Engaging American Literature: Connecting Students and Communities[1]
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Although it may seem like the latest buzzword in college teaching, service-learning has the potential to reignite the longest standing pedagogical and theoretical battles in literary studies. By taking critical inquiries about literature outside of the traditional classroom, our students can engage directly in the most provoking controversies of the field. Does the study of literature have any relevance or worth in the world outside of the academy? Does the reading and interpreting of literature belong to the specialist or to the common reader? Do literary experts or do the tastes and values of "real" readers determine the literary canon? Is it possible to acknowledge the social and political relevance of literature without undermining the aesthetic value of literary art? When I ask students in my American literature classes to develop literary programming for public libraries, I invite them to confront those compelling controversies first-hand. As a result, not only do they bring American literature to life for the local communities surrounding our campus, but they become more conscious about their own critical assumptions as well as their responsibilities to the various discourse communities of their lives in and beyond college.

In English, the question of "real world" relevance continues to plague scholars and students alike, especially because relating English studies to the real world has the potential to blur the lines that justify the specialized studies of literature and language and because of the lingering suspicion that public-based projects undermine the rigor and legitimacy of critical inquiry. Despite those risks, Laurie Grobman has turned to the practice of service-learning to teach multicultural and women's literature

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[1]A small portion of this paper is forthcoming at the 2011 Modern Language Association Convention.

because she asserts that it is the responsibility of English scholar-teachers to "actively and critically define their roles as educators and define the relevance of English to students' lives in an increasingly complex world" ("Service-Learning in the Literature Classroom," 79). By integrating community service into her students' literature learning experiences, Grobman enacts what Amy Koritz has argued is the sort of "pedagogical change that recognizes the centrality of civic engagement to higher education" (81). But the engaged literature classroom is still far from common practice, even though the dearth of civically conscious English curricula has prompted serious reconsideration of the field, such as Ellen Cushman's (2002) proposal of a massive restructuring of English around the pedagogy of service-learning – a practice-centered shift that Michael Bérubé anticipated over a decade ago.

The usual site of service-learning pedagogy in English departments is the composition classroom. In addition to the well documented educational benefits of service-learning in general, including enhanced critical thinking, issue identification, and problem solving skills (Bhaerman, et al.), the fostering of stronger connections to local communities (Dorman and Dorman), student retention (Mundy and Eyler), and awareness about and empathy for social inequalities (Green), contemporary composition theory acknowledges the potential for the real-world rhetorical situations of service-learning projects to enhance students' critical engagement and ability to develop effective arguments (Watters and Ford; Cooper and Julier; Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters) while also developing their sense of civic responsibility (Crisco). But the challenges and problems that composition teachers sometimes encounter may translate to the literature classroom. The two most common pitfalls of service-learning in English classrooms include the tendency of students to identify themselves as rescuers rather than collaborators within the communities they serve (Gere and Sinor refer to these student identities as "liberal saviors";

Cushman in "The Public Intellectual" calls that perspective the "liberal do-gooder stance") and the potential for political interpretations of literary works to supplant readings that study literary, artistic, and aesthetic elements. Grobman points out that these outcomes can be especially risky in the teaching of multicultural and women's literature, but she embraces the challenge of facilitating the reflections and dialogues about literary representations that result from her students' service-learning. Gregory Jay asserts the potential for integrating service-learning into critical reading experiences to enhance the "pedagogy of difference" in multicultural general education curriculum.

For the most part, service-learning in literature classrooms typically has students provide social services to disadvantaged members of the population, with the goal of developing their empathy for the subject positions that are presumed to be central to the experience of reading and interpreting literature written by minority authors. My own experiment with service-learning sought to bring English students out into the surrounding communities, not as observers of social identities represented (or absent) in the literature they read, but as collaborative readers, facilitating literary and intellectual engagement in the public sphere. I have found that by making the reading of literature itself the focus of a service component in a literature course, I can offer my students the increasingly valuable opportunity for "real-world" engagement and practice, while broadening, rather than narrowing, the possibilities for their critical engagement and understanding of the very real power of literature as well as the relevance of their own critical thinking about literature, culture, diversity, representation, and authority. This article focuses on my recent experiences building library-based public service assignments into my American literature classrooms, first with a single assignment in a literature class in Spring 2009, then more extensively in a capstone course in Spring 2010. These experiences indicate the rich potential for service-

learning to enhance English students' critical reading skills, rhetorical awareness, and sense of the transformative power and relevance of American literary studies.

My first venture into service-learning was motivated by my wish to support the ambitious Big Read program in the local region surrounding my Western New York campus.[2] The Big Read, a program of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), is "designed to restore reading to the center of American culture."[3] As a response to its discouraging report, "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America," the NEA piloted the Big Read in 2006, seeking to address the decline in literary reading among American citizens and youth. The program provides grants to select communities across the U.S. (800 grants were awarded in 2010) to read and enjoy a single book, in order "to encourage reading for pleasure and enlightenment." Grant applicants may select a book for their community from a list of classic works that are chosen by a "Readers Circle," which the NEA defines as "a distinguished group of writers, scholars, librarians, critics, artists, and publishing professionals – who recommend the next Big Read books for American communities to share." Grants support the purchase of books and the development of community programs and events surrounding the reading of the selected book, and the NEA hosts a website with resources about the Big Read books and their authors.

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[3] http://www.neabigread.org/about.php, June 23, 2010

The Big Read, both as an outlet for my students to contribute to literary reading and enjoyment in the community and as an object of our theoretical study for its role in canon making, was of special interest to my course, American Literary Landmarks. Required of our English Education majors and elective for English majors, the "Landmarks" courses (we offer sections in American, British, and World landmarks) feature in-depth critical studies of a selection of major works in order to familiarize students with canonical literary texts and traditions. My Spring 2009 section of American Literary Landmarks focused on literary canon history and challenged students to interrogate the "Landmark" status of the works we read and studied. To that end, not only did the Big Read offer a meaningful opportunity for a public service project, but it provided a relevant context for our class to consider the various modes of consumption of American literature, the mechanisms of "Landmark" (or canon) making (both in academic and in public settings), and the implications of critical interventions in the literary canon. Beginning the semester with the regional Big Read selection for 2009, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, our reading list continued with a sampling of major works throughout American literary history that share some of the predominant themes and contexts of Harper Lee's novel, including Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The main objectives of the course included building awareness about critically important traditions and texts in American literary history, enhancing critical reading skills, practicing critical and archival research methods, and applying critical interpretations and interventions in a variety of modes and rhetorical situations, including academic writing, an oral presentation, and, of chief interest here, a library exhibit.

Although it was not a semester-long activity, the service-learning project ended up being a defining critical activity in this course, perhaps because of its place as the first unit on the syllabus and its sustained relevance to the course design. The assignment challenged student groups to design, research, and produce exhibits for public and school libraries throughout the region. The class of 16 students were divided into two large teams, 8 committed to mass producing a single exhibit of their own design for 15 public libraries, and 8 asked to do the same for 3 school libraries. Within each team of 8, students were further divided into pairs, each pair assigned to research and design a specific component of the overall exhibit design decided upon by the entire team. The assignment would require rhetorical analysis, archival and secondary research, and the successful presentation of relevant findings for target audiences. As a result of their research findings and creative and critical decisions, the students' exhibits shared a range of historical, cultural, and literary materials, collectively aimed to enhance library patrons' critical thinking about the novel and to provide access to relevant information and resources.

Having had invaluable lessons in library exhibit design from Dawn Eckenrode, Reference & Instruction Librarian at our college's Reed Library, the class produced two distinctly different exhibits, reflecting in part the different critical assumptions and processes of the student groups, but also reflecting their keen and informed sense of their different audiences. The public library exhibit sought to broaden access to the meaningful contexts of Jim Crow history by offering an educational pamphlet along with its poster-display of contemporary and historical images. The school library exhibit catered to the needs of high school teachers and librarians, showcasing a wealth of relevant historical background in an accessible, engaging display designed to appeal to the high school student demographic. As an additional outreach, several of

the college students opted to visit one of the more culturally isolated school libraries they served to discuss their exhibit and share ideas about the novel and the historical contexts with a group of high school students.

Despite its relatively brief duration – just a few weeks instead of the entire semester or more that is typical for service-learning activities – this library service project had a surprising impact on my students' academic study. Participating in the Big Read challenged students to question not just the public reception surrounding a literary work, but also their own critical assumptions. The Big Read project initiated and brought to life critical inquiries that the class sustained throughout the study of each new reading selection, both in class discussions and in writing and presentation assignments: How does the public reception of a literary work shapes its role in the canon? As students, teachers, readers, library patrons, citizens, what role do we play in the shaping of the canon, and how can we employ our participation as a means to make critical interventions in the impact and legacy of canonical works? To what extent can critical interventions (like the exhibits) shape, inspire, or provoke new public "readings" of the work? And do we want institutions of learning, libraries, or literacy initiatives like the Big Read to reinforce a text's canonical status, or do we want to use those settings to interrogate that status and the text's relationship to other literary texts and traditions and to cultural contexts? These important lines of inquiry and more arose in our many in-class reflections about our contributions to the Big Read and about the status of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and they continued to frame our considerations throughout the semester of each text and its historical reception and cultural contexts.

The challenge of presenting materials that would educate and inspire public audiences compelled students to become more aware of their own critical assumptions and processes, which they too often take for granted, because it asked them to share those ideas in a setting outside of

their own classrooms. Or, as one student put it, "the library exhibit made me step outside of my comfort zone." Such discomfort produced one of the most productive and sustained critical debates to emerge from the exhibit project when the students on the public library team argued over the appropriateness, relevance, and sensitivity of evoking the history of violent white supremacy in a public library display about a classic American novel. When the dissenting student reflected in his writing, "I thought of it like this: if most of the public libraries we attend are black, would we still want to talk about Jim Crow laws," he was unconsciously echoing the arguments that groups of concerned African American parents and community leaders often make when they oppose the inclusion of Harper Lee's novel in their children's schools. Our classroom of mostly white, suburban, middle-class students presumed that the agenda of exposing the history of racial segregation was universally accepted as enlightening and welcome; their classmate's alternative point of view forced them to come to terms with their own assumptions and to make more conscious rhetorical decisions. Making such an important, if at times painful, breakthrough about the diverse assumptions and worldviews among their own classroom and campus communities equipped this group of students to interrogate the complicated controversies surrounding the reception of almost all of the canonical works on our syllabus, some of which are high on banned books lists.

The most surprising results of that growing critical and rhetorical awareness were the students' final research projects, which included traditional research papers, lesson unit narratives, as well as, in light of the productive outcomes of the exhibit assignment, public library service projects. The final assignment required students to engage critically with relevant secondary sources related to their chosen project, and to produce a meaningful critical intervention, whether in formal writing, teaching plans, or public service. While this sort of genre flexibility in final research

projects in upper-level courses is not especially new, this group of students imagined and applied an uncommonly sophisticated range and depth of possibilities for their critical interventions. Lesson unit narratives reflected future teachers' heightened awareness of the potential impact of their pedagogy; their methods were supported by relevant critical research and reflected their own critical insights and concerns. One of the future teachers in the classroom explained why her plans to teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* would feature opportunities for her students to make personal and societal connections to the novel, drawing upon the critical literacy and reader-response theories she discovered to support her pedagogy. Research papers that took a position on the inclusion or banning of a particular "landmark" text in a school curriculum went beyond the typical generalized response, adopting concrete, authentic rhetorical situations and giving due, sensitive, and informed consideration of all valid points of view. Two different students chose to address such arguments to the school boards of their own alma maters, presenting balanced, exigent research to support their claims. And three students used their end-of-semester research to return to the service of public libraries in the region; two of them provided needed exhibit materials to different libraries, and one of them led Big Read discussion sessions and updated the library's web resources to enhance the public access to and study of Harper Lee's novel.

The challenge of broadening public access to materials and ideas typically contained within the classroom encouraged my students to become more conscious of their critical process and assumptions, and it also allowed them to apply that critical consciousness in their roles as professionals and citizens, an opportunity that may be all too rare for most humanities students. While the professionalizing of education majors on our campus has grown so that students enjoy the benefits of "real world" learning settings from their first year through their student teaching

placements, most English majors, and perhaps humanities students in general, feel "left out" when it comes to our attention to their roles in the world outside of our classrooms. While we earnestly hope and believe that we are preparing them with critical thinking, reading, and communication skills they will need for whatever roles they play in the real world, we limit their opportunities for practicing their identities as critically conscious professionals and citizens when we confine their critical experiences to the classroom. A surprising result of the Big Read exhibit project was the impact that it had on the self-perception of the students who were not planning to become teachers. From English majors who were considering careers as academic librarians (there were three who stated that goal) to History majors wishing to work in the museum field, working on a project to support and encourage public literacy and provide public access to archived materials was not only exciting, but it helped them imagine the relevance of their academic discoveries to their real-world ambitions. Whether students were proudly sending newspaper clippings about their Big Read service home to their parents or filing them away in their professional portfolios, they were all experiencing the rewarding and real connections between their growing critical literacy and their lives as members of families, communities, and professional fields.

The invigorating experience of my students' involvement with public library exhibit design inspired me to make such public service central to an entire course. It was clear to me that my students' capacity for critical reading and theorizing about literature was enhanced by their work on the library exhibits. It was also clear that the libraries throughout the region were in need of some support for their programs, especially in light of

ever-increasing public demand and ever-shrinking budgets.[4] In revisiting the role my students could play in the Big Read, I sought to make more deliberate and conscientious community partnerships with the directors of our local libraries, and to design a course that would be mutually beneficial to my students and the library communities they would serve, in keeping with the collaborative, activist research methodology advocated by Cushman ("The Public Intellectual"). In the Spring 2010 semester, my Senior Seminar course, a 3-credit capstone requirement with 20 English majors enrolled, again supported our region's participation in the Big Read, a program awarded to our college library director for the third year in a row[5]. This time, instead of mass-producing exhibit materials for distribution to the entire range of public libraries of the Chautauqua-Cattaraugus Library System, my class would work more closely with 9 of those libraries, tailoring exhibits and programs to the individual libraries. Such individualizing of our Big Read projects led to surprising discoveries about the diversity of our surrounding communities and reminded me and

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[4] The paradoxical impact of the national economic crisis on public libraries – the unprecedented public need for library services coinciding with severe drops in public funding – is well documented. The American Library Association website features extensive toolkits, information, and support for "advocating in a tough economy," and across the nation regional library systems are struggling to meet the sudden demand for their resources and services, including internet access while fighting for the funding necessary to keep them available. Both *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* have featured articles that report on the critical demand for public libraries and the stress of financial cutbacks, as well as activist protests from the public (most recently, NYT, "24-Hour Read-In Protests Cuts to Libraries" and WSJ, "N.Y. Librarians Fight Budget Cuts, Pledge 'We Will Not Be Shushed'").

[5] The NEA Big Read grant, directed by Randy Gadikian, provided copies of *My Antonia* to the library patrons and to my students. My students' transportation expenses and programming-related costs for their work in the libraries were generously supported by a grant from the Carnahan-Jackson Fund for the Humanities.

my students of the power of a shared literary reading experience to nurture such essential civic skills as empathy and critical thought.

As a service-learning assignment, the students were required to work in pairs as Big Read Coordinators, developing public programs and materials for the public libraries to which they were assigned. The assignment sought to balance academic goals with the needs and interests of the communities which we were serving. To that end, while students were researching the critical trends and contexts of Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, our 2010 Big Read director's selection, they were also carefully investigating their audiences and building collaborative relationships with their cooperating library directors. The assignment asked students to prepare a formal, written proposal, sharing their critical awareness about the novel, their rhetorical awareness about their assigned library communities, and their plans for rhetorically appropriate and critically interesting public programs and materials that would engage the library communities in reading and thinking critically about Cather's novel. While the specific focus on Cather's novel would seem like a modest undertaking for three credits, the scope of this course became especially ambitious as a result of the surprising effort it would take, both for me and for my students, to balance rhetorical awareness and sensitivity with critical agendas, insights, and goals, as well as by the amount of energy and time that our theoretical engagement surrounding this project would entail.

Free from the concern about coverage that necessarily shapes my American Literary Landmarks course, my design for this capstone experience seized upon an opportunity for an in-depth study of a literary experience. The Big Read, with its capacity for engaging students both in critical study and in public discourse, provided a context for my students to intensively study Cather's novel, while at the same time confronting and considering theoretical issues central to our discipline, namely debates

about literary canons, professionalization, and the potential of the public sphere. While from the start of the semester my students were acting upon their critical assumptions about a work's canonicity and literary worth, performing professional skills, and intervening in public spheres, our work of theorizing their own active involvement in these debates would have to wait until later in the semester. We had much to do to get the Big Read programs underway.

Because of the timeframe of the local Big Read programming needs, the students' work in the libraries began immediately. Having read the novel over the semester break (I sent an email to the roster explaining our public service project and asking them to read *My Antonia* before we convened for the Spring semester), the students met our library partners during the first week of classes in a reception we held in their honor at our college's Reed Library. By the end of the first week, students were paired together, and student pairs were partnered with libraries, all collaborations which resulted from a detailed survey the students completed as well as my personal conversations and interviews with the 9 participating library directors about their needs, interests, concerns, and goals. As much as possible I sought to match students with peers and library directors according to a range of criteria, from pragmatic and logistical needs (class and work schedules, library hours, proximity of libraries to campus, transportation availability) to intellectual and professional goals and interests, student skills, and library needs and concerns.

Despite some initial problem-solving and ironing out of the collaborations, most of the partnerships turned out to be ideal. And when they were less than ideal, they presented unexpected opportunities for me and my students to think innovatively and creatively about our contributions to the Big Read. While most of the library directors were thoroughly supportive of the students' roles as contributors to the public programming, in one surprising instance a library partner declined to have

the students organize or take any leading roles in public discussions about Cather's novel. With remarkable wherewithal, the student pair designed an artistic and enlightening exhibit, which they respectfully presented to their partner library director, and attended as audience participants the public discussions arranged and publicized by the library staff. They carved out space for their more substantive contributions to the Big Read by composing extensive and engaging posts for the Big Read blog that our class used to support and extend their public programming. While their intellectual and critical ideas were for the most part shut out of the library to which they were assigned, those students sought an outlet in the virtual public sphere of our blog, and their posts contributed much-needed critical discourse to the blog's lively but mostly reflective commentaries about the public events that took place across the library communities.

That unexpected barrier to a student pair's participation in the public programming allowed my class to theorize the reasons for what may sometimes be the public's fear and anxiety about our intervention in the Big Read. We considered the fraught relationship between the public realm and academic settings (a topic we would address more extensively in our course activities following the Big Read project), and we brainstormed ways in which we could accommodate our audiences and overcome those potential barriers without compromising our critical inquiry. Working closely with their cooperating libraries to understand their patrons' needs and interests, the students integrated their own critical ideas and discoveries into the programming and exhibit materials, resulting in a series of programs ranging from fun, family-centered events – dances, skits, community quilting, parties with popcorn balls and lemonade – to intellectually stimulating discussions with wine and cheese. In libraries with existing book clubs, the student coordinators consulted with their members about their traditions and expectations and sought to honor those while introducing new ideas and inquiries; when the space of

the library was shared with other public institutions (one of the smaller libraries shared a building with a pre-school), the students took those broader rhetorical considerations into account (avoiding, for instance, displaying mature materials that would be considered inappropriate for the town's pre-schoolers). We were all surprised by the diverse levels and styles of engagement with *My Antonia* at the different libraries and at the power of the novel to connect with the lives of readers with widely ranging backgrounds and experiences – some with little formal education, others with advanced degrees; some having hardly ever left their Western New York rural hometowns, others world travelers; some teens and many senior citizens; folks of various ethnic, religious, and family backgrounds. Together, the college English students, library staff, and community readers connected with the narrative of the title character's immigration experience, the power and identity struggles that surrounded her life story, the aesthetic implications of Cather's masculine narrative point of view, and the competing memories of the American frontier, just to name just a few of the topics that emerged throughout these collaborative studies. The varied and rich exchanges reminded us all of the power of literature to evoke empathy, imagination, and critical thought – all crucial civic skills for a healthy democracy.

Developing appropriate rhetorical awareness and accommodating the libraries and their communities certainly required some logistical flexibility, and my students and I realized that, rather than impeding the learning outcomes, that flexibility itself yielded important lessons and opportunities. One of our cooperating library directors, overworked and understaffed, as is all-too typical these days, was held up by more pressing duties and unable to meet with the student pair assigned to her until rather late in the planned timeline of the project. The assignment directed students to meet with and interview their library director partners to assess their audience's needs and interests *before* embarking on their

critical research about *My Antonia*, and the formal proposal and bibliography due at the end of that research period was expected to result from the students' rhetorical awareness and sensitivity and their critical investigation. For the pair of students whose library director was unexpectedly too busy to meet with them until later in the semester, we slightly extended the timeline of their formal proposal, brainstormed additional methods for them to develop rhetorical awareness (they visited the library for a sense of the physical space and to learn about the existing exhibits), and allowed them to focus more of their time in those early weeks of the semester on their critical research than on their collaborative relationship building with their assigned library. As a result, this pair honed their critical study, which focused mainly on the cultural history of the American western frontier, and spent productive time exploring secondary sources and archives of primary source materials that shed light on Cather's representation of the frontier in *My Antonia*. By the time the students got to meet with their library director, they impressed her by bringing concrete ideas and materials for her consideration for inclusion in her library's Big Read programs and by their earnest interest in learning about her library community, and she confidently turned her programming over to them as a result. While initially stressful for the students, especially given the rigidity of academic timeframes and expectations that they were accustomed to in traditional classrooms, our flexibility, crucial to any community-based classroom endeavor, allowed them to adjust the priorities and timeline of their work and to meet and exceed the expectations of the assignment.

Perhaps it is just that sort of ambitious flexibility – the ability to adjust to new, realistic situations – that led so many of the students involved in this project to muse over the confidence they discovered through this service-learning experience. In response to an anonymous, post-project survey question that asked "What did you gain personally

from participating in this experience," students over and over again reflected upon their newfound confidence. In a typical response, one student answered, "Mostly, confidence. In school everyone is bright and has something to say, which, at times, can cause doubt in your own abilities. This project reassured me that I am worth listening to. It was truly rewarding to have a room of people respect – maybe not always agree with – what you are saying." While today's college English classroom is typically student-centered and discussion-based, the almost inevitable hierarchies of class discussions, the competitive demonstrations of knowledge that develop even despite our best intentions to intervene, keep some students silent.

Taking the literary discussion outside of the classroom and authorizing students to lead and moderate it impacted their self-confidence and reinforced their voices. Actually, the responses to the simple inquiry about their perceptions of personal gain revealed a level of need or anxiety among my students that I was mostly unaware of before this experience. One student admitted, "I learned that I had skills of analysis, intuition, and a natural ability to discuss literature that I didn't entirely realize I had before participating in the Big Read." Given that the course was entirely populated by graduating English majors, and given my own sense of their mostly impressive and advanced skills in academic English, the predominance of such reflections surprised me, and confirmed for me the importance of occasionally allowing English students to discover their voices and capabilities beyond the walls of the traditional classroom. The experience facilitated their intellectual self-awareness, an especially desirable outcome in a capstone course. Rather than emphasizing the new knowledge gained in their experience (and new knowledge they certainly did gain), mostly the students reflected upon their new understanding about their knowledge making and about the relationship between their academic knowledge and the "real world": "I

gained confidence and ownership of my knowledge. I finally realized that maybe everything I had learned in college could really help me in the real world."

Much of that self-discovery and enlightenment, important outcomes in contemporary theories of capstone pedagogy,[6] resulted from the theoretical engagement in the course after and in response to the Big Read programming project. From my experiences teaching a smaller-scale Big Read service-learning project the previous year in my American Literary Landmarks class, I anticipated that the process of collaboratively designing the programs and the outcomes and discussions during the programs themselves would lead to some important philosophical topics for our consideration: selection (What makes a work worthy of selection in the Big Read? What are the criteria for Big Read options and for other lists of "major" literary works?); authority (What are the different values for literary works in academic settings and in public arenas? Whose tastes and values determine a text's worth?); aesthetics (What role does the aesthetic value of a literary text play in its status in the canon? How do we define and evaluate the aesthetic impact of literature?); and representation (Should diverse representation be a factor in the inclusion of literary works in the canon? To what extent do we assume that an author and/or her literary subjects are representative of particular voices and identities?).

Those lines of inquiry and more began to take shape in the formal presentations students shared with the class just before our spring break. The presentation assignment asked students to share the process and results of their Big Read project outcomes with the rest of the class, and specifically to explain their research methods (*What critical approach did your team take? Did the target audience play a role in defining that approach?*); the extent of their critical intervention (*Did your team's critical*

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[6] Goldstein and Fernald assert that "students' learning and experiences, rather than course content and subject matter, are critical" (27).

approach extend the limits of traditional "Big Read" programming? Did you seek to make critical interventions that would enhance the Big Read in your assigned library?); the relationship between their initial goals and outcomes (*What programming goals did you start with, and what were the results of your programming efforts?*); their key critical discoveries and application of them (*What critical material and/or primary sources did you find, and how did you use them in the programming and/or the exhibit? Did you provide additional resources to the library?*). It also asked students to explain their roles in the public aspects of the programming (*How have you been publicizing the program, and has that been successful so far? Have you hosted any events yet; if so, how have those been going?*). The presentations were scheduled just after the mid-term point of the semester while the Big Read was still ongoing, so the students shared with the class various stages of their programming outcomes; all of them had completed their research and planning, but a few of them were still awaiting planned programs. Because the project encouraged a careful collaborative relationship with our library partners and attention to their library community's needs, the programming varied greatly and ranged from single but extensively planned and promoted book discussion events to series of smaller, diverse events (one collaboration with a small, rural library, whose ambitious new director wanted to use the Big Read to breathe new life into her flailing library, pulled off up to 6 activities, including fun events with cultural relevance to the novel, such as contra dances and quilting demonstrations, as well as book discussions). The classroom presentations gave us the opportunity for a more intimate and open sharing of the outcomes and implications of those plans, at whatever stage of execution they happened to be.

A final category of inquiry in the presentation assignment asked students to theorize and share the impact and implications of their contributions to the local Big Read programming: *…please reflect on the*

experience of "critical intervention" in the public sphere. In other words, to what extent did you apply your critical awareness about the novel and your own critical agenda in the design of the library programming and exhibit? What was it like to take your critical interpretations and discoveries outside of an academic (classroom) setting? How did public figures (library directors and/or community members) respond to your attempts to critically intervene? Do you have any thoughts about the role that a program like the Big Read plays in the creating of public spaces for intellectualism? While the students in their presentations tended to focus on the methods and discoveries of their research and their responses to any public events and discussions they had already hosted, they began to express ideas about the broader implications and possibilities of those experiences in the various spaces provided for their reflection, including the discussions following each presentation, the individual written reflections they submitted to me after their presentations, the on-line class discussion board (which provided the class a private space for open reflections about the project), and the Big Read blog that was open to the public. Not only did the various opportunities for such reflection challenge students to navigate different rhetorical situations (Which reflections are appropriate for sharing in the public Big Read blog? In the on-line discussion course forum? In the class presentation? In written essays submitted just to me? In journalistic pieces promoting or reporting about the project? What are the consequences of crossing conventional rhetorical expectations?), but they allowed the students to use their own first-hand experiences as subjects for the theoretical inquiries that would occupy the remaining weeks of our semester.

Because the theoretical potential for this project was central to my course objectives, I made room on the syllabus for a luxurious few weeks devoted to our study of those important lines of inquiry that our work in the public sphere opened. While in classroom and writing exercises students

were carefully locating and interrogating the various sites of authority in their own experiences as students, as members of worlds outside of the academy, and as Big Read coordinators, our reading list affirmed and complicated their growing sense of their own relationships to literature and literary studies. Rosa A. Eberly's study of the intricate connections among literature, rhetoric, and democracy in *Citizen Critics* not only added to my students' rhetorical theory vocabulary, but it initiated crucial conversations about the potential for rational discourse in the public sphere to shape and contribute to the reception and critical treatment of literary works, as well as the contrarily restrictive potential for specialized literary study to impact a text's status in literary and cultural history. While seeking neither to affirm nor deny, ultimately, the validity or righteousness of either side of that debate, my intentions with this study were simply to invite my students to consider this contentious history and to recognize the sites and consequences of such power struggles in their own experiences, throughout history, and in the worlds in which we live and work today. Further readings by and about such major voices as Jürgen Habermas on the public sphere and John Guillory on the canon, as well as responses to those seminal theories in scholarly as well as non-academic venues advanced our consideration of the history and the terms of public sphere discourse debates and the often divisive history of academic English.

This intensive study – beginning with rigorous literary research applied to non-academic rhetorical settings and developing into theoretical analysis of authority, canon, representation, and the public sphere – culminated for my students in a flexible final writing assignment that asked them to compose a critical response to any of the varied subjects of our study. The flexibility of the final assignment allowed students to return to the comfortable work of literary analysis and research and to develop their study of *My Antonia* in a formal paper, but it also made room for students to develop responses to inspiring or provoking theoretical positions

surrounding the type of public intellectual service they performed in the Big Read. The students' various final projects consisted of academic essays, journalistic editorials, and blogs, and their diverse topics included literary analysis (only one student chose this familiar path), rhetorical analysis (one student, for example, evaluated discourse about literacy in local bookstores, another assessed the rhetorical implications of our college library's recent acquisition of extensive comic book collections), 21st century public sphere discourse, and even engagement pedagogy (one writer, inspired by the service-learning experience in our class, studied the presence and impact of service-learning in our campus and community) and the history of town-gown politics (a double Art and English major composed an editorial about recent controversies in the local media about arts programming on our campus).

Even given the wide-ranging genres and topics of my students' final writing projects, a common trend emerged in their decisions: the students integrated the experiences of their service projects, their specialized academic training, and our theoretical reflections to engage in individualized critical experiences. By choosing topics relevant to their own academic backgrounds, interests, and post-graduation goals, and adopting authentic rhetorical situations, my students' writing projects reflected the objectives Goldstein and Fernald assert when they suggest that a capstone course should "integrate and cap previous academic learning…[and] also prompt self-examination leading to both personal and professional growth" (28). It is my assertion that my students' service-learning project greatly facilitated that integrated, personalized outcome favored in current capstone pedagogy.

Even when they chose not to respond directly to the Big Read or to analyze *My Antonia*, the students' projects consistently revealed the impact such integration and reflection had on their critical thinking and writing. When an accomplished creative writing student in the course, for

example, composed and published a blog devoted to critical discussions about the pedagogy of creative writing workshops, she studied and responded to critical discourse about academic and public sphere writing instruction. Within her impressive and rhetorically sensitive discussions about the complex pedagogy and power stakes in community-based writing workshops, this Master of Fine Arts (MFA)-bound English senior expressed her commitment to maintaining her public intellectual and creative investments while pursuing and discovering her academic identity in graduate school and beyond. Her topic, genre, rhetorical awareness, and sense of the complex dynamics of power, authority, and agency which surrounded the subject of the craft of writing in the public and academic realms all revealed her intense engagement with the theories and practices of our course and her willingness to apply them to the exigencies of her own immediate future as a professional creative writer, college English teacher (she had accepted a position as a graduate teaching assistant), and member of public discourse communities.

Even the more formal essays revealed the writers to be engaging with the experiences of their public service and integrating our reflections upon those experiences with their own critical and intellectual interests and ambitions. In a particularly sophisticated essay, a student headed to a competitive Master of Library Science (MLS) program after graduation took Richard Sennett's powerful *The Fall of Public Man* into account to explain and understand what he considered to the comparable phenomenon of identity posturing in social networking websites. Not only did this writer demonstrate his impressive ability to comprehend and engage complicated philosophical works, but he chose to theorize a topic (communication technology and new media) with important relevance to today's scholars of library and media sciences. Again, while not directly responding to the Big Read, to the public we served, or to literary studies, this capstone writing project represented the rich potential for the reflective

outcomes of that work earlier in the semester to motivate and feed students' more personalized and individualized intellectual studies. Certainly, our consideration of the public sphere and its status historically and in contemporary society influenced this future MLS candidate to theorize the relationship between the public sphere and internet identity dynamics in the 21st century.

Taken together, my experiments with supporting the Big Read program through service-learning projects suggest the potential for such public engagement to enrich my students' learning of literature and theory while building and facilitating public access to and participation in critical literacy. In a post-project anonymous survey, 100% of the library directors agreed to future collaborations with students in my classrooms, and all but one of them (presumably the library that decided to keep the paid staff in the driver's seat of the programming) reported that the students "noticeably enhanced programming" (the other options for responses to that survey question included "negatively impacted programming," "no impact on programming," which was the one dissenting response, and "slight improvement upon existing/past programs"). The collaborations with the library directors opened new opportunities for my classrooms to support the public library communities beyond the Big Read, including public relations work, community programming, book clubs, and exhibits, and to facilitate public literary engagement beyond the libraries, including after-school enrichment clubs and programming for senior citizen homes[7].

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[7] My colleague Dr. Jeanette McVicker engaged her graduate capstone students in coordinating Big Read programming for a local senior citizen's home with impressive outcomes for students and participants. Also, my students' programming experiences at the public libraries revealed the senior citizen patrons to be the most active and involved participants. Given the growing demographic of senior citizens in our local communities in particular, I plan to develop opportunities for my students to work with senior groups in English-related collaborations.

Perhaps of most significance to me as I continue to develop approaches for engaging my college literature classrooms, the students' work with the library directors revealed a lively interest in collaborative critical reading among the public communities surrounding our campus, which suggests exciting possibilities for broadening and diversifying the opportunities for such engagement across the English curriculum. The surprising interest in and capacity for public engagement with literature, which my students reported about in the Big Read blog[8], reminded me and my students of the transformative power of meaningful reading experiences. Participants in the programs led by my students responded to Cather's novel in myriad ways, sharing personal histories of immigration, interrogating gender and sexuality and social codes, connecting to folk traditions, small-town politics, and family dynamics, and raising the sometimes difficult questions about canon and authority (*who chose this novel for us to read*?) and the values of academic literary study (*why is this a "good" novel, and should we call it a "classic" novel?*). Rather than seeking to provide authoritative answers to those lines of inquiry, my students and I sought to facilitate, feed, and promote the space for such discussion to take place, and we brought the implications of these inquiries and their outcomes back to our classroom to further reflect and theorize together.

By taking their critical reading outside of the classroom and challenging them to engage the public in thinking critically about literature, my students recognized – some of them perhaps for the first time – the social relevance and power of literary reading experiences. Making the reading of literature the focus of a public programming series and making the public realm the focus of an academic literary study served to raise the visible legitimacy and power of literary studies in the social world as well

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[8] http://myantoniabigreadprogram.blogspot.com/, June 23, 2010

as to build students' appreciation for and understanding of real-world diversity, values, interests, and needs. Though my own gestures are modest, they suggest the potential for our discipline to institute such change more radically, restoring the Jeffersonian value for civic education in a democracy that Amy Koritz evokes in her provocative suggestion that the humanities transform their structures to support the development of citizens and "eschew the self-referential structure of the research university that became dominant after World War II and that has served the humanities so poorly" (89). Service-learning, especially when it is broadened to envision opportunities for students' public intellectual engagement and when it involves students in working closely with members of the community, has the capacity to restore the social and civic relevance and power of American literature, both within and beyond the academy.

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