

# Who holds the narratives

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**Abstract**

This article presents a view on the debate regarding the Western literary canon from an intersectional perspective. The issue will be explored through an analysis that considers the complex power dynamics involved in its definition and the subjectivities engaged. Furthermore, a critical analysis of the most recent proposals aimed at overcoming or redefining the canon will be conducted, stressing that it is a matter of reference systems.

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**Parole chiave**

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## 1. Introduction

This article is about narratives: they permeate the world we inhabit, describing it and giving it shapes and meaning. They influence our lives and are influenced by them. Powerful tools potentially serving both the community and the capitalist economic system, all depending on the key players involved. Through this article, I will endeavour to highlight how all narratives are not objective matters and how some can serve as actual means for exercising and consolidating power (either individual or cultural); in other words, they serve as excellent vehicles for the assertion of cultural hegemonies.

A particular focus will be placed on the concept of Western literary canon as it can be regarded as a tool for constructing and conveying narratives, whether hegemonic or marginal. The debate concerning the Western literary canon is vast and rich in multifaceted contributions. Therefore, this article aims to elucidate some of the cultural mechanisms involved in constructing the canon and to comprehend the implications of its use, both critically and uncritically, within the realm of academic formation and research. In order to convey the complexity of the discourse and highlight the multitude of factors at play, both literary and cultural, I have chosen to adopt an intersectional feminist perspective, commencing the discourse with the definition of the concept of intersectionality and its praxis. It should be regarded as lenses that allow us to see more clearly what would otherwise be blurred. Through them we can begin to observe the underlying power dynamics of some narratives present in our everyday lives, such as the narrative of scientific knowledge, another factor intrinsically connected to the concept of the literary canon and its validation. Being part of a context that produces and validates scientific knowledge means to deal with extremely powerful tools. Identifying power dynamics and technically understanding what narratives are helps us clarify their functionality so that we can handle them with care. In the contexts defined thus far, the particular attention given to literary narratives and their characteristics of canonicity is because they are considered shapers of the cultural landscape of the world while simultaneously being influenced by it. This materializes through acts of narrating, reading, and selecting literature; therefore, it is essential to be aware of the influences on/from our cultural reference system. Starting from a dualistic discourse that initially sees the seemingly binary opposition between phallogocentrism and marginality, the intention is to show some extremely common questions with non-trivial answers that permeate the discussion of those who must necessarily make selections based on cultural criteria: data humanists. The purpose of this work is to conduct a comprehensive reflection on some issues that require methodological choices, in an attempt to restore the complexity that characterizes such decision-making processes. Ultimately, the issues brought to light will be functional to an aspirational problematization of the choices made and, more generally, of the research context inhabited, an activity far removed from the feared censorship one resorts to out of fear of change. Identifying problems does not necessarily require the removal of the objects representing them; rather, what is required is their recognition combined with a progressive reinterpretation and relativization of the objects aimed at unveiling the dominant narrative of the world system we inhabit, which illusionary places us as the sole center and possible point of reference in a context characterized by non-concentric circles.

## 2. The lenses of intersectionality

During a protest in Rafah, Rahma Zein addresses to CNN's international correspondent Clarissa Ward claiming she tells the truth about the on-going genocide of the Palestinian people. However, live videos made by Motaz Azaiza, Plestia Alaqad, Bisan Owda (and few other Palestinian journalists still alive) documenting the daily ethnic cleansing fall short. This inadequacy stems from the fact that they do not control the narrative; Western media, as CNN, do. Power dynamics manifest and reinforce themselves through communication. Thanks to its wise use, narratives can be constructed; whether they become dominant or marginalized depends on the power dynamics to which they, and their narrators, are ascribed.

Understanding what narratives are, where they originate, and why they wield such power is essential for comprehending the hegemonic power structures. Recognizing and understanding power requires cultivated skills, beginning with the concept of privilege and the consequent self-awareness of our societal position, which reveals our privileges and role within the social environment. To be a privileged individual, it's crucial to belong, totally or partly, to a dominant social group. In Western society privileged social identities, denoting those who have historically occupied dominant positions over other social groups, include whites, males, heterosexuals, cisgenders, Christians and the wealthy<sup>1</sup>.

Privilege is closely linked to our social experience, and it is common not to be able to recognize it because it permeates the way we perceive and experience the world. More specifically, if we are privileged individuals (even from a partial perspective), our human experiences align with the reference standard that identifies itself as hegemonic. The issue with privilege lies here: it is implicit and generally goes unnoticed<sup>2</sup>. Privilege resides in what we take for granted and in what we define as normal experience simply because we assume it is equally shared by all social identities, whereas it is the limited experience of the privileged group. When we discuss privilege, we are identifying unearned and largely unacknowledged advantages that people from dominant groups benefit from<sup>3</sup>. The ability to recognize one's own privilege involves both the capacity to perceive repetitive statistical patterns and systems in social life and an awareness of one's individual experiences. Viewing ourselves systematically is the first step to addressing systemic discrimination and is essential for understanding social group categories, privilege and marginalization. Acknowledging the inherent limitation of rigidity defining social groups due to the constant evolution of both individuals and social systems, the use of categories remains valuable in discussing marginalized groups, as demonstrated by Crenshaw in 1989<sup>4</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> *Privilege and Intersectionality*, « Rider University », 11 January 2023, <<https://guides.rider.edu/privilege>>, (Consulted: 20 July 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, «The University of Chicago Legal Forum», 1989, 1, 8, 1989, <<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>>.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Rothman, *The origins of privilege*, «The New Yorker», May 12, 2014, <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-origins-of-privilege>>

<sup>4</sup> Crenshaw, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply burdened, and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. [...] I suggest further that this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon.

There is the tendency to treat race and gender (and all other factors involved in social marginalization) as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis. When discussing systemic discrimination, it is essential to consider various nuances of privilege within this discourse. In a complex system of discrimination, the focus often shifts to the privileged individuals in specific groups while Crenshaw's proposal encourages a global perspective on these experiences, recognizing their interconnected nature, which unveils systemic discrimination through their connections; she addresses race and gender categories within a more complex context, emphasizing that there is much more to explore and understand.

Evidence suggests that the concepts of privilege and intersectionality are interconnected, and both are not merely abstract. Intersectionality, like privilege, is rooted in the experiences of people from marginalized social groups and this concept becomes more evident as these experiences become known. Once again, it is a matter of narration, specifically concerning the existence of narratives. Being absent from narratives, whether they are hegemonic or marginalized voices, means making experience invisible and, consequently, rendering existences invisible. The experience of marginalization of people cannot be understood and narrated without considering the multiple factors that lead them to the margins. When Crenshaw formally introduces the concept of intersectionality, she advocates for a method that challenges the single-issue analyses. This does not imply a need to sum up every form of discrimination, but rather emphasize considering the combined effects of different and multiple types of discrimination, thereby challenging dominant discriminatory thinking:

The value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of colour in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when white women speak for and as women. The authoritative universal voice – usually white male subjectivity masquerading as non-racial, non-gendered objectivity – is merely transferred to those who, but for gendered, share many of the same cultural, economic and social characteristics<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. Scientific knowledge and power

To challenge dominant discriminatory thought, it is essential to understand mechanisms through which they are constructed and legitimized. The presumed objective nature attributed to Western science is a recent narration stemming from the establishment of positivist philosophy in the 19th and 20th centuries. During this period, an absolute trust in scientific knowledge, its theoretical models and their application to the study of

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<sup>5</sup> Crenshaw, *op. cit.*, p.154.

society resulted in the simplistic justification of oppressive action<sup>6</sup>. So, there is a context in which knowledge to attain the scientific status, requires validation based on parameters and criteria defined by Western scholars.

The whole corpora of knowledge validated by Western culture was identified as the only owner of truth, so, the only possible from which disciplines and chairs were established in universities and it consolidated the theoretical framework upon which our contemporary knowledge is based<sup>7</sup>. One of the indicators of scientific rigor asserted in this context is the feature of objectivity<sup>8</sup>, inextricably linked to quantification. If scientific knowledge is measurable, it assumes an almost elitist status within the socially defined hierarchy of knowledge. Furthermore, it is considered worthy of greater trust, making it more challenging to challenge.

In this context, intersectionality is essential for a decolonial academic approach, showing that true patriarchy analysis requires moving beyond the biased white perspective and its colonialist cultural hegemony<sup>9</sup>. In this regard Borghi, employs the tools of decoloniality in her essay<sup>10</sup>: it is a veritable performance as it politically deviates from the norm scientific knowledge production while contributing to its production. The issue revolves entirely around methods of narration and interaction. Western scientific knowledge traditionally has been narrated through colonialist lenses, extensively diversified in shapes but never in meaning. The snare in an academic decolonial approach is that it should not assert itself as yet another university trend, but it must be recognized as an act aimed at both critiquing Western knowledge, acknowledging its origin from a dominant subject, and critiquing the process of deconstruction itself. It is an approach which challenges the universality and legitimacy of Western knowledge. The latter is a part of that inherently violent modern world-system which intertwines capitalist economy, knowledge, culture (exemplified in the dichotomy of civilization/non civilization attributed based on the level of adherence to the Western models) and subaltern subjects positioned due to specific characteristics (race, gender, social class, species, religion, age). Hence the need to clarify one's positioning, as Borghi puts it: «Non si può cambiare il sistema-mondo senza toccare i suoi fondamenti epistemologici, i saperi, le epistemi su cui si fonda<sup>11</sup>».

There is a clear connection between power and knowledge, and it is possible to discuss about coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of power. In the former case, what occurs is defined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos as epistemicide<sup>12</sup>. This allows the

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Social Darwinism was employed to support violent colonial practice.

<sup>7</sup> Rachele Borghi, *Decolonialità e privilegio. Pratiche femministe e critica al sistema mondo*, Milano, Meltemi Editore, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> An ambition attainable through the construction of knowledge utilizing the anthropological process called inter-subjectivity. Elena Pierazzo, *How subjective is your model*, in *The shape of data in digital humanities. Modeling texts and text-based resources*, curated by Julia Flanders and Fotis Jannidis, New York, Routledge, 2019, pp. 117-132.

<sup>9</sup> Crenshaw, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Borghi, *op.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p.74.

<sup>12</sup> The genocides of populations deemed subaltern are compounded by the systemic delegitimization of the knowledge of subaltern subjects. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Una epistemologia del Sur: La*

assertation of a dominant discourse through the introduction of narratives that impose themselves as hegemonic in the name of a (self)declared superiority of Western logocentrism, given its rational character; thus, epistemic violence occurs: hegemonic narratives with the power of defining what is deemed worthy of being known, it leads not only to the under-representation of minorities but also to the deprivation of the necessary tools for these minorities to communicate their way of experiencing the world. Its strength grows in proportion to our insensitivity in recognizing it. In the second case, there is, however, the race: a mental category that acts as social organizer. Indeed, its main function was to encode the relationships between conquering and conquered populations, an escamotage functional to naturalize relationships of domination. Hence, the transition to a hierarchization of cultural differences based on race as a principle of social organization, capable of establishing, together with the capitalist system, a coloniality of power, seems inevitable and, therefore, essential to highlight in this context.

Hegemonic narratives should not be conceptualized as something abstract or immaterial, contrarily, they are made of and from bodies of privileged subjects inhabiting the world-system; narratives of specific modes of experiencing space by specific subjects that aspire to universality<sup>13</sup>. In the cultural storytelling process made by each ethnic group about itself there is a common predisposition to place itself at the center of the world. What is not common «is the pretense to be the planetary center and the desire and design to homogenize the world to its image and likelihood»<sup>14</sup>. To analyze these narratives is crucial to have a clear understanding of the characteristics of producing subjects. As pointed out by Moira Pérez<sup>15</sup>:

Knowledge and experience - and the subjects that embody them - are organized in a multi-leveled hierarchy where the most privileged side affirms itself as a "radically exclusive universality, and the least privileged -with a range of more or less valued knowledges in the middle - is completely excluded from the epistemic system.

It is on these assumption that epistemic violence is based<sup>16</sup>, a phenomena that acts mechanisms of power and oppression present outside the epistemological realm. If it is true that the final goal, as well as the most desirable scenario, consists of a social context and, consequently, an epistemological one, where it is possible to dismantle mechanisms of oppression, it is equally important to emphasize that the path to achieve this is long and necessarily involves unveiling, consciousness-raising, and questioning. This is why

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*reinvencción del conocimiento y la emancipación social* [2009], curated by José Guadalupe Gandarilla Salgado, 5<sup>a</sup>ed., Mexico, Siglo XXI, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, *On decoloniality: concepts, analytics, praxis*, Duhram, Duke University Press, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p 194.

<sup>15</sup> Moira Pérez, *Epistemic violence: reflections between the invisible and the ignorable* in «El lugar sin límites», 1 (1), 2019, 81-98 <<https://www.academica.org/moira.perez/84>>.

<sup>16</sup> Kristie Dotson, *Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression* in «Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy», 28, 2, 2014, pp.115-138, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782585>>.

it is important to identify hegemonic narratives, and the way through which they spread, legitimizing themselves. They represent the voice through which powerful subjects express and define themselves, suggesting their own experience as universally shared. This identification serves the purpose of unveiling the colonialist and imperialist aspirations inherent in hegemonic narratives, a crucial step in subjecting them to discussion. The latter action, however, is crucial to be undertaken by individuals who, in a patriarchal, capitalist and Western-centric society, hold privileges and, consequently, a significant share of power. Recognizing this is essential to avoid perpetuating oppression, and it is achievable by choosing to engage in a conscientization practice. While it begins at a personal level, this practice becomes a political act when individuals, starting from a privileged social position, actively seek practices aimed at interrupting the reproduction of domination relations learned from the environment<sup>17</sup>.

#### 4. Narration of stories

Previously we observed that « the materiality of the world (its ontology) is shaped by epistemology (world sense projected into storytelling and argument) coded, in every culture and/or civilization, as knowledge<sup>18</sup>».

As extensively discussed by Christian Salmon<sup>19</sup>, we live in the era of storytelling management, where the act of narrative is employed by both companies and political elites to construct narratives that serve to maintain the status quo unchanged: one where storytellers (or narrators) act (and are perceived) as point of reference and wielders of power. Long considered a form of communication reserved for children, storytelling shapes the audience's perception of the world, it can serve as a tool to legitimize system of oppression, but at the same time, it can also serve as a means through which marginalized communities can narrate their stories in their own voice, asserting themselves as subjects in the discourse. Hence, storytelling can be defined as a tool for self-legitimization and self-assertation, whose strength lies in its extreme versatility, as it can be easily adapted to the specific communication techniques required by different media and beyond: in the literary realm, storytelling plays a central role. The narratives within literary works, canonical or not, are not mere accounts of real or imaginary events; rather, they serve as contexts in which storytelling encompasses the customs, values, and practices of the society to which the author belongs. If there had been heterogeneity in the canonization process, the phenomenon described above would not have been a cause of concern. However, when the authorship of works can be attributed to a specific category of individuals, it is logical to assert that the values conveyed will reflect those of the social category to which the authors belong. Without a plurality of perspectives and value systems, there is a risk of presenting a single narrative that, if appropriately endorsed, has the potential to assert itself as hegemonic. Impositions of dominant culture occurs through slow, complex processes capable of altering the viewpoint, sentiment, and morality of a particular social class into axioms deemed naturally agreeable, or to use a Crocean expression, into 'common sense'. When a social

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<sup>17</sup> Borghi, *op.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Walsh and Mignolo, *op.cit.*, p.196.

<sup>19</sup> Christian Salmon, *Storytelling. La fabbrica delle storie*, Roma, Fazi editore, 2008.

class succeeds in imposing itself as a reference model, it lays the groundwork for the construction of cultural hegemony, with consequences extending to artistic production. As Antonio Gramsci points out in his *Quaderno n. 21*:

Non si riesce a intendere concretamente che l'arte è sempre legata a una determinata cultura o civiltà, e che lottando per riformare la cultura si giunge a modificare il «contenuto» dell'arte, si lavora a creare una nuova arte, non dall'esterno (pretendendo un'arte didascalica, a tesi, moralistica), ma dall'intimo, perché si modifica tutto l'uomo in quanto si modificano i suoi sentimenti, le sue concezioni e i rapporti di cui l'uomo è espressione necessaria<sup>20</sup>.

In light of this, the social responsibility becomes evident for those who, working with language and artistic-literary production, find themselves in the position of having to make choices in order to select samples that are as representative as possible of the phenomenon they intend to investigate.

#### *4.1. Western Literary Canon: a matter of reference systems*

Franco Moretti's 2000 theoretical-political proposal<sup>21</sup>, leading to distant reading, offers a way to minimize dominant narrative effects by using distance as a knowledge condition.

This allows focusing on broader or smaller text issues, potentially making them disappear, and suggesting less mediated reading using tools to observe landscapes beyond the familiar. This approach, seemingly contrasting with close reading, actually complements it by broadening perspectives. Studying a set of texts with almost religious dedication reflects their importance to researchers and scholars. There is a high likelihood that the focus will be on canonical works, whose representativeness and consequent relevance are already taken for granted; works considered distinctive and exemplifying. The close reading approach can offer interesting perspectives if there is a shift in viewpoint concerning the subjects under scrutiny, whether canonical or not. In this regard David Damrosch's considerations<sup>22</sup> are particularly relevant, as they, in accordance with the hypercanonical historical-cultural context, would allow for moving beyond the normativity of the canon itself and using it critically. In the contemporary socio-historical context, the discourses about the canon and World literature are inextricably intertwined, and in these debates, attention is also focused on the systemic marginalization of certain social groups in specific contexts, hoping for its overcoming. However, many efforts result in a mere reiteration of the oppressive mechanism, albeit, this time, allegedly to the advantage of marginalized subjectivities; such proposals aim at a substitution of hegemony rather than its leading mechanisms deconstruction. An uncritical act of "substitution" lacks the prerequisite to be a lasting solution, whereas an

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<sup>20</sup> Raul Mordenti, «*Quaderni dal carcere*» di Antonio Gramsci in *Letteratura Italiana* Einaudi. Le Opere, curated by Alberto Asor Rosa, IV.II, Torino, Einaudi, 1996, p.62.

<sup>21</sup> Franco Moretti, *Conjectures on World Literature*, «*New Left Review*», 1, Jan-Feb 2000, <<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii1/articles/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>>.

<sup>22</sup> David Damrosch, *World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age* in «*Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*» curated by Haun Saussy, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2006.



approach that starts from the canon and broadens its perspectives with diachronic and diatopic connections allows for limiting the usually saturate space<sup>23</sup> typically dominated by major authors<sup>24</sup>. Shakespeare's sister<sup>25</sup> will not be born out of the *damnatio memoriae* of her brother, but rather through a connection with him. Rethinking the literary canon through the lenses of World Literature requires the ability to weave new threads that connect the subjectivities inhabiting the categories articulated within the world-system<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, it still makes sense to discuss the Western literary canon: since the last decade of the previous century, this evolving discourse, has been enriched by numerous contributions reflecting on the theme of representation and representativeness. Greater attention has been given to the role of female writing and female authors within/without the literary canon<sup>27</sup>, often adopting a binary and white-centric focus, reflecting a white and liberal feminism insufficient for conducting a homogeneous discourse. On the other hand, analyses with an intersectional perspective have not been slow to emerge with essential works<sup>28</sup> for overcoming white-centric and binary perspectives, bringing attention back to the necessity of a feminist and intersectional approach, especially considering the impact of the literary canon in pedagogical contexts. If hegemonic narratives have an impact on the education and development of individuals' value sets within a specific social context, a multiplicity of voices becomes fundamental. John Guillory first, and Susan V. Gallagher later, in the discourse on the Western literary canon, grasp the substantial difference between the set of works ideally part of the canon and those included in educational curricula; there exists an ideal canon that can be defined as the «imaginary canon», which contrasts with the «pedagogical canon», namely the selection of work actually intended for teaching<sup>29</sup>. The hostility and systemic marginalization reflected in the Italian literary canon correspond to a systemic invisibilization of precise subjectivities; however, if a story is not a part of mainstream narrative, it does not mean that it is silent or that it has not been narrated, as is the case with Italian postcolonial literature<sup>30</sup> and with the expansion of production and literary success of women writes in the 1980's and 1990's<sup>31</sup>. The production of the canon involves values and hierarchies, produced in turn by the literary system as a whole; for this

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<sup>23</sup> To acquire a quantitative understanding of the saturation of literary space: Ivi; Alberica Bazzoni, *Canone letterario e studi femministi. Dati e prospettive su didattica, manuali e critica letteraria per una trasformazione dell'italianistica* in *Le costanti e le varianti. Letteratura di lunga durata*, Siena 5-7 December 2019, curated by Guido Mazzoni et. Al., Siena, Del Vecchio Editore, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Damrosh *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Una stanza tutta per sé* [1929], curated by Egle Costantino, Milano, Rizzoli, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis. An Introduction*, New York, Duke University Press, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> *Dentro/fuori, sopra/sotto. Critica femminista e canone letterario negli studi di italianistica*, curated by Alessia Ronchetti e Maria Serena Sapegno, Cambridge, 9-10 September 2005, Ravenna, Longo Editore, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Bazzoni *op.cit.*; Cristina Romeo, *Interrupted Narratives and Intersectional Representations in Italian Postcolonial Literature*, London, Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Natalie Dupré et. al., *Canone e l'insegnamento della letteratura italiana oltre frontiera. Risultati di un'inchiesta empirica negli atenei belgi e olandesi*, in «Narrativa. Nuova serie», 38, 2016, <<https://journals.openedition.org/narrativa/803>>.

<sup>30</sup> Romeo, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Bazzoni, *op. cit.*

reason, the canon can be described as the result of a field of forces including teaching at all levels, research, publishing, criticism, literary awards and festivals, readers, authors. From the observation of this set of factors, a disconnect emerges between literary production (writing subjects), research and critical activities (feminist, postcolonial, or cultural studies), and how much of this is absorbed in teaching and the process of conferring prestige. Therefore, the hierarchical structure and the universalizing tendency of the values of dominant subjects persist.

Il dispositivo retorico fondante del discorso dominante è quello dell'organizzazione del simbolico in binarismo gerarchico, che costituisce l'identità del sé per contrapposizione all'altro -le donne, le classi subalterne, i colonizzati. Parte di tale dispositivo è la rimozione della violenza attraverso cui opera, ovvero la trasformazione dei rapporti sociali di dominio in rapporti naturali<sup>32</sup>.

The success of such transformation implies a repeated resistance to change; an essential attitude for strengthening rather than undermining the status quo. This mechanism also impacts the context of study and teaching in Italian Studies in Italy, where there is a predominant reproduction of dominant values presented as neutral, objective, and universal. As Bazzoni demonstrates in university teaching in Italy there is an over-representation of male writers, and a significant difference is observed when analyzing the situation of Italian Studies in the Anglo-American context<sup>33</sup>. The interrogation of tradition carried out by feminist literary studies, coupled with the reconsideration of specific normative criteria, can be a viable path even for those who choose to adopt the approach of distant reading. Indeed, one of the challenges faced by digital humanist teams in literary circles is precisely to understand the motivation behind the choices that will guide corpora composition, as well as to anticipate their implications as much as possible. The interventions required by the latter in the embryonic phase are quite pervasive, and despite being necessary to achieve research goals, it is always useful to remember that they are not neutral interventions. In this context, the concept of canon could intervene to guide the selection of texts suitable for corpus formation. But according to which criteria is it possible to assert whether texts are canonical or not? An interesting example is provided by the collection of corpora, the European Literary Text Collection (ELTeC), created within the frameworks of the networking project Distant reading for European Literary History where is chosen to use a criterion of canonicity identified in the number of reprints that each novel has had within a certain time frame; furthermore, it has been decided to carry out an additional classification in order to discern two groups of texts<sup>34</sup>. The method used, though interesting, leads to questioning whether a quantitative criterion such as the number of reprints within a relatively short period is sufficient to gauge the measure of a text's canonicity. Indeed, this parameter encompasses variable economic and sociological aspects to consider, such as the taste of

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<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p.145.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi.

<sup>34</sup> Christof Schöch et. al., *Creating the European Literary Text Collection (ELTeC): Challenges and Perspectives*, «Modern Languages Open», 17 December 2021, <<https://modernlanguagesopen.org/articles/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.364>>.

the reading public that will influence the market (and subsequent reprints) in a historical context where demand and supply were taking on increasingly market niches emerging within it<sup>35</sup>. Adopting such a criterion in a capitalist context is risky as it requires reflecting on the modes of reception of specific texts, also questioning who comprises the audience directing their attention towards such types of texts. In fact, if the corpus includes samples whose first editions fall between 1840 and 1920, there is a high likelihood that the readers of these works are students of various levels and scholars, especially concerning those texts that have not had reprints. If a work is known for its plot and general information learned during studies, but not read in its entirety, can it still be considered canonical, or should it rather be defined as classic? The boundary between the two concepts is imperceptible and resides in a characteristic of flexibility. The Western literary canon can be seen as a code stemming from a solid and seemingly unchangeable structure, useful for self-affirmation and the consequent self-foundation of a particular literary civilization<sup>36</sup>; however, it is simultaneously endowed with receptivity and flexibility to be able to accommodate new contributions, different but not dissonant. Of this potential for change, there may be a shift in paradigms involving the space that certain works benefit from within the contexts of knowledge production and legitimation. At the same time, the concept of the classic literary texts assumes a more static meaning as it is linked to what is considered the best literary tradition: it is a product of the canon, towards which people (and particularly for those who are not deeply immersed in the literary field) learn to cultivate a certain sensitivity and respect with an almost religious connotation. This attitude identifies a series of texts as indispensable reading, also influencing the social status of the reader. This is another factor that intervenes in market demand orientation. Given the aforementioned considerations, I believe that using the criterion of reprints as an operationalization of canonicity leaves too many questions open and too many considerations that may interfere with the analysis conducted.

Considering the awareness regarding the complexity of the phenomenon, thinking of defining its aspects through finite criteria appears reductionist<sup>37</sup>; therefore, in an analysis that considers canonicity as a selective criterion, it is useful to consider the set of systems contributing to its definition. They are dynamic systems in an interdependent relationship with the cultural system within which they develop and with the position occupied by the latter in the world-system. For these reasons, a possible alternative could be to observe the presence of works and authors in literary histories; such an approach involves focusing attention on contexts dedicated to education and scientific research, places that, as repeatedly emphasized, are dedicated to the legitimation of knowledge. However, the question of the canon resurfaces when the discourse turns to literary histories. The selection of these can be made according to two criteria: the first involves considering those deemed classical, points of reference within the cultural system; the

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<sup>35</sup> Chris Anderson, *The long tail*, «Wired», 1 October 2004, <<https://www.wired.com/2004/10/tail/>>.

<sup>36</sup> Fausto Curi, *Canone e anticanone. Studi di letteratura*, Bologna, Pendragon, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Barré, Jean-Baptiste Camps, Thierry Poibeau, *Operationalizing Canonicity: A Quantitative Study of French 19th and 20th Century Literature*, «Journal of Cultural Analytics», 8, 3, 17 October 2023, <<https://culturalanalytics.org/article/88113-operationalizing-canonicity-a-quantitative-study-of-french-19th-and-20th-century-literature>>.

second relies on those most widely adopted by official channels of education. By combining these criteria, it may be possible to obtain a framework that considers the flexibility of canons and anti-canons<sup>38</sup>, while also making space for texts that can be defined as classics, for which the space may be resized over time. Even in this case, however, objections regarding the arbitrariness of such choices can be raised, with which one may choose to compromise, or decide to focus on multiple efforts to ratify proposals containing various options that meet the aforementioned parameters, periodically updated.

Similarly, the question remains regarding what is studied and what is read. Considering the various canons<sup>39</sup>, which, when combined, contribute to the complex phenomenon of canonization, it is possible to conduct further preliminary analysis by focusing on what is published by major publishing houses in the reference contexts in the series dedicated to classics. If a text is published by at least three different publishing houses, it can be considered hypercanonical, whereas if published by one or two, it may be considered counter-canonical, and if it has one publication in major publishing houses and at least one additional one from small independent publishing houses, it may be a text to be considered as a shadow-canon<sup>40</sup>. Once again, it is a matter of reference systems, considering the multiple coexisting canons within the same socio-cultural system. More specifically, five interconnected contexts<sup>41</sup> can be identified in which the phenomenon of canonization can be observed. In each of these, the perspective changes and directs the form that the phenomenon will take. These cultural processes incorporate the potential for the dissemination of an uncontested discourse, a singular discourse that shifts in its mode of self-narration but not in its content; therefore, a proposal aimed at the progressive dismantling of the Western literary canon may not only prove fruitless but even harmful. The coexistence of complex cultural systems, whose specificities vary according to the geographical, historical, and political contexts in which they coexist, is a hallmark of contemporary times. This is evident in an increasingly strong need for multiple narratives. These narratives find space to be told in contexts situated at the margins of the hegemonic culture: it is here that multiple other canons come into formation. The margin, a place theorized by bell hooks<sup>42</sup>, is a political space where narrative constellations coexist, forming the foundation of a plurality of discourses that serve to unmask the oppressive intentions manifested through the phenomena contributing to the formation of the representative canon of hegemonic culture. Therefore, a progressive unveiling of the oppressor perspective is a necessary condition for the dissemination of multiple narratives, that is, multiple representations described by the protagonist subjectivities. In this context, the margin is not a place to be absorbed or included but an autonomous context to be listened to create fruitful interconnections. The margin can be considered as part of the whole but outside the main body; it is a physical and conceptual space, a narrating space of a «counter-hegemonic discourse that

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<sup>38</sup> Curi, *op.cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Barré, Camps, Poibeau, *op.cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Damrosch, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Barré, Camps, Poibeau, *op.cit.*

<sup>42</sup> bell hooks, *Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness*, «The Journal of Cinema and Media», 36, 1989, pp.15-23, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44111660>>.

is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives<sup>43</sup>»; it is much more than a site of deprivation; it is a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.

This resistance is built through the voices of those who inhabit it and through them it must be understood; by interacting with the literary tradition, disposed into constellations on present canons, it is functional to establishing a dialogue between the literary cultures of the center and of the margin; thus, returning a complex, contradictory image, in other words, a real one.

To conclude, the debate on the contemporary literary canon risks devolving into a sterile confrontation between factions aimed at exposing the error of one side. However, the goal is not the redefinition of a singular discourse achieved through substitution, but rather the advancement of a complex discourse that is genuinely plural. Such plurality can be realized through constant debate among constellations that relativize perspectives, tools used, narratives and reference systems; complex dialogical practices among (sub)objects of study highlight the partiality of narratives, data and canons.

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<sup>43</sup> Ivi, p. 20.