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‘Canon in colour’: Contextual Knowledge of Race and Empire as Powerful Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the concept of powerful knowledge to consider the teaching of canonical literature in the secondary English classroom. Drawing on Muller and Young’s definition of powerful knowledge which draws on *potentia* rather than *potestas*, a distinction which focuses on the enabling potential, rather than the idea of power over others, I argue for the relevance and significance of teaching canonical literature with the context of race and empire. The theoretical analysis is supported by small amounts of empirical data from a survey of teachers about their teaching of diversity in the English classroom in the UK, and specifically open-ended questions about their teaching of 19th century texts, and the plays *Othello* and *The Tempest*. I argue that ‘canon in colour’ is an example of powerful knowledge and link this account to Hodgson and Harris’s concept of horizontal literacy.

KEYWORDS

Canonical literature; powerful knowledge; empire; race; secondary English

Introduction

Young’s powerful knowledge has been frequently revisited in relation to school curricula since its original inception. It has also been challenged for being based on and therefore primarily relevant to scientific knowledge (i.e. knowledge in the sciences). This is partially because of the misapprehension identified by Young (2013) that ‘the humanities represent the cultural “knowledge of the powerful” (Young 2007) in a world where such knowledge compares less and less favourably, on universal criteria, with STEM subjects’ (233). However, it is also because the ways in which ‘powerful knowledge’ are defined in Young’s earlier work are not compatible with disciplinary views of literature, as exemplified by Eaglestone (2021). This paper explores a particular case within the teaching of literature in secondary schools, that of canonical literature, here figured as 19th century literature and plays by Shakespeare, as that is how it primarily features in the curriculum in England. A conception of powerful knowledge as a ‘cluster concept’ (Wittgenstein 1958), as applied to powerful knowledge in Puttick, Elliott and Ingram (2024) enables its use in a less judgemental or divisive way. This draws specifically on a refiguring (in my account) by Young of his concept in 2019 (Muller and Young) to align ‘powerful

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knowledge' with the Latin root *potentia* rather than the more conventionally understood *potestas*.

Since curriculum reform in 2015 children in England have been required to study a 19th century novel for the main secondary qualification taken at age 16, the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE); Shakespeare has been a compulsory part of study for much longer and has been the only named required author on the English National Curriculum since its inception. Canonical literature is therefore central to the current experience of secondary English, and since examination specifications drive curriculum, younger students are also reading more 19th century literature, or extracts from it, to prepare for their examinations. Examination specifications in England require this study to include contextual knowledge of a text to support its analysis. It is my contention that for 19th century texts the context of Empire is, or should be, inescapable for the understanding and analysis of British literature. However, data reported later in this paper will show that this is far from agreed. To give a handful of examples of how Empire is embedded in these texts: Magwitch in Dickens' *Great Expectations* gains his fortune that enables the entire plot from exploiting the opportunities available to him after he is transported to Australia. More deeply the extractive, capitalist foundation philosophy of empire is also the foundation of the financial and moral journey on which Pip goes on. Jane Eyre sees her escape from Mr Rochester through missionary work in India. The importunate Mrs Smith in *Persuasion* is rescued when her inherited plantations are restored to her. Race is equally important in various ways: Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four* (a set text studied by some students at 16) abounds in racialised and racist depictions,¹ leaving aside the dubious moral claims of the various white people to the treasure at the heart of the story. Mr Hyde is described in racialised terms, drawing upon racist stereotypes of the period. In *Wuthering Heights* Heathcliff is racialised as Other; whether this is Black, Mixed Race, Roma or Irish is debatable, but the fact that Irish could be was a racialised identity in the 19th century is valuable learning, and pertinently for the analysis of the text, his racialisation is part of his alienation and therefore the motivation for his action in the novel. One of the key findings of the Lit in Colour report (Elliott et al. 2021) was that race and empire form an important part of knowledge about British literary heritage texts. Another important finding from that research which will be important for later discussion was that 70% of young people, rising to 77% when considering only young people from a Black, Asian or other Minority Ethnic background, thought that diversity was part of British society and as such should be represented in the school curriculum.

Powerful knowledge: cluster concept and *potentia*

Cluster concepts are those where the definition draws on a range of criteria, but no single one of those criteria is either necessary or sufficient for the definition, exemplified by Wittgenstein (1958) through the discussion of games. There is not one common element that can define all games: some games, but not all, involve winning and losing; some games require skill while others are driven by luck; some games are played on boards, and so on. Author et al. (2024) argue that the cluster concept is apt for thinking about powerful knowledge. A non-exhaustive list of criteria might be:

- ‘Conceptual as well as based on evidence and experience;
- Systematically revisable;
- Emergent;
- Material and social;
- About the real world;
- Reliable and in a broad sense ‘testable’ explanations or ways of thinking;
- Always open to challenge;
- Organised into domains with boundaries that are not arbitrary and these domains are associated with specialist communities such as subject and professional associations;
- Normally (but not always) discipline-based (Young and Lambert 2014, 73; Young and Lambert 2014; Young and Muller 2013).

Cluster concepts resonate for English practitioners with a Derridan view of genre – genre as something which texts participate in, perform, or use, but to which they do not belong (Frow 2014). Utilising such a view removes the binary yes/no for whether a particular piece of knowledge counts as powerful and allows for a more nuanced perspective, where the concept of powerful knowledge can be used discursively rather than as a normative, judgemental stick.

Muller and Young (2019) draw on Spinoza’s distinction between *potestas* (power over) and *potentia* (power to). The former – potestas – is ‘the traditional notion of power as domination of one agent over another . . . always deformative, it withdraws, excludes or deprives’, whereas potentia is ‘productive or creative, it extends horizons, it imagines new futures’ (2019, 201). They recognise powerful knowledge in this second sense: ‘power in the sense of its augmentative, enhancing and empowering capacity’ (209). There have been critiques of this as moving so far from the original conception of powerful knowledge as to make it worthless as a concept, and in particular moving from a descriptive to an emotively resonant conception (e.g. White 2019). This might be a valid critique, but I find the concept of *potentia* to be productive (augmentative, enhancing, one might say), and when taken in conjunction with earlier characteristics associated with powerful knowledge as a cluster concept, the framing enables us to consider the value of inclusion of particular aspects of curriculum in the classroom. In undertaking this analysis, I acknowledge what Doecke describes as Young ‘usefully goad[ing] us into thinking about the relationship between subject English and the knowledge that English teachers typically bring to their professional practice and how that knowledge figures in their exchanges with students in classroom settings’ (2017, 231).

The challenges of context

The embedding of socio-historic context within the examination specifications in England has had some deformative effects on the ways in which English is taught, particularly when coupled with dominant paradigms of the science of learning, cognitive load and recall. The demand for knowledge which can be tested and the smallest possible unit of ‘knowledge’ to be conveyed leads to particular forms of contextual knowledge being prioritised. Eaglestone (2021) has challenged the validity of teaching where ‘the historical context is prioritised over how a play works or what comedy is’ (Eaglestone

2021, 27). Historical context does not have to be deformative, however. Where contextual detail is led from the needs of the text and provides essential knowledge for comprehension, or is used as a lever to pry open interpretation and understanding, it is valuable. Where it is a list of details on a knowledge organiser which are never used to approach the text, it is nothing more than a preparation for entering pub quizzes in later life. It can be assumed throughout this paper that when I am arguing for the power of teaching canon in the context of race and empire (or, more succinctly ‘Canon in Colour’), it is when it is used in the form of the lever. If the only way context is used is as a miscellany, then it is still important to ensure that the context of race and empire is represented, to avoid the ‘psychic disequilibrium’ (Rich 1994, 99) of the white gaze, but it does not carry the same *potentia* as otherwise. It is also worth remembering Rosen’s warning that: ‘stories do not arrive in a package complete with their cultural context and ethnic origins. Another context slides easily into place’ (Rosen 1999, 345). This is the tradition that a number of teachers have drawn on in considering their own classrooms in relation to race and literary heritage (e.g. Iffath 2020; Mohamud 2020; Shah 2013).

Methodology

The data used to illustrate the discussion here is drawn from a survey of teachers of English in England and Scotland, gathered in 2020–21. Ethical approval was granted by the [REDACTED]. The overall survey was on the diversity of literature teaching in English classrooms; the questions which are considered here are *Do you explicitly consider Empire as a contextual factor when teaching 19th century texts? If so, which texts and how? And Do you teach The Tempest or Othello? If so, do you engage with issues of race and colonisation with these plays and how?* Respondents to the part of the survey reported here were a volunteer survey of 248 teachers (approximately two-thirds secondary to one-third primary); for these questions 137 White teachers (out of 166) answered the first question, and 135 White teachers answered the second. For the first question 56 teachers who identified as Black, mixed race, traveller, Roma or other GEM answered, and 54 for the second. The open responses were coded for yes/no answers, but otherwise the data is used to illustrate the discussion.

Teacher responses

Of the 193 teachers who responded to whether they explicitly considered Empire as a contextual factor when teaching 19th century texts, except with ‘not applicable’, 79 said no (of whom 10 said some form of ‘but we should’), and 114 said yes. Table 1 shows a break down of this count.

It should be noted that there is no sense in which this data is intended to suggest that White teachers should not be teaching this material; merely that the racial identity of

Table 1. Do you explicitly consider empire as a contextual factor when teaching 19th century texts?.

	<i>No, but should</i>	<i>No</i>	Total No	Yes
BAME/mixed race/Roma/traveller/other GEM (out of 56)	3	24	27	29
White (out of 137)	7	45	52	92
(out of 193 total respondents to the question)	10	69	79	114

respondents did make a difference in this study. There are many other factors at play here, including gender and other minoritised characteristics.

What emerges from the comments is a tale of two mindsets. Those who said no often justified their response by claiming there was no relevance to the text they were teaching:

There is no mention of Empire in our study of 19C text, *A Christmas Carol*, but it isn't an obvious theme.

No – not sure GCSE texts are linked? *Jekyll & Hyde*, *Christmas Carol*.

I'm not sure we've specifically taught any texts from the 19th century where it has been a factor. (we've done *Great Expectations*, *A Christmas Carol* and *Jekyll and Hyde*)

For these teachers, the text and its meaning are contained within the authorial framework which does not look outward; rather there is a 'canonical' interpretation that can be delivered to any class of students over the years. In contrast, there are those who see the text emerging from its context. Almost every text which was mentioned as having no content of race or empire was mentioned elsewhere by a teacher as having empire or race as being central to understanding the text. This teacher, for example, understood the capitalist critique of *A Christmas Carol* to be tied into empire:

It definitely comes into play when discussing *A Christmas Carol* as we think about origins of wealth and how it is often achieved on the back of others' Labour.

Or on *Jekyll and Hyde*:

We teach *Jekyll and Hyde* at GCSE and explicit links are made when discussing phrenology and Hyde's portrayal in some films as having stereotypical black features and being the antagonist, so Empire is mentioned.

And finally in relation to *Great Expectations*:

Yes – we look at the Empire when teaching *Great Expectations* and how people's expectations of London as the centre of an Empire are undermined by Dickens.

These three comments demonstrate the varied ways in which the contextual factors are employed: used to examine key themes in the novel, or to explore the language and representation of characters, or to consider the setting and the wider work of the author. Beyond these, using contextual detail about race and empire could link a text to contemporary events and the concerns of the students:

Yes, it is explicitly taught – and links are made with current day issues – pointing out that in some instances, very little has changed. We have touched on Windrush and also looked at Edward Colston and the slave trade in some non-fiction extracts

The fact that the data were generated in 2020–21 becomes clear here, with the issues that were in the news at the time. This exemplifies the ways in which the colonial history and contexts of these texts are not only relevant to but construct our present. A few teachers commented that their students were the ones driving the discussion of these issues, such as this one who seems to be talking about an A level (age 16–18) class to judge by the names of the authors raised:

Yes, and in recent months I've found my students to be more direct in bringing these considerations to the fore; not only in well-trodden areas (Bronte, or Dickens), but also in other places (Waugh and Bennett). I feel students are certainly asking questions that might not have necessarily occurred to myself or my teachers when I was a student, and I feel this often opens up really fruitful, engaged ground.

This resonates with my own experience of watching a lesson on *The Sign of The Four* being taught (excellently!) by a beginning teacher, where a child piped up as they were reading a depiction of the 'Hindoo' [sic] servant with 'that's really racist, Miss!' This class went on to consider the ethics of a group of white people arguing over the moral rights to a treasure trove looted from India.

Similar patterns of responses were seen in the question about *Othello* and *The Tempest*, shown perhaps most clearly in this comment, where the respondent teaches:

The *Tempest* in Y8; *Othello* at KS5. We don't really engage with race and colonisation with either. This question has made me decide to revisit these.

The idea of revisiting here may refer to the schemes of work, but it may refer to the texts themselves, which raises a key point about the potential need to revisit texts that we have taught for years – or decades. Considering well-trodden texts in the light of new (that is, new to us – a postcolonial reading of *The Tempest* is not new per se) questions enables us to update our own analysis of a text to support that of our students. *The Tempest* seems particularly popular as a Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) text, which supports previous findings on what Shakespeare texts are taught (Elliott et al. 2021).

I have taught *The Tempest* to Y7 and Y9 and always address these issues with reference to Caliban and Prospero by encouraging students to shift perspectives – considering P as a coloniser and C as the colonised changes a modern audience's reactions to both characters.

Year 8 – *The Tempest*. We talk about the relationship between the coloniser and colonised through Prospero and Caliban. We examine if the play romanticises the dynamic of the coloniser and colonised through Prospero and Ariel.

These two comments both illustrate the use of contextual knowledge as a lever, deeply engaged in the text and thinking about the interaction of characters, and also the overall audience response to the play, linking contexts of production to contexts of reception.

The power of canon in colour

In one way, teaching canonical literature in the context of race and empire falls within a very traditional understanding of powerful knowledge. Despite some of the responses to the survey, it constitutes core knowledge without which the fundamental understanding of the text is altered or lacking. Even if all we are looking for from our teaching is a knowledge of that particular text, canon in colour is the lever that unlocks meaning in a number of ways. However, when we turn to the idea of *potentia*, to the sense of knowledge that is 'augmentative, enhancing and empowering' (Muller and Young 2019, 209), the value of canon in colour emerges in a very different way. For one thing, it challenges the whitewashed version of British history that erases any multi-racial population from before the mid 1950s (and which has been used as the basis of the political exploitation of a faux nostalgia that tries to vindicate racist attitudes). This is

both empowering for the students who feel otherwise feel the ‘violent form of erasure’ (Olufemi 2019, 56) of the ‘silent slots in syllabi’ (Manzoor-Khan 2019, p. 15), but also it provides the kind of understanding of the reality of the past that Akala is calling for in *Natives*:

The government and the education system failed to explain to white Britain that, as the academic Adam Elliot-Cooper puts it, we had not come to Britain, but ‘rather that Britain had come to us’. They did not explain that the wealth of Britain, which made the welfare state and other class ameliorations possible, was derived in no small part from the coffee and tobacco, cotton and diamonds, gold and sweat and blood and/death of the colonies. No one explained that our grandparents were not immigrants, that they were literally British citizens. (Akala 2019, 6–7)

In this the contextual knowledge becomes augmentative not only for the text itself but also for the wider understanding of the world and the society in which students are living. This speaks to that majority of young people who want the diversity of contemporary British society to be represented in the curriculum they study. Canonical texts can speak to that diversity too. Indeed, they can enable all of us to see the ways in which British culture is completely enmeshed in Empire and the cultures, tastes, foods, and other things imported from other countries. Behind the interminable different drinks of punch in Dickens’ novels lie spices imported from across the world which become cheap enough and therefore accessible to those outside the nobility only through the establishment of colonies in countries which grow them. The taste of Christmas pudding depends on the dried fruits and spices from across the globe. *A Christmas Carol* is often taught with one eye to the ways in which it has become an important cultural touchstone both through the story of the central character and its association with Christmas. It is no stretch to include a little more of the ways in which its contents reflect the global origins of British food and culture. Similarly, to discuss the racialised view of Heathcliff, a key aspect of how his character is viewed by and interacts with others gives the opportunity to examine race and racism as a construction of the society in which it is placed, in the ambiguity of Heathcliff’s racial ascription, which could include Irish or Black heritage, which leads to the ability to critically dissect contemporary society.

Heathcliff is a particularly interesting case, because there is also a possibility that he is a very rare example of a Roma character, a heritage which is almost completely absent from our school texts. Knowledge which disrupts the disequilibrium experienced when those ‘who have the power to name and to socially construct reality’ describe a world that you are not in (Rich 1994) is very ‘powerful’ knowledge indeed. It is the very essence of *potentia* in that it is ‘productive or creative, it extends horizons, it imagines new futures’ (Muller and Young 2019, 201). When we think of powerful knowledge where it holds ‘power in the sense of its augmentative, enhancing and empowering capacity’ (p. 209), it provides the capacity to encompass knowledge that enhances a sense of (school) belonging. School belonging (‘the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported in the school social environment’ (Goodenow 1993, 80)) is considered to be a buffer or protective factor for young people (Millings et al. 2012). Belonging is positively correlated with academic achievement (Niehaus, Moritz Rudasill, and Rakes 2012); with self-esteem (Watson 2017); and mental health (Millings et al. 2012). Higher levels of school belonging are associated with reduced incidence of health risk behaviours, that is underage drinking, taking drugs or sexual

activity (Resnick et al. 1997). An identity which is valued enough to feature in the curriculum is one which is perceived to be valued by a school, and that is knowledge which can increase school belonging. Almost all children who are racially minoritised in Britain have heritage from a former British colony, or somewhere that the British Empire impacted profoundly (such as China). Indeed, the reach of the British Empire was such that it would be hard to avoid. Shah (2013) speaks of the richness that bringing multicultural lenses to bear on heritage texts brings to the English classroom (while also problematising the categorisation of texts as ‘literary heritage’).

This returns us to the statistic mentioned at the beginning of this paper, that 70% of young people surveyed, rising to 77% of young people of colour, believed that diversity was part of British society and as such should be represented in the curriculum. The moral imperative to teach this material is for all students, not only those who think diversity should be taught. It is relevant, however, in that in recent years the focus on knowledge-based curricula, drawing on Young’s earlier accounts of powerful knowledge, in English schools, has made for an argument which rejects ‘relevance’ of the curriculum to lives in favour of the need for the systematic teaching of ‘the best that has been thought and said’, in the words of Arnold, cited by multiple Conservative politicians. More recently, Ofsted’s subject review of English criticised primary schools because too often they ‘choose texts to study in English lessons based on their link to other curriculum areas, rather than on how they might advance pupils’ knowledge of English language and understanding of literature’ (Osted 2024, n.p.). I do not think it is controversial that ‘the choice of texts for English lessons should be based on literary merit’ (Osted 2024, n.p.) – or at least most texts – although I suspect I am less likely to equate merit with canon than the authors of the review. However, teaching canonical literature in the context of race and empire – canon in colour – is a way to enhance literary merit with the kind of relevance to society that young people desire. In doing so, it resonates with the idea of knowledge as ‘emergent’ - in the context of the classroom it is developed in – and as ‘material and social’, relating both to the ways that society existed in the past but also in the way that that past has constituted our present. ‘Canon in colour’ also offers the opportunity for challenging received interpretations and past attitudes, in similar ways to the resistance described by Iffath (2020) offered by her students.

Final words: horizontal literacy

I have written before (Elliott 2020) of how the English literature classroom can be an urgent counter to Claudia Rankine’s elegiac statement:

because white men can’t
police their imagination
black men are dying

(Rankine 2014, 135).

The critical and explicit consideration of racist tropes and stereotypes in canonical literature (think of Caliban, think of Mr Hyde, think of Tonga in *The Sign of the Four*) prevents their incorporation into unconscious imagination, instead providing information to counter fabrication, and directing attention towards the tropes. In this it speaks to the potential for literature teaching to inform future social interaction and behaviour. Understanding teaching canon in colour as being this kind of powerful knowledge resonates with the idea of ‘horizontal literacy’ (Hodgson and Harris 2024), which

draws on Freire's idea of 'reading the world' (1968) and involves 'both empathy and responsibility as well as cognition' (Hodgson and Harris 2024, 206).

Such a model would conceive literacy as a process of critical understanding and communication in a range of modes and contexts. Unlike the vertical model of literacy, where the individual banks 'cultural capital' for their own benefit, horizontal literacy is outgoing and indwelling, constantly remaking what Leavis (1962, 27–28) called the 'humanworld' of consciousness by a multi-modal engagement with a multicultural community (Hodgson and Harris 2024, 206)

This is powerful knowledge full of *potentia* indeed – the potential to benefit society as a whole through the development of skills and understanding to interact with others is a collectivist benefit. Teaching canon in the context of race and empire is also an individual benefit, whether that is for the students of colour seeing themselves 'recognised' (Taylor 1994) by the curriculum or for the fundamental disciplinary benefit it provides in enabling greater analytical depth and opening up new interpretations and understandings of texts.

Note

1. The depiction of Tonga is particularly egregious because of the pseudo-scientific entry in a gazetteer that Holmes draws on (the 'rankest tissue of popular stereotype, crude sensationalism, and bare-faced fabrication' (McBratney 2005, 154) which falsely portrays the Andaman islanders as a foot shorter than their real height, physically repulsive and cannibalistic.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Victoria Elliott is Associate Professor of English and Literacy Education at the University of Oxford. Her book *Knowledge in English: Canon, Curriculum and Cultural Literacy* won the UKLA Academic Book Award in 2022. Her research is largely in the teaching and learning of literature and its role in society.

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