Amodern 4: The Poetry Series

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THESES ON DISCERNING THE READING SERIES

Jason Camlot, Darren Wershler

Introduction

The literary reading series as an object of study is now more discernible than it was in the previous century.

This has everything to do with the rise of networked digital media and the associated appearance of online repositories of literary recordings transferred from analog sources.

With the aid of digital media, we can fruitfully approach the reading series as a literary artifact. Study lends it coherence.

Search for "reading series" with the engine of your choice. Most results refer either to serialized texts for parlor or classroom recitation in the nineteenth century (as in H. M. Soper's *Scrap-Book Recitation Series* [1885]), or textbook anthologies for developmental reading pedagogy in the twentieth (as in Simpson and Gilmer's *Developmental Reading Series for Improving Reading Habits* [1940]). Only a few refer to our topic here: consecutive occasions for literary performance.

Study of the reading series entails an historical understanding of reading as an ever-changing practice, and an historical understanding of the place of different reading practices in relation to historical conceptions of the literary. Understanding the reading series demands a grasp of the changing methods, motives and disciplinary categories of reading from the eighteenth century to the present, from rhetoric to elocution to recitation to expression to oral interpretation to performance (among other categories). (See Robb, Bahn and Bahn, Edwards, Wheeler, Elfenbein, Hoffman, Smith, Preston, Robson.)

Thinking about the reading series situates individual and collective acts of reading,

writing, listening and conviviality at specific historical moments in specific geographic locales.

A reading series is a complex discursive assemblage. It exists because of the circulation of bodies, texts, objects, affects, aesthetics and ideologies through particular places.

The decision to study the reading series is itself an ideological act and a deliberate intervention into how literary studies traditionally operates. Such study makes the reading series *discernible*, but at a price. The complexity of the reading series as an object of study means that approaching it challenges traditional methods of literary analysis, and ultimately even the constitution of "English" as a discipline.

The methodology we're describing as discernment includes two major components.

First, we are interested in *making the reading series perceptible*. This would involve the incorporation of the reading series as a regular object of study into the more-or-less established literary tradition, via a range of approaches that concern the groups involved in their creation, performance and reception: oral history, ethnography and the study of interpretive communities. These methodologies have been part of a standard (if minoritarian) tradition of literary studies since the late 80s/early 90s (in particular, see the work of Janice Radway).

Second, we are interested in *making the reading series material*. The methodologies necessary for this approach are not literary in origin, but media-historical and media-archaeological. Their approach is post-hermeneutic, and their interest is the relationships between the specific material technologies necessary to operate, publicize and record a reading series, and the social protocols that govern the circulation, transformation and effects of those objects.

The two components of this process of critical discernment exist in a more-or-less irresolvable (but nevertheless productive) tension.

"Making the reading series discernible" is an hyperbole. Recordings of reading series allow us to hear the limitations of our ability to analyze the live event, help us to recognize the significance of an organized series of events, and remind us that the monopoly print media once held over literariness is long over.

The recent discernibility of the reading series as an object of study can be attributed to a number of factors:

- the rise of networked digital media and a concomitant demand for "content" across all cultural sectors. In Harold Innis's terms, The Internet is a space-biased medium, privileging the rapid-fire, promiscuous spread of knowledge over large distances rather than the stable preservation of knowledge over time
- the increasing affordability and ease of use of hardware and software tools (including file codecs such as the MP3) for amateur digital audio manipulation
- the near-ubiquity of a range of personal audio listening devices (esp. the iPod, smartphones, podcasts, etc.) leading to a desire for more varied audio content than popular music
- the long-term popularity of Ubuweb (ubu.com), and the subsequent appearance of other poetry-related sites such as PennSound, The EPC (Electronic Poetry Center at Buffalo) and Harriet, the Poetry Foundation blog, among many others
- policy decisions from federal and provincial granting bodies favouring the creation of forms of funding designed to support the creation of digital cultural "archives" (this is a logical development from the truism that the one policy statement that all parties seem to agree upon is that "telling Canadian stories" is a priority – see Wagman & Winton)
- the interdisciplinary, critical overlap of scholarly disciplines such as English, Communication Studies, Cultural Studies and Performance Studies, which allows the poetry event to be conceptualized as artefactual
- the impact of materialist and historicizing approaches to bibliography and the subsequent interest in textual differentiality (McGann, Bernstein, Perloff)
- the trend toward institutional and disciplinary self-consciousness and the subsequent historicization of literature pedagogy (Graff, Guillory)
- the current cachet of the Digital Humanities in English Departments and a corresponding need for technologized objects for literary study

The fuzziness around the relative beginnings of the poetry reading series as a cultural form is itself a sign of this newly emergent discernibility.

What Is A Reading Series?

Reading series are historically situated phenomena that can be framed to reveal

critical significance at the individual, local, national and international levels.

A reading series is a serial event where people gather to present literary work to each other, usually but not necessarily oral (read, sung, screened, played, exchanged or otherwise performed). The work presented at a reading series does not have to be written by the people who present it, but from the 1950s on, it often is. The participants do not have to imagine themselves as writers, but from the 1950s on, usually they do. There may not be an audience other than the writers who are presenting their work.

There is no minimum duration for a reading series. Some reading series are only imagined and never actually occur. Some reading series occur only once but imagine a possible future for themselves. Some reading series occur in secret. At some reading series, nothing is ever read. These facts underline the ideological/Imaginary nature of the reading series.

Every reading series is formal.

The formal structure of the reading series can vary. It is determined by a variety of factors including the will of the organizers and participants, the availability and nature of venues, the purpose of the series (pedagogical, promotional, grassroots communal), funding, and the patience of the audience.

The structure of the reading series has some formal and social similarities to other public serial forms of art and humanities presentation, such as art exhibits, public lectures, round table series, coffee house music programming, congregationalist church services, 12-step programs and comedy open mics.

The larger, distinct yet variable structure of the reading series consists of smaller formal units called "readings." The specific format of the poetry reading and its function within a particular reading series is worth describing. Again,the rules of the series might define it, but an individual reading might also differ as a result of a variety of factors.

It is possible to build a taxonomy of types of reading series along a variety of axes:

- predominant style: slams, open mics, page-based poetry, performance
- economics: paid readers, readers pay, pass-the-hat, government-funded
- size
- geography

- age and frequency
- organizing agents: grassroots, public institution, university, students, poets, poetry lovers
- editorial mode: hosted, non-hosted, open, invitation-only

The reading series is an instrument of cultural dissemination and a training ground for modeling and cultivating modes of cultural reception.

From the 1950s on (at least), the reading series has been implicated in an existential ethos that values *presence*, and a hermeneutical ethos that values *context*—what Stephen Fredman has identified as an "existential practice—an art of contexts."

The reading series is an instrument of cultural policy that positions those subjects in relationship to the State and its official and unofficial cultures.

A reading series can be approached synchronically in relation to other series that occurred in parallel to its set of organized occasions and diachronically in terms of its historical precedents and antecedents.

Why Is Studying the Reading Series Worthwhile?

Reading series are construction sites.

The reading series is a ground against which writers, collectives, books, magazines and other cultural objects emerge.

Their conviviality produces specific kinds of subjects (writers, readers, audience members, performers, hosts, organizers, editors, arts bureaucrats, critics, hecklers, fans).

They also produce objects such as writers, readers, fans, arts bureaucrats, editors, writing communities, contexts for reception, manuscripts, chapbooks, newsletters, presses, other reading series, recordings, and photographs, among other things.

The reading series is an affect-distribution centre powered by social circulation.

Reading series produce an extraordinary amount of affect: affinities, romances, rivalries and ambivalences that tinge local, national and international communities and their respective publishing organs long after a given reading series has

disappeared.

The reading series is a crucible of literary taste.

Every reading series is ideological.

Factors that can influence the ideological flavour of a given reading series include, but are not limited to:

- the series organizers, programmers and hosts
- the body that funds or sponsors the reading series
- the locale where the reading series is staged
- the management of the locale where the reading series is staged
- the clientele of the locale where the reading series is staged (sympathetic, hostile or indifferent to the readings themselves)
- the audience of the reading series (other readers, regulars, students, teachers, artists in other media, respectful/aspiring amateurs, casual attendees, venue staff, people who were trapped there before the event started and desperately want to leave, hecklers, members of the press)
- the structure of the series, and the structure of the readings it hosts
- the formal and informal relationships of the reading series to other local, national and international series

A particular quality (or set of qualities) of literary immersion, exposure or experience is the conceit informing the occasion of the reading series.

The reading series is a pedagogical laboratory in which the subject attempts to teach/amuse itself/others.

The implied audience for both readers and audience members is the State. Both readers and audience are engaged in a process of self-improvement, performing themselves as cultured citizens participating in something larger than themselves.

Every reading series (oppositional or otherwise) is part of cultural industry. It positions everyone and everything that passes through it in relation to local, national and international cultural formations and institutions.

Maybe as much as "poetry" itself, "community" is a frequent justification for the institution of a reading series.

Establishing a "community" includes setting the boundaries of exclusion and the

establishment of internal hierarchies.

Another primary reward for the production of a reading series is cultural capital (reputation). The amount of cultural capital that a given reading series produces varies drastically, both in the moment and over time.

Methods for Approaching the Reading Series

Historically, the imperceptiblity of the reading series was due to a variety of factors:

- the ephemerality of literary events
- willful obscurantism born of Romanticism and avant-gardism
- inconsistent documentation practices among organizers of reading series
- disciplinary bias within literary studies toward print-based literary work as the primary artifact of aesthetic and cultural analysis (an historical residue of the New Criticism)
- the lack of will and or institutional structure for preserving, organizing and displaying the documentation of such events that does exist
- the complexity of assembling and interpreting the documentation
- the difficulty of engaging with the documentation when it takes the form of audio recordings
- the increasing degree of caution, if not always conservatism, at both the authorial and institutional levels around handling recorded works, fostered by ongoing public debates about cultural ownership in a networked digital milieu

The methods of literary study traditionally assume the need to conceive of their objects in terms of visibility. This also entails the need to favour certain modes of analysis over others, and is thus implicitly biased toward:

- fixed texts over performances
- seeing over hearing
- literacy over listening
- narrative over event
- archiving over collecting
- meaning over happening
- print media over analog or digital recordings
- analog or digital recordings over broadcasts

While such biases have historically been critically productive, the long-term methodological challenges of the critical and historical recovery of complex objects such as the reading series will require literary scholars to overcome such biases. This will entail the development of new critical methods and vocabularies, new tools, and new modes of presenting and disseminating knowledge. These new methods may not be recognized as activities of research or interpretation by institutional structures that evaluate intellectual labour.

To make a reading series into a coherent object of study, scholars require some kind of documentary residue of the series: photographs, posters, printed programs, event listings, reviews, accompanying publications, broadcasts, etc. The particular type of residue that preoccupies us at the moment is the audio and/or video recording, in a range of possible media and formats.

The primary means at the disposal of literary scholars interested in studying the reading series are residual media from the series and other historical documents, surviving participants and digital tools. Note that these are not the *only* means available; the study of a reading series through the methodologies of cultural anthropology, sociology or other disciplines would also yield many valuable insights. Our approach focuses on the use of recordings, primarily digital ones.

For all parties involved (poets and artists and their estates, librarians, archivists, scholars, students, programmers, audio engineers, administrators, arts bureaucrats, publishers, members of the general public, etc.), working with recordings of reading series stored by libraries, archives, or other institutions, or kept in the basements and attics of individuals, raises a thicket of questions about cultural ownership, copyright, and intellectual property.

Working with recordings of literary readings raises complex and fascinating

questions about "editing" literary texts that are manifest in an audio format. As Bernstein notes, "the basic principles of textual scholarship have not yet been applied to the sound archive."

Working with historical documents to study the reading series entails a methodology of critical synthesis for the production of historical narrative.

In marked contrast, working with media recordings to study the reading series entails a profoundly *non*-hermeneutic approach that places textual interpretation in the back seat. Wrestling with this contradiction (and its implications for the discipline of literary studies itself) is another problem that scholars interested in the reading series will have to address.

Working with surviving participants to make aspects of a reading series perceptible entails methodologies associated with the discipline of oral history.

Oral literary history is a branch of the discipline of oral history that focuses specifically on the prompting of memory and reconstruction through oral storytelling of events and experiences understood to have been "literary."

The recording, storage and subsequent circulation of a given reading series is not necessarily an index of its cultural significance. Instead, it is a function of a number of possible factors:

- the funds that a given institution invests in recording equipment at a particular historical moment
- the interests of technologically skilled audience members
- the interests and ambitions of series hosts and organizers
- the interests of librarians, archivists and other professionals
- the interests of bloggers and website hosts
- battery power, tape length, disk size or digital storage space
- serendipity

Audio and/or video recordings have become the privileged documentary form for both historical and contemporary poetry reading series. As Friedrich Kittler and Wolfgang Ernst have noted, audio and video recordings capture elements of the Real and Imaginary (respectively) as well as the Symbolic register (the domain of print), thus breaking the historic hold of print on vivid ("hallucinatory," in Kittler's terms) aesthetic experience. This condition is relatively new and contingent but is unlikely

to change. Consequently, we refer to documentary audio and video recordings as "the primary data" or "the data" of the poetry series.

As Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson note, there is no data before the fact. We use the term "data" because it presupposes interpretation as well as collection and management (*"Raw Data" is an Oxymoron*). Our goal is to re-imagine how literary studies conceives of our heretofore-neglected object.

A *closed* reading series has taken place in the past and its data can no longer expand (except through the discovery of new recordings). An *open* reading series is ongoing and its data continues to grow.

Some reading series data is digitized from other analog media (usually magnetic tape), and some reading series data is born digital.

We do not yet (and may never) know the location, availability and status of much poetry series data. The extent and condition of audio data documenting multiple reading series demands a proper survey, but libraries and other memory institutions may not hold more than a fraction of the available poetry series data.

The use or development of digital software tools for the analysis of documentary audio recordings can help make the available data of the poetry reading series discernible.

Digital media change more than the means of distribution of poetry series recordings; they change the type of analysis that is possible. For example, from MP3 players to services like SoundCloud and sound editing applications such as Audacity, visualizations of the wave form have become a commonplace of poetic listening. The waveform partakes of the Symbolic register, but requires an entirely different form of reading than a verbal transcript of the same recording.

Visualizing the documentary audio of a poetry reading series using visual renderings of elements of the audio spectrum (amplitude, formants, pitch contours, etc.) not only transforms the possible means of critical engagement with the data, it transforms the expectations of what literary scholarship can and will do, and of what literary scholars can and will be.

To explore the potential of visualization techniques for the purpose of a critical engagement with literary recordings, we must first ask some basic questions about the practice of listening as it relates to scholarship. As Murray and Wiercinski think

to ask in the first instance: "What do we look at when we listen? What helps researchers listen in deep and engaged ways to poetry delivered on the Web?" We must answer such questions, and then continue to assess the validity of our answers as new tools and new critical purposes arise.

Recordings of reading series have a drastic effect on their temporality: an immediate and previously ephemeral activity becomes replayable, at various rates, at later moments in time.

Digitized or digital recordings of reading series also make a *microtemporal* analysis possible (see Ernst). Waveforms can be read, compared, tagged and analyzed for a whole range of information (prosodic and otherwise) not possible with text.

The data of the poetry series can be approached up close and at a distance. "Close Listening" is the term Bernstein has used to describe micro-analysis of the sonic elements of the audiotext. Aggregation (the aggregation of data from multiple, historically parallel reading series, for example) may prove to provide a complimentary macro-analysis of the data, a potentially informative mode of "Distant Listening."

There is nothing on the recording medium, intentional or otherwise, that is not data. This includes tape hiss, edits, laughter (canned or otherwise), music, snatches of previous recordings under the recording of the reading series, labels, packaging, inserts, stickers and all forms of annotation after the fact of recording. We exclude nothing from consideration.

The non-poetic speech in a poetry recording is often more informative than the actual poetry reading.

The non-poetic speech in a poetry recording may be more informative than the actual poetry reading due to our methodological limitations in interpreting speech prosody.

Other kinds of media traces of the poetry series also constitute data to the extent that they can be collected, managed, duplicated, shared and interpreted.

The other types of media that may also constitute data used to make a reading series visible include (but are not limited to):

- documentary photographs
- event posters

- programs
- chapbooks, broadsides and manuscripts circulated at the event
- periodical event listings
- periodical reviews
- institutional records (for universities, the personnel files of faculty organizers and participants, internal correspondence and memoranda, documentary information about space and AV)
- grant applications
- official correspondence
- personal correspondence
- published interviews
- articles and reminiscences
- diary and journal entries
- oral accounts of individuals who were present at the event(s) and the media they were recorded on

Beyond these immediate categories of materials, we can also use a much wider set of materials and methodologies (historical and sociological) to frame the reading series within a broader cultural, social and historical context.

- The data of the poetry reading series captured in sound and/or video recordings can consist of, but is not limited to, the following:
- individuals introducing a poet to an audience
- poets speaking about the poems they are about to perform
- poets performing their works
- invited or ambient sounds from the audience or physical space where the readings of a series took place
- sounds and silences due to splicing, editing, audio bleed, "drops" or other mechanical factors
- sounds disrupting the audibility of speech due to a variety of factors
- subsequent commentary or other inserted materials (e.g. commercials)

The data of the poetry reading series is subject in significant ways to the particulars of the medium and the format in which it has been captured, and is inseparable from the informing characteristics of that medium and format. For example, the data of a poetry reading series captured on a mobile reel-to-reel tape machine will be shaped by the specifications (the specs) of that technology and the preservation materials it demands.

The transposition of such recordings to other media (e.g. through digitization) requires the analysis to include the application of a careful form of *media forensics*, as exemplified in the work of Matthew Kirschenbaum. As Kirschenbaum has noted, media forensics is the digital equivalent of bibliographic research, and is necessary for any competent reading of digital materials, whether born-digital or transposed.

Interpreting the recordings of a poetry series is not primarily an hermeneutic activity. The generation of "readings" is certainly within the realm of the possible, but to do so exclusively would be to miss most of what the study of poetry series recordings can tell us about the changing nature of literary studies.

The study of digital files (especially born-digital files) documenting a reading series is a contingent activity because of the inherent instability of digital media.

The "digital archive" is a contradiction in terms because of digital media's bias toward circulation over preservation.

The existence of multiple copies provides evidence of the movement of digital files, transfigured by the act of circulation. There is no perfect digital record of the reading series. Therefore the study of the material specificity of digital recordings of the reading series (or any other digital files, for that matter) is inseparable from the study of their circulation. As Jussi Parikka notes, "Memory is not so much a place of rest but part of a wider setting of calculation – working memory."

In the case of digital files created from analog sources, both are parts of the same discursive assemblage, bearing a family resemblance to each other. Neither is a substitute for the other, and neither can be ignored by the scholar, because each has its own specific materiality and its own functionality.

Any discussion of the data of the poetry reading series should be informed by an awareness and theoretical understanding of the implications of media "form" and "format", as described by Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone in their work on the

newspaper form, and Jonathan Sterne and Lisa Gitelman, in their work on MP3s and the PDF, respectively. The categories of media form and format involve consideration of the material history and specs of the medium, the processes by which forms and formats become standards, and the ideological implications of forms and formats.

Discerning the reading series involves both objects and methods that are only vaguely recognizable to most literary scholars over the last century. Ironically, the project of studying recordings of poetry will be part of an ongoing collection of processes that is busily turning English professors into something else.

Discerning the reading series transforms literary scholars into new kinds of geeks.

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