the changing profession

Community Reading and Social Imagination

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AS MEMBERS OF THE PENN STATE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, WE SHARE OUR INSTITUTION'S COMMITMENT TO BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN town and gown. As writers and teachers, we believe that reading is a powerful vehicle for community building, for democratic deliberation, and for imaginative reinvention of seeming inevitabilities. As friends who enjoy discussing ideas with one another, we believe that collaboration can allow for both individual voice and shared vision, can offer mutual instruction and delight. In our various ways, we have committed ourselves to reading and writing beyond the boundaries of the university. In this brief essay, we hope to share our experiences of community building, creativity, and democratic negotiation with readers of *PMLA*.

Penn State's Center for American Literary Studies held its first Community Read in the spring of 2007, in the belief that sharing texts builds community. Our focus was Colson Whitehead's debut novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), a wonderful book we thought would be great to read together with our colleagues and members of the local community. Michael Bérubé proposed the book in part out of frustration with his students' routine objections that its tone was too cerebral and its protagonist, Lila Mae, too cool and remote. Particularly vexing were complaints that the novel was not "realistic" enough for readers to care about its outcome, suggesting that some students have low tolerance for imaginative literature that is too imaginative. The students who objected to *The Intuitionist* were registering their dismay at violations of realism per se, as if literature courses rested on an implicit contract: in this class, we will read only representations of events that might plausibly have occurred or will predictably occur in the world we know.

But when we held our culminating event, at which Colson Whitehead graciously responded to four critics' readings of his novel, it turned out that many people not enrolled in literature classes did realize how good *The Intuitionist* is, and they even seemed to enjoy reading it alongside professional literary critics.[1] They came to our roundtables, which we held every week for a month; they filled

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a 150-seat auditorium and remained rapt and entertained for the ninety-minute exchange between Whitehead and his academic critics; and they stayed for another hour asking Whitehead questions. They became, in other words, a community of readers (and, to the degree that interpretation is also an act of creative reshaping, a community of *writers*). To gauge by the complexity of their questions and their response to Whitehead, they were a community that found *The Intuitionist* delightful and instructive.

This juxtaposition of experiences in and beyond the classroom raises questions central not only to community reading but also to our conceptions of imagination, citizenship, and community in and beyond the academy. Beginning with the observation that community readers seem more receptive to imaginative language than many of our students are, we might challenge the belief that imaginative language is a frivolous fascination of those in the ivory tower, of little to no use—much less interest—to those engaged in the "real world." Is it possible that our practices of academic reading and writing have trained students out of the very fascination with the imaginative that, after they leave college, they will find increasingly necessary as they negotiate the restrictive life plots and overconstraining "realities" of everyday life? If receptiveness to imaginative language seems to facilitate community interaction (and vice versa), might the realism favored by students be related to their belief in a necessary connection between adulthood and individualism? If we answer these questions in the affirmative, should we not be learning valuable lessons about reading, writing, and imagination from communities outside the academy, instead of assuming that such exercises in community reading are moments of pedagogical outreach?

The persistent (if perhaps erroneous) faith that we have something to teach the community relies on a conception of professional critics as protectors of a shrinking cultural literacy that may not, in fact, have existed for some time. Some sources—such as the widely cited National Endowment for the Arts 2004 study *Reading at Risk*—would have us believe that reading is in an alarming decline. That report documents that less than half of all adults in the United States now read literature; there was a ten percent drop in literary reading between 1982 and 2002, and the steepest decline (twenty-eight percent) occurred in readers from age eighteen to twenty-four. The breakdown of readers was as follows: twenty-one percent were "light" readers, accounting for one to five books a year; nine percent were "moderate" readers, at six to eleven books a year; twelve percent were "frequent" readers, at twelve to forty-nine books a year; and four percent were "avid" readers, knocking off more than fifty books a year, roughly one a week.

While these statistics seem bleak, the four percent figure is intriguing—not only because one wonders whether those avid readers are enjoying works like *The Intuitionist* or crateloads of "genre" fiction (whether romance, mystery, political thriller, or science fiction/fantasy) but also because that happens to be the proportion of American undergraduates who major in English. We like to fret over the dramatic decline in English enrollments since the late 1960s, when English accounted for over seven percent of all BAs, but that jerry-rigged narrative of decline and fall masks the fact that we accounted for 3.99 percent of all BAs in 1950, 3.5 percent in 1980, and 3.8 percent in 2007 ("Trends," table 1; US, Dept. of Educ.). We've had our spikes and troughs, in other words, but over the long haul we can plausibly call ourselves the Four Percenters.

But this statistical coincidence is just that—a coincidence. The four percent of the population who are avid readers aren't identical with the four percent of undergraduates who are English majors. As we know all too well, English majors don't automatically join the ranks of avid readers when they graduate; many of them, whether they took courses

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in queer theory or the history of English literature, do not remain serious or dedicated readers of imaginative literature over the remainder of their lives. If it is depressing to contemplate this or to review our enrollment statistics, it is still more depressing to compare the place of literature in our era with its standing in the late nineteenth century. Here, for instance, is Bromfield Corey in William Dean Howells's 1885 novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, sounding an Arnoldian note in a conversation with his son Tom about the cultural illiteracy of the arriviste Laphams:

> All civilization comes through literature now, especially in our country. A Greek got his civilization by talking and looking, and in some measure a Parisian may still do it. But we, who live remote from history and monuments, we must read or we must barbarize. Once we were softened, if not polished, by religion; but I suspect that the pulpit counts for much less now in civilizing. (118)

If we take Howells's account as our starting point, all we can say of ourselves is, O how fallen, how changed from them in the happy realms of the late nineteenth century who, clothed with transcendent brightness, didst civilize myriads. Indeed, it's hard to read *Silas Lapham* without wistfulness, for a time when the nouveaux riches worried about which poets and novelists to have in their new libraries. By contrast, our era would seem to be summed up by an *Onion* headline of March 2008, "Novelists Strike Fails to Affect Nation Whatsoever." The humor derives from the contrast with the three-month-long strike by the Writers Guild of America, which involved film, television, and radio writers. Unlike the panic produced by that action, a novelists' strike would apparently produce no "adverse effects whatsoever, as consumers easily adjust to the sudden cessation of any bold new sprawling works of fiction or taut psychological character studies." We smile ruefully, knowing that serious readers are a tiny minority in a tiny minority and that they have no discernable economic effect on anything.

As Wendy Griswold has recently argued, however, our narratives of decline and fall depend on jerry-rigging that takes anomalous high points as the norm. Noting the "universal pattern" throughout the world in which "no sooner does a popular reading culture get established than commentators start worrying about the decline of reading" (47), Griswold points out that comparing the era of *Silas Lapham* with that of the *Onion* is tendentious at best. Reading for pleasure, Griswold notes, has been "very rare and very recent," since it is typically associated with "education and with urban social elites." Mass reading, Griswold shows, is an anomaly, whereas our current disregard for literary consumption is a return "to its former, narrower social base: a self-perpetuating minority" that Griswold calls "the reading class" (66). Griswold cites a Canadian study that suggests "the NEA finding of an abrupt drop in American reading from 1992 to 2002 might have been a post-9/11 effect" (52), thanks to a spike in the audience for electronic news media; moreover, unlike most critics of the Internet, she acknowledges that it "actually supports reading" (63).

Perhaps the problem with studies like the NEA report, then, is what they consider literature and where they recognize imaginative language (or don't). If many people are not reading literature, does it necessarily mean they're not appreciating forms of inventive language that, for some time, have been of only secondary interest in many literature classrooms? When the community finds such language in supposedly nonliterary sources—*Amazon.com* reviews, Web forums, *Goodreads*, blog book events, and library resources online—professionals of the "reading class" are quick to dismiss the activity as wrong reading, a phenomenon we might call the Biennial Harry Potter Backlash. In 2007 in the *Washington Post*, the literary critic Ron Charles blamed "Potter mania" for the find-

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ings of the NEA report. Charles complained that each Potter release had driven readers "not only into greater fits of enthusiasm but into more precise synchronization with one another," thereby "submerging the world in an orgy of marketing hysteria" that "doesn't encourage the kind of contemplation, independence and solitude that real engagement with books demands—and rewards." Unfortunately, such reactions are all too common in "serious" literary culture, a habitus inhabited by people who think of themselves as solitary readers and who like it that there is something exclusive about reading literature, something precious that will be lost if too many people do it (especially if too many people do it at the same time). The assumptions that underlie Charles's essay also inform complaints about coffeeklatch reading groups, which for the past century have been overwhelmingly conducted by women (and often disparaged for that reason alone). These assumptions were at play, as Janice Radway has shown, in elite cultural critics' horrified response to the creation of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and they animated Jonathan Franzen's infamous discomfort at having *The Corrections* chosen for Oprah Winfrey's book club (Kirkpatrick). For some members of the reading class, laments about the state of reading go hand in hand with a deep distrust of community reading and of collaborative imagination more broadly.

In English departments, versions of this distrust are sometimes enacted in the gap between literary criticism and creative writing. When Colson Whitehead came to Penn State, for instance, none of the writing faculty members were invited to take part in the event. This was neither their choice nor a conscious slight by the organizers but a vivid demonstration of typical habits and identities and perhaps of the ways institutional funding streams flow. The writers were puzzled because living authors are usually their domain; creative writers teach new books and host readings by visitors that often attract a few people from the broader community. A literary critic once taught a work by a visiting writer but failed to attend when the author came to campus, as if honoring some division of labor between the dead and the living, readers and writers. This is a late turn in English studies, one that writer-critics of an earlier era might have found strange, dividing as it does individuals and vocations. The Community Read events exposed and transcended that divide by demonstrating that creative writing and contemporary literature—distinct categories in most universities—sometimes converge, producing an unexpected communal outcome.

In questioning this division of labor, we want also to question Ron Charles's contention that "real engagement with books demands" (the imperative verb is telling) "contemplation, independence and solitude." That claim is the trace of one function—although only one—that reading has historically served. Literature helped to popularize a solitude conceived as independent and contemplative, thereby supplementing a diminishing public sociability. As mobility became easier in the eighteenth century, people moved more frequently, severing long-standing connections with family members, friends, and neighbors. At the same time, industrialization turned people into functions and alienated workers from communities enabled by broader economic exchange. Industrialization further concentrated masses of people in cities, where anonymity increased. The spread of the modern market turned alienation into competitive individualism, a desirable virtue. Throughout these changes, literature became a compensatory supplement, offering the illusion of participation in wide social networks—in gossip, curiosity, sympathy, outrage, and other affects of social interaction—now consumable in private in the novels of Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and Walter Scott. Reading, in short, made privacy seem satisfactorily (if illusorily) public, recasting passivity as contemplation and isolation as individuality.

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Yet reading was not always so solitary. David S. Shields contends that the Anglo-American world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was filled with community reading: coffeehouses, literary salons, reading clubs, reform associations, tea tables, lyceums, sewing circles were all places where people read, and listened to others read, together. According to Shields, such practices of community reading were not trivial byproducts of a civil society: they *generated* civility. Through the communal reading of newspapers and magazines, political pamphlets, poems, plays, novels, reform tracts, philosophical treatises, literary annuals, gift books, and broadsides, communities "made for themselves covenants, articles of agreement, laws binding members into communities," generating locations autonomous from state regulation where "opinions might be formed, manners refined, and arts encouraged." In the experience of communal reading, in short, people "took part in—and were transformed by—the great project of civility" (xiii).

While coffeehouses and salons, available to the monied citizens of early Anglo-America, might resemble the contemporary university, practices of collective reading and writing were, then as now, widely dispersed and often found in unpredictable places. The sailors on polar expeditions and other long voyages in the nineteenth century, for example, would seem as remote from opportunities for community reading as possible. Yet such seamen produced their own lively and inventive cultures of literary expression in extremity. In a practice not uncommon to extended nautical cruises, for example, the crew of the naval frigate USS *Macedonian* frequently staged plays while serving off the Pacific coast of South America in 1819–21. As an officer, Charles Gauntt, recorded of one such performance, "[W]ritten hand bills were distributed about the ship, giving notice that, on the evening of Christmas, a play, called the Weathercock, with an after piece entitled the Sailor's Fortune, would be performed: the authorship of the latter piece was claimed by D. C. B. carpenter's yeoman of the frigate" (21–22). Those "written hand bills" led to other circulating material: a scathing review of the elocution and performance of the seamen actors was published in the second number of "the Thespian Critic and Theatrical Review, a paper written and edited on board by some of the crew" and costing "12½ cents single" (22). But, as Gauntt describes, the uncharitable notice was counteracted by an "opposition paper" called the "Macedonian Scourge," the seventh issue of which featured a positive review that eased the critical crisis aboard ship (25).

Although we cannot return to the heyday of nautical expeditions or pre-Starbucks coffeehouses, it's worth pausing on these historical precedents to consider what community reading might offer us in its present state, however diminished, and, beyond that, what role inventive language might play in the maintenance of civility in contemporary democracy. In coming together to listen to, write, or discuss literature, we ideally develop and hone the skills (of listening to, evaluating, and critically engaging others' arguments and articulating rhetorically effective positions of our own) that make civil society pleasurable and productive. These sound like the learning outcomes of any contemporary course in the humanities, but they have particular importance when sites of public interaction are so dramatically curtailed that the very concept of publicity, much less civility, is becoming virtually unthinkable. In the face of such diminishment, yearning for social interaction becomes keen, and that desire often seeks satisfaction in places of literary exchanges: bookstores, reading groups, blogs, the Oprah Book Club.

Other public conversations might serve these needs, but literary conversations provide particular benefits central to public democracy. Without the skills of interpretation and imagination, a forward-looking civil society is impossible. The social affects Adam Smith

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placed at the heart of civil society—sympathy, compassion, empathy—require imaginatively placing oneself in the condition of others, imagining what we might feel like in other conditions. Without imagination, fellow feeling is impossible. We might expand Smith's claims: to imagine a more just, pleasurable, and democratic ordering of society, we must be able to imagine a social environment different from the currently existing one. That is, if one's encounter with present social conditions is unsatisfactory and if one's capacity to act differently is limited by a sense that past social arrangements have led inexorably to constraints on possibilities in the present, then one must imagine conditions unhindered by precedent. This capacity for envisioning the unprecedented is integral to imagination. The pleasures of literature arise largely from its capacity to introduce us to things unforeseen: experiences alien to our own and surprising plot twists. Encouraging trust in acts of imagination untethered from predictability and precedent, reading literature fosters the imagining of unprecedented *social* arrangements as well, opening limiting social imperatives to the horizon of inventive possibility.

As the sailors' *Macedonian* shows, community reading is also, in important ways, community writing. These imaginative practices, collaborators in the production of social possibilities, are never far apart. Beginning in the mid–nineteenth century, a number of seagoing expeditions found cargo space for printing presses, with which expedition members produced printed matter that circulated among ships' crews. Two sister ships that were engaged in a futile search for the Northwest Passage explorer John Franklin in the 1850s, for example, published and exchanged rival newspapers, the *Illustrated Arctic News* and the *Aurora Borealis*, while wintering in the Arctic. Other ships produced broadsides and playbills for their shipboard theatricals, and the coxswain on the British ship *Enterprise* printed the *Polar Almanac* in Camden Bay in 1853. In the Antarctic, various members of Ernest Shackleton's 1907–09 British expedition published a 120-page book, *Aurora Australis*, in situ. At a vast remove from the usual literary spheres, sailors' reading communities produced not just conversations, ideas, and challenges: they also produced new works for circulation, debate, and provocation, recognizing that all components of literary publication could be mutually engaged.

The remarkable fact of these productions reveals more than the sustaining power of collective reading to generate forms of communal sociability, understanding, and sustenance. The most arresting feature of polar printing presses may be what they say about the drive to create literary matter for circulation among a responsive community and about who—apart from professional authors—writes creatively. This drive will not surprise English professors who recognize that many undergraduates are drawn to the major because they write or want to write, and consequently they read. While the major hovers at four percent, creative writing in the United States continues to grow: from 79 discrete major, minor, or degree offerings in 1975 to 822 in 2009, the sharpest climb occurring in recent years, according to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs ("About AWP"). At the same time, the conventional workshop's apprentice mode is being eclipsed by a mix of pedagogical methods that incorporate peer review with collaborative close reading of student and published texts. Creative writing may be on the rise, but workshops borrow strategies from traditional literature classrooms, as undergraduates enroll in workshops to read closely in small groups, to negotiate meanings, or to compose and revise their own imaginative texts in conversation with others.

But these are not only academic or undergraduate desires. Consider the weekly poetry workshop run by Penn State graduate students at Centre Crest, a public nursing facility ten miles from campus. It began in 2005 as part

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of The Writer in the Community, a seminar in which students study community literacy and creative writing pedagogy while leading writing groups at nonacademic sites such as prisons, shelters, and community centers. Despite their hectic schedules, graduate students of both literature and creative writing continue to find time to sustain the workshop, which is devoted to imaginative writing although nonfiction life writing is often recommended for the aged. For students facing a tight job market and pressures to professionalize, teaching at Centre Crest might seem a waste of time, yet they find it richly gratifying. It connects them with old people, poor people, individuals who can no longer hold a pen or remember what they wrote last week. Imaginative-writing exercises prompt the elderly to see beyond the confines of their lives, to revise memories, and to craft and share aesthetic and blunt responses to their circumstances. The workshop creates community among residents who experience the nursing home as crowded yet isolating, and the graduate students continue to return each week, as if the workshop also serves their own imaginative purpose.

When writing and reading are undertaken collectively, when imagination moves to the sphere of collective interpretation, then negotiation joins with invention to foster skills of democratic deliberation. Anyone who has participated in a reading or writing group knows that the range of backgrounds is often wide—from PhDs to novices, from dedicated enthusiasts to those who come for free coffee. Contributions are phrased as cryptic contentions, careering conjectures, gossipy guesswork, hackneyed contrivances, academic axioms, or poignant confession. Across the range of backgrounds and discourses, it's often hard to find common ground or indeed a connecting link to keep comments from dangling in the air. One often feels embarrassment, dismay, anger, resentment, or boredom at what one hears. A common thought might be, Where is this going? But making oneself listen to perspectives one doesn't agree with or even understand, struggling to figure out a ground on which give-and-take can occur, finding dialogue in discord, trying to remember that people are making their best efforts at self-expression: these are skills that all social engagement with a various population requires. In answer to Where is this going? we might not arrive at a coherent interpretation of the book or at a satisfying work of creative imagination, but we might come to trust our capacity to express a viewpoint or opinion, to support or contest a divergent opinion, to engage in disagreement without rancor or suspicion, to work with others toward a common goal, even if that goal appears, for the time being, beyond our capacities. If this is all that comes from community reading and writing, it might be more than enough.

Note

1. We sought participants for the Community Read in a variety of ways: we placed posters and discussion notices in local bookstores and cafés and the town library and distributed flyers to students; we invited the Penn State retirement village and local book groups to join in; and we promoted the event in county and university newspapers, magazines, and Web sites. The Community Read 2009, on Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, found us advertising events on *Facebook* for the first time.

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