

Searching for good news about American literary culture: Questioning enclosure and emancipation in a nation-wide reading program

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Goal: 2700 words

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On December 20, 2005, the US's National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released a press statement announcing its new nation-wide reading program. The Big Read, as the program is called, is the NEA's response to a US-wide arts study that found that reading in the US was on a drastic decline. Part of the release read:

[insert Dana Gioia Slide]

QUOTE: "The NEA's landmark 2004 study, Reading at Risk, showed that literary reading in the U.S. is in steep decline," said NEA Chairman Dana Gioia. "No single program can entirely reverse this trend. But if cities nationally *unite* [emphasis added] to adopt The Big Read, our community-wide reading program, together we can restore reading to its essential place in American culture. Call me naïve, but I can actually envision an America in which average people talk about To Kill a Mockingbird and The Great Gatsby with the same enthusiasm as they bring to Lost or Desperate Housewives."

According to that same release, literary reading in the US is not only on the decline but, further, reading for “pleasure and enlightenment” is *in crisis*. Modeled on successful One Book, One City programs in which citizens of a city or region are encouraged to all read the same book, The Big Read’s aim is “To restore reading to the center of American culture,” and, more implicitly, to educate and civilize American citizens through shared reading of “classic” books.

What is the price of this type of “enclosure” within particular discourses of citizenship and literacy regulated by a national institution? Are there opportunities for participating communities to achieve “emancipation”—through individual or collective social change at a local level, and if so, what kind of change? Today, I will concentrate on The Big Read program in Huntsville, Alabama. This southern US city is one of 10 different sites across the UK, Canada and the USA that is part of a project that is investigating mass reading events.

[INSERT BtB Slide]

Part of our work in ‘analysing the labour and beliefs of cultural workers [and the readers who participate in the events] enables us to un-pack the tensions between institutional ideological imperatives and the politics of social change, as well as the tension between discourses of “reading as liberating” and “reading as civilising” that inflect the organisation, rhetoric and ideology of mass reading events’ (Fuller, p.8).

In the first part of the paper I engage briefly with *Reading at Risk*, the 2004 survey on which the NEA bases its dismal predictions of the state of reading in the US. I will demonstrate how the NEA uses the report as foundation for their promotional rhetoric. Part two of the paper will provide an overview description and short critique of The Big Read in Huntsville. In this section, I turn to preliminary research findings that are a result of the BtB research team's efforts in Huntsville in May 2006 and 2007. I employ feminist standpoint theory to analyse the tension between institutional power, and local and individual agency. This interrogation of the ideological labour of cultural workers continues work already begun by my research partner, Danielle Fuller. We employ feminist standpoint theory in the research process, which enables an ethical analytical approach to making sense of cultural workers and readers own experience and knowledge. I will end today with several concluding remarks about the ideological work performed by the NEA's Big Read in Huntsville, Alabama. Work that questions enclosure for some readers and specific emancipation for the cultural workers whose aim it is to enrich the reading experiences of those same readers.

[insert Reading at Risk slide]

Reading at Risk

In the opening paragraph of the *Reading at Risk* report, Dana Gioia, the appointed chairman of the NEA, writes, "Anyone who loves literature or values the cultural, intellectual, and political importance of active and engaged literacy in American society

will respond to this report with grave concern” (*Reading at Risk*, 2004, National Endowment for the Arts, p. vii). He bemoans electronic media for replacing literature in young people’s lives. A “well-read citizenry is essential to a vibrant democracy,” he writes. And if you agree with this, then “the decline of literary reading calls for serious action” (p. ix) As a person who loves literature and spends most of her working and personal life thinking about or living “the cultural, intellectual, and political importance of active and engaged literacy,” I was, of course, intrigued by Gioia’s doom speak. By the time the report was released in July 2004, I had been studying reading groups for more than five years. My research travels had put me in touch with booksellers, publishers, librarians and readers. Conversations with them suggested that Gioia was sounding false fear alarm bells. Even the quantitative reports that I studied on reading (citation), book buying (Garvy) and publishing (citation), and literacy (citation) lacked NEA’s pointed and gloomy conclusion. What then was going on?

Apart from the normal questions social scientists must ask when evaluating quantitative surveys such as, sampling procedures, questionnaire length, recall, and the like, there are two main critique points I want to concentrate on today. First, I believe we must question how the NEA implicitly defines democracy through civic engagement with literature. And secondly, but related, how do they link “literary reading” to “social activities such as volunteerism, philanthropy, and even political engagement.”¹

¹ See Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer’s (2006) “Reading Matters.” In this meta survey of reading research, the authors argue that a literary “crisis” occurs when what counts as literacy changes, not when fewer people learn to read (p. 3).

The *Reading at Risk* study is drawn from data collected from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), which was conducted by the Census Bureau in 2002. Only four of the questions were related to reading. Of the 17,000 American adults surveyed, 56.6 reported reading any book in the past 12 months, and 46.7 % reported reading literature. That was down 4% and 7%, respectively, from a 1992 SPPA study (*RaR* p. ix). In the category of “literary reading”, the NEA includes novels, short stories, plays or poetry. Political analysis, biography, travelogues, online new sources and the like are not counted.

So what counts as real reading? At the turn of the last century cultural authorities lamented novel reading. The NEA has turned this around 180 degrees, and does not consider nonfiction reading in their narratives about the dire situation of the American reading public.

According to the RaR study, literary readers are more likely than non-literary readers to “perform volunteer and charity work” (43%); visit art museums (44%); attend performing arts events (49%); attend sporting events (45%) (*RaR*, pp. 5-7). As Catherine Ross, Lynn McKechnie and Pauline Rothbauer point out, the Reading at Risk study does not report participation for nonfiction readers (p. 23).

[insert Main Message – 1- slide]

Based on these two analyses, the NEA has created a reading program whose main message is that reading literary fiction of a certain type will encourage civic engagement. Reading literary fiction does not *cause* one to volunteer or be politically active or visit museums. What the study suggests, however, is that those who read literary fiction are *more likely* than those who do not read literary fiction to engage in other civic activities. What those activities look like in 2007 may not be what they looked like in 1992 or 2002, for that matter. For example, many of the traditional f2f activities now take place in a virtual environment. But that point aside, even if we consider the correlation between reading fiction and civic engagement, I do not think that only literature will make for an informed citizenry that the NEA idealizes. Information may come from non-fiction books, newspapers, magazines, films, television, and as others at this conference have argued, from whole host of online sources.² As one literary proponent argued at a recent conference hosted by the BtB team: we are asking literature to accomplish a very large task (Jonathan XXX). And, as Ross, et al. have argued, to give such a task to reading can take away from the individual pleasures of reading.

[insert Main Message – 2- slide]

Dana Gioia comes by his belief in the power of reading honestly. He grew up in a working class immigrant family, and climbed his way through the ranks of large American corporations to become the appointed Chairman of the NEA. In an interview

² I would like to acknowledge my colleagues on the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing list (SHARP-L), whose discussions helped me begin to form some of these ideas back in 2004 when the report was released.

with my research partner, Danielle Fuller, and I, Gioia recounted a love of reading and what seemed to be a genuine belief that reading had led him to the successful life he leads. He believes in an emancipation function of literature. Perhaps this is why he chose a literary project as his legacy of his tenure as chairman.

[Insert slide of map]

Gioia and a staff of less than five other created The Big Read. Less than two months after the RaR study was released, calls for grant proposals were sent, and by the end of the year, ten cities were chosen to pilot the program. The four prescribed books in 2004 can be considered classic American canonical choices: Fahrenheit 451, The Great Gatsby, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and To Kill a Mockingbird. In 2007, 72 cities and towns funded. And, the program moved to XM satellite radio.

[insert Laura Bush slide]

The NEA plans to expand to 200 cities by 2008 and to a list of 12 mostly canonical titles.

[insert Current Titles slide]

While many of us can look at this list and identify some favourites, it's important to remember that these texts often show up on required reading lists for American high

school students. If the NEA's goal is to get America reading again, they might not be reaching those who had bad experiences with the text during their early education, and they may be scarring off reluctant readers who view the "classics" with apprehension or aversion. According to Ross, et al.'s meta survey of reading and literacy research, "the key factor in motivating readers is pleasure in the reading experience itself" (p. 4). They argue further that "Pleasure and free choice are both key elements in the making of readers" (p. 7). None the less...

Although this paper provides only a superficial political economy of the Big Read, I believe it's important to mention that the sponsoring partners of the program include the Institute of Museum and Library Service, Arts Midwest, which since the beginning provides training for event producers, and the Boeing Company. In addition, the partners include: W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Community Foundations of America, the Association of American Publishers, and the American Library Association. By funding book purchases, reading guides and events, such as film screenings, public lectures and discussion panels around the selected books, the program has been a gift for cash-strapped libraries and over-worked librarians in many American municipalities.

And, this brings me to The Huntsville Case Study.

[insert Hunstville mosaic slide]

When I talk about Huntsville, I should really be saying Madison County because this is the area that the library serves. The population is a little more than 300,000. 72 % of the population are Caucasian, 23 % African American, 2 % Asian or “Islander” and 3% are considered “other races”. The medium household income is higher than average at \$57,220 and the median age is a young 36. While the residents of the area are quick to tell researchers that the area is not the typical south, there are stereotypical generalizations that are evident to those who come from away. These include the pervasiveness of the Christian religion, evident in the everyday language of the residents, the abundance of outdoor advertising promoting this church or that, and the fact that this was the only location in our research where the young people openly denied reading Harry Potter. Also obvious was the kindness the residents show visitors, and the politeness of genteel rituals, such as flowers and punch bowls at an afternoon lecture. Unfortunately, racial and socio-economic class segregation is also evident with the palpable north/south divide of the city itself. The distinction narrative of the residents is a result of area’s abundance of information technology and military arms production. The transient, highly educated and well-paid citizens create for the area a reputation that suggests it is a Southern anomaly.

[insert librarian slide]

There are currently three librarians who stage the Huntsville Big Read. For four years, the program was called Get into Reading, and was managed by the same small committee who chose the books, planned the program, wrote and distributed the promotional

material and reader's guides, and facilitated the events, which included film screenings, art competitions, book group discussions and historical re-enactments. As we can see in this next slide, Mary, one of the Huntsville Public Library's Branch Librarians who produces the Big Read, reacted emotionally to news that they received funding from the NEA program.

[insert emotion slide]

Not only was the program losing steam, but also she was losing steam. The NEA funding provided financial umph that allowed the group to continue with the programming that Mary herself said, is "a unique way that people from different walks of life, different parts of the community, could connect." The librarians didn't question the prescribed list because they could find regional links that would support programming, and in Mary's words,

"...I didn't care *what* they threw at me. I was just like, "Put four books on a piece of paper; I'll come up with some kind of idea. I want that \$25,000!"

Even with the infusion of money, the following slide demonstrates that the producers of the events often work on the projects "off the sides of their desk."

[insert Three work Quotes slide]

Such dedication speaks to the ideological, material and emotional effort wrapped up in book programming (See Fuller, 2007). I've covered the material and emotional effort, and would like to turn briefly to the ideological labour.

Not unlike other producers we've spoken with in the three different nation-states, Mary, Judy and David articulate ideals of creating community through shared reading and discussion. Those ideals, however, are not necessarily those promoted by the NEA. Much like individual reader response, the producers have different expectations of the programming. The goal might be to get more people into the library; for someone else, it's to engage with the book through augment programming. For another, it just might be that the book acts as a conduit for discussion that can work to address community problems.

I want to take you through a few slides to demonstrate the magnitude of programming produced by the librarian team.

[go through slides 15-18]

In total, during April and May, there were 41 book discussions, film showings, public lectures, related book talks and signings, and a panel discussion. The public lectures by local university professors and by Mary Badham, or "Scout", had crowds numbering in the 100s.

More so than any site we've studied, Huntsville's Big Read attracted an older audience. In both the large lecture-type events and in the small book group discussions, we heard interesting reminiscing and memory work going on. First, there was re-experiencing the book or film by those who had done so 40 years ago. Articulations of pleasure were wrapped up in experiencing a "good read" relevant to the area in which the participants lived, and in the mystic that surrounds Harper Lee. However, while there were opportunities to confront racial tensions, the discussions we observed either ignored it outright, or skirted around the issue in a stereotypical Southern politeness. Sam, one of our focus group participants, articulates well what we observed in the events themselves and in our discussions with other Huntsville readers.

[insert Sam's quote slide]

Conclusion

[insert beyond the book slide]

So is there any good news? Yes, of course there is. There is good news for the NEA, for librarians and other cultural workers who produce local Big Read events, and for readers who participate in the myriad of ways one can participate in the event. But we cannot ignore that the Big Read events are informed by neo-liberal ideologies, and national, state and local government policy, commodity capitalism and its influence on library funding.

There is enclosure in a community for the man who wants to talk about books with “people who have similar interest in readings so [that he] can go a little deeper.” There is enclosure for the new mom who yearns for adult conversation, and for the retired man who wants to hear “experts” take the book further for him.

Left out are those who cannot read, who do not read books, the cannon or fiction. Left out are those who are rendered powerless in public discourse because of gender, race or class inequities.

As I have already mentioned, the producers have different expectations of the programming. The NEA promises the public, funders, potential supporters, and politicians that a certain type of book acts as a conduit for discussion, for public engagement. Huntsville’s Big Read 2007 book choice, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, seems particularly promising as the American South struggles to make sense of the Jena (Geena) 6, in which the arrest of six black youth for the beating of a white youth has resulted in protests in Louisiana and elsewhere across the country. But event producer training programs and then programming efforts need to include community members from marginalized or under-represented groups who are willing to engage with the book. And, the book should ideally be chosen by the community.

Cultural workers – or cultural mediators as Bourdieu termed them – do not, as David Wright has recently suggested – ‘mediate between cultural production and consumption in benign ways.... Rather, their work reflects the interplay, inherent in contemporary

cultural production, between generating new styles of life and protecting established hierarchies of cultural value' (Fuller, xxxx, 106).

Then again, this onus on a book might be unfair. To create engaged citizens is important for a critiquing, knowledgeable society, but to prioritize the cultural value of literary fiction assumes an elitism that might take away from the pleasures of reading. And, that ultimately could lead to even more dismal future reading studies findings—or at least, the interpretation and reporting of them.