

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Information: When the Small Vanish, the Large Grow Weak

Ulli K. Ryder, Ph.D · Thursday, January 19th, 2012

There is a disturbing trend in academia and society at large: In a nation that is becoming more diverse, the information available to us is becoming less so. Those driving this shift use two main arguments: 1) certain kinds of information are not economically viable and 2) certain kinds of information are divisive. Whether making an economic or political argument, the result is foreclosing of opportunities to study, explore and experience the lives of people marginalized in our society. We also have to consider the ways the economic and political arguments are linked: that because we have devalued certain people, information about them has become unsellable. I believe we need to view the loss of specialty publishers, the closing of independent bookstores and the attacks on ethnic studies as all part of the same trend towards creating a society in which we have less information available to us, particularly information about so-called “minorities.”

Recently [William Germano published an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education](#) lamenting the end of Duke University’s Series Q, which published works by and about gay, lesbian, and transgendered people (“Q” stands for queer). As Germano points out, changes in bookselling and publishing – from big chain stores and Amazon.com to digital publishing and e-readers like Kindle – have changed how people receive information. Dedicating resources to publishing specialty titles, in an age of information overload, is not economically prudent. Books, like those formerly published by Series Q, can be published more cheaply in electronic formats and be distributed by online giants like Amazon.com. Yet the end of Series Q is just the latest loss in once-thriving specialty, independent publishing and bookselling. Along with Series Q we have lost many independent feminist and African American publishers, and their corollary, independent bookstores.

It is tempting to believe that race-specific or otherwise specialized bookstores are not needed in the era of Amazon or Barnes & Noble. Yet the truth is that independent bookstores carry many titles (and non-book items) not available through other outlets. While independent bookstores often carry books by well-known authors, they also carry works by lesser-known writers and specialized books on topics geared towards specific audiences. They also often carry films and audio CDs that, because of a limited audience and distribution, are hard to find anywhere else. But an independent bookstore is something more: it is a gathering place for people with something in common. Independent bookstores provide a space to come together, a safe space in which to talk about issues that impact one’s community and peers. Therefore Germano’s article on Series Q is not simply about the closing of a publishing series, it is about larger cultural shifts in our society, shifts that are attempting to homogenize the information available to us at precisely the moment when our culture is becoming more diverse.

Enter the ethnic studies debate. [Arizona continues its march to dismantle ethnic studies programs](#) in its schools and has suspended Mexican American courses. There are a two, related, assumptions

operating in Arizona's desire to end ethnic studies programs: 1) ethnic studies cause divisions between groups and 2) ethnic studies are unnecessary. The first assumption can be dealt with fairly quickly. Many people, [including me](#), have exposed the fact that the purpose of ethnic studies classes is not to divide people but to include more voices in school curricula. This was the purpose for creating ethnic studies in the 1960s and 1970s and it is still the purpose.

The second assumption is trickier, but it may help to think of it in the same way we have just thought about bookstores.

Many traditional fields of study have become more inclusive over the years. For example, [English departments were originally instituted to pass on English culture](#), literature and language. In fact, it wasn't until the 20th century that English departments in the United States started teaching literature written by *American* authors. Although American writers had been publishing since the 17th century, English departments devalued these works and refused to teach them to students.

Can you imagine an English department that refused to teach [Walt Whitman](#), [Henry David Thoreau](#) or [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#)? It seems unbelievable now but this was the case for generations of US English departments. And when American authors were included, they were invariably white and male. No [Phillis Wheatley](#), no [Frederick Douglass](#), no [Anne Bradstreet](#). Over the course of the 20th century, particularly in the post-civil rights era, English departments started teaching women authors (of all races) and works by racial and ethnic minorities (Asian Americans, Native Americans, etc.). Most recently they also started teaching works by LGBTQ authors.

However, ethnic studies courses offer more than just information about or by marginalized groups. They also offer alternative ways of viewing the world. As was recently argued in [Why Ethnic Studies Courses are Good for White Kids Too](#), Dr. Emery Petchauer notes that ethnic studies helps students in three important ways: 1) thinking critically; 2) replacing white guilt; and 3) functioning in today's world. Ethnic studies, in short, helps young people understand their world and their place in it. It also helps them think in more sophisticated ways by learning a variety of perspectives. Women's Studies, for example, incorporates [feminist theoretical models](#) that de-center male privilege and seek to understand women's lives by using models created by and for women. Chicano Studies often employs [borderlands theory](#), which (in part) seeks to understand and explain the specific histories of people who are not simply Mexican or American but a hybrid, "borderlands" group: Chicanos. [Afrocentricity](#) offers a way to understand African American lives by incorporating African theoretical models. What all these models have in common is a desire to step away from Western European, male-dominated models in order to explore different groups in historically and culturally specific ways. These perspectives augment the perspectives students learn in non-ethnic studies courses and give them more tools in their educational arsenal. And more is better. Students will graduate and be employed by companies that are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and nationality. As educators, the best thing we can do for students is to give them as much information as possible so that they can succeed in the global economy.

The way to do this is by increasing the opportunities for our students (and all members of our society) to engage meaningfully with information representing a variety of experiences. This need encompasses independent and specialty bookstores and publishing, as well as ethnic studies courses in school curricula. Consider this: While Barnes & Noble may carry books on Japanese American history, their stores do not generally create a space in which Japanese Americans can come together and discuss their lives on their own terms. Likewise, an English* course may include a book by a Japanese American author but it may not delve into the history of Japanese Americans, or Asian Americans more generally, or provide theoretical models for understanding books that have been created by and for Asian Americans. This is what is being lost in our current homogenizing efforts.

An English department resembles a Barnes & Noble in some ways. Like what we find on the stocked shelves of Barnes & Noble, the core of an English department is likely to be filled with faculty who teach Shakespeare, 19th century British literature, and 20th century (white, male) American literature. English department syllabi are also full of ancient Greek texts and very early books like *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*. In short, the vast majority of what English majors study (and what we find on bookstore shelves) is Western, European and male. All of these books and authors are worthwhile. I am not suggesting that they be abandoned. But I do suggest that since this is the structure of academia, ethnic studies still fulfills a purpose. We all have to take a class on Shakespeare; we don't all have to take a class on [Gloria Anzaldua](#). Anzaldua is perhaps the foremost Chicana lesbian feminist scholar of the 20th century. It can be argued that Anzaldua is more relevant to the day-to-day lives of most 20th and 21st century students than the 17th century Shakespeare, yet few students learn about her. But the biggest problem is that the omission of works by and about marginalized groups perpetuates the idea that some people and groups are less worthy, less valuable, and less accomplished than others. Shakespeare is important; Anzaldua is not.

So what are we left with? Germano's article on the discontinuation of Series Q points to the larger problem of publishers, who, in their effort to stay solvent, limit the number and types of books they publish. Independent bookstores, faced with digital media and multinational chains, are closing their doors. Ethnic studies is being dismantled by those who claim that it is divisive and, perhaps, un-American. Even as our US population becomes more ethnically and racially diverse, as women and other "minorities" gain education and political power, and as LGBTQ communities argue for (and gain) full rights, we are limiting the amount of information available about these groups. This homogenizing, "white-washing" trend is partially explained by a changing publishing market and the rise in new technologies.

But, most disturbing, is that the political aspect of the explanation is as old as the nation itself: good old-fashioned discrimination.

*I am using English departments as an example, but other departments (history, sociology, etc.) have similar issues

*Image: Cover art from *Virtuous Vice* by Eric Q. Clarke, published by [Duke University Press Series Q](#).*

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