Grant-in-Aid of Research, Artistry and Scholarship

American Novels in the Conglomerate Age: An Institutional Account
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Abstract
This project examines the effects of the integration of American publishing houses into multimedia conglomerates on the making, marketing, and reception of American novels published between 1965 and 1990. Prior to 1965, when RCA acquired Random House, almost all American publishing houses were independent businesses. By 2000, eighty percent of books sold in the United States were published by five conglomerates. This shift in ownership, little-studied by literary scholars, profoundly transformed both the economics of literary production and perceptions of the cultural value of novels; anxieties about this shift, moreover, are discernible in novels and in critical reactions to them. Drawing on the history of the book and of the book trade, the tools of literary analysis, and insights drawn from the sociology of culture, my study aims to investigate how these shifts in ownership affected novel production as both a business and a cultural enterprise.
Category 1: Funding of new members of the faculty who need assistance in establishing research, scholarly, or artistic programs

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Proposal

1. Category Justification
Having completed three semesters as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, I am beginning an ambitious research project that I hope will result in a second book manuscript being near completion by the time my tenure case is reviewed.

2. Present Status of Knowledge
Over the past decade, the field of book history and the subfield of the history of the book trade have received increasing attention from literary scholars, as attested by a special issue of *PMLA* from 2006 devoted to “The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature.” The sociology of culture has also become a rich field of theoretical and empirical study, often drawing on classic works by Pierre Bourdieu and Paul DiMaggio. Specific studies to which my proposed project bears comparison include Lawrence Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism* (1998), Janice Radway’s *A Feeling For Books* (1997), and Catherine Turner’s *Marketing Modernism Between the Wars* (2003), all of which examine Anglo-American literary culture of the first half of the twentieth century from a perspective that pays close attention to the business of books and combines literary study with insights drawn from the sociology of culture.

However, major gaps exist for the contemporary era in the United States and specifically for the age of consolidation, which has been much-discussed in non-academic sources but has yet to receive a systematic, concrete assessment. My first book addresses shifts in novel production and the book trade in the fifteen years prior to this consolidation, when the book trade modernized but before publishers were integrated into multimedia conglomerates. But with few exceptions, prominent among them Richard Ohmann’s essay “The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975,” the subsequent era of novel production, an era marked by changes to the book trade and to the ways in which American novels were produced, marketed, and received, has received little scholarly attention, and no full-length, single-author scholarly book. Ohmann’s essay, moreover, was published in 1983, and focuses on a narrower time frame than does my proposed project. Other sources on this subject are sociological articles on the effects of concentration on the book trade generally. Most of them are also about three decades old, and they are generally quantitative and so do not focus on the cultural questions specific to the novel that my study aims to raise. The emergence of Internet commerce starting in
the 1990s has again transformed the cultural field; the period from 1965-1990, marked by the start of consolidation at one end and the rise of the Internet at the other, now seems ripe for study as a discrete historical moment.

3. Plan of Work
Implicit in my project title, “The American Novel in the Conglomerate Age: An Institutional Approach,” are two ideas: first that the integration of American publishing houses into conglomerates had meaningful effects on novel production, on perceptions of both individual novels and novels in general, and on the practices of novelists and aspiring novelists, and second that the best way to apprehend these effects is to study novels not solely as the products of individual authors but instead from an institutional perspective, in the context of what Theodore Ziolkowski calls “the totality of agents performing specific tasks in the production, distribution, or promotion of literary works.” Thus my aim is to shine a light on the institutions that collaborated to produce and promote novels—including but not limited to authors, publishers, literary agents, critics, and university English departments—between 1965 and 1990, paying particular attention to the vexed question of consolidation’s impact.

My academic interest in this topic began during research for my book Advertisements for Themselves: Mass Culture, the Book Trade, and Postwar American Fiction (currently in production at University of Pennsylvania Press), which includes an epilogue on one contemporary novelist, Jonathan Franzen, and his nostalgia for the literary culture of the 1950s, when television was an obvious foil for a literary culture that seemed to matter more in American life than it does today. Franzen’s frustration over his inability to recreate this culture raised the question of how literary culture had changed in relation to the culture as a whole. My research for a subsequent article on novels in the 1980s, called “Reading in the 1980s: In Country, Minimalism, and the Age of Niches,” published in Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory, strengthened my conviction that consolidation—and, crucially, the constellation of circumstances that helped bring consolidation about—substantially shifted the ways in which novels were produced and marketed and the ways they were received by critics and consumers of culture.

To give an example of the kinds of issues my proposed project will explore, I intend to begin by considering various implications of the success of Truman Capote’s bestseller In Cold Blood. Capote was a “star” author, emerging at a moment when the novel was highly valued, and In Cold Blood was arguably the first bestseller of the conglomerate age, published by Random House just months after RCA acquired it. The marketing campaign, featuring advertisements, magazine profiles, and television interviews, was massive, exemplifying the power of a publisher merged with mass-media corporations; though little-studied since, it was frequently called unprecedented at the time. As I hope to argue, the consolidation of the publishing industry and the story of the mass success of In Cold Blood revealed the same fact: contrary to much of the rhetoric about them, publishing houses, magazines, and television networks were not just competitors, they
were also always partners in marketing each other’s products.

As commercially promising as this idea was for some novelists, it proved problematic for the cultural idea of the novel as a special form of artistic expression, which had been a crucial part of the effort to “produce belief” (Pierre Bourdieu’s phrase) in its specifically cultural value. My project will show that as the novel’s place in the economy shifts, perceptions of its cultural value shift as well, in ways more subtle than have previously been appreciated.

During the period covered by this grant, my aim is twofold: to construct a narrative of consolidation specifically and institutional media change generally for the period my study aims to cover, and to examine more closely the circumstances surrounding the publication, marketing, and reception of specific texts, including among them Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, and Mario Puzo’s sensation *The Godfather*, with specific attention to the relationship between the marketing of these texts—not just how much they were marketed but to which audiences they were targeted—and the amount and form of artistic prestige they accrued. Later chapters will deal such topics as the rise of the postmodern novel and the controversial “minimalist” movement that took hold in the 1980s.

My theoretical approach aims to bridge what some have seen as a divide separating sociological approaches to culture from literary approaches. In a recent study, Pascale Casanova writes of “the supposedly insuperable antinomy between internal criticism, which looks no further than texts themselves for their meaning, and external criticism, which describes the historical conditions under which texts are produced, without...accounting for their literary quality and singularity.” My aim is to connect, from an institutional perspective, a shift in the cultural status of American novels to the mergers of American publishers into conglomerates. At the same time, I hope to show the ways in which anxieties about the cultural status of American novels affected what novelists produced and how critics, scholars, and other readers have received those novels.

The materials on which my study will draw include novels, reviews, and correspondence among novelists, publishers, and agents. Other crucial materials include symposia on media concentration during the 1970s and various publisher archives.

Drawing on these methods and materials, this study will address some fundamental questions throughout: did the consolidation and concentration of the American publishing industry have the effect of lowering the number of literary novels published, as many feared it would? Did the construction of the idea of the “literary” itself shift over this time? What was the fate of the “avant-garde” novel in the conglomerate age? How is the emergence of the idea of literary postmodernism connected to the corporatization of the
American book trade? Does anxiety about consolidation figure in the novels themselves? In what respects does consolidation-fueled anxiety about the fate of novels affect their reception by critics? What is the relationship between these developments and the emergence of the Masters of Fine Arts programs in creative writing, new to this era, which provided American writers with a new institutional base?

4. Budget Justification
This project requires a substantial amount of time spent examining publisher and author archives. Because the publishing industry continues to be based mostly in New York City, I seek funding for two 3-week research trips to New York. There I will have access to several valuable archives, of which I will list a few. The Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University holds the archives of Bennett Cerf, co-founder of Random House, and of Random House itself. It also holds the papers of Lincoln M. Schuster, co-founder of Simon & Schuster, which was acquired by Gulf and Western in 1976. Crucially, the library also holds records of the Book Industry Study Group, an organization formed by book trade professionals to study the commerce of books in the late 1980s.

The New York Public Library holds three archives of great interest for my proposed project. First, the papers of Truman Capote are housed there, and I plan to use the story of the publication of Capote’s *In Cold Blood* to introduce my account. Second, the papers of publisher Farrar Straus & Giroux, a celebrated “literary” publishing house founded in the late-1940s, now owned by the conglomerate Verlagsgruppe; I hope to use the story of the evolution of this house as a case study. Finally, the New York Public Library holds the papers of the *New Yorker* magazine, a crucial literary institution that was itself transformed when integrated into a larger corporation when Advance Publications acquired it in 1985.

5. Need Justification
I currently have about $6500 in start-up funds. However, some of these funds will be spent for final changes to my book manuscript, now in production at University of Pennsylvania Press. Among other things, I will need to pay for an index for this book. A substantial amount of start-up funds will be needed to purchase books and other media, for which Grant-in-Aid funding cannot be used, as I shift my research focus from the 1950s to more contemporary topics. Finally, I hope to use what remains of my start-up funds for a research trip to University of Texas in Austin, which holds the papers of two writers, Don DeLillo and Norman Mailer, crucial to my proposed project. In particular, I hope to see any papers connected to Mailer’s work with *Esquire* and *Harper’s* magazines, and any papers connected to the writing of *The Executioner’s Song* in the 1970s.

With respect to potential funding, I will apply for a McKnight Land Grant Professorship, but the odds of receiving it are quite small. I will also apply for a Arts and Humanities Faculty Award, which I hope will help to fund my research visit to Austin.
The grant-in-aid is intended entirely for the portion of my research that can be done in New York City, at various locales including the New York Public Library, the New York Library for the Performing Arts, the Columbia University library, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.