

Fiction Redux: Common Core and the Vanishing Art of Reading Ourselves

Dana Williams

Dana Williams is professor of African American literature and chair of English at Howard University and was 2014 president of ADE. A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in November 2014.

NGŪGĪ WA THIONG’O, who was recently nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, argues in *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* that fiction holds a special, an irreplaceable, place in his critical arsenal—and not simply because he works in the genre as a novelist. It was only fiction, he suggests, not the dramatic arts (for which he was jailed) and not even his essays (those collected in *Decolonizing the Mind* among them), that created the critical bridge to cross the gulf between reality as lived and reality as imagined experience, between the text without context and the colonial world, between imperial forces and the quest for freedom. “In the works of Peter Abrahams from South Africa, Chinua Achebe from Nigeria, and George Lamming from Barbados, to take only a few examples,” Ngūgī writes,

were characters and relationships clearly reflective of the howling winds. It was amazing to find a novel could capture the drama of the colonial and the anticolonial while obeying all the aesthetic laws of fiction. . . . It was fiction that gave us a theory of the colonial situation. . . .

Confronted with an environment that they could not always understand, the human invented stories to explain it. . . . The very origins of the universe are explained in myths and stories. [Kemet or] Egyptian, Yoruba, Greek, Chinese, Indian mythologies explain the multifaceted forces of nature by giving them dynamic personalities derived from the way they manifest themselves to the human. (15)

Toni Cade Bambara describes the significance of stories thusly:

Stories are important. They keep us alive. In the ships, in the camps, in the quarters, fields, prisons, on the road, on the run, under siege, in the throes, on the verge—the storyteller snatches us back from the edge to hear the next chapter. In which we are the subjects. We, the hero of the tales. Our lives preserved. How it was; how it be. Passing it along in the relay. That is what I work to do: to produce stories that save our lives. (41)

Few, if any, would dispute the significance of fiction, of stories and their ability to teach us something meaningful about others and ourselves. But if Ngūgī and Bambara are to be believed, fiction (or stories), because it allows the writer to go deep inside the imaginative territory and to take the reader along, is unique in its ability to help us understand the inner logic of a full range of human and social processes and, thereby, to order otherwise unorderable encounters with chaos—unorderable because there is no scientific or even social data to make sense of the chaotic experience.

A crucial question then—one literature loyalists and enthusiasts have asked all along—is how does the Common Core’s emphasis on reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both informational and literary (but largely nonfiction), support or limit a student’s ability to achieve benchmark to mastery-

*Fiction Redux:
Common Core and
the Vanishing Art of
Reading Ourselves*

Dana Williams

level critical thinking in relation to reading, writing, and speaking skills. The Common Core's privileging of text-dependent questions, in theory, eliminates invisible biases that attend to inquiry based on prior knowledge and experiences rather than on reading a common passage carefully. Students are required to reveal that they can "grasp information, arguments, ideas, and details based on evidence in the text" and then to produce evidence-based expository and argumentative writing ("Key Shifts"). Evidence, it would seem, is a thing to be privileged, coveted even perhaps. But seldom are stories about the business of evidence; stories operate in the realm of anecdote by both choice and definition. But, lest I digress from my own storytelling to provide evidence, accept my promise now to come back to this digression later.

If we drill down further, we must ask the question most relevant for our line of inquiry today: Does content-rich, evidence-laden nonfiction build knowledge differently from, as well as, or better than fiction? In "Key Shifts in English Language Arts," the architects of the standards note that while in K–5, "fulfilling the standards requires a 50-50 balance between informational and literary reading" (with informational reading including "content-rich nonfiction in history/social studies, sciences, technical studies, and the arts"), in grades 6–12, "there is much greater attention on the specific category of literary nonfiction." Literature is still the "core of the work of 6–12 ELA teachers," but literary nonfiction is the point of focus, and this is, of course, the key shift from traditional standards. The closest thing to a rationale that justifies the shift is the declaration (pun intended, since the Declaration of Independence can be used as literary nonfiction) that opens the section of the report titled "Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction": "Students must be immersed in information about the world around them if they want to develop the strong general knowledge and vocabulary they need to become successful readers and be prepared for college, career, and life. Informational texts play an important part in building students' content knowledge."

What goes unstated, though it comes across clearly, is the underlying assumption that literary texts, especially fiction, do less than informational texts in this regard. The corresponding assumption is that literary texts are somehow easier than informational texts and that it takes literary nonfiction to get students to think on a deeper level, even about fiction. So, in one instance, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is paired with Malcolm Gladwell's *New Yorker* essay about the novel.

Because the Common Core drama is a well-rehearsed one, I need only summarize the best-known critiques of the shift to standards where seventy percent of the reading across subjects is nonfiction:

- The problem with college readiness is derived from an incoherent literature curriculum that has become less challenging since the 1960s and onward and not from an over reliance on a literature curriculum. Instead of fewer literary texts, these critics argue for a greater number of complex literary texts to strengthen college readiness.
- Reading fiction creates more lifelong readers than reading nonfiction does. It also makes readers mentally ambidextrous and deft.

*Fiction Redux:
Common Core and
the Vanishing Art of
Reading Ourselves*

Dana Williams

- Similarly, reading fiction makes readers more empathetic when readers learn “to see the world through . . . alien perspectives” and “to understand how other peoples’ point of view reflects their experience” (Smiley).
- Reading fiction creates a freedom—“freedom to contemplate characters, themes and settings the work depicts, freedom to experience a variety of feelings . . . , freedom to make up one’s own mind, freedom to investigate one’s own experience and inner life” (Smiley).

Closely linked to these last points is the claim that fiction engages the brain uniquely. As Annie Murphy Paul outlines in the March 2012 *New York Times* article “Your Brain on Fiction,” neuroscience offers the best support for the value of fiction. And here is my first return to the conversation on evidence I forestalled earlier. Research suggests that “[f]iction—with its redolent details, imaginative metaphors and attentive descriptions of people and their actions—offers an especially rich replica” of a real or imagined experience or encounter: “The novel . . . is an unequalled medium for the exploration of human social and emotional life.” As Paul reminds us, Raymond Mar’s research has

concluded that there was substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals—in particular, interactions in which we’re trying to figure out the thoughts and feelings of others. Scientists call this capacity of the brain to construct a map of other people’s intentions “theory of mind.” Narratives offer a unique opportunity to engage this capacity, as we identify with characters’ longings and frustrations, guess at their hidden motives and track their encounters with friends and enemies, neighbors and lovers.

Reading fiction also “hones our real-life social skills,” researchers say, and this point is crucial since negotiating the social world effectively requires us to contemplate tangential but disparate experiences in ways fiction readers are wonderfully accustomed to. Will evidence from science save the liberal arts curriculum? We doubt it.

Seriously, though, in the world we find ourselves in, what could be more useful than a narrative form that helps students and teachers alike learn to negotiate a social world that is undeniably and increasingly global? An encounter with fiction as an act of pleasure that has the added benefit of imitating life and lessons on how to live it more fully, with more humanity, gives readers access to the world of the writer as artist who does the hard work Bambara describes as pushing us “up against the evasions, self-deceptions, investments in opinions and interpretations, the clutter that blinds, that disguises that underlying, all-encompassing design within which the perceivable world . . . operates” (42). “[I]mmunity to the serpent’s sting,” she argues, “can be found in our tradition of struggle and our faculty for synthesis” (42). The issue, she keeps reminding us, is salvation. This reality brings me back one final time to the dreaded primacy of evidence and its relation to teaching and learning.

The transferable skill Common Core borrows from literary study is close reading. It is this skill, proponents of the core argue, not a body of texts that matters most. If students can show evidence of an improved ability to perform close readings of informational or literary nonfiction, the core will have succeeded, its architects argue. “But without that broad political-cum-ideological framework,” Ngũgĩ argues, “close

*Fiction Redux:
Common Core and
the Vanishing Art of
Reading Ourselves*

Dana Williams

reading . . . can turn into attempts to squeeze the world of the . . . text through the eye of the critical needle. . . . It's like entering a treasure trove and counting the items inside without an awareness of their value, unable to relate them to anything outside" (13). This is the danger of the privileging of literary nonfiction in my estimation—its potential to ignore the importance of how a story is put together, “from sentences to paragraphs to the structure and the overall balance of moral forces in the text” (14). In its ability to help make sense of chaos or to give voice to the otherwise ineffable, the unthinkable even, fiction becomes theory, the original “poor theory,” Ngũgĩ argues: “Confronted with an environment that they could not always understand, the human invented stories to explain it” (15). And this is precisely what poor theory does; it maximizes the possibilities inherent in the minimum. As a theory of felt experience, fiction has obvious limitations—it cannot talk about itself or its relation to others, nor can it contemplate itself, except as metafiction (and even then only minimally). But its greatest limitation is that it has little value for evidence beyond what is felt.

The question we've all no doubt raised is why the snipe (intentional or otherwise, real or imagined) at fiction? Is it an epistemological question, as some of us imagine, funded by a broader assault on words that matter and in the service of a marketing and market-driven schema? The query alone reminds me of Percival Everett's *Erasure*, a cautionary tale as metafiction that should be of interest to us really. In *Erasure*, the narrator, a writer reflexively named Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, is frustrated by his inability to sell his latest novel, despite his success as an established writer. One reader's report for his manuscript quips: “The novel is finely crafted, with fully developed characters, rich language and subtle play with the plot, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus' *The Persians* has to do with the African American experience” (2). The market will only embrace a certain kind of text, one based in truth and authenticity, where the author keeps it real, not unlike content-rich literary nonfiction. When the freshman author Juanita Mae Jenkins's “We's Lives in Da Ghetto” becomes the rave (though the author has only visited her family in the ghetto for a few days), Monk, tongue in cheek, shoots off a memoir he titles “My Pafology,” under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, and it becomes an immediate success. It even wins a book award, much to Monk's chagrin and despite his outright rejection of the novel and his attempts as the lone black judge on the review panel to sabotage it. Monk's satire on the commercialization of literary culture backfires on him (and on Everett even, at least one reviewer argues, since the book becomes Everett's first best seller).

If the Common Core's snipe at fiction is a snipe at bad fiction that flattens out three-dimensionality and not at fiction more generally, as I suspect it is, then we all had better hope that a less-fiction-heavy curriculum doesn't become an award-winning one—a probable fiction as reality in the “teach to the test / change the test to get the results you want” era. Then again, if it does, those of us who are driven by narrative and who believe it matters inimitably, that stories especially can save lives, can simply write our own stories about storylessness and the politics of knowing when it all goes terribly wrong—we can even anthologize them. Perhaps we can call the collection “My Pafology; or, Revenge of the Best Stories Never Told.”

*Fiction Redux:**Common Core and
the Vanishing Art of
Reading Ourselves*

Dana Williams

Works Cited

-
- Bambara, Toni Cade. "Salvation Is the Issue." *Black Women Writers, 1950–1980: A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Mari Evans. New York: Doubleday, 1984. 71–84. Print.
- Everett, Percival. *Erasure*. Hanover: UP of New England, 2001. Print.
- "Key Shifts in English Language Arts." *Common Core State Standards Initiative*. CCSSI, n.d. Web. 3 June 2015.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*. New York: Columbia UP, 2012. Print.
- Paul, Annie Murphy. "Your Brain on Fiction." *The New York Times*. New York Times, 17 Mar. 2012. Web. 3 June 2015.
- Smiley, Jane. "Fiction Is an Exercise in Empathy." *The New York Times*. New York Times, 6 June 2012. Web. 3 June 2015.