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### **MASS READING, NEW KNOWLEDGE? :**

#### **READING FOR COMMUNITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN ONTARIO**

Mass reading events such as the CBC’s “Canada Reads” and “One Book One Community” programmes encourage people of the same town, region or country to get on the same page by reading the same book – usually, a work of literary fiction. Related events can include anything from pub-crawls to bus tours around a book’s locations, to on-line discussions and television shows. Mass reading events have attracted criticism for their vulgarisation of a cultural practice, in this case literary interpretation, and their pandering to “the prizes and showbiz mentality” that has “infiltrated” (Canadian) literary culture (Henighan 2003, 166). Another Canadian critic describes “the ‘one book’ craze” as “the *reductio ad absurdum*” of a “blockbuster culture” that is “fixated with competition and success.” (MacSkimming 2003, 373).

Of course it is responses such as these that underline for us the imperative of investigating mass reading events. Our preliminary work suggests that such criticisms *may* have some validity. However, critics of mass reading events neglect the identification of knowledge that is produced and articulated by individual readers and participants. Today, we aim to nominate various kinds of knowledge that are made explicit by people who participated in the 2004 Kitchener/Waterloo/Cambridge, Ontario, “One Book, One Community” event. In particular, we will discuss the different reading practices that emerge, and in the interest of time, we will concentrate on the regional and historical knowledge that is made evident through several participants’ reading experiences.

Our discussion is part of a larger project that includes multiple site investigations in North America and the UK. It is informed by the theories of “feminist standpoint epistemology,

which emphasises the importance of beginning thought from the lives of people who have been excluded from dominant cultural practices” (Fuller, 1999, 123-124). As a feminist praxis, standpoint theory engages with the power/knowledge matrix as a means of making tacit women’s ways of knowing and the situation of knowledge-formation within ruling and non-ruling relations of power. In other words, as feminist researchers, we ask “whose knowledge is being articulated here?” and, “for whose benefit?”

Scholars such as Heather Murray (*Come, Bright Improvement : The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario*) Elizabeth McHenry (*Forgotten Readers*) and Jonathan Rose (*An Intellectual History of the English Working Classes*) have proved that collective reading has a long history in North America and the UK; so what, if anything, is new about its contemporary manifestation? Why *do* people come together to share reading? What kinds of communities of understanding are being formed through mass reading events—and what knowledge is articulated within those communities?

Our paper is divided into two main parts: an overview of mass reading events, followed by a discussion of our pilot study.

### **1. Mass Reading Events**

First, let us expand a little on our working definition of ‘mass reading event’ by offering a potted history.

Since Oprah Winfrey launched the first series of her televised Book Club in 1996, and Nancy Pearl initiated the One Book, One Community (OBOC) reading programme in Seattle, Washington in 1998, projects that actively encourage citizens of one town, city, state or nation to read and discuss a selected work of literary fiction have proliferated across North America. This contemporary cultural phenomenon crossed the Atlantic in 2003 via the BBC’s “The Big Read” and Bristol’s “Great Reading Adventure” – both separately inspired by “One Book, One Chicago.” Coventry and Liverpool also have their own city-wide programs. All projects are comprised of at least one literary text, and events such as literary pub nights with the selected author, city tours around the theme of the book, discussion groups or online book “clubs.” More than 125 US cities and states sponsor these cultural events while in Canada, Vancouver, Cambridge/Kitchener/Waterloo and Ontario’s First

Nations hold annual OBOC programmes.<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "Canada Reads" project on CBC Radio 1 has now run for 4 years.

While the scale and explicit aims of the events differ, as do the agencies involved, all projects deliberately use mass media to promote and enable reader participation. Some, like "Canada Reads," are media productions able to capitalize on content-streaming technology to reach a widely dispersed "imagined community" of listener-readers, while mass reading events rooted in specific locales such as "One Book, One Community" in Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge (Ontario), generally focus on face-to-face encounters between readers and rarely have the funds, time or staff to fully exploit the potential for virtual participation offered by the Internet, television and radio.

Specificities of place and culture, and different conceptualisations of "reading", "writing" and "community" clearly inflect the process and reception of the various events. Different hierarchies of knowledge and the privileging of particular skills, such as print literacy over oral storytelling, also inflect the different conceptualisations pertaining in different "One Book" sites. For example, the first two of the three-year-old Vancouver Public Library-produced, "One Book, One Vancouver," highlighted literary works with a focus on the city, enabling a range of programming that could connect to specific city spaces and histories. Activities for Wayson Choy's novel *The Jade Peony*, for instance, included a walking tour of Vancouver's china-town and the Dr Sun Yat-Sen classical garden, a dim sun reading with the author, presentations on the historical experiences of the Chinese in the city, and demonstrations of Chinese calligraphy, as well as book discussions, author interviews and readings in libraries. One aspect of the Vancouver program worth noting is that many of these events do not depend on people reading the book. Thus, print literacy is not always privileged in the process of "One Book" activities, even if it is a knowledge central to the operation of, and highly prized by, organizing agencies such as public-sector librarians.

Not all Canadian "One Book" programs are directed at a community defined in geographic terms or dominated by print cultures. "First Nations Communities Read" which has been part of First Nations Library week in Ontario since 1999, was, as far as we know, the first OBOC program in Canada. Initiated by Patty Lawlor, a non-aboriginal who works for the Southern Ontario Library Service, the goals of the program are to promote family literacy and to encourage intergenerational storytelling. The selected book is, therefore, always a children's

picture book and the program is scheduled for winter: the traditional time for oral storytelling. Drawing upon their knowledge of local social networks and oral cultures, participating native librarians (all women, some of whom are ‘trained’ librarians) have initiated creative programming, such as persuading leaders of Band Councils to read the book at a meeting, or over the local radio. Involving community leaders has been an important means not only of promoting the program – and therefore intergenerational storytelling and shared reading experiences, but also as a way of publicizing the library and evolving its role and status within the community. “First Nations Reads” could be interpreted as an intervention that recognizes the dynamic interaction of oral and print cultures in the lives of contemporary Aboriginal peoples. Its success depends upon Aboriginal librarians who can act as mediators or translators between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal notions of reading and knowing.

Other mass reading events, like “Canada Reads” are much larger media productions that are able to capitalize on content-streaming technology to reach a widely dispersed “imagined community” of listener-readers. However, reading events rooted in specific locales in Canada generally focus on face-to-face encounters between readers and rarely have the funds, time or staff to fully exploit the potential for virtual participation offered by the Internet, television and radio. So who participates in mass reading events and what do they gain from doing so? A closer look at our pilot study in KWC offers some answers.

## **2. Introducing One Book One Community – Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge**

Our investigation employed a number of methods. During a brief visit in July 2003, Danielle met with the organizing committee. We have collected promotional materials, cultural artefacts and newspaper reports about the program. We also sent an evaluative questionnaire on the literary bus tour that took place in August 2004. Last September we spent 10 days in KWC during the final days of the program when Nino Ricci, the author of 2004’s selection, *Lives of the Saints* (originally published in 1990) gave a number of interviews and readings in libraries, Elmira High school, and participated in a gala evening at Waterloo recreational centre where he was serenaded by a local Italian choir.

In addition to participating in the culminating week’s events, we met with 16 readers who participate in OBOC and 9 readers who do not, in either a focus group or one-to-one interview setting. An on-line quantitative survey was also part of our research and was available to participants for four weeks. Ninety-seven people responded to the survey and

forty-two percent (40) of those reported attending OBOC this year or in past years. The data collected in the survey cannot be generalized to the entire population of K/W/C residents, or even to the readers who participated in OBOC because we did not use random sampling procedures. However, we have identified a number of themes and issues across our qualitative investigations that support our qualitative work.

Now in its fourth year, OBOC encompasses three small cities in southern Ontario – Kitchener, Waterloo and Cambridge – which have a combined population of 440,000. Unlike many other OB programs in North America the instigator of the Waterloo program came from the private sector. Tricia Siemens, the owner of Waterloo’s independent bookstore Words Worth books appears to have the perfect combination of social and cultural capital, local knowledge and creative energy required by agencies who wish to promote reading as a community-building activity.

Unlike many OB programs in North America which are championed by public libraries, OBOC is unusual in that it is organised by a more informal coalition of local agencies that includes public librarians, independent booksellers, representatives from the city and the editors of the literary journal *The New Quarterly*. These agencies, working through an organizing committee, combine their expertise in book programming with local knowledge of community cultures and social networks. Thus, the program depends for its success on both public money and private capital, paid and unpaid labour, to stage activities.

### **3. “Building a community through reading”?**

The librarians and ex-teachers on the organizing committee of OB KWC cherish the ideal of increasing print literacy. (QUOTE 1) However, the collectively negotiated vision for their program as articulated by its instigator, Tricia Siemens, is to “build community through reading.” The committee’s focus on “reading and community” is expressed in the publicity material where they advocate “the shared experience of reading.” (QUOTE 2) The challenge of “building community” through an activity that, within Euramerican cultures at least, is frequently conceptualised as a solitary, private activity, emerges in the contradictory messages constructed by the publicity for the program.

The tag-line for all three years of the program, for instance, is: “Open Up the Book, Open Up Yourself.” This slogan is interesting because it appears to adopt the discourse of self-help

identified by Trysh Travis in her examination of the reading strategies employed by US book groups in their engagements with Rebecca Wells' *Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood* (2003). Travis delineates collective reading of Wells' book as a form of therapy or self-help evangelism that obscures social history, structural inequalities and political activism by foregrounding the capacity of the individual to recover herself. In contrast to this, OBOW publicity underlines the importance of collective reading as a "shared experience." Within the committee's conceptualisation of "shared reading," the community acts as a type of translator of the private, individual act of reading and the understanding of subjectivity and everyday experience that it enables, into a search for common grounds of knowing. "Once people have read the same book," says Tricia Siemens, "They talk to friends and neighbours about how the story resonates in each of their lives." The organizers wish to promote a reading practice that is dialogic because it needs to be heard by a community of reader-listeners. However, the tag-line "Open Up the Book, Open Up Yourself" which looms large on bookmarks and posters for the program, displaces the committee's emphasis on "build[ing] community through reading." As they recently recognised, their messages about community and reading are not only mixed but also gendered: "that [tagline] was a mistake, that's not a guy thing, guys don't open up themselves." (Tricia/Wrap Up). This brings us neatly to the question of participation...

#### **4. Who participates in the OBOC community?**

The success of OBOC in KWC can be measured statistically – during the first two years 26,950 people from a population of 440,000 participated in the program, so the original goal of persuading 1% of the population to read the selected book was exceeded four times over. Nevertheless, participation in OBOC KWC is dominated by, to quote Tricia speaking to the organizing committee in a wrap-up meeting last November, "people who look like us – white, middle-aged women readers." This perception is certainly borne out by our on-line survey, our bus tour questionnaire and participation in our focus groups. By contrast, the region around the three small cities is an interesting and heterogeneous one: descendents of German, Scots, British and Italian settlers live alongside a substantial number of Mennonite communities and "new" Canadians, since Kitchener-Waterloo receives the fourth highest amount of immigrants in Canada after much larger urban centres such as Toronto and Vancouver. More than 20% of the current population of KWC identifies as Indo-Canadian; and, more anecdotally, at the Kitchener "Word on the Street" festival on 26 Sept 2004 we heard German, Spanish, Chinese and several other languages being spoken.

This demographic has proved to be a challenge for the organizers of OBOW who very honestly admitted that their efforts to include the newest members of the community in year one had been a failure because they had not supplied copies of the Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* in a sufficiently wide range of languages, nor had they advertised OB events in multicultural centres. The attention that the committee had paid to other forms of difference – in particular to age and gender, rural/city background, religious beliefs and levels of formal education – in their programming of a creative range of OB events, suggests that their shared notion of community is inclusive, egalitarian and sufficiently flexible for the programme to develop further strategies of inclusion. For example, this year's book selection (2005) is the science fiction novel titled *Hominids* by Robert J. Sawyer, which is meant to attract more men. Their choice of book for the 2004 programme – Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* – was supported by a creative writing competition entitled "Lives of the World: Coming from There to Here," which invited contestants, particularly high school students, to "create a short story or poem based on the immigrant experience." A free workshop on scrap-booking in Waterloo library was another means of encouraging storytelling that did not depend on the participants' English-language print literacy skills. However, the visible face-to-face community "built" by the program in 2004 – that is, those who attended events - was still predominantly white, middle-aged, middle-class women, although the high schools in Elmira to the north of the three cities included children from Mennonite, African Canadian and Indo-Canadian families. There are a number of structural and organisational factors that we have identified as privileging Euro-Canadian middle-class middle-aged members of this multi-ethnic constituency, and that work to exclude others. First, as some event participants themselves noted, a number of events involve fees or extra costs that would prove prohibitive to many people. Second, although the libraries order hundreds of extra copies of the selected book, and the author readings in public libraries and the gala evenings at the Recreational Centre are free, such public spaces are not always as 'shared' or welcoming as white educated liberals like us, who don't have to think twice about entering them, might like to imagine.

Third, in its first year the program involved children from a majority of local high schools because MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* was already on the curriculum and the author was involved in 8 different events – since reduced to 4. Funds and curriculum have restricted school participation in subsequent years, however. Fourth, the choice of book is clearly

important. OBOC KWC deliberately selects a Canadian novel by a living author who is prepared to spend time in the community. The books chosen from the past three years are all prize-winning works of realist literary fiction with narratives that centre on the experiences of Gaelic, Anglo-Canadian and Italian peoples respectively. MacLeod and Urquhart's novels have ties to the region through the depiction of local places, while *Lives of the Saints* is set entirely in Italy.

We mention this last, rather dramatic shift in book selection criteria because the current program appeals primarily to readers who are already active in book clubs, and who, therefore, often attend events such as author readings and the bus tour as a group. About half (52.1%) the people participating in the survey belong to book clubs. In KWC, in other words, it is active readers who participate in events, even if they haven't read the selected book. This is consistent with what we heard in our interviews. Like book clubs, the events seem to add an *extra something* to reader's experience of the book.

### **5. Does this “One Book” Community create New Knowledge?**

So, what is this 'extra something' and how does it inflect the notions of community, belonging and knowledge understood by those who participate as readers and event attendees? The focus group participants consistently told us that the events they participated in didn't necessarily change their interpretations of the book. Rather, the events provided opportunities to experience the book in a different way, and to do it with and through other readers. (QUOTE 3) As DeNel has determined in her work with “traditional” book clubs, experiencing the historical and/or contemporary contexts of the book adds to the readers' enjoyment of the text, and their motivation to “learn new things.” Often this is focussed on a reader's desire to understand the process of research and reflection that the author undertook while working on a novel. A comment from a respondent to our on-line questionnaire captures this well: “The event puts me in touch with the real person behind the book. I like to know more about the author and the 'why' behind the book.”

Reader participants also enjoy learning about their region and hearing experts share their knowledge of subjects that may be peripheral to reader-interpretation of the book's content through events such as the literary bus tours. As Trudy, a professional woman in her early fifties, put it: “I learned a lot on [the *Lives Of the Saints*] bus tour, not related to the book particularly, but I mean the whole concept of greenhouse gardening. I mean, I thought, I'll

do a greenhouse with a few tomato plants!” Meanwhile, in a different focus group, Gail highlighted the importance of sharing this learning experience as well as ideas about the book, with others:

“That to me is just what has added another dimension again. It’s one thing to read the book and then to discuss it, but the events that they’ve done – especially the tours... *The Stone Carvers* one, the tour was first ---to the pond, Tilman’s Bridge and it was exactly as I’d pictured in the book and it was like “yeah, I know exactly where I am!” and then did we go to Stratford next? To see some of the carvings...then we had lunch and then we drove up to the Formosa church...it’s so nice to be with other people who are appreciating the same thing.”

The “other people” can often be intergenerational family members who would not otherwise be together discussing books. Several members of our focus groups, for example, reflected with joy how the bus tour offered an opportunity for them to be with their sisters, or to accompany a mother who doesn’t get out much. One family group on the tour consisted of three generations of women who all grew up in Southern Ontario.

Place and history permeate the articulated experiences of the reader participants in this portion of our study. Gail’s words from the previous slide describe a vernacular form of reading that OBOC events encourage, one that articulates a mimetic identification between textual representation and both physical environment and local history. Here’s Trudy again:

“I really enjoyed [*The Stone Carvers*] and the bus tour really bought that book alive....because you went to places that were described that were part of the book and somehow it seems real, you know – I know it was a novel, but just, you know you could see the characters, you see the places...you felt that what was described could have happened and you were where it, you were where these places were.”

Meanwhile, Jill, a librarian who grew up in Leamington, the focus for the *Lives of the Saints* bus tour in Aug 2004, was intrigued by how other people might see her home community. Although she was cognizant of the immigrant histories and economic issues pertaining in Leamington, hearing what other readers thought about Ricci’s novels and their portrayal of place and history offered her a chance for self-reflection on her own family’s history and their affiliations with Leamington.

There is, then, a desire on the part of participants to combine the acquisition of new knowledge with a sharing and articulation of already-known wisdom about local environment and community histories. Here, having the cultural competency to be able to decode the meanings of literary fiction is less dependent on knowledge of genre, stylistics and literary traditions, than on local, experiential knowledge: a reading practice that excludes recent immigrants to the area.

### **Concluding Remarks: Evolving Community/ Evolving Knowledge?**

Clearly, the notions of community and belonging articulated by organizers and participants do not neatly coincide. To some degree this is because there is a tension between the different visions of the program held by members of the organizing committee. The librarians want to increase print literacy and diversify reader's experience of reading by targeting existing library users. Other members such as Tricia (bookseller) and Kim (unpaid editor of *The New Quarterly*) want to build new face-to-face communities through shared reading and activities centred around the selected book. Negotiating these tensions and articulating the value that books, community, and reading represent to each committee member will be part of the cultural labour that the organizers must perform in order to take the program forward.

As we have suggested, mass reading events can encourage the creation of a temporary, ephemerally realised physical community. And, they may enable the expansion of a reader's social networks. For some readers, the opportunity to hear "experts" share their professional knowledge, and, in turn, be given the chance to articulate their own local knowledge - knowledge that enables the affirmation of familial and local histories and place-based identities- is important in the production of new knowledge. The question of *who* has access to these communities and new knowledge remains problematic. Current participants themselves recognise some of the factors – economic; the focus on literary fiction in English; the spaces in which events are held; differing conceptions and levels of literacy - through which OBOC excludes – or fails to include – many inhabitants of KWC.

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## TELLING QUOTATIONS

1. “What people are saying is that one of the values of the program is that they are reading things that they might not otherwise choose to. That was really one of our goals...I think that’s just, oh, such a good thing.” (Sharon, librarian at Kitchener Public Library, Wrap Up meeting)

2. “I thought that the goal of the program is to build community through a book...one of my staff will say, ‘there was somebody on the bus today going back from work reading the book,’ and she went over and talked about the book. So that’s, to me– those kinds of encounters are part of building a good community feeling, ‘I’m part of a community that’s reading a book and I don’t know who you are or who you are, but I notice that you’re reading a book that I have read and even if I don’t talk to you about it, I feel good because you’re doing something I’ve done.’” (Tricia, Words Worth Books, Organizing Committee Wrap Up meeting)

3. “OBOC gives me a whole other social network that is part of the warp and woof of holding a community together. I can carry that book with me into a restaurant or to have a cup of coffee and somebody will stop and say, ‘I read that book.’” (Lynn, Focus Group)

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<sup>i</sup> See, for example, (US) <http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html>; <http://news.bookweb.org/news/305.html>; (Vancouver) <http://www.vpl.vancouver.bc.ca/MDC/onebookonevancouver.html>; (Kitchener/Waterloo/Cambridge) <http://www.therecord.com/onebook/>; (First Nations Reads) <http://www.sols.org/FirstNations/2004week/index.htm>