

The Monstrous Hospitality of Canonical Text Selections: The Need for a Hospitable Literacy Framework

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Abstract

Recent political excursions into classroom text selections by local and national politicians and pundits have made teaching canonical texts more appealing to many school districts and teachers. In this study, we used conceptions of Derridean hospitality alongside monster theory to examine what common canonical texts teach students about who is welcome and worthy of hospitality in American society and who is viewed as wholly monstrous and outside the bounds of hospitality. The results of our critical content analysis revealed that in commonly taught canonical novels, identity categories like race and gender shape determinations of who is welcome and who is othered. The findings suggest that critical readings of canonical texts cannot offer a hospitable welcome to marginalized and othered youth in ELA classrooms. Instead we offer a hospitable literacy approach to text selection in ELA classrooms.

Keywords

adolescent literacy, critical content analysis, critical literacies, culturally sustainable, literature

In 2022, two Missouri high school teachers sent a note to inform parents about the semester's whole class novel, *Dear Martin* (Stone, 2017), which they described as a “gripping novel that tells the story of an Ivy League-bound African American student named Justyce who becomes a victim of racial profiling” (Riley, 2022). The teachers also offered an alternative text for parents who did not want their children to read the novel. Parents complained to the administration about the book being taught at all. The principal responded with a letter to parents apologizing for the

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undue stress and saying that *Dear Martin* would be replaced by *To Kill a Mockingbird* (*TKAM*) by Harper Lee (1960). This is a common story in the United States, as far-right politicians focus on education and attempt to maintain the cis-hetero-patriarchal-White supremacist status quo by eliminating discussions about oppression and power from public school classrooms. This recent surge in book bannings and restrictions at the state and district level means that many secondary ELA teachers who relied on young adult literature to support relevant, rigorous, and critical classroom instruction are being pressured (either directly through legislation or through the chilling effect of combative school board meetings) to retreat into canonical texts, like *TKAM*, because they are viewed as less controversial, safer choices.

While we understand that canonical texts might feel safer and acceptable due to the history of academic and social legitimation, we must ask: Safer for who and accepted by whom? Retreating into canonical texts because they are categorized as universal or less contentious ignores how the politics of the powerful are always positioned as applicable to all, even though no text is best suited for *all* readers. As Castillo (2022) argued, “every reader, in principle, should be unexpected: it’s a minor miracle, to create a work of art that reaches another person; to write something that then finds someone willing enough to take it on, engage with it—read it” (p. 62). And yet, unexpected readers are often those whose identities do not fall within the categories of White, Christian, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class, and/or male. Thus, the political demand for the inclusion of canonical texts is, at best, a failure to consider the unexpected reader who might be Black, trans, atheist, disabled, or financially insecure. At worst, it is a complete erasure and lack of care for those readers, a rejection and dismissal of readers who are “not remotely imagined—maybe not even imaginable—” (p. 64) by those promoting allegiance to canonical texts.

As scholars of critical literacy studies, we wondered what canonical stories like *TKAM* communicate to the reader who is unexpected. We wondered what school and district text selections—from contemporary to canonical texts—might convey to the young people who are often shunned in schools and the world at large. As critical literacy is a method of enabling young people to read the word and the world (Freire, 1972) and as critical literacy approaches recognize how discourse can position readers in particular ways (Janks, 2013), we wondered how canonical texts might position readers to understand the world in ways educators might not expect, even if the text is taught through critical lenses.

Thus, in this article, we engaged in a reflexive critical content analysis of five canonical texts to examine how these novels position readers, unexpected, and otherwise. Specifically, we employed the Derridean concept of hospitality and monster theory as a conceptual framework that enables educational stakeholders to consider the ideological underpinnings of canonical texts that communicate beliefs about who should and should not be welcomed in the home, at school, and in the world. While a host of content analyses centering the investigation of canonical texts exists (Miller et al., 2022; Mantsose et al., 2017), this study directly responded to recent calls from literacy scholars to consider “who and what is included and excluded” (Haddix, 2020, p. 27); “Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable maintaining dehumanizing views?” (Stewart, 2017, para. 15); and “What does it

mean to be human in the 21st century?” (Baker-Bell et al., 2017). Considering these calls to action, we centered the following research questions:

1. What might commonly taught canonical texts communicate about who is considered Other and/or Monstrous?
2. What do these texts communicate about society’s responsibility to the Other?
3. Across these texts, which people are deemed worthy of unconditional welcome and hospitality?

The answers to these questions led us to argue for the adoption of what we call a *hospitable literacy framework*, which extends the work of critical literacy by bringing forward new questions of what it means for teachers and students to be responsible to and with each other.

Literature Review

Curriculum Violence via Texts

Coined by Ighodaro and Wiggan (2010), curriculum violence refers to “the deliberate manipulation of academic programming in a manner that ignores or compromises the intellectual and psychological wellbeing of learners” (p. 2). They explained that curriculum is often used to dictate which experiences and histories are worth knowing and which should be shunned due to their negligible importance in the overall trajectory of society. The expansive influence of the curriculum on learners results in the curriculum assuming the form of a “psychological discourse of power” where “the interests of dominant groups or power elites are stated and then served through a dominant curriculum” (p. 3). By positioning the knowledge and experiences of dominant groups at the forefront of the curricular experience, educators teach students who is and is not inferior, who is and is not intellectually dependent on others, who is and is not capable of thinking, and who is and is not worthy of cultural empowerment and social progress.

Although Ighodaro and Wiggan (2010) referred to curricular violence embedded in curriculum content, pedagogical processes, and educational assessments in the overall education system, Jones (2020) highlighted the violence of English and literacy classrooms, and she noted that intention, or deliberateness, is not required for curriculum violence to occur. Specifically, she argued that syllabi construction, assignment and assessment creation, standards prioritization, and even classroom rules can be violent for minoritized students. Curriculum violence, although sometimes influenced by larger political issues, can also be a result of individual educator’s pedagogical decisions. While all aspects can be violent, Jones (2022) pinpointed text selection as particularly dire to students’ intellectual and psychological wellbeing:

If our text selection presents a blatant allegiance to characters from marginalized communities only if they remain marginalized and/or a White character is part of their redemption story, we are complicit in upholding a form of curriculum violence that is not inclusive of the full range of people’s stories and histories. (pp. 4–5).

Ultimately, curriculum violence via text selection occurs when educators: (1) refuse to include texts showcasing the richness and creativity of minoritized students' histories, experiences, and dreams for the future (Griffin & Turner, 2021; Toliver, 2020); (2) foreground texts suggesting BIPOC students have little or no value in society (An, 2022; Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2021); (3) ameliorate the horror of racial violence by excluding texts that center the realities of minoritized life (Gibbs, 2021); and (4) reproduce disparaging caricatures of the lives of Black, Indigenous, Latine, Asian, and multiracial young people by centralizing texts that solely uplift White protagonists (Jones, 2022a). Curriculum violence occurs when educators use texts, unwittingly or not, to uplift certain students as worthy of welcome into the curriculum and the classroom, while other students are shunned, not deserving space in the classroom or the text.

Critical Literacy and the Teaching of Canonical Texts

Recent scholarship on the teaching of canonical texts has acknowledged that these texts center "implicit and explicit narratives [of] Eurocentrism, conflict-resolution through violence, gender stereotypes, and racism," but the research often focuses on how critical pedagogical and critical literacy approaches to these texts can "subvert the traditions, norms, [and] expectations" (Macaluso & Macaluso, 2019, p. x) of traditional literary analysis and pedagogical approaches. Dyches (2019), for example, cited research showing that students from nondominant groups feel marginalized and silenced by the disconnect between their own experiences and the narratives in canonical texts (Bissonette & Glazier, 2016; Schieble, 2014) and argued that students from dominant groups are also negatively impacted by reading these texts having their privilege reproduced and affirmed (Glazier & Seo, 2005). Still, she noted that teachers "continue to find generative ways to teach their canonical curricula using approaches that are critical, careful, and social-justice oriented" (Dyches, 2019, p. 36) by engaging students in "analysis of how texts and discourses work, where, with what consequences, and in whose interests" (Luke, 2012) across social, political, and cultural contexts.

Recent pedagogical articles that have examined canonical literature pedagogy focus on how teachers might mitigate curricular violence via canonical text selections by building robust text sets that bring forward multiple perspectives (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2019; Johnson & Neville, 2019); by teaching canonical text using critical literacy frameworks (Borsheim-Black & Saragianides, 2019; Ebarvia, 2019; Ervin, 2022); by connecting thematic elements of the canon to popular culture or current events (Cook et al., 2019; Macaluso & Macaluso, 2019); and providing opportunities for youth to provide counternarratives or personal responses to canonical texts (Bissonette & Glazier, 2016; Falter & Schoonover, 2019). Jones (2022a) critiqued these attempted mitigations as inadequate responses to texts that construct and uphold dehumanizing constructions of identity, arguing instead for "space [in ELA classrooms] to let our darlings, in this case our outdated texts and pedagogies, die, and along with that, parts of ourselves that were nostalgic about how we taught familiar texts" (pp. 4–5). Certainly, teachers reported complex factors beyond nostalgia that limit their ability to teach non-canonical texts, including district and school approved

reading lists, standardized curriculum and testing, and limited funding for new texts (Boyd & Darragh, 2017; Smith et al., 2018), but Jones challenged literacy researchers, policymakers, and teachers to reconsider whether curricular violence through text selection can be mitigated simply by adding additional voices, analyzing more critically, or building more current summative assessments.

Conceptual Framework

To answer our research questions that attend to text, monstrosity, and the Other, we relied on a conceptual framework that builds from the knowledge of monster theory and Derridean hospitality. We brought these concepts together to discuss how monstrosity and hospitality in the classroom are intricately intertwined.

Monster Theory

Coined by Jeffrey Cohen (1996), monster theory is a critical philosophy that asks researchers to consider how monstrous bodies exist as cultural metaphors. Specifically, monster theory contends that literary monsters are “difference made flesh, come to dwell among us” (Cohen, 1996, p. 7), where “us” refers to dominant, traditional, hegemonic entities who classify the self as normal and any being promoting difference as Other. To mute or obliterate diversity, the monster/Other must be destroyed via murder, maiming, or banishment, and its removal is praised as a heroic endeavor. In fact, the monster/Others’ death or banishment is a warning: beware the pull of difference; beware the movement of normal bodies into monstrous spaces to avoid contamination; beware the desire to challenge normality, for you might become monstrous. Still, those who avoid the monster are jealous of its freedom, envious of how the monster can express itself in its exiled state. The monster is liberation made real, so people repressed by the restrictions of normalcy use the monster as a second body, one that can live out desires deemed improper. When the tourism of the monster’s body ends, the being is killed, a ritual sacrifice to maintain the myth of tradition. Because the monster never dies, however, it always returns. When the monsters rise again, they present questions that so-called normal people cannot ignore. They “ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions ... They ask us why we have created them” (p. 20).

Monster theorists are clear about who societal monsters tend to be, as literary monsters are often symbolically or blatantly represented by racial, gendered, sexual, and/or disabled Others. Stories about zombies and other undead creatures mirror implicit anxiety over race relations (Newitz, 2020). Narratives of creatures with perceived bodily oddities are “important elements in understanding the psychologies and the body-images of ‘normal’ subjects, attesting to what is and is not tolerable or incorporeal into normality” (Grosz, 2020, p. 419). Speculative fiction (e.g., sci-fi, fantasy, and horror) includes aliens, futuristic beings, and monsters who mirror the existences and experiences of real-world Others marred by pernicious stereotypes (Weinstock, 2020). Any tale that includes “fantastic beasts, witches, zombies, vampires, dragons,

manticores, shades, and the rest of the monstrous menagerie [are] analogous to those who are positioned as different in the real world” (Thomas, 2019, p. 20). Thus, monstrous bodies in texts are often an author’s way of critiquing societal beliefs about the construction of the normal/abnormal, right/wrong, welcome/shunned. Difference in minoritized identity is exaggerated into monstrous aberration. In this way, the monster is a “[text] in need of interpretation” (Weinstock, 2020, p. 46). It is a metaphor for those considered monstrous in dominant society.

When interpretation occurs, however, what do we learn? For many researchers, it is enough to note the parallels between monster and Other, detailing how minoritized people are consistently situated as villains, enemies, monsters (Thomas, 2019). But other scholars have noted that this positioning communicates something to readers about the people who are made monstrous. Explicitly, scholars have argued that readers are taught who can and who cannot be welcomed into the home. Halberstam (2020) suggested that the monster often destroys the sanctity of the home, so even if they have an invitation to visit, they are not allowed to stay for long. Beal (2020) argued that the monster is a representation of Freud’s conception of the *unheimlich*, the unhomely or uncanny. He stated that monsters destabilize one’s sense of security, health, and wellbeing: “They make one feel not at home at home. They are figures of chaos and disorientation within order and orientation, revealing deep insecurities in one’s faith in oneself, one’s society, and one’s world” (p. 453). These destabilizing creatures, figures of chaos, beings-that-are-not encroach upon normal society’s feelings of at-homeness, safety, balance. The traditional folk cannot give these creatures a place in their homes, for their very existence feels parasitic, as if the foreign being is feeding off the host. In this way, hospitality toward the Other means a loss of the self. Thus, literary monsters teach readers who is and is not deserving of hospitality, who does and does not warrant space in the home, who we are and are not responsible for.

Derridean Hospitality

The notion of Derridean deconstruction explores our responsibility to the Other, with the understanding that the Other historically includes women, children, non-Europeans, and other formal identities. Rather than arguing that identities are irrelevant, Derrida deconstructed the subject with the goal of “improv[ing] the concept of the human subject” (Derrida, 2000, p. 179) so those currently defined as Other can be recognized as “the subject of his or her own experience, life, activity, responsibilities and so on” (Montefiore, 2001, p. 177). In the context of education, this means that teachers, students, administration, staff, and community members must deconstruct personal ideas and fears about the Other to see each person as an individual subject, each being as someone worthy of expressing life on their own terms. Categorical identifications are important, but for Derrida, they cannot determine the gamut of humanity. Parts of people do not constitute their whole of being.

Absolute hospitality “requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner ... but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come” (Derrida, 1997/2000, p. 25). While classrooms in the United States are mandated—often after protracted legislative and judicial battles

(e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, Title IV, Title IX, The Americans with Disabilities Act)—to allow the Other entry, there is a fundamental difference between allowing entry and *giving place* to all young people. In fact, Derrida would claim that our historical understanding of hospitality is deficient due to the numerous restrictions people place on unlimited welcome. For example, students of color and students with diverse gender and sexual identities can physically enter the classroom, but books by, for, and about them cannot, due to teacher censorship and/or state mandate (Boyd et al., 2021; Moeller & Becnel, 2020). Educators increasingly bring youth literature into classrooms around the United States, but the texts are often judged based on their ability to align with canonical texts or state standards, rather than how they might provide students a place to dream and exist in the literature classroom (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020; Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016). Canonical texts are taught to ensure commensurability and promote a shared cultural heritage (Coles, 2013), but the texts often uplift White, cisgendered, able-bodied, wealthy American men as the only beings whose cultural heritage is of worth (Toliver & Hadley, 2021a; Miller & Worlds, 2021). Thus, students and their stories can enter, but they may not be given place in the classroom, curriculum, or school.

The only one who can give place is the “master at home” (Derrida, 1997/2000, p. 53), the host who has the power to receive or refuse the Other as they wish. As classroom hosts, teachers, in the moment of arrival, must immediately decide if the Other deserves hospitality or if they are *wholly* other, a parasite or a “being that is not” (Derrida, 1997/2000, p. 5). They must decide which classroom texts and assignments to include, determine which students are deserving of care and representation, and choose which students are wholly Other. The connection between host and visitor, teacher and student is a necessary one. Derrida maintained that a key factor in determining who is worthy of hospitality and who is a “being that is not” (p. 5) is whether the host perceives the other as threatening:

Anyone who encroaches on my “at home,” ... on my power of hospitality, on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy. This other becomes a hostile subject, and I risk becoming their hostage. (p. 55).

In short, when the host feels that their sense of dominance over their at-homeness is threatened, then the Other is seen as a hostile, terrifying subject. That construction of the Other as vicious allows the host to refuse hospitality, to refuse to *give place* or see the humanity of the Other. In fact, the Other may be classified as *monstrous* to justify all sorts of cruelty and violence toward them. Thus, an ELA educator’s selection of text can position some people as perpetual bestowers and receivers of hospitality and some as hostile subjects who are always accused of being monsters.

Method

In the fall of 2018, at a large public research university in the southern region of the United States, we were tasked with creating a course to help future ELA teachers challenge dominant educational practices and policies (for more information on course design, see Toliver & Hadley 2021a). Each author taught one section of the course

with a combined student population of 34 secondary preservice teachers (PSTs). To meet course goals, we chose to foreground readings, assignments, and discussions that centered educational equity. As examples, each week, students would respond via written reflection to questions like the following: How do we talk about, think about, and learn about students and what are our assumptions about young people? and How do we resist narrowed ideas about which texts we can/cannot use in classrooms? We also included assignments that asked students to consider their historical experiences as students in ELA classrooms and how those experiences might influence their future roles as English teachers. For one such assignment (English Education Autobiography), we asked students to reflect on their secondary English language arts classroom experiences and discuss how those experiences might impact their ideas about curriculum and instruction. As part of this assignment, we asked them to list each book they remember being assigned in their secondary English classes. This list foregrounded class discussions about which books are given space in ELA classrooms. Ultimately, our goal was to assist students in considering what they might teach, how they might teach it, and how these pedagogical ideas are connected to their educational beliefs and histories.

Text Selection

In a previous article, we discussed the list of books we compiled from the English Education Autobiography assignment and highlighted arguments the PSTs made in defense of the canonical texts present on that list (Toliver & Hadley, 2021b). In that article, we showcased the vast array of texts the PSTs were assigned in secondary school ($n=220$); we also revealed how little overlap they had in their ELA classes (only 16 books were read by at least one-third of students across class sections) and highlighted the arguments PSTs made in defense of the canon (e.g., canonical texts are the highest quality; are necessary to understand literary allusions; and are able to teach overarching themes better than other books). Rather than just centralizing PST arguments, the article also challenged common arguments for canonical texts that we heard in our teaching contexts.

For this study, we first wanted to examine the 16 texts most assigned to the PSTs to consider what was being communicated in those narratives, but we noticed extensive differences in the texts. For instance, the sociohistorical context of Shakespearean plays like *Romeo and Juliet* are vastly different from novels like *The Great Gatsby* and *TKAM*. To account for this difference, we narrowed the texts based on setting. First, we limited our analysis to narratives set in the past 100 years (1922–2022 at the time of this study). This eliminated eight books and created historical commonality across the texts. We then eliminated texts in which the protagonists were not U.S. citizens. This constriction highlighted the geographical, political, and social context of one specific location which was essential because different spatial contexts are faced with sociopolitical issues bounded by geographical demarcations. After narrowing the texts, we were left with five books: *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925); *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1953); *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960); *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967); and *The Things They Carried* (O'Brien, 2009).

Data Analysis: Reflexive Critical Content Analysis

To engage in this research, we combined critical content analysis (CCA) (Johnson et al., 2016) with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019). CCA is a flexible method that positions critical paradigms as the frame for textual analysis (Short & World of Words Community, 2017). RTA is also a flexible method that prioritizes theming and coding to analyze research data. A key criterion for RTA is that researchers must continually question their assumptions, consider how their positionality influences data analysis, reflect on how they engage with the data, and acknowledge that data interpretation can never be separated from the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Trainor & Bundon, 2021). Combining CCA with RTA enabled us to attend to all the steps required for the former while acknowledging how the researcher is embedded in the whole of the process. We called our process *reflexive critical content analysis* (RCCA).

To engage in RCCA, we employed several distinct steps over the course of 6 months. First, although CCA begins with research purpose and questions, we began with our positionality. Heidi is a White cis-hetero woman who works with both Derridean post-structural conceptions of responsibility to the Other and critical theories that reckon with the role of gender, sexuality, race, and other identity categories in personal and institutional settings. Her identity and the privilege it affords has required a great deal of *unlearning* in her past and present considerations of self as a reader, person, public high school English teacher, and teacher educator. Alternatively, Stephanie is a Black cis-hetero woman whose work centralizes Black youth, speculative fiction, and social justice in the context of education. She often thinks about her experiences as a Black girl in public schools and her position as a former public high school English teacher. Her identity as a Black girl and woman was often at odds with her identity as a student and teacher; this conflict has required her to explore the difficulties of teaching for equity and justice in schools steeped in Whiteness. In discussing our positionality, we clarified the contrast in our racialized sociopolitical, historical, and theoretical locations, and we noticed how, even though there was resonance in our gender and teaching identities, our life experiences and analytic attunements greatly contrasted when race was discussed. Thus, we agreed that even as theory would guide our analysis of text, race would be a central feature of our collective work.

After an initial discussion of our positionality, we followed CCA by deciding on a research purpose, creating research questions, and selecting research texts. As we engaged in each component, we kept our positionality in mind. For example, because we knew race would be a salient feature of our analysis, we created research questions centering race as a major focus of the investigation. Once these selections were complete, we followed CCA guidelines and read deeply within our theoretical frames to select tenets relevant to our research purpose. By first reading theory, rather than beginning with a familiarization of data as RTA would require, we knew our analysis would follow a deductive approach.

For the deductive analytical process, we set a schedule in which we read one book per month. We individually read and took notes on each book with theories of

hospitality and monstrosity in mind. Although we left room for in vivo coding, we theoretically coded the texts using these broad categories: hospitality, welcome/shunned, monstrous, Other, whiteness/white supremacy, racism, us/them, giving place, normal/not normal, outsider/insider. At the end of the month, we collectively discussed our readings alongside our research questions and theories. During these meetings, we reviewed our coded sections and took detailed notes to create a record of salient codes and passages. We discussed not only the elements connected to our readings, but we also explored our pre-existing knowledge and social positions in relation to the texts.

To illustrate, we followed CCA by creating collaborative theoretical memos for each book. In our notes from January 3, 2022, after the reading of *The Outsiders*, we wrote:

Every group has its Others - Greasers see the Socs as monsters, so it allows them to kill them and brutalize them without remorse and vice versa. Every group has monsters—

Ponyboy, because he wanted to be a Soc—he saw the goodness in the Socs. Darry is not meant to be a greaser and neither is Ponyboy, so the Socs are still positioned as the ideal, the end goal, the “normal.”

In addition to collaborative memos like the one above, our summary notes also included statements guided by RTA:

We noticed how this book extended the adult texts from prior readings and how the inclusion of this book shows that it's not just adult canonical texts, but YA as well... we noticed that there were cultural things that influenced how we read and what we saw. Some things would have remained invisible, like *Gone with the Wind* as a cultural staple for young White women. That book was not a part of Stephanie's upbringing. She didn't even know it was a thing until she was older. Heidi read the book and watched the series with her mother. If it were two White women, it's possible that this text would have been invisible. If it were two Black women, it might've stood out, but we may not have known why it mattered, how it was such a ubiquitous experience for White women. It's difficult to talk about past racist history and how it influenced who you are and how it affects the unlearning you have to do.

Essentially, we engaged in the steps of CCA by reading the texts with theory in mind and attending to structures of power, but we also engaged in RTA through discussions of our sociohistorical experiences and how they affected our reading and analysis. We questioned our assumptions about who could be classified as monsters (i.e., White and poor people can also be monstrous in the case of the Greasers); considered positionality and its influence on our data analysis (i.e., how our racial backgrounds affected our understanding and investigation of textual allusions); and reflected on how data interpretation was entwined with our identities (i.e., how analysis would change if we had a different writing partnership).

As we moved toward the writing of themes, we reviewed our codes across all the texts and grouped them into larger categories foregrounding our theoretical frames.

As we did so, we found that even as we selected passages reflecting our theoretical tenets, our positionalities affected which passages made it into the final paper and which passages did not. Namely, as race was an essential component to our discussions, we realized that although there were multiple passages we could have included to address the monsterization or welcome of characters based on gender, ethnicity, ability, or sexuality, we consistently selected passages that illustrated Otherness based on race as examples of hospitality and monstrosity. This forced us to narrow our research purpose to more closely align with the findings from our analytic process.

Ultimately, we utilized RCCA to ensure that even as we followed the flexible, yet comprehensive steps for CCA in our exploration and study of the data, we also attended to the fact that we were responsible for interpretation and representation of the theory, context, and data. Thus, we were able to construct several interpretive stories about the texts that were grounded in our theoretical assumptions, linked to our analytic resources and skills, and connected to who we are as researchers and people.

Findings

We divided our findings into two sections—*hospitality to the monstrous* and *monstrosity that precludes hospitality*—but it is worth noting that the texts had multiple examples that could be written under either category. Our findings are meant to show examples across multiple texts with enough detail to make clear the patterned representation of how racial identity, hospitality, and monstrosity are intertwined.

Hospitality to the Monstrous

In every book, there were characters who acted monstrously—they committed murder; treated other characters in degrading and dehumanizing ways; and espoused racist, homophobic, or misogynistic views—yet, because of the white racial identities they carried, they were offered hospitality. For instance, Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* is the fictional embodiment of white supremacy culture (Okun, 2022), and his monstrosity and brutality are carefully cataloged throughout the novel. As examples, Tom broke his mistress' nose because she mentioned his wife's name, promoting fear through aggression. He engaged in paternalism when he hesitantly identified Daisy, his wife, as White, showcasing his perceived power to bestow whiteness upon others. He believed white people must hoard power or else "the other races will [one day] have control of things" (p.14). Tom is a character capable of both thoughtless and purposeful monstrosities because of his white supremacist beliefs.

However, Tom is *always* offered hospitality by those around him, no matter how monstrously he behaves. When Tom compared Daisy's affair with Gatsby to "inter-marriage between black and White," Jordan murmured, "We're all White here" (p. 137), welcoming Tom's negative description of interracial marriage and his description of Backness as inferior. After Gatsby mentioned the word "uncivilized" during conversation, Tom began a rant about civilization, of Whiteness, "going to pieces," and if they don't "look out, the White race will be—utterly submerged" (p. 14).

Daisy affirmed Tom by saying, “We’ve got to beat them down” (p. 15) even though she said this with a wink. Nick internally stated that Tom’s outburst was pathetic, but he never responded aloud. No one corrected or challenged Tom during his rant. No one left the room. Essentially, Tom’s behaviors are excused because the combination of wealth and whiteness made his monstrosity tolerable, securing his limitless welcome in every setting.

White wealth also played a role in *TKAM*. Near the end of the novel, a group of White, well-to-do, religious, and mostly racist ladies of Maycomb gathered for their customary missionary circle. In attendance was Miss Maudie who asserted herself as one of “the handful of people in this town who say that fair play is not marked White Only” (Lee, 1960, p. 270). Still, when the civilly monstrous White women began lamenting the sullenness of their cooks and field hands after the murder of Tom Robinson, a Black man, Miss Maudie was silent. When one of the ladies stated, “there’s nothing more distracting than a sulky darcy” (p. 264) and another discussed that no amount of education or Christian doctrine will save White women from Black male sexual deviance, Miss Maudie did not object. Of course, Miss Maudie was a guest who had a responsibility to wholly welcome others in someone else’s home whether she agreed with their politics or not; however, it is worth noting who was and was not excluded from that unconditional welcome. In this instance, Miss Maudie welcomed the White women and their racist views through her silence. Calpurnia, the Black housekeeper, can enter the room to serve the nice White women, but she existed only to offer hospitality, never to receive it. Even Miss Maudie did not provide welcome. Ultimately, as the monstrous missionaries positioned Calpurnia and the other Black residents of Maycomb as wholly Other, Miss Maudie also refused to give place to Calupurnia through her silence.

The Outsiders also makes clear that Derrida’s “moment of arrival” or Beal’s determination of the *unheimlich* is deeply tied to socially constructed considerations of racial similarity or alterity. Once again, wealthy White women (or girls) are symbols of generosity and hospitality, as when Ponyboy and Dally (White Greasers) first met Cherry and Marcia (White Socs) at the drive-in. When Johnny joined the group, Cherry “looked at him, sizing him up as she had me. Then she smiled softly, and I knew she had sized him up right” (Hinton, 1967, p. 24), meaning she had determined he was an Other worthy of her hospitality. The Greasers were offered hospitality by the Soc girls because, although they were poor, they still have shared identity categories like whiteness and shared concepts of identity performance like traditional masculinity and femininity. Even when members of the Greasers killed, robbed, fought, and engaged in other violent behaviors, they could be humanized in ways that the nameless Mexican, who got knifed in a fight was not. Even the verbal digs that the boys and girls gave each other—“wild Indians” (p. 106), “sq**ws” (p. 107), “Arabian slavetraders” (p. 28)—made clear what identities the characters viewed as “beings that are not.” (Derrida, p. 5).

In *The Things They Carried*, the story of one soldier’s attractive and bubbly girlfriend, Mary Anne, who showed up in Vietnam to be near him, is one of the more striking examples of how White femininity is equated with hospitality and comfort. She was “good for morale” (O’Brien, 2009, p. 100) because “she made you think about

those girls back home, how pure and innocent they all are” (p. 115). She danced to music, played volleyball, and flirted with her boyfriend’s friends, and “the men genuinely liked her” (p. 100). In short, Mary Anne’s youth, whiteness, friendliness, and beauty reminded the soldiers of their own (lost) humanity and hospitality.

However, by the end of Mary Anne’s story, she is portrayed as monstrous through her association with the land and people of Vietnam. As Mary Anne’s curiosity and fascination with the land grew, she was transformed: “Vietnam made her glow in the dark. She wanted more, she wanted to penetrate deeper into the mystery of herself, and after a time the wanting became needing, which turned then to craving” (pp. 115–116). Her transformation into the monstrous is clearest in the description of her jewelry: a grotesque necklace “elongated and narrow, like pieces of blackened leather, the tongues were threaded along a length of copper wire, one tongue overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable” (pp. 112–113). The text suggests that Mary Anne’s monstrosity is directly connected to the land of Vietnam: “She was part of the land...She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill” (p. 118). Thus, Mary Anne becomes a cautionary tale about how dangerous the Other can be—so dangerous that even a bringer of hospitality can be corrupted. The fundamental problem is that Mary Anne, in the moment of arrival, chose to see the Other as quaint and wonderful instead of as beings unworthy of hospitality. Her inability to make the correct decision meant that she became monstrous. Even as a monster, however, Mary Anne’s whiteness carried weight: When she finally left the compound to become one with the land, the soldiers conducted a week-long air search and brought in the military police to bring her back. They never found her, but if they did, she would be welcomed with open arms, tongue necklace, and all.

Across the text set, the consistent double standard of hospitality in these texts—where only a white racialized identity makes “inviolable immunity” (Derrida, 1997/2000, p. 51), a characteristic of hospitality highlights these texts’ failure to “improve the concept of the human subject” (Derrida, 2000, p. 179) in determining who deserves hospitality.

Monstrosity That Precludes Hospitality

As some monstrous characters were granted hospitality due to their proximity to whiteness, other characters were described as more beast or object than human, relegated to the outskirts of humanity and described as dead or ghostly rather than living human beings. As an example, Black characters in *The Great Gatsby* are scarce, their presence only referenced twice throughout the text. In one of these instances, the narrator described his encounter with Black people in the following way: “a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry” (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 73). The term *Black buck* was often used to classify Black men who refused to bend to the will of Whiteness and whose supposed violent and sexual natures wreaked havoc on White citizens. These unnamed Black men are problems, monsters prone to viciousness and lasciviousness who refused law and order. The racial slur is one way to dictate the men’s monstrosity, but

Nick's description of their eyes also situates the characters as lurid beings. The Black people did not just look at the White men. Instead, the yolks of their eyes rolled toward them, a garish sight. These "haughty" individuals lived on the outskirts, away from civilized society. They may be dressed nicely, and have the outer trappings of wealth, but they were still inhuman, which is why Nick says, "anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge," [...] "anything at all ..." (p. 73). Said another way: even monsters wear nice clothes and ride in limousines in a land of beasts and brutes.

That Black people are removed from true civilization to protect a town's innocence is represented in both *The Outsiders* and *TKAM*. In Hinton's text, Black people do not exist and representations of people of color are limited even though the novel is set in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a city historically filled with Black people. Indigenous people are only referred to using racial slurs, and the only Latine person is a Mexican hitchhiker who attempts to stab someone. People of color haunt the narrative, existing on the periphery of civilization, unwelcome into the Greasers' or the Soc's world. Another example was shown through Tom Robinson in *TKAM*. Tom is prominent in the narrative, but he is mostly a specter that haunts the daily conversations of White characters with little dialogue to position himself human. Atticus called Tom a "quiet, respectable, humble Negro" (Lee, 1960, p. 232) who had the gall to feel empathy for a White woman. Scout described his manners as aligned with those of Atticus. The pastor called Robinson's family "clean-living folks" (p. 219). Even during his defense, Tom is a shadow, lurking behind Atticus as the lawyer defended him. Thus, Tom is a respectable negro because he was allowed entrance into civilization, but he existed as an ephemeral being/not being who did not speak for fear that well-meaning townspeople would murder him for existing.

Beyond metaphorical monstrosity, explicit descriptions of Tom's body showcase how he was made monstrous in the town. Scout described Tom as a "black-velvet negro, not shiny, but soft black velvet" (Lee, 1960, p. 218). Mr. Ewell said Tom, alongside the rest of the Black community, lived in a "n***er nest" (p. 198) and the proximity of the "nest" to Mr. Ewell's house lessened the value of his property. Atticus argued that the belief that *all* Black people were immoral and untrustworthy was "a lie as black as Tom Robinson's skin" (p. 232). In narrating Tom's presence in the courtroom, Scout said that despite Tom's powerful look, his left arm was rubber-like, "fully twelve inches shorter than his right, and hung dead at his side. It ended in a small shriveled hand, and from as far away as the balcony I could see that it was no use to him" (p. 211). These images of Tom focus on his body as an oddity: he is closer to fabric than human. He resides in a monster nest, of which his very existence devalued the existence of other, White residents. He is deemed a monstrous Other, lurking in the metaphorical and physical shadows.

Although Tom Robinson was symbolically constructed as a ghost, the Vietnamese people in *The Things They Carried* represented a direct ghostly classification. In the text, the narrator portrayed the Vietnamese people in the following way:

We called the enemy ghosts ... The land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science. Late at night, on guard, it seemed that all of

Vietnam was alive and shimmering—odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogiemens in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas. It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost. The way he came out at night. How you never really saw him, just thought you did. Almost magical—appearing, disappearing. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass ... He was scary. (O'Brien, 2009, pp. 213–214).

In addition to the people, the land was also situated as a haunted space where Vietnamese people engaged in otherworldly, savage behavior, striking fear into the hearts of American soldiers. In a time when the U.S. military sent troops to raze Vietnamese land, the residents were considered scary, frightful, and monstrous. Because of the monstrous classification, the murders of Vietnamese people were seen as justified. In fact, the narrator said, “if it isn’t human, it doesn’t matter much if it’s dead. And so a VC nurse, fried by napalm, was a crispy critter. A Vietnamese baby, which lay nearby, was a roasted peanut. ‘Just a crunchie munchie...’” (p. 248). The soldiers ignored the Vietnamese people’s humanity and bestowed monikers of monstrosity to justify their deaths. Vietnamese people, soldiers and civilians, were monsters to be tamed, creatures that could not exist on their own land, beings that must die for the glory of White nations.

Descriptions of monstrosity are not relegated to otherworldly presence, as minoritized peoples were also deemed monsters because of their distance from whiteness. For instance, in *Fahrenheit 451*, Beatty, the antagonist of the story, complained that increased minoritized people resulted in the sordid state of the country—book burnings, lack of social connection, an ignorant populace, fear-based politics. He says,

Don’t step on the toes of the dog-lovers, the cat-lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico... The bigger your market, Montag, the less you handle controversy, remember that! All the minor minor minorities with their navels to be kept clean. Authors, full of evil thoughts, lock up your typewriters. They did. (Bradbury, 1979, pp. 55–56).

Beatty considered “minorities” to be harbingers of a destroyed nation, one in which freedom of speech and press no longer existed because someone might be offended by the content. He does not confine his accusations to people of color. Instead, any person could be a subsection of a larger group that could dissolve the remnants of an industrious and intelligent society. Of course, although he began his outburst with dog-lovers, his move toward ethnicity is important to note. There is a specific whiteness that is presented as a minority—Italian, German, Irish—alongside a mention of second-generation Chinese people. Thus, the monsters responsible for destroying the land might include merchants and Baptists, but they also included those who did not embody a specific form of whiteness.

Ultimately, minoritized characters in each text were deemed monstrous solely because of the racialized identities they occupied. Their Blackness was grotesque; their Brown and Asianness otherworldly; their distance from Whiteness horrifying and hideous. They are positioned as the monsters who destroy the sanctity of the

home, the beings that destabilize the ideals of safety and integrity. They bring chaos and disorientation to the world, and thus, they must be put down like Tom Robinson and the Vietnamese people, removed from society like the people of color erased from *The Outsiders*, and viewed with disdain like those in *The Great Gatsby* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Their treatment suggests that those who refuse to cater to whiteness or to dominant ideologies are those who are not deserving of hospitality or welcome.

Discussion

Across each text, racially minoritized Others are categorized as monsters, and White characters are deemed worthy of hospitality, even when they engage in monstrous actions. Thus, the texts suggest that the reader's responsibility is to ensure that whiteness merits welcome, while rejecting Others lest the reader be pulled into corruption and monstrosity. They suggest that minoritized Others must sacrifice or minimize themselves to allow whiteness to remain comfortable. In contrast, Derridean concepts of hospitality state that all should be welcome:

Let us say yes, *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature..." (Derrida, 1997/2000, p. 77).

These texts, however, respond, "Let us say no, especially to those we consider Other."

Of course, critical literacy scholarship suggests that educators can mitigate the violence of these texts by applying critical frameworks to both literary analysis and pedagogical approach. However, we would argue that we, as literacy researchers, have given ourselves too much hospitality in the way we view these constructions in literature. We say it is useful to show students racist depictions as long as we say, "Look, isn't this horrible?" But that does not mitigate the sting of seeing oneself portrayed monstrously. It does not erase the implicit message that forces young people to see themselves as the horde, the enemy, the monster (Thomas, 2019). For example, defenders of the canon may argue that a critical read of *The Great Gatsby* allows students to consider the intersection of class, race, and ethnicity; however, Jewish students and Black students are still reading representations of themselves as monstrous. Some may argue that *The Outsiders* is a critical text for young people, as it is the first published YA novel, but that does not preclude the harm to Indigenous and Latine students who see slurs used as epithets and racism used as a plot device. No matter the criticality of our lenses or the intention of our research or pedagogical practice, curriculum violence occurs.

Another common argument concerns the intent of the author. In fact, one of the hospitalities often offered to White authors is the assumption that when they recreate racist structures in their novels, they are critiquing those structures, even when personal communications and other writings indicate otherwise. For example, Heidi told her students that Fitzgerald wanted readers to see Tom's declaration that "it's up to us who

are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things” (p. 17) in the same way that Nick describes it: “pathetic.” Letters written by Fitzgerald in 1921 complicate hospitable reads of Fitzgerald’s attitude toward Tom’s eugenicist views. In these letters, Fitzgerald bemoans European and U.S. immigration policies, and exposes his racist beliefs:

“The negroid streak creeps northward to defile the Nordic race ... Raise the bars of immigration and permit only Scandinavians, Teutons, Anglo-Saxons and Celts to enter.

... I believe at last in the white man’s burden. We are as far above the modern Frenchman as he is above the Negro.” (Turnbull, Ed., *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 1963, p. 326).

The generosity Heidi offered (and encouraged her students to offer) to Fitzgerald was misplaced.

Similarly, Stephanie told students that Beatty in *Fahrenheit 451* was supposed to be an illogical antagonist, but Bradbury’s Coda (which was published in the book’s supplementary material) suggests that Bradbury and Beatty are aligned. As Bradbury argued: “it is a mad world and it will get madder if we allow the minorities...to interfere with aesthetics. The world is the playing ground for each and every group, to make or unmake laws. But the tip of the nose of my books or stories or poems is where their rights end and my territorial imperatives begin, run and rule” (Bradbury, 1979, p. 165). Stephanie suggested that Bradbury wanted readers to disagree with this antagonist. In doing so, she afforded Bradbury an ill-advised level of hospitality.

Even as teachers committed to principles of critical literacy instruction, we were too hospitable to the authors and the texts. In extending hospitality to these authors, we created a space more welcoming to the authors than the young people forced to read these texts in our classrooms. No matter the criticality or intention of our pedagogical practices, we engaged in curricular violence by being hospitable to texts and authors but not our most vulnerable students.

Thus, we argue for a hospitable literacy framework, where the texts teachers select and teach affirm the humanity of ourselves, the students in classrooms, and those who are not in the room with us. Derrida (1997/2000) contended that there are two categories of hospitality: conditional and absolute. Conditional hospitality is guided by law and moral obligation. That is, the host recognizes and tolerates the guest, but the guest is perpetually reminded of their otherness. We posited that sometimes our methods of critical literacy employed conditional hospitality, where we acknowledged students and authorized their presence, but we consistently reminded them that they were strangers in the classroom. We made space for students to engage in critical analyses to highlight the oppression in these texts, but our hospitality came with conditions. Our guests were still required to read the text, see themselves as monstrous, and witness themselves degraded by White characters. They were welcome as long as they knew the limits of their acceptance.

To engage in absolute hospitality, on the other hand, would demand that we, as literacy teachers, “let them come, that [we] let them arrive, and take place in the place [we] offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or

even their names” (Derrida 1997/2000, p. 25). Absolute welcome would require that our text selections affirm young people without limitation or reservation, that we continually let them know they are not strangers in the classroom or Others who must earn conditional welcome. It means that our hospitality is not contingent on their willingness to analyze monstrous representations of themselves. In the context of canonical text selection, this means that while conditional hospitality enables violent, racist texts to be examined, absolute hospitality suggests the inclusion of texts that predominantly center affirming representations of minoritized students. To participate in this level of hospitality, we must ask ourselves: Even if I do not know who will arrive at my classroom doors, how might I be responsible to all who enter? How do I ensure that my hospitality does not discriminate? How do I become a host who strives for absolute welcome for all students “before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification”? (Derrida, 1997/2000, p. 77).

Certainly, the existence of two definitions of hospitality creates an aporia: conditional hospitality cannot exist without the absolute as it is inspired by the unconditional, and yet without the absolute, conditional hospitality cannot ever progress beyond the demands of the moment. The two are forever bound—which creates an impossibility: Can we ever provide absolute hospitality in a sociopolitical context where book banning, budget constraints, and educational controversy limit which texts can be selected? Should we journey toward utopianism, or should we maintain white-centered practices due to the difficulty of welcoming minoritized Others in this politically wrought moment? Derrida (1997/2000) would respond that the aporia creates possibility as the asymmetry leads us to constant demand.

For those of us who teach in education systems constrained by state legislation, prescribed textual options, and fear of right-wing retaliation, the aporia allows us to use our imaginations to find ways to exist in the incommensurable. We can consistently work to give welcome, knowing we cannot attain absolute hospitality, knowing our choice to try may cause parents, colleagues, and/or students to position us as wholly monstrous. We can continually negotiate between the conditional and unconditional so we might give place to all students even in a world where hospitality is often restricted, even in a world that inaccurately assumes that affirming representations of minoritized students somehow equates to monstrous representations of those with dominant identities. If conditional welcome requires critical analyses of canonical texts and unconditional welcome demands the banning of canonical text selections, the aporia allows space for us to consider how we might deal with the conditionality of realistic constraints while we also ponder how we might engage in actions that lead us toward absolute welcome of all readers, especially those most unexpected.

Conclusion

Right now, book bans are ballooning, with many educational stakeholders urging teachers to retreat into canonical texts to avoid controversy. However, we must consider what we are running toward, and this study contends that we are running toward racism, ethnocentrism, and violence, rather than toward the hospitality and welcome of all students. In this moment we need a hospitable literacy framework

that extends critical literacy practices to allow space for educators to exist between the conditional and absolute. In this space of incommensurability, we can dream together so all students are unconditionally welcome, even when the laws are stacked against us. In this place of incongruity, we can collectively figure out how we can better care for each other so no student is made monstrous, so every student in every classroom is given place in our shared readings of texts and the world. Even in this monstrous world, we can run toward hospitality, toward a more welcoming and humanizing classroom that gives place to all who enter.

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