

Lagging Behind: Tradition and the Prevalence of the Western Canon in Davidson Humanities

Syllabi from the 2000s

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Looking at the 2017-2018 Davidson College Humanities website, one might be startled by how far removed it is from tradition.¹ When the humanities program began, it was the epitome of tradition, starting with ancient Mesopotamia and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and following through to the Modern Age. Now, the course has been shortened to a yearlong focus on the theme of revolution. Not only did the program upend the traditional thematic approach, but the curriculum emphasizes technology with the syllabus, coursework, and portfolios. This shift likely occurred as a result of the controversy over the Western Canon that began with the culture wars of the 80s and 90s.²

The controversy and culture wars of the 80s and 90s over the Western canon and Western civilization narrative have not only persisted to the current academic moment but have also become a significant debate in popular media today.³ One traditionally more conservative group adamantly defends the value of the Western Canon and western civilization narrative, explaining that it should remain an integral piece of academia. In an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, conservative columnist David Brooks explores the value of the Western civilization narrative, explaining that it offers a shared purpose for a certain “humanistic ideal” or common intellectual ground to work from.⁴ He argues that those who believe the Western civilization narrative to be oppressive fail to understand that a move away from the Western canon causes further polarization and intolerance. On the other side of the spectrum, a more liberal, academic group laments the lack of diversity in the traditional study of western civilization. This also holds true

¹ hum.davidson.edu

² Matt Reed, “Remember the Canon Wars?” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 11, 2013, accessed March 27, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/remember-canon-wars>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ David Brooks, “The Crisis of Western Civ,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2017, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/opinion/the-crisis-of-western-civ.html>.

in popular media as many have even replaced the Western Canon with other texts that better represent a more diverse authorship. *The Root*, a magazine about African-American culture, published an article in which they attempted to “rewrite the Western canon,” including a more diverse group of voices attesting to issues of gender, sexuality, racism, and cultural differences.⁵ Somewhere in the middle are those who praise the invaluable role of the Western Canon in humanistic inquiry yet argue that the canon should be expanded to include more voices. Reviewing Harold Bloom’s novel, *The Western Canon*, author Daniel Mendelsohn explains that the Western Canon holds value in showing the ways in which past thinking has influenced the present, but he pleads that the canon must adapt to include new voices which speak to modern cultures and ideologies.⁶

This tension between the Western Canon and diversifying voices becomes evident in a close examination of Davidson College Humanities syllabi from 2008, 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2018. These specific syllabi offer insight into the divergence from the Western Canon and eventually the entire step away from the Western Civilization narrative. While at first glance it may seem as though the Humanities program began to diversify their syllabi in the 2000s, a closer read reveals that the program’s content did not change much until 2013 and 2017 and did not significantly change until this academic year with a divergence from the Western civilization narrative and a lesser emphasis on works traditionally included in the Western Canon. This becomes evident in examination of the texts used, looking at the prevalence of the Western

⁵ Eboni Farmer, “The Root Rewrites the Western Canon,” *The Root*, November 2, 2009, accessed March 27, 2018, <https://www.theroot.com/the-root-rewrites-the-western-canon-1790867720>.

⁶ Daniel Mendelsohn et al. “How Would a Book Like Harold Bloom’s *Western Canon* Be Received Today?” *New York Times*, March 18, 2014, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/books/review/how-would-a-book-like-harold-blooms-western-canon-be-received-today.html>.

Canon and the diversity of authors and subject matter. Beginning with definitions of the Western Canon and Western Civilization narrative and exploring the disruption of a progress narrative, we will look to the program's inclusion of women and non-Eurocentric perspectives and cultures. Ultimately, we will find that the Davidson Humanities program was unable to create a syllabus that embodied a diverse range of lived experience until it departed from the Western Civilization narrative.

Ironically, not much scholarship exists defining the Western Canon, and not many scholars agree on what the Western Civilization narrative entails even though people often throw these terms around with the assumption that there is a common understanding or meaning. Broadly defined, the Western Canon is a large body of works that Anglo-American and European societies have upheld as the greatest works of literature and fine arts. Scholars such as Harold Bloom traditionally define the Western Canon as including revered works from ancient Greece to the 20th century United States.⁷ These texts often, but not always, come from a Eurocentric, Christian, male perspective. Universities such as Reed College, which has a reputation for being progressive, traditionally teach the Western Canon chronologically in Humanities courses focused on the Western Civilization narrative.⁸ This narrative is distinct from the canon as defined by scholars like Harold Bloom and assumes a sense of progress due to its chronological nature. This idea of progress implies that over time, we as humans are improving—becoming intellectually sophisticated, more advanced, more humane. Drawing

⁷ Leslie Schenk, "The Western Canon," *World Literature Today* 70 no. 2 (1996): 325-328, accessed April 1, 2018, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/stable/40152051?seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents.

⁸ Vimal Patel, "Students Said a Keystone Course Was Racist. Here's What Professors Did About It," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 11, 2018, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Students-Said-a-Keystone/243095>.

heavily from the Western Canon, this progress narrative often spans from Ancient Mesopotamia to the Modern Age. However, there is disagreement about what should be included in the Western Civilization narrative. Scholar Lawrence Birken asserts that the term Western Civilization proves to be too expansive and would prefer a more narrowly defined civilization.⁹ Because the Western Civilization narrative draws so heavily from the Western Canon, the canon is the largest influence determining the narrative itself although noncanonical texts can be included. For the purposes of this paper, I will use Harold Bloom's definition of the Western Canon and the traditional, expansive definition of the Western Civilization narrative.

While the work of women can be found in the Western Canon and Western civilization narrative, they have often struggled for adequate, equal representation, and this plight becomes evident in examination of the Davidson Humanities syllabi. In Spring 2008, only two of the assigned eight texts were works written by female authors.¹⁰ The program included Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, a novel that draws inspiration from E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*, a work traditionally included in the Western Canon. Smith's rendition explores the differing cultures of the United States and United Kingdom, themes of beauty, and the conflict between conservative and liberal academia.¹¹ This novel offers insight on differences of race, socioeconomic status, and how these things manifest in two different cultures. The program also included Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, a canonical work that depicts a society which primarily concerns itself with money and appearances and is highly revered for its literary stature. Clearly, these two women

⁹ Lawrence Birken, "What is Western Civilization?" *The History Teacher* 25, no. 4 (Aug., 1992): pp. 451-461, accessed 1 May 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/494353>.

¹⁰ Jonathan Berkey, "Humanities 161: Cultures and Civilizations – Family Stories," Syllabus, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 2008.

¹¹ Frank Rich, "Zadie Smith's Culture Warriors," *New York Times*, September 18, 2005, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/books/review/zadie-smiths-culture-warriors.html>.

have talent, but their voices are underrepresented in the Davidson Humanities program much like the Western Civilization narrative. Moving forward to Fall 2009, one finds no women authors in the syllabus.¹² This reality blatantly demonstrates the underrepresentation of women's voices. Progressing even further in time, the Humanities syllabus only included three women's voices in Spring 2013. The program features Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*, and Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa."¹³ These literary works encompass a wide variety of topics from social structures to experiences in a Nazi concentration camp to feminist arguments. Again, these women and others have important contributions to offer, but they are traditionally silenced for preference of a male voice. Similarly, the Davidson Humanities syllabus for Spring 2017 only includes female authors three times over the course of the semester.¹⁴ They again incorporate Virginia Woolf and add Gertrudis Gomez de Avellanada's *Sab* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Avellanada's novel demonstrates the detrimental effects of slavery on the protagonists, and in a review of the novel, author Adriana Mendez Rodenas explains, "*Sab*, still sparks the contemporary reader for its bittersweet recasting of Cuban slave society and its tragic effects."¹⁵ This novel offers a unique learning opportunity for the Humanities students as it allows them to read about an underrepresented issue written by an underrepresented author. Further, Shelley's novel remains an integral piece of the Western Canon for its literary merit, offering elements of science fiction and romanticism. These authors

¹² Meghan Griffith et al., "Humanities 250: From the Renaissance through the Eighteenth Century," Syllabus, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 2009.

¹³ Scott Denham et al., "Humanities 251: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," Syllabus, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 2013.

¹⁴ Kyra Kietryes et al., "Humanities 251: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," Syllabus, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 2017.

¹⁵ Adriana Mendez Rodenas, "*Sab*, by Gertrudis Gomez de Avellanada," *Cuban Studies* 35 (2004): 157-160, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/183669/summary>.

contribute great works, but their male peers outnumber them. Finally, in the current 2017-2018 Humanities syllabus, female authors receive much more attention with the dedication of an entire unit to the women's rights movement. In the other units, it is much easier to find women's authorship with the inclusion of Susan Sontag and Svetlana Alexievich.¹⁶ This sudden increase in the representation of women can be traced to the departure from the male-dominated Western civilization narrative emphasizing the Western Canon.

As the Western civilization narrative and Western Canon often have a Eurocentric focus, one can see how the Davidson Humanities program struggled to include more diverse perspectives until they diverged from their classical program. In Spring 2008, the Humanities program included, in their eight assigned texts, two non-canonical novels written by Middle Eastern authors documenting political transitions in the Middle East: Naguid Mahfouz's *Palace Walk* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.¹⁷ These novels offer experiences underrepresented by the Western Canon and Western civilization narrative. The diverse authorship and subject matter offers a new perspective on political transitions and, as a Howard Hower describes in a book review, opportunity for "demystifying Western readers' views of the Middle East."¹⁸ The final text the program included from outside the Western Canon, Derrick Walcott's *Omeros*, draws on the style of Homer's *Odyssey* to depict conflict over land and the realities of living with colonization.¹⁹ This epic poem offers a different perspective from a Caribbean author crafting a

¹⁶ Scott Denham et. al., "Humanities 103-104: Connections and Conflicts," Syllabus, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, Fall 2017-Spring 2018.

¹⁷ Jonathan Berkey, "Humanities 161: Cultures and Civilizations – Family Stories," Syllabus, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 2008.

¹⁸ Howard Hower, "A Pious and Depraved Life," *New York Times*, 1990, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/04/books/a-pious-and-depraved-life.html>.

¹⁹ Mary Lefkowitz, "Bringing Him Back Alive," *New York Times*, October 7, 1990, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/06/specials/walcott-omeros.html>.

story from his own life experiences. Overall, it is evident that the Davidson Humanities program made a conscious effort to draw on different cultures and life experiences to create a more diverse narrative than the traditional Western civilization one. Showing a bit of a regression in stepping away from the Eurocentric narrative, the Fall 2009 Davidson Humanities program included no perspectives from a non-European.²⁰ Although rooted in the Western civilization narrative, the Spring 2013 Davidson Humanities syllabus reflects a slightly greater shift away from the Western Canon, including Heinrich von Kleist's novella, "Betrothal in St. Domingo."²¹ This work explores themes of colonialism and racial tension, representing a positive step forward in diversifying the Humanities program beyond the Eurocentric Western Canon.²² Four years later, the Davidson Humanities program continued the push for diversity with Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden."²³ This poem depicts colonialism and provides fodder for discussion of this issue.²⁴ Along with this poem, the Davidson Humanities program spent time with a few more texts that explored the issues of colonialism, incorporating texts and authors that fell outside of the Eurocentric traditional narrative. This academic year, 2017-2018, the Davidson Humanities program achieved a syllabus not dominated by the Western Canon because it finally stepped away from the Western civilization narrative. For example, spending a unit on Rumi's

²⁰ Meghan Griffith et al., "Humanities 250: From the Renaissance through the Eighteenth Century," Syllabus, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 2009.

²¹ Scott Denham et al., "Humanities 251: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," Syllabus, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 2013.

²² Sebastian Weirauch, "Heinrich von Kleist's Novelle Die Verlobung in St. Domingo. Literatur und Politik im globalen Kontext um 1800," *German Studies Review* 69, no. 2 (2016): 236, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/618790/summary>.

²³ Kyra Kietryes et al., "Humanities 251: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," Syllabus, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 2017.

²⁴ John Bellamy Foster et al., "Kipling, the 'White Man's Burden,' and U.S. Imperialism," *Monthly Review* 55, no. 6 (November 2003), accessed May 2, 2018, <https://monthlyreview.org/2003/11/01/kipling-the-white-mans-burden-and-u-s-imperialism/>.

poetry and the relationship between Islam and mysticism, the program gave students more exposure to Middle Eastern culture. This conscious effort to craft a more diverse, non-Eurocentric syllabus allows students to learn more than they might achieve in the traditional Western civilization course reading primarily from the canon.

Ultimately, the Davidson Humanities program was unable to escape the overwhelming influence of the Western canon until it diverged entirely from the Western civilization narrative. This academic year was the first year that the course was organized in a new way. Instead of following the course of Western civilization, the program focused its academic pursuits on a common theme of revolution, drawing from a diverse body of authors and subjects to gain insight about this theme. Not only did this allow more freedom in determining the course of study, it disrupted the progress narrative, that we are continually improving ourselves, implicit in the Western Civilization narrative. Examining syllabi from the 2000s, one can see that the program, utilizing primarily canonical texts, seemed traditional for its time especially after the controversy surrounding the Western civilization narrative in the culture wars of the 80s and 90s. This debate has persisted to the present academic moment, driving the dramatic change in the Davidson Humanities curriculum. Not only is this issue important because it is nationwide conversation, but the way Humanities is taught reflects what an institution values. Older iterations of the Humanities program offer invaluable grounding in classical academic texts that teach how Western society has thought and matured for centuries. The new Humanities program offers a much more diverse group of texts, coming from authors of often underrepresented cultures and bringing new perspectives to the classroom. Because they both have values and shortcomings, it is difficult to determine a correct curriculum. However, one solution would be a combination of the two. The Davidson Humanities program could spend a unit gaining a

background in the Western civilization narrative. After this, they could progress with the newer program. As a whole, the Western Canon is too foundational to ignore, but it is too homogenous to be the sole course of study.

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