survey might claim for it in the US. It does not bind the students to a sense of collective identity. Since it does not do these things, we must ask what the course is supposed to accomplish *as* an English language national literature survey. If the goal is to promote language learning or personal development, then why is the figure of the nation so prominent? If the goal is to promote cultural and historical understanding, or 'civilization' instruction, then why privilege literary texts in the manner we do? In this essay I shall train these questions about our practices and assumptions onto literature instruction in the first year of the English program in Norway, although the issues involved go beyond what we teach our students at this level. I want to focus on the first year partly because many of our students—those pursuing their education at institutions where the national survey courses are regularly offered—will receive most of their postsecondary literature instruction in these national survey courses. I am writing this essay because I am uncomfortable with that. I will argue that we should reorient our often highly populated first-year literature courses away from the nation-based paradigm, so that we can teach literature in more ethical, inclusive, adventurous, and innovative ways. I believe that adopting a global English approach is far more likely to deliver on these desired ends. The first part of this essay will consist of argument against teaching the national literature survey. In the second part I will make the case for reorienting our first-year literature instruction toward a global horizon. In the third part I want to gesture toward a more comprehensive issue: the purpose of the English Program itself in Norwegian higher education.

Against the national literature survey

We might want to rethink the American literature survey for some of the same reasons that motivate college and university instructors in the US. In an essay titled 'Lose the chronology, lose the anthology: Clearing the way for innovation in American literature survey courses', J. D. Isip calls for 'a reconsideration of how we teach what we have to teach' (2011: 39). Isip (2011) questions basic pedagogical assumptions and offers useful ideas and suggestions for rethinking approaches to the venerable survey

course. He complains about 'the narrow, compartmentalized focus of faculty and the unquestioned acceptance of [the] time period/anthology-driven model' (Isip 2011: 41). Isip's criticism is directed at what he perceives as a general lack of self-reflection about both method and justification in the American literature survey, and his goal in part is to break up, or break out of, the 'time period model' (2011: 41) so that writers across decades and centuries can more readily speak to one another on the basis of common themes. But that is not all. Isip (2011) also claims that the American literature survey is not good at promoting literature instruction. Rather, he writes, 'we have [been] engaged in teaching "history through literature" which is not the same thing as teaching literature, and certainly no more or less noble than teaching "culture through literature"' (Isip 2011: 46). The concerns I want to address in this essay are similar to Isip's, though they are ultimately more far-reaching because the need for *our* self-reflection and self-scrutiny is even greater. In Norway we ought to feel far less compulsion to teach the American Literature survey in the first place. Certainly, we have more reason to question our easy acceptance of its presence in the postsecondary curriculum, and we should feel a greater sense of responsibility to consider arguments for and against it on political, ethical, and pedagogical grounds.

Let's start with a common explanation for teaching the survey: our bachelor students here in Norway need the coverage that American and British national literature surveys provide before moving on to more focused, in-depth studies. Do they? The fact is that the greater part of our bachelor students' instruction in English language literature *is* the first year of study. Our department at the University of Agder offers only one taught course in literature studies at the second-year level, along with one in linguistics, and once students pass these courses they are eligible to write their bachelor theses. Study abroad was originally designed to function, at least in part, as crucial supplementation to the limited discipline instruction offered in Norway, but most bachelor students today do not avail themselves of this opportunity. For our first-year students *not* enrolled in the English bachelor program, which is the vast majority, the national literature surveys will likely constitute the full extent of their exposure to literary studies. Given these circumstances, we should think very carefully about what we want our students to learn about literature.

What are the general effects of imposing a national filter on our students' reading and learning experiences? What are the more specific effects of privileging American and British literature canons? We are conditioned by our institutional frameworks to think it perfectly natural that our English program students should learn about literature through the national literature survey. After all, the *Norton anthology* is an institution itself, and the prevalence of its use both in the US and internationally helps to perpetuate the national survey model. American literature has been a part of literature instruction at the postsecondary level in Norway for a long time now. The University of Oslo introduced the American literature survey in the wake of the First World War, and it created the first chair in American literature in 1946. However, the idea of both national literature and a progressive national literary history goes further back in the past. In *An ecology of world literature*, Alexander Beercroft argues that the modern emergence of a 'national ecology' of literature 'lies in the supplanting of the cosmopolitan past' (2015: 202). Early modern cultures both in Europe and elsewhere, he explains, employed vernacular literatures 'in some kind of complementary distribution with a cosmopolitan literature … (In Europe the cosmopolitan language was of course Latin.) With the rise of modernity, a new and antagonistic relation began to hold sway between cosmopolitan and vernacular literatures, marking the difference between 'early modern and modern "nationalisms"' (2015: 202):

> In the national literary ecology's original home, Western Europe, this new ecology takes the form of a notional ontological equivalence between national literatures, which does little to hide the structuring inequalities of the system, just as the post-Westphalian system of international law creates a fiction of the equality of nations while simultaneously enabling the inequalities of power inherent to the European order … While notions of communal identity and fellow-feeling among members of a shared linguistic, religious or cultural community are nothing new, the framework of the nation-state represents a qualitatively different version of these sentiments, shaping them into a uniform and universalizing system of notionally discrete identities, an experience very much at odds with the complex and overlapping categories of identity common to the pre-modern world. (Beercroft 2015: 202)

In this manner, national literatures see their environments as whole unto themselves. Through the offices of literary history, they create a deep past for themselves by assimilating elements of vernacular heritage. Furthermore, national literatures are 'from the beginning constructed as

elements of an *inter-national* system of literatures' (Beercroft 2015: 199). They are designed, in other words, for competition.

By its very nature, the national literature survey perpetuates in the minds of our students a vision of separate national destinies. And even though, as Beercroft (2015) suggests, literary history views the literary canon 'as a guide to reading rather than a model for literary production' (201), the national literature survey projects the nation state as the ultimate horizon for both individual creative motivation and the collective significance, or the meaning, of literature. Do we believe this? Every day we use digital communication devices that bounce electronic signals off orbiting satellites. We travel to far off continents for conferences and vacations, and our colleagues and collaborators are likely to come from all over the world. Our Norwegian students attend classes with young people studying in Norway and from around Europe, and increasingly, from various countries in Asia and elsewhere. Yet they are urged through the very form of the national literature survey to think in terms of national stories, national experiences, and national voices.

What we cannot deny is that literary production in the US has been shaped in part by an imperative to defend the concept of national literature, and to define the contours of a distinctly American literature. At the same time, we must keep in mind that literary history and the canon mainly possess a prescriptive value. They constitute a 'guide to reading,' but of course a very powerful and persuasive one. The survey paradigm essentially commits the literature instructor to foreground the story of national growth and development as correlative to literary expression, at least if the instructor is to do any justice to the contents and the contours of the *Norton anthology* or other similar products conventionally used to support the survey model. I believe there is good reason to account for the story of the national literary narrative and to educate students about its historical roots, even though I am arguing for abandoning the national literature survey. It is important for our students to know that the imperative to defend the concept of national literature was strong in the nineteenth century, when modern political consciousness, mass media, and public education were all being forged in the matrix of nationalist ideology. Our students should know that the First World War provided a great boost to the national literary paradigm, when the political figure of the nation-state itself emerged victorious over the old central European empires, bolstered by the Wilsonian ideal of 'national self-

determination.' In the US, as in other countries, literary authors both dead and alive were pressed into the service of promoting the idea that literary expression was largely shaped by national experience and national identity. In the years between the wars, an important connection was forged in the US between an increasingly masculine concept of authorship and a masculinized notion of democratic citizenship.

Such lessons about US literary history are important, not because they tell us about the *exceptionalism* of America, but because they help to underscore a more general lesson about the susceptibility of literary studies to ideological repurposing. It is inevitable that art will be used by people to justify a certain belief system, or a certain way of life. Indeed, this lesson is crucial for understanding what art is for: it is a readily glorified and mystified, and just as readily marginalized and abused, mode of communication, and from the time of cave paintings it has (very likely) always been an important way of creating a sense of community. The question then becomes one of values: what does any specific community of art consumers take to be the significance of its treasures? How do they interpret them? What lessons about themselves and others do they draw from them? Our students should understand that the answers to such questions are always being contested.

During the early cold war period, the national literary-critical paradigm, or the liberal consensus paradigm, trained students to interpret American literature in specific ways. The lessons were predicated on the idea of American exceptionalism, on a faith in critical consensus across the political spectrum, and on an adherence to a narrow, race-based literary canon. The breach of national faith caused by the Vietnam War, along with the rise of African American and other civil rights movements, immigration reforms, and the subsequent emergence of multiculturalism, helped to bring significant changes. The qualities of the American story started changing. The range of writers represented in American literature courses became more ethnically diverse as immigration from outside of Europe, especially from Asia and Central America, started rising from the late 1960s.

Let us consider for a moment the rise of multiculturalism in American literature. The most immediately graspable story communicated in the later pages of the *Norton anthology* editions we use in our classrooms today is that of a multi-ethnic flowering of American life and art in the postwar decades, as well as the widespread liberalization of attitudes

towards ethnicity and otherness following on the heels of civil rights struggles and immigration reforms. Look at the roster of authors in the *Norton anthology of American literature* whom, since around 1950, were either born abroad or born into families as first-generation Americans: Julia Alvarez, Rita Dove, Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, Li-Young Lee, Jamaica Kincaid, and others. One might think how inevitable that these gifted writers, or their parents before them, ended up in the US, the nation of immigrants. Yet, despite the considerable historical and literary-historical background provided in the *Norton anthology*, one gets little sense of the driving forces for the mainly postwar, 'third wave' immigration history that these writers were a part of. Such forces are variable and complex, as they are in previous periods of US immigration history, but amongst them we cannot overlook the global violence, dislocation and misery caused by America's postwar/cold war power struggles. This includes the waging of conventional war, the backing of repressive pro-American dictatorships, and the widespread meddling in domestic political affairs of countries for the sake of promoting American interests. How should the knowledge of this globally dispersed history influence what we think about the *Norton anthology*, populated as it is in late sections by writers whose families were in effect driven to the US by acts of American aggression on the world stage? How should this knowledge affect how we understand the logic of the survey course?

One way of looking at it is that the *Norton anthology* in its post-1945 section very productively draws our attention to American literature's complex insinuation with the world. To some degree, the anthology reveals American literature as 'a species of world literature'. The problem with that, as Jeffery R. Di Leo suggests in *American literature as world literature*, is that '[w]hen considered as a species of world literature, it becomes much more difficult to track the "progress" of American literature, or to map and contain it. As world literature, American literature requires many different maps and many different timelines that connect and disconnect its history, or more properly, its histories' (2018: 7). The consequence of seeing American literature as world literature is a very logical dissolution of the unified image of American literature, a giving-over to the critical discoherence of the old field-Imaginary for the sake of new ways of seeing, and new ways of ordering and connecting literary texts. This is a daunting prospect, threatening both what we know and

what we do. Indeed, Di Leo (2018) can't quite bring himself to endorse the very project he outlines in his introduction to a collection of essays that seek to imagine what taking world literature seriously might mean for the discipline of American literature. In an opening gesture meant to underscore the scope of the problem, Di Leo (2018) rightfully claims that from the very beginning of 'American literature', the annals of the late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century explorers 'always already' constitute 'a story about world literature' (6):

> Or more directly, from the annals of exploration and discovery comes a story of world literature *that comes to be* American literature. The more we begin to appreciate this and understand it, the more doing American literature with a timeline broken into periods and a list of individuals born in the United States becomes fraught with difficulty. 'Made in America' is often the other side of 'Made in the World', and bringing this to bear on our understanding of American literature is the task of the more globally and transnationally attuned twenty-first century sensibility. Thus, our task as students of American literature who want to view American literature through the lens of world literature is both an easy one and a difficult one. (Di Leo 2018: 6)

If it is an easy task, that is because of the American inclination to confuse, or conflate, the world and America; which, extrapolating from Di Leo's observation about the world literary dimensions of the writings of the early Spanish, French, and English explorers, is precisely what has allowed for the easy domestication of immigrant literature as American literature. It makes far more sense to think of immigrant literature as transnational, or better yet, global literature. If it is simultaneously difficult to view American literature through the lens of world literature, that is because the project is prone to an element of bad faith. Di Leo (2018) himself displays a strong desire to have it both ways: to maintain the integrity of American literature despite the transnational and global critical provocations he invites.

I would like to consider the value of, and the justifications for, presenting to our students a dis-integrated picture of American literature, by foregrounding a global vision of English literary studies in the classroom. The greatest justification in my mind is that this wider-angle vision better reflects the conditions of the world we now live in, with instantaneous communications, world-wide economic development, increased global economic interdependence, and the rise of English, or Englishes, as a lingua franca. The rise of English is an historical development at the very heart of what it is that we do professionally, and

critical reflection on this situation seems crucial to me. Our curriculum, our pedagogy, our very jobs could not exist outside of this conjunction, and for the sake of our students' education in English language studies we should be talking about it with them. 'While we cannot deal with English without also dealing with globalization, we need to consider very carefully how we understand globalization in order to understand global English' (2010: 115), writes Alistair Pennycook in the pages of *The Routledge companion to English language studies*. The circuitous syntax speaks volumes in its own right. As Pennycook (2010) sees it, globalization and the spread of global Englishes are mutual causes and effects: 'it is evident not only that English is widely used around the globe but also that it is part of those processes we call globalization' (113). What this means, or how this will play out in the future, is anybody's guess. In *An ecology of world literature* Beercroft (2015) poses anxious questions about this linguistic globalization. 'Where in particular', Beercroft wonders, 'does this leave literature in English? Will the English literature of the future be written in a variety of global Englishes, or in English as a lingua franca, or will native speaker varieties continue to predominate?' (261).

Beercroft (2015) sees significant signs of this anxiety about global English reflected in 'aspects of contemporary literature' (261), or more specifically, in critical debates about contemporary American literature:

> Horace Engdhal's comments on American literature as not participating "in the big dialogue of literature," Tim Parks's contrast between the pared-down style of contemporary writers in European languages and the exuberant diction and local color of American writers such as Jonathan Franzen, Vittorio Coletti's observation that American literature (like, for him, Israeli and Italian literature) remains more resolutely national than most other literatures today … could these observations perhaps be understood not in terms of a hegemonic Anglophone culture indifferent to whether its products are accessible to foreigners but rather of a somewhat fragile and threatened culture, using its capacity to generate slang and pop-culture mythologies as an adaptation to ensure its continued viability in the world of Global Englishes? (Beercroft 2015: 261–262)

The response to Beercroft's question is not nearly as important as the simple fact that it can be legitimately asked; it would have been almost unimaginable thirty years ago. The question itself opens the space for new visions. It admits to the non-exceptionalism of American literature as an archive belonging to a non-exceptional nation; it gestures toward the fact that contemporary American authors must compete all the harder for attention on the world stage today, and that literary canons are cultural

products subject to market forces. The acknowledgement of this hard fact of global economic competition undermines notions of the literary spirits of nations. And whether or not it is true that American literature 'remains more resolutely national' than literature produced in many other parts of the world today, it is definitely true that those who persist in teaching national surveys help to perpetuate a nation-based interpretive model.

There are many great writers from the US worthy of our students' attention. The packaging is the problem, the national flag wrapped around the anthology pages, the literary-critical frame that is always forcing the picture of the nation in between the reader and the text. Post-secondary level literature instructors *should* teach about the history of national literary history, as I have suggested above, because it reveals so much about the importance of art in our lives, as well as the nature of our responsibilities towards the art we love. But I believe the time has passed for us to be *doing* national literary history in our first-year English classrooms. We may be located a long way from major centers of English-language literature production here in Norway, but educators still help to set the tone for discussion and debate about it. What we say and do, or do not say and do, in our classrooms will have effects, though it is difficult to gauge them. Still, we do know that some of our students will write masters theses and get jobs teaching in high schools and junior high schools. They will introduce American and British authors to their pupils, and they will likely read little other English-language literature in the classroom because they will have gotten the message from us that nothing else really matters.

Reorienting toward a global horizon instead of teaching the American literature survey in the first year of post-secondary education, we should consider teaching a course with literary inputs from various parts of the English-speaking world along with the US and the UK, depending on the selected topic and the aims of the course. Inviting the world of English-language writers to a substitute first-year literature course might encourage a postcolonial critical approach, in which anti-colonial resistance, diasporic identity, or nationalism itself might function as organizing themes. A new course would not preclude a focus on US relations with specific regions or countries, though the novelty of such a course would lie in its exploration of such relations from a non-hegemonic European-American perspective.

A first-year course drawing its inputs from beyond the US (and Britain) could be organized thematically, in such a manner that does not

ignore cultural and social-political contexts, but delivers lessons about how literature is shaped by historical forces; and just as importantly, how literature does its own shaping as well—of readers' feelings and understanding about these very forces and their effects and impacts on our lives. In *Mapping world literature*, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen suggests the value of 'seeking and finding constellations based on formal and thematic similarities in international canons…' (2008: 139). He finds precedent for this literary-pedagogical notion of the constellation, which is really another word for the theme, or the organizing concept, in Erich Auerbach's 'Philologie der Weltliteratur', where the German philologist and comparative literature scholar locates 'the solution to the complexity of world literature in finding *Ansätze* [approaches] that would have a particular *Strahlkraft* [illumination], around which knowledge about literature from diverse parts of the world could be assembled' (Rosendahl Thomsen 2008: 139). That complexity of world literature is significantly reduced for us, insofar as our discussion, unlike Rosendahl Thomsen's and his interlocutors, bears strictly on global English literatures rather than foreign language literatures in translation, or otherwise. Nevertheless, it is still a tall order. Adopting a global English approach to literature instruction in the first-year classroom would require considerable retooling. It would require partly new curriculum, new pedagogical approaches, and attention to new questions: What does English literature *mean* in a global environment? How has globalization, or theories of globalization, come to influence attitudes about national identity, and local identity too? What, as Nicola Galloway and Heath Rose consider in *Introducing global Englishes*, are the 'advantages and disadvantages of a global lingua franca' (2015: xvi); and what are the various ways of claiming authority for English? How will 'the growing dominance and centrality of English', as Beercroft (2015) puts it, impact 'linguistic ecology' and 'literary form' in the future (295)? These are different kinds of questions than we are used to asking in the first-year literature classroom, but I believe they are more relevant to our students' lives than many of the questions we pose to them under the national literary paradigm. As for Rosendahl Thomsen's (2008) constellations, he devotes separate chapters in *Mapping world literature* to migrant literatures and literatures of trauma. It is easy to imagine engaging first-year courses, developed by creative instructors here in Norway, on themes or constellations such as family, friendship, ecology and environment,

poverty and wealth, home and imaginary homes, immigration and emigration, education, trauma, work and play, transformations, love, health and illness, the arts.

Rosendahl Thomsen (2008) argues that the paradigm of constellations has four important things going for it: 1) realism, 2) pluralism, 3) didacticism, and 4) innovation. Its realism, he suggests, deals with how the paradigm operating on the level of the single work reveals which generic and formal properties have contributed to any particular work's canonization. Its pluralism lies in its power to connect 'internationally canonized works' with 'less circulated literature' (141). The constellation's didactic dimension inheres in how it necessitates compelling arguments for any specific assemblage of diverse texts. Finally, its innovative dimension rests in the constellation's 'capacity for finding similarities in works that are usually not thought of as belonging together' (Rosendahl Thomsen 2008: 140). The author sums things up in this manner:

> Constellations and canonization can … be valuable in revealing the finer web of literature. Like the universe, world literature is infinite, but constellations appear and help connect things near and far in a reflection of interests shared by human beings in the perpetual process of experiencing the world and its words. (2008: 142)

This emphasis on shared human experience is absolutely crucial in my mind, as is the notion of highlighting authors' shared, and mutually divergent, experiences—*struggles*, perhaps, is a better word—in communicating through English language, or Englishes, whatever readers might see as connecting disparate texts and making them speak to each other meaningfully. Constellations connect disparate things, near and far. The constellation-maker seeks out new ways of relating and connecting texts for the sake of finding new ways to produce knowledge about literature and the world.

This 'relational epistemology' of global literary studies is already helping to reorient and reenergize fields such as literary modernism. 'A relational epistemology,' Susan Stanford Friedman writes in *Planetary modernisms*, 'allows us to see the globe afresh, to see that modernity which is not one, to see modernity in its multiple and diverse forms in the geohistory of the world' (2015: 59). As both Friedman (2015) and Rosendahl Thomsen (2008) argue in different ways, a relational epistemology cashes out in terms of a relative empowerment of both the

literary text *and* the reader/interpreter over and against the explanatory power that we normally assign to history, or context. I want to be clear. These critics' point, and mine too, is *not* that historical contextualization is inherently unimportant, or old-fashioned, or intellectually impoverishing, or anything like that. Rather, their point, and mine, is that scholars can benefit from seeking out new ways to contextualize, and to get beyond the familiar constrictions of national literary history. Contextualization demands creativity, if it is to elicit excitement and motivate student-scholars and teacher-scholars alike to value and treasure literature. My experiences with colleagues at the University of Agder and elsewhere around Norway attest to the fact that much hard work and passion goes into creating and developing upper-level literature courses. We invest time and energy in personalizing them, so that they reflect those personal interests which *compel* us to make constellations, to build worlds of words out of the literary and critical resources we assemble with care and attention. In upper-level literature courses we *wish* to serve as guides in exploring literature through themes, concepts, and creative juxtapositions which we hope will fire our students' imaginations and help them to better appreciate the revelatory power of words. We should wish the same for a large group of students at the first-year level.

I want to consider one more critical articulation of this epistemology of relation and its mobilization on a planetary scale, for the sake of drawing out its creative potential. In *The planetary turn: Relationality and geo-aesthetics in the twenty-first century*, Amy Elias and Christian Moraru ask readers to consider the relation between literature and the figure of the world (2015). They suggest—not unproblematically, given the resurgence of especially nativist forms of nationalism around the world in recent years—that 'the twenty-first century is witnessing the rise of a broader, postnational formation, which is the planet' (xxv). Elias and Moraru (2015) offer planetarity as an alternative to the familiar, and fairly jaded, figure of globalism, conceived as a 'world vision' and an 'economic trajectory' (xiii), and 'understood primarily as a financially, economically, and technologically homogenizing force' (xvii). If globalism, and globalization, conjure images of one-world homogeneity through technocratic administration, the key to planetarity is a commitment to relationality. Elias and Moraru (2015) write:

> in our judgment, the best discussions of planetarity gravitate away from global studies' obsessions with economic, political, and technical administration and move

> closer to the vital problem of the ethical relation obtaining in new models of transnationality, internationality, or multinationality. This relational *potenza*—the 'strength' of the multitudes of the planet—multiplies the meaning of relatedness … Concomitantly descriptive and prescriptive, analytic and normative ('aspirational'), theories of planetarity unfold a vision not of globalized earth, but … of a 'world commons', *thus helping us conceptualize how cultural productions such as art enable this vision*. (xvii-xviii, emphasis added)

The role of literature for Elias and Moraru (2015) is not construed as primarily mimetic, but as generative. This is a crucial lesson, which emphasizes and reinforces what the national canon survey essentially reifies with its retrospective and monumentalist outlook: the role of literature and other arts in shaping the world that is always in process, which is a sort of "picturing" of what is yet to come.

The language here might conjure in the minds of science fiction fans H. G. Wells' speculative novel *The shape of things to come*, or the multitudes of other such sci-fi narratives that imagine either near-future or distant-future scenarios. At any rate, this language of picturing what is to come possesses a speculative dimension, just as it speaks more broadly to the imaginative power of literature per se. I am not suggesting that a substitute for a first-year American literature survey ought to be a science fiction course. However, I think that new courses, conceived along theme-based lines, or constellation-making, should be amenable to science fiction and fantasy inputs, and that we should think of this as an important strength. 'Genre fiction' would occupy a rightful place alongside 'literary fiction' on the reading list, so long as it contributed meaningfully to selected themes and issues. Along with other virtues, substitute courses for the traditional national survey would thus contribute to a de-ghettoization of genre fiction: they would help signal to our students that the scholarly value of literature should be measured in terms of its capacity to help us think meaningfully and productively about the world we live in. They would help students to understand that the critical thinking we encourage them to exercise requires plenty of room for the kind of imaginative power they might already associate with genre writing, as well as genre in visual media. We should also seek opportunities to incorporate comics, cinema, and television into our new courses. If there is value in drawing together in our courses relatively more familiar American or British writers with less-known writers from other parts of the English-speaking world, there is also value in bringing in contact familiar and unfamiliar media, or 'comfortable' and 'uncomfortable' media, as students may think of it.

Such a comparative approach allows us to explore with students the unique affordances of any particular medium, and it also allows us more convincingly to make the case for what we think is special about language and literary arts.

So, why not introduce students to Zakes Mda, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, Flora Nwapa, George Lamming, Earl Lovelace, Sally Morgan, Deji Bryce Olukotun, and Alexis Wright? These new critical developments in literary studies we are tracking are motivated at least in part by an ethical injunction to transcend the national literary orientation, and by a desire to open students' minds to a fuller breadth of human experiences and perspectives. If we value literature for the sake of its power to communicate the variety and richness of human experience, then we should not limit the field of inquiry in the manner to which we are conditioned by the national survey model.

What is the purpose of the English program?

The above considerations about what we should teach are inextricably connected to a bigger question: what is the English program in Norway designed for? What is its purpose, now that teacher training has its own dedicated track? Students who take our English courses can still become teachers, but it is a longer road for them, and those increasingly rare students who complete the English bachelor program, the master's program, and then Practical Teacher Training (PPU) may find themselves at a disadvantage on the job market. It seems likely that primary and secondary schools would look more favorably on those graduates from new professional training programs purpose-built to suit their needs and requirements. Some of the teacher-training students will have practiced extensively in the very school districts where they might also be seeking employment.

Here at the University of Agder, efforts are being made to encourage English bachelor students to think about career options outside of education. So far there is no professional writing or technical writing profile in the curriculum, although administration now encourages us to speak with bachelor students about careers in business-related fields. Instead, our BA curriculum offers a schizophrenic mix of mainly national literature instruction, and at many institutions, an increasingly theoretical linguistics. Considering that this design is the legacy of a time before our hyper-diverse digital media landscape, when post-secondary Norwegian

students likely benefited considerably from the kind of practical language-in-use instruction that our current, theoretically-oriented linguistics courses have evolved from, we should be more willing to question the appropriateness of this widespread English program architecture. It should also be noted that the current curriculum was designed at a time when literature played a larger part in more people's lives than it probably does today. At many institutions across Norway, students enrolled in English bachelor programs will receive roughly the same combination of too little linguistics and too little literary studies. Many of our students would prefer a more well-rounded education in one field (or sub-discipline) or the other.

Bigger changes need to come. In the meantime, we could start offering literature instruction that is more student-centered, which is to say, more practically, and ethically, oriented. We should think long and hard about what is best for our students. Arts and Humanities studies in Norway have the third lowest retention and graduation rates amongst all study programs (Statistik sentralbyrå 2019). It is possible that English programs around the country have lower rates than those for Arts and Humanities as a whole. This is the case at my university, where we are struggling to figure out how to engage students more meaningfully, so that more of them will complete their English bachelor degrees. If we were not beholden to the national survey, perhaps we could make literature speak more directly to our first-year students, especially to those who may be considering further literary studies. Perhaps we could design new first-year courses that are more meaningful to students; that better fulfill important pedagogical aims, such as imparting problem-solving and critical thinking skills, as well as creative thinking skills; that cultivate a sense of the relevance of literature for their own lives, and for their personal growth.

We know that literature is more than just cultural-historical instruction, yet we run the danger of reducing it to that by hawking the national story. We know that literature does more than reinforce the image of the powerful tribe. Literature is a potent art form, and it can help us find our way to new visions and new worlds. Through its training and attunement of the complex psychological and perceptual processes of reading, it can help to unleash remarkable human powers of empathy and belonging. These are the powers that make all new things possible.

'Literature is one of the few spheres that try to keep us close to the hard facts of the world', the Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk writes in her recent Nobel Laureate address, 'because by its very nature it is always

psychological, because it focuses on the internal reasoning and motives of … characters, reveals their otherwise inaccessible experience to another person … Only literature is capable of letting us go deep into the life of another being' (2019: 14). Reading literature cannot magically make us better people, but it makes us more aware that any possible comprehension of 'the hard facts of the world', as Tokarczuk (2019) puts it, possesses a deeply interpersonal dimension. This is a lesson variously informed by developmental psychology, psychoanalytic theory, continental philosophy, parenting, friendship, and formal education. We know the world through feats of projection, or, getting into the minds of others to see what they think. And through this, we also learn about the malleability of the world. The world is made and remade by remaking social bonds, or to put it in a more literary way, by collective exposure to new points of view, new stories, and new plots.

The logic of this recognition drives Tokarczuk (2019) to the same kind of appreciation for a global mindset that we witness in the writings of our critics and theorists above:

> We should drop the simplistic categories of highbrow and lowbrow literature, popular and niche, and take the division into genres very lightly. We should drop the definition of 'national literatures', knowing as we do that the universe of literature is a single thing, like the idea of *unus mundus*, a common psychological reality in which our human experience is united. The Author and the Reader perform equivalent roles, the former by dint of creating, the latter by making a constant interpretation. (2019: 22)

It would be so valuable to share Tokarczuk's thoughts with students, because I think it would confirm what many of them who are already avid readers feel about literature. Our experience of reading is private, reading silently as we do, but it connects us with others in a very powerful and life-affirming way. This is another way of saying that the universe of literature is both one thing *and* many things, just as Susan Friedman (2015) says about modernism. (It is not simply 'a single thing,' as Tokarczuk writes.) Readers discover the freedom of finding themselves through others, within the context of a shared capacity of language, and within a framework requiring a disciplined cultivation of interiority. There is no national horizon to this work of discovery, knowing as we do that what is at play in our relation to literature far outstrips the nation's power to define community or limit belonging.

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