“The Editorial Meeting at a Little Magazine: An Ethnography of Group Judgment”

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Abstract. Judgment and distinction have been topics of persistent interest for cultural sociologists. Recent theory has particularly emphasized social interaction and cognition as key sites for understanding judgment, and a number of studies examine gatekeeping practices as a means of understanding the interactive and perceptual determinants of judgment. This article builds upon previous work by presenting the results of an eighteen-month ethnography at a long-running little magazine based in a large American city. In addition to providing an empirical description of an important but understudied domain of cultural production, this article has two findings of theoretical interest. First, without strong external constraints on processes of group evaluation, editors’ judgments became markedly negative, and their deliberations were often inconclusive. Second, negative and positive evaluations were not symmetric, but were produced by two differing sets of evaluative practices. These findings are broadly consistent with developing field theoretic descriptions of social life, but also raise many empirical and theoretical questions.

Keywords

culture, publishing, gatekeeping, judgment, evaluation

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Introduction

Evaluation and judgment have long been subjects of interest to cultural sociology and are a growing concern for the discipline as a whole. A large body of research influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu examines the relationship between judgment and social position, and in recent years sociologists have turned their attention to the role of cognition and the context of social interaction in the articulation of judgments. Though much of this research focuses upon the taste of cultural consumers, a number of recent studies of judgment in social interaction have examined gatekeepers, whose judgments are particularly consequential because they have the formal power to confer visibility, position, or material reward.

This article builds upon these active lines of research by reporting the results of an eighteen-month ethnography at what I refer to here as the *Big City Review*, a long-running little magazine. Though little magazines—low-circulation periodicals with culturally elite readerships—have played an important role in the development of a number of intellectual and aesthetic movements, they have received little social scientific attention. This ethnography offers a description of the organization and history of the *Review*, with a particular focus upon the work of the fiction board, a group charged with selecting short stories for publication.

The case is well suited to address the literatures on gatekeeping and the perceptual and interactional bases of judgment. Externally imposed constraints on the process and outcome of evaluation consistently emerge as key determinants of gatekeeping judgments. However, *Big City Review* has an extraordinarily high level of institutional and financial autonomy, affording a chance to study gatekeeping judgments in circumstances where the social dynamics of editorial interactions largely supersede other factors. I observed that aesthetic uncertainty was a prominent feature of editorial deliberations. I suggest that these findings are broadly consistent with recent work on the importance of ritual and social networks in cultural production.

Extended observation of the fiction board at work also revealed a great deal about how the readers experienced submitted texts, a matter that is particularly interesting because much of the board's labor is devoted to reading unsatisfactory work. Board members formed unfavorable judgments based upon several kinds of immediately perceptible deficiencies in stories, and the humorous articulation of these negative judgments was the main source of entertainment for the staff. Favorable judgments, in contrast, derived from holistic evaluations of texts and employed

inconsistent criteria. I argue that the presence of two relatively distinct processes for reaching favorable and unfavorable judgments suggests that aesthetic perception may become deeper, more nuanced, but less self-aware when objects are close to the social position of the evaluator. Contrary to accounts—drawn mainly from accounts of social reproduction through education—that point to habituation in itself as a cause of perceptual deepening, the board members did not develop a deeper or richer sense of bad writing simply because they encountered it routinely.

In the following section, I present a brief overview of relevant work on publishing and little magazines in order to define the empirical problem addressed in this study. I then turn my attention to the case of the *Big City Review*. After describing the study, I present an overview of the history and institutional position of the magazine, followed by a discussion of the operation of the fiction board. I describe the routine articulation of unfavorable judgments as well as the often disorderly discussion of more successful texts. I close by considering the broader theoretical and substantive significance of my findings.

Judgment without Constraint: Defining the Empirical Problem

This section offers some background for the empirical problem addressed in this article. Research on gatekeepers has generally explained evaluative outcomes by pointing to contextual constraints. Such practical restrictions on possible judgments make the work of gatekeepers simpler. However, little magazines, as a field, are shielded from many of these constraints, and this may be a key factor in their outsized role in aesthetic and intellectual innovation in the United States. The problem is to describe the process of consequential judgment when this judgment is freed from the most common practical constraints.

The study of cultural products has been a topic of sustained sociological interest. A great deal of this work, especially that inspired by Bourdieu's (1984) classic account of the judgment of taste, has attended to consumption; consider, for instance, the extensive literature on omnivorous taste (see Lizardo and Skiles 2012). However, many important social practices occur “upstream” (Becker 1982) of consumption: cultural production, gatekeeping practices that selectively provide visibility or legitimacy to certain cultural products, and practices of consecration that confer durable status to cultural products already available to a consuming public. Gatekeepers—persons or institutions able to confer visibility or legitimacy to cultural

products—occupy an intermediate position between production and consumption. Gatekeepers, unlike other cultural producers and consumers, are obliged to reduce their complex sense of an object to a definite evaluation with specific consequences (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014).

In most cases, the task of gatekeepers is aided considerably by various contextual factors that constrain possible judgments and outcomes (Shepherd 2010). Sociologists have identified a number of significant constraints, including the physical qualities of the objects being judged (Acord 2010); formal constraints such as deadlines, ordinal ranking requirements, or fixed quantities of prizes, grant money, or pages (Lamont 2009); and constrained evaluation procedures such as stereotypes or fixed rules for scoring and ranking (Green 2011; Chong 2011, 2013). In short, socially consequential judgments typically occur in an orderly environment, and this environmental order considerably simplifies the task of evaluation (Martin 2011). The interactional context also shapes evaluative outcomes. Harmonious interaction, or the preservation of working relationships, often takes priority over the production of a strictly calculated outcome. For instance, preserving a good relationship with aspirants can lead to a softening of judgments (Rivera 2010; van den Hoonaard 2011), and deference in the interest of concord is common between members of evaluative groups (Hirschauer 2010; Huutoniemi 2012).

Research on nonacademic publishing has pointed to economic constraints as particularly important in shaping editorial decisions. These include direct economic constraints such as sales expectations (Bourdieu 1996, 2008) or editors' understanding of their readership (Radway 1997). These may also be manifested indirectly in the form of space limitations, which play a particularly important role in editorial decisions at periodicals (Clayman and Reisner 1998; Gibson 2011). If evaluative outcomes are largely produced by practical constraints, little magazines are a problematic domain. Little magazines are low-circulation periodicals containing literary, intellectual, or political writing aimed at a nonspecialist elite readership. In consequence, they are shielded from many of the economic pressures that shape publishing outcomes more generally (Griswold, McDonnell, and Wright 2005.) This insulation from immediate economic and practical demands may go some way in explaining the importance of little magazines in the United States.

Major sociological works on intellectual production such as Coser (1965), Shils (1983), and Collins (1998) acknowledge the significant role played by little magazines in developing

new aesthetic and intellectual perspectives. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a major innovation in English-language writing from the last century that did not begin in little magazines. For instance, little magazines figured centrally in the emergence of the historical avant-gardes (Morrisson 2000; Scholes and Wolfman 2010), midcentury leftist politics (Cooney 1986), neoconservatism (Mattson 2008), now-dominant literary styles originating in academic creative writing programs (McGurl 2009), and major approaches to academic criticism (Kindley 2011). This influence can be produced by several means. Little magazines can consecrate work (Bourdieu 1993), serve as a focus of intellectual activity for producers (Collins 2004) or geographically concentrated consumers (Coser 1965; Griswold 2008), or create a status “halo effect” for groups of producers affiliated with a given periodical (see Collins and Guillen 2012). Their profusion also enables a strategy of overproduction in which a reputation may be built upon a small number of exemplary works chosen from a large output (Hirsch 1972; Greif 2015).

This influence has persisted despite rapid changes in the publishing industry’s economics and distribution systems. New technologies have created significant financial exigency for newspapers and book publishers. However, little magazines have been less affected by the economic crisis or the rise of the Internet.¹ This owes to aspects of their economics and cultural function. Well-established little magazines may have a substantial passive income from licensing, royalties, and reprinting; because they earn off of their back catalog, they can afford to offer current content for free online. Likewise, an established reputation attracts a stable, lucrative base of institutional subscribers. Little magazines also continue to play a substantial role as consecrators. The partial incorporation of creative writing into the academy, as well as the introduction of intermediate levels of gatekeeping in commercial publishing, have made this function even more important (Harbach 2014; Morris and Diaz 2015). For academic creative writers, publication in respected magazines may have a function similar to peer-reviewed academic publication in traditional disciplines. Publication in little magazines also serves as a basis for literary aspirants to attract the attention of a literary agent, now the *sine qua non* of commercial book publishing.

Although classic sociological works have acknowledged the importance of little magazines, most empirical studies of their history have been produced in the humanities. Empirical investigation in sociology is well warranted: social scientific understanding of the process of literary innovation and consecration is impaired if little is known about the domain

where these innovations first emerge. The study of little magazines may therefore enrich the sociology of culture. In addition, little magazines offer prime conditions for studying gatekeeping. Their autonomy affords a chance to study how processes of evaluation operate when not encumbered by many common practical constraints. In this respect, *Big City Review* is a useful case, though one that suggests that the absence of constraints can produce interactional failures as well as successes.

Big City Review: Autonomy and Judgment in the Literary Field

Description of Study

This article is based on approximately eighteen months of participant observation at a well-established little magazine published in a large Midwestern city, which I refer to as the *Big City Review*. After securing IRB approval, I gained entree to the *Review* by way of a mutual acquaintance with the fiction editor. After an initial discussion with the fiction editor—filled mainly by literary gossip and books we had read recently—I was invited to observe the meetings of the fiction staff. I attended the first meeting intending to be an observer: I introduced myself to the staff as a researcher, and obtained their consent to observe their meetings. To my surprise, the editor deputized me as a participant: after I had introduced myself, he handed me unsolicited manuscripts and suggested that I begin reading. In this first meeting, I recommended all of the stories for rejection, and I was invited to join the staff soon afterward. Although I did not recognize it at the time, my readiness to reject stories likely served as a sign that I could be trusted not to make bad recommendations (see Bacharach and Gambetta 2002).

Meetings occurred twice monthly. The initial goal of the study was to understand what features defined editorial conceptions of good and bad writing, and how interaction established these shared conceptions. Though the focal point of the investigation was the fiction meeting, understanding the history, institutional position, and self-image of the *Review* was necessary for me to make sense of the specific interactional context. I therefore conversed informally with editors at the magazine's office, attended events such as author readings and issue-launch parties, read back issues, and examined records from the magazine's archives. I wrote extensive field

notes after fiction meetings and other events. The categories of evaluation described below emerged gradually during sustained observation.

The method of investigation may appear unusually informal for a contemporary ethnography: I did not supplement my observation of meetings with one-on-one interviews, nor did I record or transcribe the meetings. Both of these were purposive decisions. Recording a meeting would yield relatively little information that could not be collected by observation and field notes: much of the meeting passed in silent reading of stories, or in quips and remarks that did not blossom into full interactions.² Similarly, interviews could have elicited staff members' beliefs about their judgment and reading practices, but deliberate self-presentations of taste may differ quite substantially from practice. There has recently been a great deal of controversy over the appropriate uses of interviewing and observational techniques in the study of culture (see Pugh 2013 and Jerolmack and Khan 2014 for differing views). The decision to rely strictly upon observation and participation has to do with the aim of the study, which was to describe the production of shared judgments and meanings in a situated context, a purpose for which these methods are particularly well suited (see Mears 2014). Collective deliberation of this kind is, moreover, a defining feature of little magazines: about two-thirds of serious little magazines employ the organizational structure I observed at *Big City Review*, in which a genre editor oversees the work of a genre staff, and an editor-in-chief and managing editor oversee the genre editors. Many of the magazines that do not use this structure edit by committee or consensus. In both editorial structures, a manuscript will pass under many eyes, and be subjected to much debate, before it is accepted for publication. This highly social pattern stands in contrast to the Golden Age of literary modernism, when magazines such as *The Criterion*, *The Little Review*, and *Poetry* reflected the tastes of a single, all-powerful editor.

History and Structure of Big City Review

The history and current position of *Big City Review* substantially defined the local context in which its staff members make decisions. This following overview is derived from interactions with staff at the magazine, as well as an examination of the magazine's extensive records. *Big City Review* was founded in the 1940s as a student magazine at a large private university in the Midwest. By the 1950s, it had seen a dramatic increase in circulation and geographic reach. This

owed in part to a larger boom in the publication of little magazines, and in part to canny editing—a series of controversial special issues garnered progressive increases in circulation. By the 1960s, the *Review* severed most formal ties with its parent university: though the masthead remained crowded with graduate students, faculty ceased to oversee the management or editorial choices of the magazine, and the university press no longer printed or distributed the issues. Gradually, the university reduced its financial support; by the time of the economic crash in 2008, the university had entirely ceased its subvention.

Despite this, the *Review* is on firm financial footing. Its operating budget places it in the top quintile of members of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (2007), an organization of literary publishers in the United States. About a third of the magazine's annual revenue comes in royalties from academic databases; the back catalog includes a number of heavily accessed pieces by eminent authors. (This valuable back catalog is a sign of the episodic prominence of *Big City Review*: there have been moments when it was a key outlet for the early development of now-major literary movements. At other times, it has been what it is now—a respected magazine without a strong affiliation with a particular movement.) Another half of the revenue comes from a stable base of institutional subscribers, primarily academic libraries, many of them subscribers since the 1950s. The remainder of the revenue comes from arts agencies, private donors, advertising, reprint rights, and individual subscriptions. The *Review* is generally in the black, and offers modest compensation for its senior editors.

The *Review* is issued irregularly—though it nearly always appears three times per a twelve-month period, the time between issues may be as short as two months and as long as ten. Informal target dates for publication exist, but the magazine appears when the editors sense that they “have enough” to publish, a sense that is quite variable. Issues also vary significantly in length: in the past five annual volumes, the shortest issue was around 130 pages, while the longest was nearly 400.

As with a great many literary magazines, the *Review* has a hierarchical organizational structure. A managing editor handles the practical matters, while an editor-in-chief sits above genre editors in nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. These genre editors evaluate and recommend work for publication, which they do with the aid of a staff of readers. Editors are usually, but not always, graduate students at the *Review*'s host institution. Reading staff, who are selected by the genre editors, are far more diverse. During the time of my study, fiction staff members included

graduate and undergraduate students from a number of humanities and social science disciplines, as well as librarians, visual artists, and those with no formal professional ties to academia or the arts. All editors and staff had an avowed interest in literature, and about half mentioned previous work experience at other magazines. None, however, expressed a desire to make their living as creative writers, either in the marketplace or as professors of creative writing.

The *Review*, then, is unusually free from the constraints that commonly govern periodical publishing: it does not have a fixed page count or publication schedule; there are no outside administrators or investors to regulate its content; it has no avowed aesthetic commitments; and its back catalog and institutional subscribers provide it with steady income independent of current content. Though its editors and staff have a strong interest, and sometimes a great expertise, in literature, their reputations and livelihoods do not directly depend on producing literature; they are therefore slightly outside of the restricted sphere of cultural production as it is described by Bourdieu (1996). This makes the *Review* an unusual case for literature on editorial practices and gatekeeping. This also makes the review somewhat unusual in literary publishing, where a significant number of magazines have professed commitments to publishing writers from a particular region or background, work that makes use of a preferred style or form, or work that hews to a certain political sensibility.

This autonomy and eccentricity is part of the self-conception of the *Review*. The fiction editor and two succeeding editors-in-chief, all of whom had previous experience in literary publishing, articulated a similar description of the literary field and the *Review*'s position within it. They distinguished the field along three major axes:

1. Institutionally, they distinguished university-affiliated magazines from unaffiliated magazines. The *Review*, in the editors' view, does not fit in this partitioning, because it is nominally university affiliated, but is not edited by faculty, who may have conservative aesthetic commitments, or by students in academic creative writing programs, who were perceived by editors at the *Review* as apt to use journals to advance their own careers. By analogy to politics, this practice is often termed logrolling.

2. The editors distinguished broadly between "relevant" and nonrelevant magazines in a glutted literary field. Resources for writers such as the Duotrope database list thousands of American magazines that publish literary short fiction. Membership in the CLMP, a more restrictive measure, included 330 magazines at the time I began observing the *Review*. On the

editors' view, only a subset of these publications are visible in the field or have a significant readership or reputation.

3. Finally, among relevant magazines, the editors distinguished between magazines with established aesthetic views and consecrating power—editors offered *Paris Review* and *Tin House* as notable examples—and magazines that represented a new approach, which for the editors included magazines such as *n+1* or *Fence*, as well as experimental online publications such as *DIAGRAM*. The *Review* also did not fit easily in this last category: while the *Review* often publishes writers who enjoy considerable literary success, or go on to do so, the magazine is not currently visible enough to independently consecrate authors, and though it publishes experimental work, it is too eclectic to represent a particular “approach” to literature.

The Fiction Meeting

The fiction board operated in this context of high institutional autonomy and aesthetic freedom. Fiction published in the *Review* comes from two sources: work solicited through personal contact with presses, literary agents, or established writers, and unsolicited work, which is sent to the *Review* in large volumes. Solicited work enjoyed a relatively high chance of being published. I observed that nearly half of solicited manuscripts were accepted. By contrast, only a fraction of 1 percent of unsolicited manuscripts were published. Though unsolicited submissions are not a major source of publishable writing, they occupied nearly all of the fiction staff's time and attention, and were the main object of discussion. During the period of observation, the magazine received about forty unsolicited fiction submissions a week.

Two notable findings emerged from my observation of the fiction staff. First, the social dynamic of the meeting itself became the most important factor influencing the assessment of manuscripts: the staff operated without editorially imposed constraints or guidelines, and the remove between the staff and authors allowed the meeting to revolve around jokes made at submitters' expense. Second, the judgment of manuscripts involved two distinct processes of evaluation. Stories were deemed “bad” based upon immediately apparent features of the writing, and the staff had a number of shared categories for describing badness. “Bad” and “good” were not symmetric judgments: stories that were “not bad” were not necessarily judged favorably. The “not bad” stories that received the serious attention of the staff tended to be evaluated according

to holistic and inconsistent criteria, and the staff often could not reach a consensus about the quality of a story or its suitability for *Big City Review*. This lack of consensus generally resulted in the rejection of stories the staff had considered promising.

The fiction staff usually met on alternating Wednesdays from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. The fiction editor, Alan (a pseudonym), was invariably present at the meetings, and on average about five of the eight-member fiction staff would attend a given meeting. The staff were evenly divided by gender, ranged in age from late 20s to late 30s, and came from various academic and artistic backgrounds. Five were graduate students, and came from four academic disciplines. The nonstudents included an archivist, a visual artist, and a graphic designer. The members had a comparable tenure on the staff: most had been chosen by Alan when he became fiction editor the previous year. The staff met in a bar near the university campus in a semi-private room. This last fact may have some bearing on the patterns of interaction I observed at the meeting. Reading was combined with moderate beer drinking, and the atmosphere was relaxed and jocose.

Most fiction meetings were devoted to reading “slush,” the slightly unkind but ubiquitous publishing term for unsolicited submissions. A large box of unsolicited submissions sat in the center of the table—staff members took submissions at random, and read at their own pace. Uncertainty about what this box might contain is what made the group deliberative rather than clerical: there was always the possibility that the next unopened envelope might contain something extraordinary, whatever previous experience had shown (see Tavory and Eliasoph 2013, 912–13).³ At the beginning of each meeting, Alan instructed the staff that they should read the first three pages of a submitted story, but could then reject it if it failed to hold their interest. Submitted stories follow a relatively standard format. Fonts and spacing of manuscripts vary, but nearly all of them arrive in a 9" × 12" envelope, which contains a cover letter, the submitted story, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) for the magazine’s reply. Cover letters are similarly standardized: they contain one paragraph stating the title of the manuscript and the conditions under which it is submitted, and a second paragraph offering a short professional biography of the author. Deviation from this script was regarded as highly unprofessional, and disposed readers unfavorably to the enclosed story.

Readers took one of three actions with these manuscripts: (1) They rejected the manuscript. If this was the case, they would throw the material onto the floor to be collected later, and place a form rejection slip in the SASE. The great majority of unsolicited stories were

rejected after a single reading. (2) They regarded the manuscript as promising and promoted it to a “second read,” the magazine’s term for work that was to receive further consideration. In this case, the staff member would write an assessment of the story on the cover letter, and hand the materials to Alan. Second reads were held for subsequent meetings so they could be discussed after the entire staff had an opportunity to read the story. (3) They were unsure of what to do with a manuscript, and either threw the manuscript back onto the central pile, or handed it to another author for what staff members called a “one and a half read.” This action was uncommon, and typically owed to genuine puzzlement about the story or preexisting bias about the author.

Although Alan offered no guidelines about what makes writing “bad,” and the staff came from various backgrounds, they shared strong beliefs about what made a story bad. Nontopical side conversations occasionally developed, but most of the chatter during meetings was about the fiction itself, especially amusingly bad fiction. Staff members might remark indirectly about material they read, or read the offending story aloud. It is, regrettably, not generally possible to reproduce this humor. It is highly sensitive to context (Tavory 2014), and supplying the context (in this case, the text of stories) would make submitters readily identifiable. This humorous talk had two effects. It produced a shared concept of what constituted bad literature. More immediately, talk about the material being read was the main source of amusement, a way of protecting against boredom or tedium (see Phillips 2015). The use of bad literature as the basis for social interaction in meetings may have unintentionally subverted the fiction staff’s stated purpose, while also making the performance of negative judgment a key means of establishing status in the group: the wittiest and most negative participant was the fiction editor, followed closely by a staff member who had a sharp tongue, but whose considered judgments often carried the day in serious deliberations.

There were six frequently occurring shorthands that staff members invoked when rejecting stories. I came to define them as categories after extended observation, but the staff members were certainly aware of them as common grounds for rejection: all staff members voiced them at one time or another. Indeed, most interactions during meetings were initiated when a staff member spontaneously announced that they were rejecting a story for one of the following reasons. Some of these declarations elicited no reaction, but others prompted the rest of the staff to listen and contribute thoughts of their own. The obligation to render a clear yes or

no decision largely precluded the use of irony, a practice that might otherwise be common means of managing cultural dissonance (Greif 2010; Guhin 2013).

1. Amateurish or egoistic cover letters. Although staff members did not reject a story on the basis of the cover letter alone, the meeting often entertained itself by sharing “bad cover letters,” and there was a perceived continuous correlation between a bad cover letter and a bad story. A bad cover letter might contain a summary of the submitted story, excessive personal information, manifest insecurity or fear about submitting, mention of the “craft of writing,” or unwarranted egotism. Ego may be shown, for instance, by including supplementary pages offering an expanded biography and complete list of publications, or inserting favorable quotations about oneself in the cover letter. At nearly every meeting, staff wished that they could publish bad cover letters in the *Review*, which one staff member likened to putting “heads on a spike at the city gate.”

2. Humorous story titles. A story title may accidentally call to mind a scenario or plot that appears ridiculous, and the reaction to the title often spoiled the story, even if the actual plot was acceptable. Staff members often serially punned on titles or extemporaneously narrated a story that better suited a ridiculous title.

3. “Creepiness”/Inappropriate depictions of sexuality. Based on coding of one thousand unsolicited submissions, I found that about 65 percent of submitters were men, and given the tendency of some men to submit frequently, they accounted for nearly 70 percent of submissions. Nearly all descriptions of sexual activity were in stories submitted by men. Some of these verged on the pornographic, or described sexual coercion or otherwise objectionable acts. Saying “that was creepy” was sufficient justification to reject a story, and staff members often expressed disgust about “creepy” stories. In other cases, however, an author’s sexual writing would be read aloud and ridiculed. Euphemistic or purple sex writing, so long as it was not highly objectifying or misogynistic, was regarded as a source of entertainment.

4. “Incompetence.” A number of compositional mistakes would lead writing to be described as “incompetent” or “inept.” The *Review* received a number of pieces that lacked correct grammar and spelling, although these were not often a source of conversation. Other work contained very pronounced errors common to amateur and beginning writers, such as the use of strings of sentence fragments in an effort to make the narrative more intense, the inexpert use of the second person, which may inadvertently transform a story into metafiction, or dialogue

that too closely mimicked natural speech or archaic writing styles. Staff members commonly read aloud from stories containing strings of sentence fragments or “inept” dialogue.

5. Incongruity. Some stories shifted abruptly from an appropriate style or tone, creating a discordant and sometimes humorous effect. The staff members were amused, for instance, by a story where Satan spoke in a narrative voice closer to Dick Tracey than John Milton, and a story that veered rapidly between philosophical disquisition and blood-spattering violence.

6. Boring plots. The majority of stories submitted to the *Review* employ one of a small number of domestic plots: weddings, divorces and breakups, funerals, serious family illnesses, and childhood remembrances. Staff members often expressed dismay at reading so many stories on these subjects, and an opposition to conventional realism (commonly called “*New Yorker* fiction” by staff) was a key source of aesthetic common ground. Other stories would entice staff members because they were competently composed, but would ultimately prove to be plotless. Staff members might complain that they were too bored to continue reading a story, or announce when they read consecutive stories using the same domestic plot. This criterion for rejecting stories would be voiced more frequently as meetings progressed and staff members came across repetitions of a small number of themes and plotlines.

Most of these grounds for rejection could be invoked before the end of the first page of a story: staff members formed negative opinions about stories very quickly. Excepting the point about plotlessness, which is a structural defect, these shared ideas of the bad were all based on technical or narrowly stylistic considerations, rather than holistic assessments of work. That is, these ways of talking about texts suggest that the staff understand bad writing to be writing that lacked technical or stylistic accomplishment.

Talk during meetings elaborated an idea of bad writing, but not an idea of bad writing that would help staff members refine their judgment of submitted works: these shorthands emphasize gross deficiencies that immediately disqualified a story for publication. Moreover, certain important criteria of evaluation were not extensively discussed, presumably because they were not entertaining. For instance, there is nothing particularly funny about a story with an unsatisfying ending. Although staff often rejected stories because they ended unconvincingly, I never observed a discussion about what made an ending satisfying.

Staff did not directly interact with the submitters, the next tier of editors in the *Review* organizational hierarchy, or the eventual readers of the magazine. Nor did they have any obligations to these other actors: rejection was understood to be the ordinary lot of a writer. One staff member commonly referred to the practice of slush reading as “killing dreams.” The next tier of editors was never present at fiction meetings and did not make decisions about the hiring or retention of fiction staff. Subscribers were both anonymous and, in light of their continued subscription, apparently satisfied by what the *Review* published.

The set of social actors most relevant to the members of the fiction staff, then, were the other members of the fiction staff. Their shared conceptions of bad writing fostered various kinds of social connection: the pleasure of being in witty company, the amusement afforded by incongruity, or the cheap laughs elicited by failure. The putative purpose of the meeting—identifying publishable writing—was therefore at odds with its social dynamics. The staff talked about (and wrung entertainment from) bad writing, not good writing.

The members of the fiction staff were there by virtue of the editor’s trust in their good judgment as readers; they were, after all, authorized to read and decide upon work without any oversight. Since the staff had no interactions with or obligations to other actors, the exercise of negative judgment in fiction meetings was a major way of demonstrating that taste. The most vocal staff members—an archivist and a student of modern languages—also attended meetings most regularly and were, after Alan himself, the most vocal and negative in their judgments. Because these members were the most often present and most likely to reject a story quickly, they considered a disproportionately large amount of the submitted material, yet were least likely to select stories for a “second read,” a possible prelude to publication. Conforming to the highly critical social style of the group left the less regular attendees to identify most of the potentially worthy material. Work that did advance to serious consideration, either by solicitation or by promotion to a “second read,” was handled very differently, though it is notable that the most vocally negative slush reader was also treated as the most credible evaluator of second reads.

While self-assurance and shared categories characterized negative judgment, the evaluation of potentially worthy texts was more difficult. “Second reads” and solicited stories were considered either at special meetings or the end of regular meetings. In both cases, the entire staff had the opportunity to read the story before it was discussed, and a given story might be discussed for as long as a half hour; if such stories did not win general approval, they were

rejected personally, with the editor's invitation to submit more work to the magazine. Evaluations of these candidate stories often involved significant divergence of opinion, or convergence of opinion from divergent but generally holistic practices of evaluation. This imperfect deliberative practice appeared to owe to lack of clarity about the specific place of *Big City Review* in the literary field, disagreement about what constituted a good story in general, and existence of a pool of candidate stories produced by criteria that were not strongly related to a holistic positive assessment.

Members of the fiction staff regularly asked Alan for clarification about what the *Review* was looking for. Though this request was common, Alan's responses never became more definite: he looked for stories that were "comfortable with themselves." Staff members also asked about practical constraints, such as length limits for individual stories or page allotments for a given issue. Again, Alan said that the story should be judged on its own merits—other constraints should not figure in their deliberations. This, along with the eclecticism of fiction published in the *Review*, left staff with few specific criteria about fitness for the magazine.

Discussion of second reads and solicited stories produced significant divergence of opinion. These opinions were articulated according to variable criteria: a story might be judged for its overt or implied political stance, overall formal structure, content, or relationship to the specific context of the *Review* or the literary field in general. I offer three examples that illustrate extreme types of deliberative outcomes: a concurrent opinion from different criteria, a divided opinion from shared criteria, and the development of a single-use evaluative criterion, respectively.

In the first case, four staff members discussed a story and unanimously favored it for publication. The story, about a corporation that extracted profit by imprisoning a group of mythical creatures, was a fusion of the mundane and the fantastic commonly termed "magic realism." The staff members each offered a different argument in favor of the story: deft satire and oblique criticism of capitalism, formal balance and careful pacing, familiarity with a variety of mythologies, and divergence from the run-of-the-mill domestic themes found in most submissions. In this case, political, formal, substantive, and contextual factors were variously invoked.

In the second case, four staff members had a divided opinion about a story describing the operation of a zoo in a country under postcolonial dictatorship. The staff members had a shared

knowledge of two authors, Graham Greene and George Saunders, whose works appeared to have important similarities to this story. The staff used these authors as an aesthetic framework for judging the story. Though the staff agreed about how the story should be evaluated, they disagreed about its merits. Taking Greene as an index, one member thought the story was colonialist while another thought it was a skillful parody of colonialism. Using Saunders for a yardstick, one member recommended the story for its lexical variety, while another said that it was, for the same reason, bloated and language-obsessed. This story was rejected.

In a third case, nearly the entire staff considered a story about a person adrift at sea. The discussion was generally neutral and failed to take a definite shape until one staff member presented an objection: it was unfaithful to the sensual experience of being adrift at sea. The staff member cited several historical narratives on similar topics, and noted the outsized place of physical misery in these accounts. The absence of strong physical description in the story, to his mind, suggested that it was not adequately imagined. Though other staff members laughed at the number of lurid historical accounts that he had ready to hand, they were quick to accept his argument, and opted to reject the story. The criterion, fidelity to embodied experience, was not employed on any other occasion I observed. Indeed, in the first example a break with reality was favored, and in the second it was a story's relationship to literary tradition, not historical reality, that was most important.

The discussion of these stories differed in several ways from reading slush: they used variable rather than fixed criteria, holistic rather than narrowly textual evaluations, and yielded (polite) disagreement rather than agreement. Bad writing fit into categories that were generally valid for staff members and immediately apparent on the page, but stories given serious consideration were evaluated according to overall effect or in a context larger than the story itself. Since the approach to reading unsolicited submissions weeded out stories based on superficial qualities, the group of "second reads" did not consist of stories that were likely to be judged "good," but rather, stories that were certain to be judged "not bad." The staff agreed about what literature shouldn't be, but not what it should be. The positive deliberation over a story showed that the staff had a variety of normative views about literature, and the structure of the interaction provided little formal guidance on how these views should be harmonized. Below, I discuss how the findings from *Big City Review* may shed light on the problems defined at the outset of the article.

Discussion

The first section of this article identified a sociological question at the center of the outsized cultural importance of little magazines: how do such magazines produce shared judgments when they face few of the common constraints that typically make deliberation a socially tractable process? The empirical evidence suggests a blunt but incomplete answer—sometimes autonomy makes coherent judgment very difficult to achieve. In this section, I discuss a particularly notable characteristic of the deliberations I observed on the fiction board: the asymmetry of favorable and unfavorable judgments. I then suggest that the interactional and network context hold the key to explaining the more successful deliberative processes that have led some magazines to become highly influential. Autonomy and credibility, understood abstractly, are not explanatorily sufficient, though they may be necessary. Comparing formal aspects of group deliberation may be the best means of gaining a further understanding of these issues.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the fiction meeting was the sharp contrast between the articulation of favorable and unfavorable judgments. Unfavorable judgments of stories drew upon a shared set of categories that emphasized immediate defects, provided entertainment, and reinforced group identity. Deliberation on second reads, possibly leading to a favorable recommendation, was protracted and used inconsistent criteria with unpredictable results. A partial explanation is readily apparent: the fiction staff had few practical constraints to shape deliberation. However, I suggest that this finding also elucidates important features of perception and its relationship to the social position or status of the perceiver: perception becomes more complex and fine-grained as cultural products approximate the evaluator's taste, and while the tastes of group members were similar enough to produce broad agreement about what was bad, they were not similar enough to yield agreement about what was good. Strongly unfavorable judgments may reveal the general structure of a field but fail to distinguish between proximate positions.

An extensive literature following from Bryson (1996) has emphasized the important symbolic role of unfavorable judgments in organizing cultural space. This body of work often does not delve deeply into the subjective experience underlying apparently symbolic negative judgments. There is a simple reason for this: given a choice, people tend not to consume cultural

products they dislike, though a few will invest considerable effort in learning to like something (Benzecry 2009). There are instances, particularly in educational settings, where people are forced to consume consecrated cultural products that are of no great personal interest. In general, though, individuals are free to ignore or dismiss cultural products that they do not find to be interesting or useful (Martin and Merriman 2015).

Cultural gatekeepers therefore offer an unusual opportunity to study unfavorable judgments in depth: their work often requires routine engagement with cultural products that they dislike or find unsuccessful or beneath their taste. The possibility of the unexpected excellent submission enjoined sustained attention to generally inadequate work, forcing staff members to become connoisseurs of the bad. The fiction staff members at *Big City Review* are further notable for being able to express their judgment with unusual candor; there were no outside observers they might offend with their unvarnished judgments. Because they have extensive experience with products they dislike, they elaborated a number of categories of badness and expressed their unfavorable judgment in a variety of ways—silence, contempt, mockery, parody, etc. Their displeasure is articulate and refined, but their categories were stable during the time of my observation. Unfavorable judgments continued to draw upon immediately perceptible features of submitted stories.

Works that survived this screening for badness did not necessarily appear to the staff as favorable or worthy of publication. Group discussion of stories receiving serious consideration made use of holistic evaluations. The staff members took note of complex, nonobvious qualities of stories, and were able to discuss a candidate story at length where a non-candidate could be summarily rejected. These holistic evaluations used variable criteria, however, and staff members often failed to reach a consensus. In part, this may reflect the messiness of face-to-face discussion. The group sometimes invented a criterion to justify their sense of a work and conclude a deliberation, just as certain staff members manifested a persistent concern with stories' politics or form when such concerns were common features of their professional or intellectual life. The direction of a discussion always possesses a branching, contingent character (see Gibson 2012), and well structured, tolerant discussions—such as may emerge in a convivial, beery setting—may be particularly likely to create a proliferation of reasons and arguments (Schneiderhan and Khan 2008).

The asymmetry of favorable and unfavorable judgments may also indicate something more basic about the relationship between one's taste and one's social status or position: perceptions are superficial when evaluators examine something at a social distance, but these perceptions become deeper with social proximity. Mere experience or enforced familiarity with a cultural product does not necessarily produce a deepening of perception. Conversely, when there is no social distance between evaluator and object, one enters the domain of pure *habitus* and the gap between immediate perception and judgment disappears (Bourdieu 1993, 218). The partial concordance between staff judgments, then, may point to their similar but non-identical positions and trajectories in the literary field. Work that is far from their constellation of tastes is obviously bad to all, but work that fits more closely to the staff members' conception of literary fiction can call attention to finer differences in taste, thereby drawing out deeply-held beliefs about what constitutes good work. The absence of a well-defined editorial or interactional framework for airing these beliefs showed how inarticulate they often were.

Understanding the interactional production of a shared sense of the good may be a key to understanding little magazines. The existing scholarly literature on little magazines, as well as much of the literature about intellectuals in general, takes success to be a product of autonomy, as well as the possession of credibility and a good reputation among similarly situated producers (see Trilling 2008, 93–103; Bourdieu 1996, 340). However, empirical work on this area commonly examines intrinsically important cases. Studying excellent work can be a good means of defining the overall possibilities for a literary form (Merriman 2015), but is a poor means of understanding how a domain becomes stratified or where excellence comes from (Chambliss 1989). The case of *Big City Review* suggests that these categories fail to offer a sufficient explanation: an entity may be autonomous and well respected but nonetheless fail to bring forth something innovative. In this case, the achievement of autonomy, absent strong shared conceptions of good work, produced a disabling form of Gans's aesthetic pluralism (1999): literary magazines, as a domain, can cater to a wide variety of tastes, but without sufficient convergence of taste at a given magazine, it was difficult to produce consistent evaluations (see also Medvedev 2013, 193–202). Likewise, strong existing credentials did little to help writers who did not have previous ties to the editors. Further attention to group style (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), interaction rituals (Collins 1998, 2004), and network ties (Childress and Friedkin 2012) may therefore offer the best way forward in studying little magazines and similar

contexts of cultural evaluation, particularly if the goal is to understand how exceptionally innovative or successful publications distinguish themselves from organizations that use similar structures and procedures.

Ethnographic methods are certain to be particularly useful in addressing these issues, though making the best use of the method may require a redirection of the ethnographer's attention. It may be particularly important to attend to cross-case similarities in group form or evaluative practices, rather than similarities in the objects evaluated, or peculiarities of local practice. In other words, it is useful for ethnographers to think more abstractly about what a field site is a case of. For instance, the most obvious substantive analogue to literary magazines would be other periodical publications: these are a class of organizations that regularly produce a printed object comprising a number of short written works. Formally, however, one of the clearest analogies to my case is college admissions, which also involves relatively private group evaluation that first considers a few immediately perceptible criteria, and then turns to holistic deliberation concerned with a vague notion of fit (see Stevens 2009). The similarity is particularly striking in cases where admissions offices have dequantified their activity in order to preserve key institutional goals (Hirschman, Berrey, and Rose-Greeland, 2016). However, generalization—or speculation—in this direction does not sit easily beside norms about what ethnographers are expected to pay attention to in the field and report in publications (on striking such a balance, see generally Small 2009 and Duneier 2011). For better or worse, this article has provided less case-specific detail than is typical for an ethnography, though it has done so in the hope that the analysis can bring forward formal characteristics of the site that might otherwise receive less attention.

Conclusion

This article has described the organizational context and deliberative practices of an editorial board at a little magazine. As gatekeepers to publication, the board's evaluations require a final outcome (acceptance or rejection of a story), but the magazine's particular position and history creates few formal, organizational, or financial constraints on this judgment. Without such constraints, members of the fiction board oriented their performance of judgment to concerns specific to the interactional context of the fiction meeting. The board members had definite

shared conceptions of bad writing based upon immediately perceptible qualities of submitted stories, but did not have a consistent, collective idea of what made writing worthy of publication, or of procedures or styles of evaluation appropriate for making such a judgment.

While the findings of this study are evocative, they are also limited. Observations from a single case may offer useful ways of probing theories but are not conducive to the production of definitive claims. This is particularly so for the specific empirical context of little magazines: while this is a domain of acknowledged sociological interest, this study may be the first to attempt an ethnography of editorial practices at a little magazine, and should be read as such. Studying magazines in other parts of the literary and intellectual field may produce a more robust description of the forms of judgment that define the field, as well as the structures of associations that provide particular visibility and success for certain writers or publishers. Though this study does not provide clear answers, it is hoped that it will contribute to ongoing discussions, and stimulate new investigation of an important but understudied domain of cultural production. The study has also advanced a formal claim about judgment—that favorable and unfavorable judgments are asymmetric and make use of different evaluative processes—that may be explored (and tested) in a variety of other evaluative settings.

Notes

1. As an illustration, I randomly selected one hundred print little magazines included in the 2007 directory of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses. In June 2015, five of these magazines had ceased publication, and one more had switched to an online-only format.
2. However, if it were possible to begin the study again, I would have recorded the meetings. There would have been little harm in collecting data that went unused, but data that are not collected cannot be analyzed later, and because they are uncollected, it is difficult to judge whether their omission has hindered the study.
3. Several members of the *Review* staff previously worked at magazines where they had been little more than mail clerks: they had been put on the masthead for the sole purpose of opening and immediately rejecting unsolicited submissions.

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