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Being of the Book: Reading Aloud, Memory and Spaces of Social Engagement

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Abstract

Learning to read is a formative human experience and indivisible from the attainment of language. For many people reading aloud is associated with experiences of early childhood and the parental intimacy of the bedtime story. While these crucial human emotions are thought to be universal, the imaginary dimension of the book is facing dramatic change, with the implication that the book itself is under threat. This is predominantly because of the impact of certain social and technological revolutions, including the 19th century invention of reading as a private activity, the depersonalization of the book due to circulation through libraries, and the rise of mass media and digital communications that threaten to bypass the object of the book altogether. The question of literacy is as urgent as ever because of ongoing global inequalities in education and the differing opportunities to acquire the skill of reading and writing or to access texts in either physical or electronic form. The ability to read and write is arguably now more than ever a significant human right because literacy is still the primary means of knowledge attainment and thus a chief agent of social, economic and cultural disadvantage and therefore exclusion.

*This paper examines the relevance of a program of reading events that I have produced for two recent art and community events, entitled *Being of the Book* and *BookBUS*, to inquire what new opportunities for literacy might be created via social engagement through the activity of reading aloud, particularly in the current space of shifting relations between the reader and the text in the realm of the book.*

Paper

Since 2009, I have presented a series of participatory art events at Australian local community festivals, contemporary art centers, at libraries and in public gardens, markets and homeless shelter accommodation. The objective of these events is to cross-fertilize practice with critical analysis in order to create as well as examine new ways to interact with books. *Being of the Book* engages in traditions of storytelling, in a revival of formerly popular practices that have recently become more prevalent in Australian society. This trend is mainly the result of the new role and responsibility that Australian libraries are developing in order to generate communities of readers by way of social engagement, which I would argue is a signal of the significance of reading aloud as part of a changing contemporary engagement with books. The primary impetus of my work is to query the communal human space of the book today, specifically examining what capacity the book has to enact social exchange, as a site and object of collective memory as well as of individual absorption. It also relates to an interrogation I wish to make, to enquire as to whether the changes arising due to technological development might have a productive potential. In this

article I will examine some of the specific shifting social concepts that are arising because of local Australian community library programs, the most exemplary of which are actively employing forms of storytelling to encourage the reading and sharing of books. First of all, however, I will describe the form that my participatory reading work has taken.

The reading event has so far been performed twice, presented as *Being of the Book* and *BookBUS* between 2009 and 2010. Both events have centered on the act and experience of reading aloud, and on sharing books donated from contributors' personal collections. *Being of the Book* invited people to loan books related to the notion of 'belonging to a place,' from which I then personally offered to read aloud to visitors one-on-one at a number of public events. *BookBUS* is the latest incarnation of the project, involving a reading activity that took place at three inner-city Sydney sites over three days in November 2010, at locations including a homeless shelter, a public market and library, and a central Sydney contemporary art centre.

Collaborating with The Footpath Library – a Sydney-based service that provides free books to disadvantaged people on the streets – a collection of donated books in a mobile book vehicle was staffed with volunteers who read aloud to visitors from a book of their choosing, which listeners were also allowed to keep. At both events participants were encouraged to share their thoughts about the experience following the reading, and others have been able to donate books of their own as well.

Extending the primary research undertaken through these activities thus far to identify other existing instances of public or shared reading, I have found that this kind of activity is not unique in Australian social contexts. For instance, over the last few decades in Australia there has been substantial change in the way that libraries interact with the public, with an increasing impetus to create stronger communities that encompass the unique context of many communities' diverse language and cultural composition, while corresponding with the development of similar community-orientated policies and practices in equivalent American and British public institutions. In Australia, local suburban and regionally based libraries have led this endeavor, many aspiring to operate as vehicles for social inclusion. According to a 2004 report, entitled *Libraries Building Communities: The Vital Contribution of Victoria's Public Libraries*, 'In recent years, the role of public and other libraries within the larger social inclusion agenda has been increasingly highlighted with the growing political emphasis on building inclusive communities' (Rosenfeldt 2005: 48).

This statement was authored and commissioned via an agency, yet it highlights a clear divergence from some of the foundational philosophies of free libraries across English speaking countries, namely that the library has more recently become the site of social engagement. That governments and local councils are becoming aware of the potential of this shifting role and are reshaping library spaces to suit this change is indicative of the power of the book as a shared space. Christine Pawley identifies the predominantly educative drive of the western library in her 2007 essay 'Blood and Thunder on the Bookmobile,' stating that, 'since their beginning in the 1850s, free public libraries have purposefully set out to shape readers' choices of material' (Pawley 2007: 265). Pawley thus emphasizes one of the key founding

premises of the public library in that it should act as a purveyor of erudite and (high) cultured knowledge. Marking the paradigmatic move away from any such hierarchical programming of its audience, The Canterbury Living Library, located at the local council library of the inner western Sydney suburb of Canterbury, is exemplary of recent developments in social. For this highly successful and popular project, local community members volunteer their time to tell a story or talk about 'chapters' of their life, enabling a conversation with a 'living book' (*Canterbury Living Library* 2010). Such purposeful efforts are a clear indication of the way that Australian public libraries are working to activate and reconceptualize their capacity for social agency and cohesion. The efforts of council-run library programs such as Canterbury City's is arguably a direct consequence of the perceived competition of the rise of electronic access to books, but is also possibly due to the respective members of the local, suburban or rural Australian communities becoming more openly desirous of these kinds of engaged activities.

Although burgeoning access to electronic books and the mass dissemination of writing online seems to be shifting the reader away from the notion of the book as an object of personal possession, I would argue that this revolution is reorganizing the ways in which the contents of books are being shared rather than debasing their existence altogether. The activity of *Being of the Book* is trained on what remains significant about books as material possessions and how people might be seeking to share their sense of self through a renewed emphasis on orality, evident in an escalating desire to talk about books, in addition to sharing one's books with others in private reading groups, on television and through electronic social media forums.

Founding Manager of The Footpath Library's Sydney based homeless mobile library service, Sarah Garnett, has identified a rise in donations of personal libraries to her organization and donors increasing wish to share books with others, in a phenomenon that Garnett associates with the liberation of books from dusty old boxes in storage. The revival of oral book cultures is evident, moreover, in the flourishing market of audio book production, book club television shows and the overwhelming editorial space given to book reviews against all other cultural forms. By bringing attention to the act of reading aloud, I intend to highlight the deeply engaged forms of reading that are associated with books that seem to have been overlooked in recent time. The loss of the book's social authority is evidently based on changing perceptions of literary engagement, even if shared reading is becoming a significant part of contemporary programs in public library systems, as in the Canterbury Library Living Books program.

Reading aloud involves a powerful social, intellectual and emotional transaction between participants. And reading to a companion is a particularly relational form of exchange. This act is situated in the tradition of storytelling and the sharing of tales as an archaic human form of gifting, akin to the creation of social bonds through the reciprocal exchange of gifts, as described by early 20th century sociologist Marcel Mauss. These concepts are most closely observed by Mauss in his seminal 1924 study of primitive cultures of exchange, *The Gift: The Form and Reason of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, where Mauss examines in specific Polynesian, Melanesian and North-West Native American social groups how objects have been used as a powerful means of carrying the identity or soul of the giver (Mauss 1990: 40).

Likewise, reading aloud transposes the book from private consumption to public listening, with the reader providing the gift of an array of verbal and physical signs that offer substantial expansion on or interpretation of the material. While the reader's 'soul' may not be part of the offering, the work of Mauss in *The Gift* offers this research a substantive means of grasping the driving force behind the act of sharing books with others. This is mainly because it is difficult for the book to be reimagined as a talismanic object of the kind Mauss advocates. (Mauss 1990). In the educated, hyper-rational west, the book stands for the unitary and the impervious. Against this fixity, oral traditions of public speechmaking and group readings in educational and scholarly contexts engender a reflexive engagement with the text. Yet this activity tends towards an engagement in which meanings are generated through group interaction or as empirical knowledge handed down by an authorial figure to the gathering. Reading one-on-one is, by contrast, an irrevocably intimate experience, commonly shared with parents in early childhood and only occurring later in life when we read to our children, or in unusually literate love relationships and otherwise, and less fortunately, in circumstances where a friend or relative is extremely unwell.

The activity of collective sharing and exchange of books creates an opportunity to study what is evolving in the doubt-filled gap between the mass produced book and an object of private consumption. This exchange exists amid the rise of boundless globalised Internet forums such as Twitter, Facebook, the latest interactive version of Google Books and weblogs or services like DailyLit (which sends books in the public domain to one's iPhone). Other interactions with literature are being

generated via the growth of e-books and online publishing, as well as enterprises that seek to meld the consumption of books with social interaction like BookGlutton (www.bookglutton.com and www.dailylit.com). All such developments seem to be generating anxious deliberation among producers and curators of books from publishers to librarians.

This is not the first time that rapid technological change has engendered apprehension. In the early 1900s, the political impact of mass production in the midst of technological transformation was a chief concern of 20th century German philosopher Walter Benjamin. In the 1935 essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin wrote that imaging technologies were in the process of diminishing the tactile experience of things by divesting the original of its 'aura'. Benjamin purported that this loss was due to the multiplication and dissemination of original objects as reproductions via photography and printing (Benjamin 1973: 211-235). The influence of Benjamin's thinking reaches well beyond questions of literacy and the production of books, indeed 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' is typically quoted in reference to imaging technologies of photography and cinema as a critique of mass production. The motivation of Benjamin's work is, however, political, emanating from a Marxist social reading (especially from the mid-1930s). In the context of this article, it is important to highlight that Benjamin perceived mass reproduction as an instrument of capitalism. The action of mass production, in Benjamin's view, was thus inextricable from an ongoing class inequality and that books were a significant part of capitalism's conquest of working and middle class minds. Adamant that the novel

was the principal cause of the loss of the art of storytelling in modern urban society, in 1935, Benjamin stated in 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the work of Nikolai Leskov' that because it is 'passed from mouth to mouth' the orality of narrative is 'the source from which all storytellers have drawn' (Benjamin 1973: 83–108). Following this claim, Benjamin's main contention in 'The Storyteller' was that the most treacherous form of commercial literature for the masses had been realized within the novel because it directly diminished the communality of shared storytelling by encouraging consumers to read alone (Benjamin 1973: 83-107). It is this effect of mass production that crucially informs my research and art practice, as I seek out sources of waylaid human activities towards renewed engagement in the social space of reading.

As the activity *Being of the Book* asserts, reading from books is not necessarily a private activity. It is difficult, moreover, to conceive of reading as an oral activity, and it is possible that this division between text and voice is not only a question of social standing and intellectual hierarchies but is more deeply rooted in human psychology. Tracing back the lineage of the practice of writing, American theologian and linguistic scholar Walter J. Ong argued in the 1960s that the shift away from oral towards textual forms of communication began with the invention of writing or early forms of textual systems around 6,000 years ago. Ong additionally claimed that the ability of writing to record social and historical events restructured human consciousness, while wresting literate societies from orality. The result was an effective shift in certain communal 'psychodynamics' – to use Ong's terminology – away from oral practices of memorialization and narrative production (Ong 1982: 7).¹ Ong's

examination of the human mnemonic and behavioral adaptation to textual forms of communication are crucial to any appreciation of the transformation of the reader from being a storyteller (as Benjamin would have hoped) and a site of exchange (with a Maussian gift; Mauss 1990), to a private, silent consumer.

While the production of books as material possessions and market commodities might be facing decline, reading itself is arguably more important than ever, observable even in the most casual analysis of western technocratic societies. In applying a Benjaminian social critique to the current, broad consternation that the electronic publication of writing has dethroned the book as an object of higher learning and knowledge, we might also admit that the Internet has freed up literature, making it available to more readers, many of whom may not have been able to access literature of this kind (while avoiding inflationary claims of the Internet's augmentation of democratic access to knowledge). The question of how publics or audiences might engage with these new textual incarnations may indeed depend once more on primary codes of social interaction, with a return to a desire to know the soul of the giver, akin to Mauss' notion of a transfer of being through the act of material exchange (Mauss 1990: 40).

From here, I will elaborate how this new interaction might find its form. Through the process of performing the *Being of the Book* work, my intention has been to test if this premise might be embodied in a revival of cultures of storytelling. My confidence in the potential of reading aloud stems from a resurgence of these cultures evident within the Australian public library system, as I have outlined earlier in reference to Canterbury City Library's Living Books program. I would, moreover,

like to contend that the activity of storytelling has the capacity to regenerate oral practices that, as Benjamin describes in 'The Storyteller', were once prevalent in social settings prior to mass print production (before it spread throughout Europe and America across the 19th century).

To describe the entire context, questions and concerns surrounding this subject is beyond the scope of this text. In order to establish the parameters of my investigation into contemporary practices of reading aloud, I will now elaborate on three points that I have already touched on, pertinent to the subject of books and reading, and to the shared experiences activated by the *Being of the Book* reading events. The rest of this article is thus focused on: one, the shifting role of the book and its new technological forms as containers for memory; two, the distinction of the written form from vocal modes of storytelling and the reception of written texts; and, three, a delineation of the emergence in the 19th century of the notion of book possession in comparison with the conception of circulating books in commercial, private and public lending libraries.

First of all, a book has the capacity to carry the dreams, ambitions and memories of its owner, and this notion is no less viable today. A number of social and technological revolutions over the past century have considerably altered the imaginary dimensions of the book, including the birth of the public library, the mass production of the novel, as well as Internet and electronic publishing, all of which have coincided with the decline of reading as a communal practice. The slow transformation of the reader as a socially, vocally and physically immersed human being into an autonomous and isolated consumer of books is indeed a syndrome of

the 20th and 21st century. Only it is too easy to decry the age of electronic mass media as the chief cause of the dissolution of communality in contemporary life; neither humans nor the technologies created by them are straightforward. Rather, it could be argued that mobile communications have undeniably augmented the flow and ease of social life, diminishing the role of formerly ubiquitous dissemination arts, such as letter writing, while giving license to a new speed, instantaneity and transience of human relations.

The concern that the rise of one form of culture or a new version of it might cause the decline of another, as Benjamin propounded in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', is an oversimplification of the process of societal change. Yet this attitude is the basis of a widespread argument that the Internet and electronic books are ruining the status and production of literature (Benjamin 1973: 211-235). A closer examination, I would contend, reveals that prolific adaptation is the prevalent operation at play in social construction, a pursuit in which people adopt and co-opt available resources without necessarily making hierarchical social or cultural distinctions. I am of the view, moreover, that these dealings are analogous to the shifting contemporary relation to the book, regardless of its material form. On this basis, I wish to emphasize that what has seemingly been lost in terms of activities of collective remembrance, storytelling and social engagement surrounding the book may in fact have been recuperated in various new guises, albeit in complex, socially mediated scenarios. Just as Mauss has said of tribal communities reciprocal identification with others via inanimate objects, the book has likewise existed as a site of exchange (Mauss 1990). Contrary to a black and

white, class-driven analysis, it is thus possible that books have only partly embodied the hierarchical ideal of an impervious object, and the interaction and dissemination of literature and behaviors of reading we are seeing proliferate in conjunction with new technology is simply another process of adaptation to an evolutionary phase of civilization. This goes beyond Benjamin's fear of a loss of collective memory because of mass production, whereby technology might be taken back by the masses a new form of exchange and recollection spawned (Benjamin 1973: 211-235). At this juncture, I will briefly examine the book as a container of memory, and the investment of human identity in books within a particular lineage of western socioeconomic relations.

The debate surrounding print media, literature and writing is no less significant today than it was in the early 20th century, as the dissemination of literature was transformed in the early to mid-1900s, from being principally accessible to learned aristocracy, proliferating with a rapidly expanding reading public in the new social strata of wealthy and reasonably well-educated, middle class populations in European cities at the end of that century. The mass production of the book quickly created a demand for popular content that arrived in the form of the novel. A paradox arose with the advent of novel, particularly in its pretence to the communication of social truths, which contrasted with the social time that the novel took from the reader, who consequently had fewer occasions to share stories in the company of others. While scholars and the privileged or educated classes saw the popularity of novels in terms of a widespread and critical decimation of cultural and intellectual sophistication, as I have outlined in the aforementioned essay 'The

Storyteller', Benjamin hailed the novel as the chief cause of a general loss of social and shared memory (Benjamin 1973: 83–108). Following Benjamin's consternation, where books have at once facilitated the distribution of stories throughout divergent and dispersed communities and given rise to a sense of shared histories and memory across previously isolated social spheres, their mass production has thus arguably emptied out the social space of collective remembrance. As people increasingly remained at home throughout the 19th century, in order to read alone, the magnitude of mnemonic exchange lessened. Thus, as one of the greatest inventions of the late 20th century, the mass-produced book at once fostered the recording of memory and displaced the story from its oral traditions, as Benjamin so ardently claimed.

Although other significant determining social factors should not be sidelined, without doubt the commercialized novel is a form that goes hand-in-hand with private over collective consumption of stories. If, once more, as Benjamin suggested in 'The Storyteller', technologies of reproduction are at the root of the shift from verbal to textual recollection, what is the locus of the word now that the article of the book in its electronic form is arguably an immaterial entity (Benjamin 1973: 83-103)? Memory may not need an object at all (which I would say is unlikely). Alternatively, the act of reading could indeed be the chief object, being an experience common to both the book and the verbal chronicle.

To address the second aspect of reading and books that I outlined above, I will now examine the distinction of the written form from vocal modes of storytelling and the

reception of written texts. In the practice of reading aloud, a feature that is often overlooked is the fact that the use of the voice involves a material exchange. In the 1972 essay, *The Grain of the Voice*, Roland Barthes defined the human voice as a trait of the body, stating, albeit in the context of an analysis of opera, that the voice possessed material qualities, because it was like a 'grain,' and that this gritty material was imparted or got in between the 'very precise space of the encounter between a language and a voice' (Barthes 1977: 181). Barthes' assertion in *The Grain of the Voice* remains profound because it delineates the ambiguous yet resonant phenomenological dimension between orality and textuality. It is an instructive concept in the context of my work because knowledge production is rooted in writing now more than ever (a notion on which much of the work of Jacques Derrida and Giles Deleuze also pivots, albeit with differing standpoints; one of which I shall offer in the following pages). Nonetheless, because of its need to authenticate ideas, the pursuit, production and categorization of empirical knowledge in human civilization has unequivocally maintained a hierarchical distinction between the written and spoken word. It's a gap between the voice and the text that Barthes attempts to inhabit through the form of writing itself. But for the most part, we rarely feel the rub of that grain when we read to ourselves, even if, as Ong eloquently asserts, 'in all the wonderful worlds that writing opens... the spoken word still resides and lives' (Ong 1982: 8). And it is Ong, alongside Barthes, who has been foremost in emphasizing that this aspect of literacy should not continue to be overlooked in academic studies on literacy and language.

Although reading aloud brings the written word back to its vocal habitat, I wonder

what kind of writing might help to produce something like Barthes' or Ong's textual grind between the word and the voice? In my readerly life I can account for a number of works that have produced a powerful sense of interiorized orality. Foremost for me among them is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (Proust 1931). The most remarkable aspect of that reading experience was that I gradually became entirely focused on the state of my body within the book. It did this by slipping into subservience to an utterly physiological operation of language, which could not be anything else but vocal yet was purely so in the deeply psychological sense of the interior voice.

The contradiction that emerges in reading Proust is that such subjectivity is at odds with the setting of the story, which is immersed in early 20th century Parisian aristocracy, even if Proust is for the most part scathing of high society. The question of the mnemonic function of the book is, nonetheless, at the centre of a striking scenario in this twelfth volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. The scene takes place halfway through 'Time Regained' where the narrator describes his retreat from the Guermantes's party to a private library and in this quiet room chancing upon a red, leather-bound edition of *François le Champi* by George Sand, an encounter that sets off a chain of involuntary memory that is comparable to the famous account of the madeleine dunked into a cup of tea. Proust writes, 'For things – and among them a book in a red binding – as soon as we have perceived them are transformed within us into something immaterial, something of the same nature as all our preoccupations and sensations of that particular, with which, indissolubly, they blend. A name read in a book of former; days contains within its syllables the swift

wind and the brilliant sunshine that prevailed while we were reading it...' (Proust 1931: 248). What Proust coyly relates in this episode, and indeed in the entire corpus of *In Search of Lost Time*, is the 'readerly' experience of how we re-imagine and invest ourselves in a book and how that book as an object becomes a specific container for something we have become both through it and in it thereafter. Our physical and metaphysical relation to the book thus enables a later retrieval of a part of ourselves produced by reading the thing, and it is this retrieval that I am interested in identifying through the process of storytelling and shared reading enacted in *Being of the Book*. In another short essay, from 1931, 'Unpacking my Library, A Talk about Book Collecting,' Benjamin describes the problem of the investment of self in the ownership of books (Benjamin 1973: 61-69). Compounded by the confusion of moving an entire library, Benjamin interrogates the construction of his identity in and through his books. Of course, private ownership is a privilege, which Proust's epic narrative highlights, and yet this investment of memory might also transfer and accumulate when books are passed on, gifted or borrowed.

This dual aspect of book culture leads me to the third aspect of this part of the essay, in a delineation of the emergence in the 19th century of the notion of book possession in comparison with the conception of circulating books in commercial, private and public lending libraries. My aim here is to question the ideal that increasing public access to books and the growth of individual book readership are markers of increasing social equality. In fact, books equally act as a means of social exclusion, depending on levels of education, social status and economic advantage. This is also a contention that is supported by the historically inextricable relationship

between power and writing, which I will now explain in more detail.

Books aggrandize knowledge, assigning authors and ownership of ideas. Institutions, such as universities and state-run libraries similarly 'serve' the public by creating canonist collections that historicize ideas, both through the categorizing practices of scholars or researchers and in sequestering knowledge within archives. The use of graphic or text based forms of communication to dominate thought itself was a primary concern of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and was outlined in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, where they argued that from its inception writing was adopted as the tool of the 'despot,' and was used to secure power through the contrivance of knowledge production and the dissemination of specific ideologies. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari list some examples of writing or 'graphism' that the despot might use to their advantage including, 'Legislation, bureaucracy, accounting, the collection of taxes, the State monopoly, imperial justice, functionaries' activity, [and] historiography' (Deleuze and Guattari 1977: 220). This list reveals more of the contradictory power relations inherent in writing and the role of books as purveyors of dominant ideologies. At this point, I therefore wonder if the fears aligned with the decline or death of the book as a discrete object has as much to do with maintenance of old and privileged hierarchies as an egalitarian outlook.

In any overview of book history many other forms of power are evidently entwined in the production and possession of knowledge. Regimes that have seized power by ideological means and deployed text as their most effective weaponry are some of

the most apparent examples. This would include such manifest yet politically divergent historical cases as western Christianity, Chinese Communism and German Fascism. What such an analysis offers is a textual or linguistic basis for political expression; an argument that Boris Groys asserted in *The Communist Postscript* was crucial to communism's configuration and dependence on language (Groys 2009: 10-14). While Groys' study of communism is a specific critique of the manipulation of society through the colonizing forces of knowledge and writing, on the other hand books are overwhelmingly vital to the spread of knowledge, education and freedom of thought across the literate world.

With the swelling education and comparative wealth of the European and American middle classes in the early 20th century, liberties flourished to the point where literature itself became effective in challenging the status quo of political power. Ray Bradbury's 1953 novel 'Fahrenheit 451,' for instance, construes America as rampantly hedonistic yet controlled society that has outlawed reading because of the potential of books to engender independent, critical thought and the threat that such awareness poses to its unbridled consumer culture (Bradbury 1967). Bradbury's story highlights another of the paradoxes inherent in books in their capacity to communicate dissident points of view that contest the rise of corporate power within western capitalism. The emphasis of this narrative is common to the potential for political resistance that Benjamin and Deleuze and Guattari also recognized within books. The role of mediated social change is not always as radical as Bradbury makes out. Often the mode of transformation is subtle and can have paradoxical effects, which is the main point I wish to emphasize about private versus shared

reading and books.

While the birth of 20th century industrialized society brought with it the privatization of space, as the notion of ownership of private property became more widespread throughout the middle classes of England, western Europe and America, the custom of collecting books gained popularity. At this juncture, the private household library became part of a burgeoning social aspiration to establish knowledge as a sign of one's status (which was one of the concerns I raised in my earlier discussion of Benjamin's 'Unpacking my Library' essay). The symbolisms inherent in status objects often exceed their limits, however, and the production of meaning within private libraries extends well beyond the collective social clout or economic value of the collection to the owner. A personal library also comprises a wider accumulation of memory and myth made up of the origins of each book and how it came to be in the owner's possession. There is also its shifting interpretation over time, which I have touched in already in terms of the Proustian narrative of the library as a space of layered, intersubjectivity. Starting with the constructed world of the book, a reader's experience and notion of a book evolves through many accumulated moments of reading, including conversations with other readers, the critical reception of books in the form of published reviews, in addition to the complex possibility of mnemonic construction and retrieval that these elements combine to invest within the object for the owner.

With the advent of the domestic library, moreover, a concomitant culture of quietude, introversion and privacy in relation to books was cultivated, as reading

became identified with reclusive, personal activity. Of course, this has differed greatly across various cultures. In his contribution to *The Ethnography of Reading*, Nicholas Howe argues in 'The Construction of Reading in Anglo-Saxon England,' that the notion of reading as a private meditation is a particularly English cultural practice. At the outset, by way of illustration, Howe quotes a few lines from Wallace Stevens's 1947 poem, *The House Was Quiet And The World Was Calm*; a poem in which the reader is alone and is absorbed in the book (Howe 1993: 4).

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.

While this isolated mode of reading is a cultural norm in contemporary western society, this was not the case prior the 20th century, nor was it common in non-English speaking societies. In Britain, the rise of the practice of private reading coincided in 19th and 20th centuries with the burgeoning of middle class affluence, alongside the wider availability of affordable books and the establishment of public libraries in local communities. Within Europe, similar social changes were occurring, and formed the basis of a number of Benjamin's apprehensions regarding the rise of institutionalized versions of history and the loss of the art of memory articulated in the 'The Storyteller' essay (Benjamin 1973). Such accounts of the history of public lending libraries, like Howe's 'Construction of Reading in Anglo-Saxon England,' along with Raymond Irwin's 'The Heritage of the English Library' would seem to support Benjamin's case, as the early 19th century ushered in the phenomenon of the

circulating library (Howe 1993; and Irwin 1964). During this period in Britain, according both to Howe and Irwin, two contrasting forms of lending library existed. The differences also reveal some of the distinctions of class and gender that hinged on literature and reading. Irwin pays particular attention, in 'The Heritage of the English Library,' to the significant gap between the subscription membership libraries the commercial bookseller's libraries. The former, as Irwin describes, maintained a disdain for the popularity of the novel and due to their annual membership rates, as well as their scholarly contents, for they chiefly served men: the wealthy, upper-middle class gentry or scholars. In contrast, the commercial bookseller's libraries were often located in shops that served a female clientele with an insatiable thirst for novels. The role of the commercial rental library, as Irwin highlights, was a compelling agent for the conceptualization of reading as a social activity. Women gathered in the back rooms of retail stores to gossip and drink tea, all the while browsing for the next novel to be consumed (Irwin 1964, 275-6). The critical contrast to which I would like to draw attention here is the distinction between the two types of social space surrounding reading: one is fluid, open and shared; the other inaccessible, classified and hierarchical. They replicate the order of gender power structures of the late 18th century as much as they do the class system. The early configuration of the public library was very different from today, and yet a combination of the two extremes I have described can be identified as part of the contemporary ethos of libraries, these principles feed into the way people are taught to interact with books.

It took more than a hundred years for the British modern public library system to be

instituted, which it was in 1950, when a principle of progressive societal change moved through the United Kingdom. Matthew Battles delineates the unfolding of this moral impetus in Britain, in *Library: An Unquiet History*, as free libraries emerged out of a struggle to resolve the country's endemic class conflict through liberal access to a collective commons of knowledge (Battles 2004: 135). Based on Battles' comprehensive study, the dual identity of libraries becomes apparent, whereby public lending allowed books to be shared among many while being held and depersonalized within vast library systems and state collections that began to be either built or opened up from private spaces to non-subscribers, such as The British Library. As a result, it is possible to view *Being of the Book* as part of a deliberate move away from the framework of the library as an institution that is inseparable from the impetus of the state. It is difficult, however, to clearly determine the degree to which this kind of activity can extricate itself from dominant or preexisting social forces.

A complex array of social distinctions surrounds this enquiry, including the socioeconomic histories that have historically divided readers along class, race and gender lines, and the discussion in this article covers only a small portion of the vast and salient history of reading and its corollaries, books and libraries. I have endeavored to extricate three key concerns that have emerged from *Being of the Book*. At the conclusion of this scrutinizing process, I am certain that reading aloud has a primary part to play in the shifting role of the book and new technologies as containers for memory; that modes of storytelling are being revived in the vocalisation of texts; and that books and reading aloud are critical to human society,

regardless of the impending social consequences of technologies of mass reproduction, which not yet well understood.

Being of the Book points to opportunities for new relationships between individuals and communities, some of who may not often come in contact with libraries or be able to easily share books with others. Amid the current seismic shifts in reading habits, resulting from virtual communication and writing technologies, it is apparent that the shared art of storytelling is able to call attention to the need to break down false hierarchies, especially where such hierarchies, across western civilization, have tended to preclude people from certain social, class and ethnic contexts from access to books. *Being of the Book* is a response to these ongoing dilemmas. It seeks to foster reading aloud to create an environment where social, cultural and linguistic differences can be shared, delineated and therefore better understood.

About the author

Dr Lily Hibberd is an artist, academic and writer. As founding editor of the independent contemporary Australian art journal *un Magazine* and its non-profit umbrella organization, un Projects, Hibberd actively involved in producing, supporting, teaching and promoting art writing and publishing, in addition to activating social engagement and opportunity within my community, she has widely published in Australian and international art journals on the topic of art writing and contemporary art practice, and recently published a number of essays that interrogate the boundaries of fiction and critical writing. Her PhD dissertation

'Border crossings: writing, confinement and the voice' examined how operations of the 'voice' function across certain forms of literature and cinema to enact a dialectical form of engagement. As a contemporary artist Hibberd has exhibited widely across Australia since 2001, presenting live performances and written works in galleries.

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¹ Ong also reminded readers that the assumed paradigm of global human literacy exists within a cultural and predominantly privileged minority, saying that, 'Of the some 3000 languages spoken that exist today only some 78 have a literature' (Ong 1982: 7 and Edmonson 1971: 323, 332).