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Valeria Gennero



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Canonicity and Radical Indifference

Valeria Gennero

The literary canon, a small section of the larger body of texts that academic scholars refer to as “literature”, is a highly controversial corpus. The emergence of canonicity in institutional discourse was instrumental in defining the so-called “culture wars,” a phenomenon that reached its climax in the last decade of the twentieth century and is now back as a crucial concern in the humanities. After comparing some of the assumptions shaping past and present debates about canonicity, I will argue that, in the age of digital media, professional disputes about what is worthy of being read and taught are being usurped by a data-driven populism that thrives on outrage and polarization. This regime is *indifferent* to the distinction between truth and lies; it disdains complex rational discussions of validity claims, and it is therefore incompatible with democracy.

Throughout this essay, I borrow the expression “radical indifference” from Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). In her outstanding book, Zuboff defines surveillance capitalism as the unilateral claiming “of human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data” (p. 8). This raw material is obtained every time anyone accesses the internet. Most online interactions are tracked, and data are then inspected and transformed in “prediction products”, a precious commodity ready to be sold into the “behavioral futures market”: this is how these predictions become available to business customers interested in knowing what drives the decision-making process. Google, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, and Meta (owner of Facebook, Instagram, Threads, WhatsApp, and Messenger) are the main companies involved in the commerce of behavioral data, and, as of 2023, a meaningful role is also played by social platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) and TikTok. Zuboff argues that these corporations constitute a political-economic institutional order capable of controlling most digital information. Tech giants are thus in the position to exert a transnational influence that puts every democracy at risk:

In result, the liberal democracies and all societies engaged in the struggle to build, defend and strengthen democratic rights and institutions now stumble toward a future that their citizens did not and would not choose: an *accidental dystopia* owned and operated by private surveillance capital but underwritten by democratic acquiescence, cynicism, collusion and dependency (Zuboff, 2022, p. 3).

This accidental dystopia controls our lives through a ubiquitous digital apparatus that relies on “radical indifference” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 377). Radical indifference is a mode of knowing in which content is no longer judged by its *qualitative* value. The validity of truth claims becomes a secondary aspect, while the relevance of content is instead «measured by the ‘anonymus’ equivalence of clicks, likes and dwell times» (p. 505). It does not really matter *what* we think, as long as we are willing to spend time online; this is what really counts: our willingness to share new data that will be stored in the digital archives that track our actions and then formulate and sell predictions about our future behavior. Anything capable of increasing our level of online engagement becomes *valuable* as content. This is *the* crucial issue for contemporary literary criticism because the arts of radical indifference are the hidden and powerful engine that is sabotaging democratic systems and limiting the role of debate and dissent in university classrooms, department meetings and, increasingly, in the wider cultural public sphere. As a consequence, it is by considering the impact of social media on academic life that we can understand the mechanisms that enable the digital culture wars.

Demands to censor books have, of course, a long history, but traditionally the charges were directed mainly against works considered blasphemous, seditious, or obscene (Lewis, 1978). This is no longer the case. Books, authors and ideas are now routinely subjected to a selection practice for which a variety of definitions has been offered: some cultural commentators view it as legitimate to name it “cancel culture,” others prefer the expression “call-out culture” and underline the importance of “accountability” as a legitimate criterion linking authors to their works, thus making writers responsible for the psychological or social consequences triggered by their words. Simultaneously, a third group denies the existence of cancellations, arguing that the emphasis on this issue is the result of the moral panic orchestrated by the conservative right (Özkirimli, 2023). I accept that the phenomenon, which we can label as *cancel* or *call-out* culture, *does* indeed exist, and I suggest that it plays a pivotal part in contemporary debates about school curricula and literary canons. The vocabulary associated with this method of selection is widening with each passing day; lexical innovations like deplatforming, doxing, and trolling designate forms of censorship that are to the digital world what labeling, blacklisting, and boycotting were to the Cold War (Robbins, 2001). Within the walls of academia, the concept of *trigger warning* became extremely relevant during the second decade of the twenty-first century, introducing novel categories in the disputes about the literary canon.

The Oxford Dictionary defines trigger warning as follows: “A statement preceding a piece of writing, video, etc., alerting the reader, viewer, etc., to the fact that it contains material or content that may cause distress, esp. by reviving upsetting

memories in people who have experienced trauma". The presence of trigger warnings is usually associated with the opportunity to be excused from reading texts that students assume to be troubling or distasteful — a decision that students are encouraged to make on the basis of the labels (warnings) indicated by the instructor. A growing, diverse group of influential scholars has pointed out how trigger warnings may condone, and even foster, the refusal to engage with ideas that the students don't *already* endorse (Boyers, 2019, p. 77; Fish, 2019, p. 78; McWhorter, 2021, p. 45). Yet, the presence of trigger warnings, and the related notion of "safe space", remain crucial in recent efforts to redraw the boundaries of canonicity. What we are witnessing in contemporary debates about the curriculum is a paradoxical reverse of the situation that led to the first phase of the so-called canon wars. The battles fought in the 1990s were marked by the desire to *open up* the canon and transgress the rigid boundaries presided over by the fierce gatekeepers of tradition. Greater inclusivity and diversity — in gender, class, race — were objectives to be reached through public debate. The case for revising the canon was based ultimately on persuasion, and disagreements were supposed to be resolved by a decision-making process where different perspectives would seek a common ground. The aspiration to decolonize a notion of literature shaped by values rooted in nationalism and imperialism was disseminated through updated versions of popular academic anthologies and innovative assessments of the history of the humanities as an academic subject (Scholes, 1992, p. 142).

Today's canon wars are fought mainly through student-led initiatives, and digital platforms are playing a key role in calls to remove from academic syllabi a growing number of works accused of being offensive (because of their content or because of the unacceptable values embraced by their authors). No matter how dedicated we are to progressive ideals, difficult questions inevitably arise when we devise a reading list inspired by values of inclusivity and diversity. Should literary works published in times that did not share our concerns (and our values) be approached simply as documents of racism, misogyny, cultural appropriation, entitlement, and other attitudes which have — justly — become unacceptable in the current cultural climate? Is it indispensable to cancel them from our reading lists because of their moral weaknesses, or should we edit them removing upsetting passages? Can we be committed to social justice and still teach Virginia Woolf, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Walt Whitman, Edith Wharton, Edgar Allan Poe, and Mark Twain? Should we only access abridged versions of works which include offensive words, even when the author is Martin Luther King? The list of authors cancelled authors is long and diverse, but analyzing Virginia Woolf's reception clarifies the difference between the twentieth and twenty-first century canon wars.

The Butler Library Banner and the status of Virginia Woolf

In 1989 a group of Columbia University students attempted to hang an unauthorized banner featuring the names of women writers on the top floor of Butler Library at Columbia. They wanted to bring attention to the absence of women from the list of great thinkers whose names ornament the façade. Security guards stopped the students and immediately removed the banner. It is a sign of the changing cultural climate that Columbia Libraries now endorse the Butler Banner Project, and that a banner created by the students and approved by the university was on display for months in 2019. Things have indeed changed. Adding women to the canon is no longer a contentious issue at universities in the United States: the canon has expanded and anthologies of American and English Literature have been revised. But many other things have changed, and the selection process is now shaped by fresh concerns. It is worth noting that few of the names on the new banner were also included in 1989 (they belong to Zora Neal Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Leslie Marmon Silko). Among the discarded writers, Virginia Woolf is especially interesting, as her critical trajectory throws light on some crucial ongoing concerns.

Woolf's legacy is going through some rough times, both in the academic world, where students can avoid reading her works if they feel triggered or outraged, and in the larger cultural context. In Great Britain she has "become the figurehead of contradictory positions, which embody the faultlines that polarize British public debate and divide British Society in the age of #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #TransLivesMatter" (Favre, 2023). In 2022 Camden Council in London included Woolf's statue in Tavistock Square in the "Racism list," a catalogue of statues and street names under consideration for removal by council officers due to their legacy of racism or imperialism (Beal, 2022). Passages that can be interpreted as racist have been spotted in her diaries and in her letters. Describing the critics' detection of offensive language in Woolf's writings, Hermione Lee, an eminent Woolf scholar, observes that what is remarkable in these accusations is the fact that they are part of a lengthy tradition of "hate speech" against Woolf. Attacks against the writer (often charged with snobbery, racism, lack of patriotism or a combination of all three) began in the 1920s and have resurfaced regularly:

Why has Virginia Woolf's offensiveness become an issue again, in this country? Possibly the continuing domination of masculine critics wielding literary axes (the sort of people Virginia Woolf most despised) in the universities and on the art pages has something to do with it (Lee, 1995, p. 132).

This statement may have been written in 2022, but Hermione Lee published «Virginia Woolf and Offence» almost thirty years ago, in 1995, during the heated polemics of the twentieth century canon wars. In her essay, Lee takes issue with the readings of Woolf proposed by professional critics like Tom Paulin and John Carey; she suggests a different reading of Woolf's use of caricature and slur. What is relevant here is not Lee's argument, but the fact that there was a discussion. A disagreement. An informed divergence of opinion based on a different interpretation of texts that had first been read and then discussed.

Today's attacks on Woolf are often born of a refusal to engage with a writer who is considered guilty of opinions too unpalatable or painful to be confronted at all. Brian Morton (1955), an American novelist who also directs the Writing Program at Sarah Lawrence College in New York State, mentions Woolf's class snobbery as an aspect of her work that students find disturbing to the point of refusing to engage with it:

Anyone who's taught literature in a college or university lately has probably had a conversation like this. The passion for social justice that many students feel — a beautiful passion for social justice — leads them to be keenly aware of the distasteful opinions held by many writers of earlier generations. When they discover the anti-semitism of Wharton or Dostoevsky, the racism of Walt Whitman or Joseph Conrad, the sexism of Ernest Hemingway or Richard Wright, the class snobbery of E. M. Forster or Virginia Woolf, [many students dump] the offending books into a trash basket in their imaginations (Morton, 2019).

Morton's concern over the cancellation of Virginia Woolf is shared by Robert Boyers, Professor of English at Skidmore College, and founder and editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Salmagundi*. In 2019 Boyers published *The Tyranny of Virtue: Identity, the Academy and the Hunt for Political Heresies*, a book in which he lamented that academic life had turned into a minefield, marked by endeavors "to create a total cultural environment and to silence or intimidate opponents" (Boyers, 2019, p. xix). Two years later the situation was even worse:

We don't want someone who has heard that Virginia Woolf frequently uttered anti-semitic sentiments to mandate that henceforth we may not ask students to read *To the Lighthouse* or *Mrs. Dalloway*, for fear that they will be contaminated by contact with such a writer. The issue now is not — cannot be — whether canonicity is to determine what makes its way into the curriculum. The issue is whether or not people who have little or no feeling for genuine literary or artistic values, and even less feeling for the liberal value of conflict and difference in the life of the mind, can be permitted to call the shots in our schools and colleges. (Boyers, 2021, p. 2)

When Boyers alludes to those individuals who possess “little or no feeling for genuine literary or artistic values”, he is specifically addressing the increasing prominence attributed to managers in determining what should or should not be taught. Cultural diversity consultants and human resources officers are now expected to offer guidance to professors regarding the selection of course materials; a recent study reports that in 2019 a Chief Diversity Officer (or an equivalent position) was in place in 68.7% of the major U.S. universities (Bradley, Garven, Law and West, 2022). One of the main arguments in *The Tyranny of Virtue* is that the expansion of the power of administrators and academic boards has been embraced by many left-wing liberals, who now actively refuse to engage in debates that would allow other speakers to express views that they deem unacceptable:

The fact that the challenges to the accredited consensus most often come from persons who are themselves liberals or progressives and, moreover, known to be invested in battles for diversity and a wide range of other standard liberal causes, only makes their deviation more enraging to inflamed partisans, for whom inclusiveness requires that all of their colleagues unambiguously subscribe to the dominant orthodoxy (Boyers, 2019, p. 25).

This is a paradoxical twist, as the desire to make even the most controversial texts (from Joyce’s *Ulysses* to Nabokov’s *Lolita*) available for class discussion had been crucial in the liberal attack on the prudish moral standards that characterized many of the authors included in the early twentieth century canon. The days when transgression and debates were seen as a source of cultural vitality are over, as Laura Kipnis explains in «Transgression: An Elegy»:

Transgression has been replaced by trauma as the cultural concept of the hour: making rules rather than breaking them has become the signature aesthetic move, that’s just how it is, there’s no going back. [...] Now it is the social justice left wielding the aesthetic sledgehammers and “weaponizing” offense. (2020, p. 28 and p. 40)

The ability to generate outrage is no longer a first step on the road to success. Modernist and postmodernist writers were willing to create offence, and *épater la bourgeoisie* was in itself an achievement. Artists were praised for being shocking, provocative, and even offensive. This is where the difference with today’s disputes becomes very clear.

The Rise of Canon Theory

By canon we usually mean a collection of texts chosen from an ideal corpus that includes all literary works ever published. The works so selected are supposedly

endowed with specific qualities that make them worthy of being remembered, taught, preserved in archives, and reprinted through time. This idea of canonicity is fairly recent. Until well into the twentieth century, *canon* was used in literary criticism to indicate the set of texts attributed to a certain author, as in “the Melville canon.” When Canon Theory evolved into an academic discipline, scholarly conversations orbited around two predominant positions. Conservative critics championed a notion of literary excellence predicated on enduring and universal values, embodied in a list of Classics, revered masterpieces belonging to a timeless Tradition. This body of remarkable works was depicted as besieged by external forces motivated by ephemeral, ideological concerns. Conversely, progressive authors advanced the argument that universality remained an illusory concept, asserting that standards invariably possessed an inherently political nature.

The conservative stance found expression in a bestseller like Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (1987) and *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, written in 1991 by Dinesh D’Souza. Both lamented the triumph of a relativist stance that had given up on questions of objectivity and truth. Bloom wrote that « [the humanities] have been buffeted more severely by historicism and relativism than the other parts. They suffer most from democratic society’s lack of respect for tradition and its emphasis on utility» (p. 373), while D’Souza condemned the sway of postmodern cynicism on Canon Theory, alleging that «the goal of liberal education» is «the pursuit of truth» (p. 179), a pursuit which requires «universal standards of judgment which transcend particularities of race, gender, and ethnicity» (p. 251). According to D’Souza, delving into literature lost its significance when scholars couldn’t come to a consensus on a canon of texts believed to hold truth, beauty, and lasting worth.

Paradoxically, while new canons found their way in university courses, anthologies and histories of American Literature, conservative authors triumphed in the best-seller charts and dominated talk shows on national television. In 1990, Roger Kimball published *Tenured Radicals*, an attack on progressive professors which sold hundreds of thousands of copies describing the ferocity of the culture wars. Kimball lamented that a generation of privileged «tenured radicals» was undermining the priority of Western values in the educational system and in society at large, observing that in the field of literary studies questions of artistic quality had been systematically replaced with tests for political relevance. In 1995 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, two well-known feminist critics, wrote a comedy of academic manners, called *Masterpiece Theatre*, in which they described the two factions fighting the new “battle of the books.” On one side, a group that uses words like «*excellence, transcendence, universality, disinterestedness*» (p. XIV) and argues that

those qualities are best embodied in writings by an outstanding, select group of writers whose works can transmit the core truths of western civilization as a legacy to students. On the opposing side of the battlefield come rallying cries which contain «such words as *relativism, indeterminacy, multiculturalism, diversity, historical specificity*» (p. XV) and the request to include in the curriculum fresh domains of knowledge, *new corpora*: products of popular culture, texts written by non-white, non-male, non-straight points of view.

On the surface, similarities exist between then and now. Yet the differences are far more relevant. In the culture wars of the 1990s, progressive intellectuals were hoping to dismantle canonicity as a concept, deconstructing conventional ideas of literature and replacing them with the non-hierarchical, democratic notion of *the text*. They were open to debate, even to rhetorical fights. The process of selection behind canon formation was discussed in talk shows. It filled theaters in the lecture circuit, as in a famous series of public one-on-one debates between Stanley Fish and Dinesh D'Souza. Disagreement was part of the show. The name of the game was persuasion:

What cannot be disputed, because it was reported to us at every turn, is that the campus communities won as they always win when important questions are taken up by serious and informed opponents. It was short-lived, but it was a great show. (Fish, 1994, p. 51)

I suggest that this is no longer true. When scholarly discussions develop as Twitter hashtags, academic debates are controlled by administrators, and their impact is defined by the number of likes or retweets, we are in the presence of a new religion, a form of revelation that does not need the kind of rational discourse which is at the core of scientific inquiry. Moral issues have taken center-stage once again. And managers are the new priests.

Canonicity in the Digital Age

How does administrative control affect the body of works taught in literary studies today? It is of course a complex and multi-layered situation. Yet we can identify a few concepts that have been reshaping academic curricula in the past few years. Here, I will continue to focus on the notion of *trigger warning*, and the related concepts of *microaggression* and *safe space*.

Popular media, newspapers and websites provide an inexhaustible source of examples. In March 2023, the Cornell University Student Assembly passed a resolution which «urged administration to require faculty to provide students a warning for content that could potentially be triggering» (Andreae, 2023). This

reignited a debate about the cultural impact on U.S. higher education of trigger warnings. While trigger warnings emerged only in the past twenty years, the use of *labeling* to warn readers away from materials that are deemed offensive or inappropriate is not new. The use of prejudicial labels aimed at restricting access to controversial, subversive books was amply debated in the United States during the Cold War and led to a statement against labeling issued by the American Library Association in 1951 (Knox, 2017b, p. XV). Today's warnings are not designed to limit the dissemination of communist ideas: their goal is to protect readers or viewers from accessing content that might provoke anxiety and stress by reviving past traumas. They are often used to give students the option to avoid the discussion of sensitive topics in a situation that makes them uncomfortable, and, consequently, they can have a significant impact on university curricula. For example, the website of the College of Literature Science and the Arts, University of Michigan, provides an *Introduction to Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings* designed to help instructors create reading lists that are both sensitive and inclusive. This is a provisional list of contents that require this kind of warning:

Sexual assault • Abuse • Child abuse/pedophilia/incest • Animal cruelty or animal death • Self-harm and suicide • Eating disorders, body hatred, and fat phobia • Violence • Pornographic content • Kidnapping and abduction • Death or dying • Pregnancy/childbirth • Miscarriages/abortion • Blood • Mental illness and ableism • Racism and racial slurs • Sexism and misogyny • Classism • Hateful language directed at religious groups (e.g., Islamophobia, anti-Semitism) • Transphobia and trans misogyny • Homophobia and heterosexism. (*An Introduction to Content Warnings*, 2022)

The list is accompanied by an overview of the use of warnings in classrooms which acknowledges that some recent reports describe how trigger warnings may indeed risk to “imperil free speech, academic freedom, and effective teaching, which prevents students from engaging with challenging material” (Jones, Bellet and McNally, 2020). Additionally — I am still quoting from the LSA introduction — “it was found that trigger warnings led to small increases in anxiety rather than decreases. For those who self-identified as trauma survivors, the study showed that trigger warnings can increase the ‘narrative centrality of trauma’ for them” (*An Introduction to Content Warnings*, 2022).

It is indeed not unusual for scholars who write about trigger warnings to highlight the risk they pose to intellectual freedom. The book *Trigger Warnings: History, Theory, Context* is a collection of essays which includes scholars who belong to a range of disciplinary fields: Communication Studies, Anthropology, Women's Studies, Library and Information Sciences. Despite their different backgrounds many of the contributors share a common aporetic position: in theory, they are firmly against

any form of restriction, yet they are willing to introduce forms of practical censorship *when they are needed*:

It can be argued that trigger warnings are prejudicial labels, as they warn people from accessing a resource. The argument that trigger warnings are a form of censorship seems to be based in this understanding of labeling. However [...] although my field has taken a strong stance on labeling, like other instructors I also have moral obligations to more than just my field. I am also concerned about the welfare of my students (Knox, 2017b, p. XV).

If used as intended, trigger warnings can be an effective practice toward fostering this [safe, inclusive] environment. At the same time, instructors have a duty to protect intellectual freedom by questioning new pedagogies that appear to be censorial (Helkenberg, 2017, p. 250).

If used as intended, trigger warnings are effective: this is a crucial formulation. Who decides if something has been “used as intended”? When can “a duty to protect intellectual freedom” be waived? And who gets to define the features of something so complex as “moral obligations”?

Some universities have distanced themselves from trigger warnings and refuse to use them in their courses. In a letter to the Class of 2020, the Dean of Students of the University of Chicago wrote:

Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called “trigger warnings,” we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual “safe spaces” where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own. (Ellison, *Dear Class of 2020 Student*).

The presence of trigger warnings usually means that students can refuse to tackle books, movies, or essays that promote ideas that they find disturbing or distasteful. The list of faculty members subjected to investigation, and sometimes fired, because their students felt “triggered” by the texts included in their reading list, or by something said or shown by the instructor, is long. Complaints posted by students on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp groups) are *liked*, *retweeted*, and often shared with the human resources managers, equality officers, or deans: in this way the administration is pressured to intervene and censor the transgressors (Boyers, 2019; Fish, 2019; Gennero 2023). Thus emerges the dilemma: should academics assume that literature is meant to challenge, enrage, disturb — that is, trigger — or should it offer readers only worthy examples of moral integrity and personal success? Should every sentence uttered by a character in a novel be considered an example of the set of values embraced by the author? Can we read texts where a racist character expresses racist views, or where we find terms that are now unacceptable? Can we still read Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*? Twain

scholars complain that it has become almost impossible. In order to be able to teach the text, a “sanitized” version replaced the offensive, racial label that indicates African-Americans with “slave”. Does this mean that scholars should prepare abridged, politically correct revisions of texts still considered admirable and important if we are afraid that they may create discomfort in our students? After all, bowdlerism has a long history: in the eighteenth century, when delicacy was considered an important moral quality, it made perfect sense to publish expurgated versions of Shakespeare’s plays, and even of the Bible, because reading was expected to be a way to “train a refined sensibility” (Perrin, 1969).

The cancellation of certain writers because their behavior is incompatible with the moral standards of their critics also has a long history, but these requests often emerged in the conservative world. One of the interesting aspects of the new appeals for *accountability* is that they emerge in the contexts of progressive activism, with the aim to create a *decolonized canon*, a body of works that embraces the core values of diversity, equality and inclusion. It is in this context that the emphasis on the need for positive images of characters that belong to non-mainstream groups has led to the hasty association of the depiction of unpleasant, obnoxious minority characters with racism or queerphobia. Francine Prose, a novelist, and a scholar who is also a former President of PEN American Center — a literary society devoted to the defense of free expression — tackles this aspect in *I Let Chekov Answer for Me*, an essay included in the special section *Revisiting the Culture Wars: A Symposium* published in *Salmagundi* in 2021:

It’s true that our job as teachers is to sort out the accurate and nuanced from the stereotype, to help students tell the difference. But if we limit our work, our reading, and our students’ reading to books in which the characters are what we *want* our fellow humans to be, heroes who suffer and triumph in the heroic way we want them to suffer and triumph, we’ll be reading and writing science fiction. And our students will be forever puzzled by how stubbornly reality refuses to follow the rules of the genre (Prose, 2021).

Fighting against stereotypes and prejudice is important, but the refusal to engage with ideas we find disgraceful does not create a more respectful and democratic world. Rational debate is the only way forward.

The personalized canon

Many of the issues described in the previous paragraph overlap and there’s no simple answer. The point I want to stress is that, in the field of American Studies, requiring warnings, avoiding disturbing content, or silencing controversial points of view in order to make the classroom a safe space is an ineffective course of action if

we hope to find an “antidote to traditional narratives of American exceptionalism and Western triumphalism” and to open “the once narrow gates of history to the voices of women, African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, and other heretofore marginalized points of view” (Kakutani, 2018, p. 53). We are facing a greater risk when we avoid intellectual challenges because we don’t want to be upset by them: we allow the profit-driven surveillance capitalists that control social media platforms infiltrate and weaken our democracies. Even if she does not cite Zuboff’s theories, Michiko Kakutani’s analysis of the legacy of deconstructive postmodernism on the Trumpian culture wars depicts a situation clearly influenced by the power of radical indifference: “Nationalism, tribalism, dislocation, fears of social change, and the hatred of outsiders are on the rise again, as people, locked in their partisan silos and social bubbles, are losing a sense of shared reality and the ability to communicate across social and sectarian lines” (Kakutani, 2018, p. 12).

We are beginning to witness what happens when greater power is assigned to bureaucrats or to students: the requirements meant to “protect” marginalized groups end up having the opposite effect. Recent development in the U.S. should not be underestimated. Good ideas — such as DE&I — can rapidly turn into instruments of control and division. Anybody can feel marginalized and threatened, and demand protection from “disturbing content”: even white supremacists.

Course reading lists today must be approved by students, diversity officers, academic boards — all of whom may have some insights — but they are also subjected to the hidden pressure provided by thousands of opaque click factories, instruments of control that can affect what gets taught and how we teach it. The current culture of optimization and performance nurtured by the arts of radical indifference excludes conflict-mediation, as it is time-consuming. Algorithms reward, punish and shape action with immediate effects. Online petitions can lead to the swift cancellation of a course and to the removal of an instructor.

In a paradoxical reversal of the motivations that led to the deployment of content warnings as an instrument for a more inclusive pedagogy, they are now often used to prevent students from having to read about issues — like violence, racism, sexuality, and other forms of discrimination — that can be regarded as “divisive.” According to the “PEN America Index of Institutional Gag Orders” (PEN, 2023), over three hundred bills attempting to regulate what gets taught have been imposed on the U.S. school system from January 2021 to July 2023. Almost all of them were by conservatives. The PEN report on educational censorship published in February 2023 describes a situation where gender and racism cannot be mentioned because they may cause discomfort to some students and create an “unsafe” learning environment:

In Connecticut, SB 280 would bar schools from adopting a curriculum that makes “any individual feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of the individual’s race or sex.” And under New Jersey’s SB 598, teachers would be unable to discuss or assign any classroom material that promotes “division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people.” (Galluscio, 2023)

In 2023, in order to illustrate the paradoxes of these attempts to regulate academic freedom, Jermaine Johnson, a Democratic State Representative in South Carolina, presented a bill (HB 3779) that would prohibit public school history teachers from discussing “persons who owned slaves” and commented:

If we’re afraid of teaching children about things that could cause discomfort, then we need to add slave owners to the list. Many people find this topic uncomfortable and upsetting, especially the grandparents of children who lived through the Civil Rights Movement and had relatives who were slaves themselves. We should protect our children from being exposed to this evil by sweeping it under the rug and never addressing it. (Chandler, 2023)

Johnson was defiantly trying to highlight the hypocrisy of gag orders that pretend to be concerned with the wellbeing of students, while they are part of the growing list of legislative attempts to restrict teaching about racism in American history in the wake of President Trump’s 2020 Executive Order 13950 (Galluscio, 2023). Johnson’s was a provocation meant to expose the illogicality of the dozens of educational censorship bills of the past three years, but it remains an exception: the other bills really meant what they proposed.

Protecting students from the exposure to ideas they find distasteful or offensive introduces a personal, subjective dimension that transforms the academic pursuit of knowledge based on rational discourse in a new entity where it is up to the administration to decide what gets taught. If we support this idea, then *everyone* is entitled to be protected from “psychological distress”, as the bills listed on the PEN site show. This encourages the creation of academic bubbles, echo chambers where *the voice of the other* is absent. Byung Chul Han, author of *Infocracy: Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy* (2022), observes that we are witnessing an attack on the public sphere which results in the crisis of communicative action in the digital world: “I am shown only those view of the world that conform to my own. All other information is kept outside the bubble. In the filter bubble, I am caught in an endless ‘you loop’” (Han, 2022, p. 29).

The ‘you loop’ quoted by Han is a concept developed by Eli Pariser, an internet activist and media scholar who in 2011 wrote *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, a timely indictment of the risks of unrestrained web personalization. Pariser is also quoted by Michiko Kakutani in her denunciation of

the dangerous divisions in U.S. culture and politics: “Because social media sites give us information that tends to confirm our view of the world — what Pariser calls ‘an endless you-loop’ — people live in increasingly narrow content silos and correspondingly smaller walled contents of thought” (Kakutani, 2019, p. 117).

It is no mere chance that the expansion of personalized syllabi coincides with the growth of the personalized internet and with the spread of social media. While rationality is slow and requires a way of thinking that includes past events and future consequences, emotional discourse allows for an immediate, strong involvement. This is why, as emphasized by Han, the contemporary polarization of the public sphere, of which the rise of the personal canon is merely a symptom, is an unavoidable consequence of the abandonment of the model of discursive rationality that seeks to reach an understanding through the confrontation of different claims of validity:

In the post-factual universe of digital tribes, expressions have lost their relation to facts. They lack any rationality. They cannot be criticized, nor is there a need to justify them with reasons. However, *committing oneself* to a certain opinion gives one a feeling of *belonging*. Discourse is thus replaced with *belief* and *confession* (Han, 2022, p. 33).

I argue that the same is true for the polarization which characterizes contemporary debates about the humanities. The corpus of selected texts emerging from the canon wars of the digital age seeks to eliminate all works that include words, expressions, situations, or points of view that can cause umbrage to a reader ideally devoid of any fixed feature, because everyone is alone and incomparable in their sum of frailty and strength. While the theoretical aim of these new personalized criteria of selection should be an increase in inclusivity, the result seems to be a reinforcement of things as they already are, bolstering reciprocal prejudice and rewarding strong emotional reactions that create a sense of community by fostering conflict.

The widespread legitimation of cloistered and self-protecting concepts has dire consequences for progressive politics. Shoshana Zuboff reminds us that “surveillance capitalism must be reckoned as a profoundly antidemocratic social force” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 513): its radical indifference to the distinction between truth and falsehood is motivated by the economic imperatives of investors who profit from fake news, deceptive advertising and disinformation sites peddling hate speech and radical political content:

Radical indifference leaves a void where reciprocities once thrived. For all their freedom and knowledge, this is one void that surveillance capitalists will not fill because doing so would violate their own logic of accumulation. [...] Now the rise of instrumental power as the signature expression of surveillance capitalism

augurs a different kind of extinction. This “seventh extinction” will not be of nature but of what has been held most precious in human nature: the will to will, the sanctity of the individual, the ties of intimacy, the sociality that binds us together in promises, and the trust they breed. (Zuboff, 2019, p. 512 and p. 516)

The loss of trust, the tribalization of society, the aggressive refusal to engage with ideas challenging and unorthodox: these are the crucial transformations that are eroding democracies on a global scale. They are also unsettling academic debates, leading to growing numbers of boycotts, cancellations, indictments (Hustvedt, 2021). In the wake of the mounting concerns for the high level of conflictuality in intellectual disputes, in May 2023 a Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act became law in the United Kingdom; the Department for Education appointed Professor Arif Ahmed as first Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom. Will an additional administrative position inspire a more open exchange of ideas? In the meantime, new controversies continue to emerge.

The challenges we face require the development of a new notion of literary criticism, a notion which foregrounds the process of reaching an understanding working our way through theoretical conflicts and disagreement. An understanding. A shared language. Maybe what we need are new metaphors for thinking about the canon: no longer as a fortress, or a battlefield, but as a meeting ground where we try to exercise that form of rational communication which is at the core of democratic discourse.

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AUTEUR

Valeria Gennero

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Università di Bergamo, valeria.gennero@unibg.it