

Reading After Trump, Episode 7: Reading 1984 in 2017

Hosts: Alex Woloch, Kenny Lidga

Guests: Justin Tackett, Abigail Droge, and Juan Lamata

Alex Woloch: Hi, I'm Alex Woloch.

Kenny Lidga: I'm Kenny Lidga.

Alex Woloch: This is *Reading After Trump*. Our aim in this podcast is to initiate conversations with literary scholars, critics, and historians about what literature can tell us about this political moment. The views expressed here are our own and don't necessarily reflect the view, policy or positions of Stanford University.

Kenny Lidga: Welcome to *Reading After Trump*. This is a special episode in a number of ways. We are joined by three guests this episode.

Abigail Droge: I'm Abigail Droge.

Justin Tackett: I'm Justin Tackett.

Juan Lamata: I'm Juan Lamata.

Kenny Lidga: This is also a special episode because I, Kenny, am uniquely ignorant this episode. Everyone else here was involved in an event which we're going to discuss, except myself. So, I get to ask the dumb questions about it. The four of you were involved with an event, Abigail, Justin, and Juan, and maybe you could just tell us a little bit.

Abigail Droge: Sure. It was called "Reading 1984 in 2017: Literary Criticism in the Community." The goal was to partner the Stanford English Department with a local high school that was already reading *1984* as part of their sophomore syllabus. We wanted to have a collaborative literary event that would bring members of the high school, and parents, and teachers together with graduate students and undergrads and professors from Stanford. We all applied for a grant that was hosted through the Stanford Office of Community Engagement with support from the Stanford Humanities Center and the Stanford English Department. The event consisted of several different pieces. We first went to the high school with grad students and undergrads to work with a group of students who were picking out passages from the novel that they were interested in performing at Stanford, and then we worked with them to analyze the passages and give dramatic renderings. We went back a second time and did a reading group with the parents who we had purchased books for. The final showcase was hosted at Stanford. The high school students came and we had Alex Woloch in dialogue with teams of students who had all chosen a different passage. We had a back and forth dialogue between Alex and the students giving analyses of specific passages.

Kenny Lidga: I'm wondering about the particular impetus behind the event. You put together the proposal. Why?

Justin Tackett: I think we had a number of shared goals. Just very simply the impetus was the fact that starting in late 2016, early 2017, 1984 shot up the best-seller lists on Amazon, for example. In fact I think it was something like 10 different editions of 1984 were on that list. So, harnessing that renewed interest or figuring out why there was that renewed interest was part of the impetus. We, as graduate students, formed a group called Civic English which is very grassroots. The idea would be to use our expertise and use our platform as graduate students to be activist in whatever way we chose to do so. This was just one of many things that was a kind of ready-made way to do more with that group.

Juan Lamata: Yeah. In the aftermath of the election the grad students in our department came together and felt that we needed to be more involved in the community within Stanford and outside. A few months after, Justin forwarded this email from the Office of Community Engagement. Abigail and I responded to apply for a grant with this idea to host a kind of community reading of 1984.

Kenny Lidga: Alex, I remember talking to you. Just when the three of you, Juan, Justin, and Abigail were leaving the office, I had an appointment with Alex just after. Alex was like, "Have you heard about this project they're working on? It's really cool." I was just curious how this kind of struck you, Alex, when you hear about this work.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. I mean, I think what struck me was how unusual it was for graduate students to have any, —graduate stu-, I'm thinking of graduate students in English at Stanford although it's probably generally more applicable, but how unusual it was to have any occasion to be interacting with high school students. So there was something about the fact that we then—that Ph.D. students were actually like had made the contacts were going to think about literature with this totally different constituency. That was just genuinely unusual. Conversely, when we had the event at the Stanford Humanities Center, it was extremely unusual for high school students to be there, like participating in an event at the University. So, the crossing each way, and you could imagine one of those two things happening independently, but in this case, it was both of these things sort of tied together. It seemed to me really significant and it started to raise a lot of interesting issues because there were different groups of readers interacting in ways that, I think, for everyone was genuinely sort of interesting because it just doesn't happen that much.

Kenny Lidga: Yes. So, what was the event actually like?

Abigail Droge: We had different teams of high school students each of whom had chosen a passage to focus on. First, we had Alex start off giving some context for 1984 in our current moment.

Alex Woloch: I would say for me that the challenge there was that I've spent a lot of time writing a book on Orwell's writing. It was pretty interesting to try to translate any thinking in that book to a different story in a different context. I was trying to say true to some of the actual ideas I have about Orwell but to kick this event off.

Abigail Droge: That provided a frame for the evening. Then we had teams come up one by one and first deliver a dramatic reading of the passage that they had chosen and then give an analysis. We had different themes like Winston Smith's relationship to his work, the relationship between power and happiness, the role of women in the novel, connections to historical events. The students were very engaged. They had agency over the topics that they had chosen. They had come to them organically themselves.

Kenny Lidga: So, they picked the topic? They picked the passage?

Abigail Droge: Yes, they picked everything. We did a workshop just to help facilitate them but we were operating completely with their own ideas.

Alex Woloch: There was one teacher that was deeply involved.

Abigail Droge: Two teachers.

Alex Woloch: Two teachers. They were playing a role probably in guiding the students.

Abigail Droge: Yes. They were both English teachers that were teaching *1984* in this class already. The students were drawing on ideas that they had talked about in class but were then developing in this new way, extracurricularly. In between each team, Alex responded and so it was a back and forth dialogue between the students and Alex. Then at the end of the night, I thought this was actually the most successful part, we had all of the students, there were about 10 or 12 total, with the teachers and with Alex come up to the front of the room, turn their chairs around and face the audience. Then we had a participatory Q and A session. We had a lot of parents in the audience, many of whom had also attended the same high school and had read *1984* when they were in high school, many of whom were in high school in 1984. They were able to ask their kids directly, having read the book themselves through our parental reading group, about these experiences across generations. Which was actually really moving, I thought, and kind of touching to see that. It was so many different constituencies able to talk about the same book. The students, I think, were so engaged in answering the questions from the audience. It became this kind of impromptu panel discussion. We did nothing. Justin and I just sat on the side and they just completely ran it themselves. Which wasn't really planned but it just came out that way which I was very very pleased about.

Kenny Lidga: I was curious like of what the surprising things were at the event and it seems like maybe that was one of them.

Abigail Droge: Yeah absolutely.

Justin Tackett: Yes, I think so. Certainly, that back and forth at the end. You could definitely detect a generational — people were trying to bridge a generational gap. There were folks, not only who had sort of come of age in 1984 but I think we had people commenting on World War II and things like this as well. Basically, sort of bestowing wisdom on the students who were there or the students were able to say, "This is how we learned about this thing that you went through in school," and sort of the accuracy of that or, perhaps, bird's eye history versus lived experience, I think, was a real great take away.

Alex Woloch: I mean I think the thing that surprised me the most was that the students were genuinely happy. Just the sheer kind of excitement of some of the students. It was a little bit infectious, so it felt like most of the students just emotionally, they were, they were into it.

Abigail Droge: I think just the opportunity to be able to talk about something they had read in class, in a public space. I think that's not something that they had really experienced very much before, and it was a

new way of thinking about what they had learned in class and being able to share it with people that they cared about, and also with a wider audience that they didn't know.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. I feel very confident that if you engage deeply enough with the way that high school students are reading literature, you'd learn something too, and that would change your own understanding of literature.

Justin Tackett: I think that's true and I think the two new ingredients that were not part of any of our first encounters with *1984*. Social media was a huge comparison that was made over and over again, and the ways in which social media spreads fake news and whips up political passions and other kinds of things. So, that was something that would not have been able to talk about, I think, and then the other piece also to me was global terrorism. I mean, these folks were not alive when 9/11 happened. So the way in which they received, what perhaps for all intents and purposes was the last major global earth shaking event. They received through text, they get it vicariously. It's not something that they witnessed or experienced on their own. The one thing I would just say was the qualities of narration or the qualities of novels themselves. So, we had a fantastic discussion about unreliable narrators and the possibility of somebody like Winston Smith being an unreliable narrator and why that might be. That just blew their mind that he could be lying to us, and that he could be not reporting things the way they quote unquote actually happened. So, that was like a real genre breakthrough that we talked about. Actually, this is partly how we stumbled upon the idea of unreliable narrator because, many, as Abigail has said, many of the students were very excited about the feminism or sort of misogyny in the book, and the question of whether the sort of misogynistic things said in the narration are Winston's thoughts or not was kind of how we stumbled upon that. So, they were super excited that they knew all about feminism and all these kinds of things, but then we had to say, "Well, who's really saying this in the novel? Whose beliefs are these?"

Juan Lamata: Yeah. I was just going to throw it out to you about like your teaching in New York, and if that shift geographically or to a different institution, you saw things about reading, or literature, or teaching.

Justin Tackett: Yeah. So, I helped organize with Abigail and Justin in this 1984 event, but I couldn't actually attend it or attend any part of it because that whole quarter, I was teaching as part of an exchange program that Stanford has with the City College of New York. So, I was teaching a intro to literary study class with about 30 students up at the City College campus in Harlem. I think the question of segmented readerships was very present there. The kind of population of students that attends city college comes from a totally different socio-economic background than the students at Stanford. Initially, I pushed at having a syllabus that was very presentist and very explicitly political. We began by looking at speeches by Obama and Trump and comparing *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. I'm an early modernist that's where I have to root my expertise. So, talking about political rhetoric, asking them to scan and close read subway advertisements. But then, later on, we move toward actually more early modern things and we were reading Othello, and I wanted to make it clear that there are different ways of being political and of different ways that literature and literary analysis can be political, that it doesn't have to be explicitly so. Actually, this event helped me think about that because when we formed the civic English group, in my mind, it was like a much more obviously political effort. I was thinking, "Okay, I've worked on political campaigns." So, I thought I need to get the graduate students making phone calls and knocking on doors et cetera, and I think especially Abigail offered a different model and a different critique which

is, there's a problem of communication and interaction between communities and we need a longer term cross pollination. So, this 1984 project, to me, opened my eyes about what could constitute political action. So, if you say more about that, about like the longer term or the bigger picture issues.

Abigail Droge: So, I think that's exactly right. I think to peg something like this to Trump is to really limit it in a negative way.

Kenny Ligda: Something like?

Abigail Droge: Like a community engagement event.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Abigail Droge: Because to do so is not to realize that those questions have been ongoing for the last hundred years. They have very little actually to do with Trump in this current instantiation, and I think it's rhetorically a lot easier to blame a president that you don't like, than it is to deal with issues at 125-year-old institution that also employs you. So, one is very easy and the other one is very difficult and takes a lot of work. So, I think to skew everything towards the frame of Trump is really to miss a much more important big picture. The big picture is a series of class politics that's been ongoing for the last hundred years since the end of the 19th century, which has produced institutions of higher education that are mainly geared towards getting people jobs. The only way, I think, that the government can make working class students legible is to slot them into specialized tracks. Because if you just had a bunch of rogue polymaths running around, havoc would ensue.

Kenny Ligda: And readership comes into that?

Abigail Droge: Yeah, I think so. So, part of the archival research that I've done is about civic colleges at the end of the 19th century in England, and one of the things that I saw was that literature was a very important extracurricular activity that could provide a sense of community for students who are now coming from different socio-economic backgrounds at school. Now, I think-

Kenny Ligda: So a civic college is a college for...?

Abigail Droge: For middle and working class students.

Kenny Ligda: Okay.

Abigail Droge: Yeah. So, now, we would think of that extracurricular unification thing as sports. Everybody goes to the football game, no matter what they study. Everybody can root for the same mascot. But before organized sports, it was literature. After class, people would go to the student union meeting and they would talk about their favorite novel, and that's the thing that provided this cohesion because otherwise, you just have a bunch of people studying different things. There's no reason they would even ever talk to each other. So, it was actually in the institution's best interest to have an extra curricular catch so that people would make friends with others who are not in their classes. Once you're segmented into, okay, after class go hang out with other students in college, don't go home, don't go hang out with friends that are not in college, because we want there to be camaraderie amongst the students in the institution

and build college spirit. So, once that happens, then you slowly get a segmentation of a reading community in college away from the reading community outside of college.

Kenny Ligda: Right. So, I'm thinking about, I don't know, *Great Expectations* and there are scenes of Pip sort of reading to Joe, and there's a sense that like, the kid who's being educated is taking home a little bit that education and ability to talk about books to the parent and I guess-

Abigail Droge: Right, that stops happening.

Alex Woloch: It stops happening in the novel.

Abigail Droge: Yeah, but it also starts happening in real life, right? Because now more and more you have this expectation that your primary social group will be the school social group, not the external social group. Again, this is not a teleological narrative, it's not a malicious mastermind plotting. A lot of the time it was in service of really great things like making friends with others who were studying a different thing from you or having more accessibility to education. But all of these very small bureaucratic and personal decisions over the last 150 years have produced a segmentation of reading in school, and reading outside of school. So, the irony that I see is that now we call this thing community engagement as like a new bizarre activity that we're doing, taking forms of reading that used to be in the community, and now bringing them back from the school, and taking them back into the community, and saying, "Look we're engaging with you." It was a divide that was created by taking those very same reading practices out of the community as they were originally organically in it to start with. The solution is indicative of the larger issue. But now, the segmentation has become even greater because things that used to be extra curricular reading like novels are now things that are squarely taught on an English syllabus in a formalized class, so you have an even bigger divide between what's on the college syllabus, and what's something that people would read outside of school.

Justin Tackett: So, it made me think of that as reinserting reading as a common activity to get excited about in the community. The other thing that it makes me think about and this is just my own stump maybe is what Abigail was saying about the way that novels, even as a wholesale genre, might be looked at as work or a school stuff, even though obviously, there are tons of contemporary novels that are just fantastic, versus our students have no problem quote-unquote "reading" movies or music videos or podcasts for that matter." I do think academia is starting to absorb some of those things. Starting to bring some of those things into the classroom as well, but to realize that reading *Pickwick* in the 19th century was similar to I don't know geeking out over *Game of Thrones* or something. I mean it was just enormously popular and people knew all the lines and the characters, and were really excited about it. So, that divide, the notion that Dickens is up here, and HBO is down here, it's not useful actually. A plot is a plot, and the characters are characters, and they're really high quality today just like they were then.

Kenny Ligda: I think it can also be a really positive thing for how we read as scholars to remember that a lot of these things were read for fun.

Abigail Droge: Another thing that would be good to mention here, is that the actual form for the final event with *1984* where we have analysis interspersed with dramatic renditions—This is a 19th century form that would often happen in these extracurricular reading communities and not just extracurricular,

but also totally outside of the college at all. They would happen all the time and just people's informal reading groups hosted by churches or schools. So, it is a very common form, a communal form of this collaborative reading where different people are getting up on the stage, and delivering passages, and commenting. So, for me, the most exciting thing, because that's a forum that I've seen a lot in my archival research, was to be able to see that come to life now in the 21st century, and see how it could be used in a different context at a different time to try to bridge some of these gaps that have been artificially created from the time that I'm seeing in the 19th century to now.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, I'm suddenly remembering that Orwell's first bestseller was through the Left Book Club which had this mission of getting lots more people to read good books and had reading groups where people would get together to talk about things. I think maybe it is coming from a similar place of an anxiety, that the society as a whole wasn't talking to each other anymore. I'm gathering that's a background concern here is basically that, people in graduate school, people out in the public, high schoolers, literati are having completely separate conversations.

Abigail Droge: I mean, even just the students and their parents, even people in the same family don't talk about their reading, and we were able to see that through this event, they were in a really cool and exciting way which seemed unusual, I think that's why people were so excited about it. It's certainly a problem with academic institutional barriers, but it's also a problem even from what happens in a high school classroom to what happens at the dinner table, that's a gap by itself. So, thinking of ways that we can ameliorate it from all different levels I think is really helpful.

Kenny Ligda: So, how much can you ameliorate it? How much can an event like this do or not do?

Juan Lamata: I think it really depends how you define the problem or the question, because if it's a question of making it so that high schoolers and their parents are reading the same books, and discussing the same books, then I think events like this can certainly make that a reality. But then if there is a question of not just that different communities are reading different things, but there are socio-economic barriers to who can attend Stanford, who can pursue a graduate education in the humanities at Stanford, and who can pursue this career in the United States today. Because that was a question that I had to come back to with my students at City College. I was there teaching them the other half of this exchange program, is that they, in the summer, come here as undergrads to work on a larger project that would prepare them for graduate school, if they wanted to apply.

Alex Woloch: And not necessarily the students that were in your class, just—

Juan Lamata: Exactly.

Alex Woloch: CCNY students.

Juan Lamata: From the entire City College network. So, in my classroom, I had to think like what do my students want to get out of this class? I had an extremely talented brilliant students, but none of them would—I wanted them to apply for this program, none of them were considering it. I think they were rightfully skeptical of pursuing a PhD in English. So, if we're addressing that problem, who is allowed to ask these literary questions, then I'm not so sure that an event like this can really address that. The question that I've been thinking about is, with an event like this who benefits? I think we as a department

benefit by taking our research and our expertise and making the case that what we do is important and showing people that there is a great power to thinking like this. I think the students and everybody who participates in the event greatly benefits and Hillsdale High School, I think Stanford as a university benefits by getting its name out there in a positive community way, but then that central—or if that is an issue that we want to tackle this way, the question of the material basis for the segmentation of readerships, then I think that that's left untouched.

Abigail Droge: For me, one of the biggest reasons to do community engagement is not because it solves the problem, but because it points it out, and then that can make it able to be discussed as we're doing now, and only once we have done that I think do we have a shot at actually changing it, because otherwise it's very difficult to see that these barriers even exist. If you're not going into a high school on a regular basis, you don't see how far apart you are.

Kenny Ligda: It's pretty poignant to think about this is like this shows what could be built, but what isn't.

Abigail Droge: But once we've seen that, I think we have a much better chance of actually addressing these problems. What if it were very common for readers from different constituencies to come together, using a historical form to read in a new way than that we usually don't do. What if that were the norm for English classes to have some community participatory component, then I think we would go actually a long way toward solving many of these problems at least by getting people in contact with each other.

Kenny Ligda: The kind of a devil's advocate thing here would be, it's really nice to have one event where you're having these discussions with people that are outside the academy, but there's another line of thinking about what we do as literary scholars that it isn't something that everyone can do. It requires a lot of training and the reason that we have elite enrollment and small graduate discussion sections is that you have better discussions, you're having them at a higher level. I'm giving this like the maximum snobbish... Okay, so if you're are a PhD in chemical engineering. A good reason for you to have a small classroom with five other PhDs in chemical engineering is that you're not always having to go back to basics. And a lot of people would like to say that it's fairly similar in literature that we have really specialized in-depth knowledge, and the reason that we don't always have conversations or never have conversations with people who are outside the academy, is that we don't want to go back, and God forbid, we should have to redefine what the novel is, what we mean by romanticism or whatever.

Abigail Droge: I think you've just outlined the problem very succinctly.

Kenny Ligda: Okay.

Abigail Droge: Yeah, I think that attitude is the problem that we're trying to work against.

Kenny Ligda: Well, so do you think there's no validity to it? Do you think there's no validity to the idea that-

Abigail Droge: I think there's very little validity to it. Yes. Because my whole polemic is anti specialization. So, what I've written about in my researches about two types of specialization. One that divides academic disciplines from each other, so that they no longer talk.

Kenny Ligda: Great.

Abigail Droge: So, the English PhD student wouldn't talk to the chemical engineering student. And the other which divides the academy from those outside of it. In the 19th century example, that I was trying to explain before, they're working in opposite ways. So, in order to address the specialization that happens between disciplines, students are now studying in different tracks based on different certifications to get different jobs. So, they're splitting apart, and they don't talk to each other. In order to address that specialization and get cohesion among those disparate groups, you have to separate this bounded institution from those outside it to have some arbitrary line of, "Okay, we are a community," because otherwise that's not obvious, everybody is studying a different thing. Once you do that, once you try to bridge specialization between disciplines, then you've created another gulf between the institution and those who are in the community around it.

Kenny Ligda: And I imagine this is especially acute with literature where at first, many people read literature and it was difficult to show that it was an academic subject, so you won't tell.

Abigail Droge: Yeah, so this attitude that you've just laid out comes from the 19th century, because once you get rid of classics as the main humanities disciplines, Roman and Greek, suddenly it's very easy to say that, "Oh, English is just something that you would do outside of class." Because everybody is already doing it in the community, everybody's reading and having these great discussions all the time, why would you do that in college?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Abigail Droge: There's no barrier anymore. So, in order to make there be a barrier, people tried to make it hard, they had to make exams, they had to make structures, philology became really successful because it was scientific. It was something that had rules, and that wasn't immediately obvious. So, there was a systematic attempt to make English impenetrable in order to have it merit a place next to the sciences.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Abigail Droge: And all the time it's also being used by the academy as a cash draw to fund laboratories because it requires no instruments. And so this attitude has been bred up in us and our institutions from the 19th century, and now we see it as this thing that's like, "Oh, this is natural. This is what we should be doing, aren't we breaking with tradition?" Yeah! To hell with tradition. I mean that's the problem. Tradition is the problem. So, the idea that we don't want to go back to basics is actually really detrimental, I think we should go back to basics all the time.

Kenny Ligda: I was curious if it did happen again, which book would you- do you think you would do?

Justin Tackett: Well, one low hanging fruit that we talked an awful lot about was *The Handmaid's Tale*, just because it already has immediate attraction to the nation because of the Hulu adaptation, and also because so many of our students were naturally gravitating towards gender, and sex politics, that I would just be—

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Justin Tackett: I think an obvious win-win situation.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, it feels like you have to do that.

Alex Woloch: *Handmaid's Tale*, any other books that would come to mind? Just as a thought experiment for-.

Justin Tackett: I mean, we had a whole list of dystopias beyond that.

Alex Woloch: Beyond that.

Abigail Droge: I've also taught community engagement classes with *Oliver Twist*, Zora Neale Hurston, and Azer Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. All of which I think very interesting resonances with current Silicon Valley issues.

Juan Lamata: I mean I'd be tempted to actually push against the impulse to pick something that obviously resonates and something written in the last 20-30 years, and maybe one of the things that I find totally lacking in our culture is a historicist imagination or understanding. So, I would like to pick something from like the 17th-18th century, what comes to mind is like Olaudah Equiano's autobiography or otherwise maybe just like Marx's *Capital*. One of the interesting things for me when I read that book and when reading kind of these older works is the challenge of a genre that's just completely different and different form, operates in totally different ways from a novel. So, that patience that it teaches you actually.

Kenny Ligda: Cool stuff, it seems like you have to do another event like this, so-

Abigail Droge: Yeah that would be great.

Alex Woloch: Thank you for joining us.

Abigail Droge: Thank you so much for having us.

Juan Lamata: Thank you.

Kenneth Ligda: You've been listening to *Reading After Trump: Conversations in Literature and Politics*. This is a production of Stanford English Department in collaboration with the Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning. *Reading After Trump* is created and hosted by Alex Wloch and Kenny Ligda. Sound Engineering and editing is by Catherine Wong, except where messed up by Kenny Ligda. Music is by Brett Yarnton.