Cultural Daily

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What Happened at ALOUD

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, October 18th, 2018

Update: The article that follows was published on October 16. On October 17, the Library Foundation announced a new director of public programs. That announcement, and the Ad Hoc Committee's response, is here.

On Monday, August 27, Louise Steinman, director of the popular ALOUD series, and Maureen Moore, ALOUD's associate director, were called into the office of Ken Brecher, president of the Library Foundation of Los Angeles. Board member Carla Christofferson, an attorney, was also present. Steinman and Moore were each told that their positions were being terminated. They were told they needed to leave immediately and were escorted from the building.

It was a sharp and unexpected end to the tenure of the most effective curator of Los Angeles's literary scene. Steinman had founded the ALOUD series at the Los Angeles Public Library 25 years ago; the series had presented more than 1,000 free events featuring a diverse array of internationally renowned and emerging writers and thinkers. One of its most significant events, *Visualizing Language*, an exhibition presenting the work of Oaxacan muralists, on view at the Central Library with 70 associated programs in neighborhood locations, had closed the day before.

The ALOUD series had been funded by the Library Foundation of Los Angeles, a separate non-profit that provides support for the Los Angeles Public Library.

Members of the Los Angeles literary community did not become aware of Steinman and Moore's termination until Wednesday, August 29, when Carolyn Kellogg reported it in the LA Times. In Kellogg's article, Library Foundation communications director Leah Price stated that Steinman "is not part of our new direction."

Petition

The news caused concern and an uproar, and soon thereafter an Ad Hoc Committee of writers got together. They decided to start a petition describing ALOUD's importance, and asking for "a place at the table as the Library Foundation discusses what happens next to ALOUD." Writers Héctor Tobar and David Ulin became the Ad Hoc Committee's spokespeople.

Initially, the petition was circulated privately, and kept off social media. More than 800 people had signed it by September 12, when it was delivered to the Library Foundation's board and Mayor Eric Garcetti. Cultural Weekly covered the petition on September 12; I also had signed it.

There was no response from the Library Foundation or the Mayor's office. The Ad Hoc Committee issued a statement requesting a formal response, which Cultural Weekly published on October 3. At this time I decided that we, at Cultural Weekly, should take a more active role.

Reporting This Story

In reporting this story, I spoke with 17 individuals with direct knowledge of and familiarity with the situation. All spoke on condition of anonymity, citing concerns about their jobs and possible retribution. I have respected their requests.

ALOUD's then-Director Louise Steinman greeting Rick Wartzman & Adam Winkler, March 8, 2018. Photo by Gary Leonard

I did not reach out to Steinman or Moore for comment or information. They are discussing a severance with the Library Foundation, and although, as of this writing, neither has signed a non-disclosure agreement, they have been told that an NDA will be a material aspect of any severance; further, that if they wish to receive a severance they and spouses must refrain from any public comment.

On September 20, a previously-scheduled ALOUD event took place, at which Rigoberto González interviewed Native American writer Tommy Orange. Prior to the event, González and Orange discussed the situation with Brecher and received a response that González described as "diplomatic press release, offering little substance." González wrote about his experience, which was posted on the LA Times's website on October 4, and then published in the Times's Sunday print edition on October 7.

On Tuesday, October 9, I emailed Ken Brecher, copying Leah Price, the communications director. After recalling to Ken that we were acquainted with each other through our work in Los Angeles theatre in the 1980s, I said that I was writing about ALOUD. "While I know that, thus far, you have refrained from public comment, it is a matter that won't go away until there's some further transparency and discussion of plans going forward," I emailed, and I requested a conversation.

The next day, October 10, the Library Foundation issued a public statement which we published here. Included in the statement was this: "While we do not discuss confidential personnel matters, we greatly honor the legacy of ALOUD." The statement was signed by the Foundation board's four officers and the seven members of the board's executive committee, as well as Ken Brecher; board signatures on this statement indicate that Brecher is operating with support of the board.

"Personnel Matters"

To define the situation with Steinman and Moore as "personnel matters," as the Library Foundation's statement does, and as Brecher did in his conversation with González, is correct only in the dictionary definition of the words. It is a "personnel matter" merely to the extent that it involves personnel. However, a corporate statement attributing an employment termination to "personnel matters" leaves the implication of wrongdoing on the part of the people who were fired. Because Steinman and Moore are tied to an implicit NDA, they cannot discuss the matter publicly.

According to sources familiar with internal Library Foundation discussions, Brecher had raised questions about the ALOUD series previously. Leah Price, the Foundation's communications

director, told me, “We have been in the process of re-envisioning our public programs over the past few years, working closely with internal and external stakeholders as well as consultants.” The Foundation has not identified who the “stakeholders” are. Brecher had also retained arts consultant Patricia Dandonoli to do a study, which was presented in November, 2017. Brecher had worked with Dandonoli at the Sundance Institute when he was executive director there. According to sources who have seen it, Dandonoli’s study did not criticize the quality of Steinman’s and Moore’s work.

The Decision

Other sources, who have spoken with Brecher, told me that he said he agonized over the decision to fire Steinman and Moore. I was told that he called at least one board member prior to firing them, and said, “I need to make a bold move so ALOUD can go forward boldly.” Such conversations indicate, again, that Brecher made his decision with the assent of the board, and raise the question of whether the Library Foundation has future plans in place already.

Additional sources told me that Brecher had stated that he wanted ALOUD to bring in younger and more diverse audiences to compete with programming at the Ace Hotel. When I mentioned this to Héctor Tobar, one of the spokespeople for the Ad Hoc Committee, Tobar said, “Personally, that deeply offends me. When you go to a lot of literary events, you see a lot of people over fifty. What’s wrong with that? A writer at fifty is at the peak of his career.” Tobar also told me that he had attended ALOUD events where a joke was told in Spanish “and forty percent of the audience laughed.”

While ALOUD’s primary venue has remained the Central Library, Steinman had been organizing ALOUD events around the city for the past several years.

Financial Information

In addition to the Ad Hoc Committee of writers, the ones who started the petition, an informal, more activist group, formed. This more activist group has staged protests at recent ALOUD events. Some members of this group have pointed to Brecher’s salary as proof that the Library Foundation is not wanting for funds, and that cost-cutting was not the reason for Steinman and Moore’s termination. According to the Library Foundation’s IRS form 990, in 2016 Brecher earned a salary of $440,000 plus an additional $47, 582 in other compensation from the Foundation and related organizations. According to the same document, in 2016 the Library Foundation operated on a budget of $6.8 million and had $44.8 million in net assets. In that same year, revenue exceeded expenses by $1.258 million.

Brecher’s salary is higher than most presidents at non-profits of similar budgets. According to Charity Navigator, a neutral evaluator of non-profits in the US, in its 2016 compensation study, chief officers at non-profits with the Library Foundation’s budget earned in the neighborhood of $200,000. For additional context, according to public database Transparent California, John Szabo, the Librarian for the City of Los Angeles, earned $236,649 in 2017, and Mayor Eric Garcetti earned $248,141. While Brecher’s salary may be higher than average, in my experience it is not unprecedented. In any event, Brecher’s compensation is determined and approved by the Foundation’s board.

Employee Terminations

There are several ways to terminate employees. In many organizations, a final date is set, publicly acknowledged, and there is a going-away party. In some cases, the organization puts out a press release explaining the end of employment – it is often stated that the person in question "resigned" – and lauding their accomplishments. Sometimes these employees are given a "consulting deal" for a period of months or years to soften the blow. None of this happened in Steinman's and Moore's case, and indeed other employees at the Library Foundation have been terminated in similar fashion: called into the office, told they are fired, and immediately escorted from the building. According to people familiar with the situation, this has caused confusion and a defensive climate among some staff. When I attempted to contact some of the employees who had reportedly been fired in this fashion, they declined to talk, citing the NDAs they had signed.



An ALOUD audience member with ALOUD's then-Associate Director, Maureen Moore, April 24, 2018. Photo by Gary Leonard

Transparency

The Library Foundation is supported by a subsidiary group called The Council, which describes itself as the "premiere fundraising group in support of the Library Foundation." Council members have also raised concerns about transparency. A Council board member, who declined to be further identified, told me that "The culture of the Foundation is one of avoiding transparency and stifling dissent. Dissent is viewed as confrontational and questions regarding transparency and different points of view are both met with righteous indignation."

ALOUD events previously have been live-streamed. Since the termination of Steinman and Moore, and the ensuing protests, live-streaming has stopped, although the Foundation says that at some point it will resume. I have also been told that security guards have been instructed to tell people not to take photographs at the next event, today, Tuesday, October 16.

This event will feature writer Susan Orlean, discussing her newest book, entitled *The Library Book*. The book's point-of-departure is the massive fire that devastated Los Angeles's Central Library 25 years ago — a fire that prompted a rebuilding effort which gave birth to both the Library Foundation and Louise Steinman starting the ALOUD series.

Unanswered Questions

The two largest unanswered questions are what Brecher plans to do with ALOUD going forward, and why Steinman and Moore were terminated in such an abrupt fashion.

The Foundation will not comment on the latter question. Ken Brecher has not made himself available for an interview. Leah Price, the communications director, emailed me that "We reached out to members of the literary community (some of which are part of the Ad Hoc committee for this petition) the moment the news was released about the change in staff. We are now working on a strategic plan for next year with hopes that we will create an advisory committee for programming that will include members from the petition who have shown interest in being part of our new direction." However Donna Frazier, a writer and editor who is a member of the Ad Hoc Committee, told me, "If they reached out to someone, it wasn't us. There was never any outreach to our group, never even an acknowledgment that the petition had been received."

What will happen next? The Foundation's October 10 statement said, "We have created a new

public programming department." I asked Price who will be leading that department. She emailed me back, "We will have more information about that this week. Stay tuned."

John Szabo, Los Angeles City Librarian, provided me with this statement, "I'm very proud of the Library Foundation's ALOUD program and the role the series plays in L.A.'s rich cultural life. During the past 25 years, ALOUD has had a significant impact on the literary conversations in our city. The Foundation has expressed its commitment to expand and enhance ALOUD and other cultural programming that it provides. I look forward to the next chapter of the Foundation's ALOUD series and to the enhancement of its programs at the library." He referred further questions to the Library Foundation. Szabo is an ex-officio member of the Foundation's board.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti is also an ex-officio member of the board. Alex Comisar, Garcetti's press secretary, gave Cultural Weekly this statement: "As an ex-officio, non-voting member of the Library Foundation board, Mayor Garcetti is not included in personnel decisions. The Mayor takes great pride in providing direction for cultural programming in Los Angeles — especially for our libraries, where Angelenos come to learn, grow and get the skills needed to move up and ahead."

Reflecting on what ALOUD has meant to him, David Ulin, the other spokesperson for the Ad Hoc Committee, told me that it had been his gateway to the literary culture of Los Angeles, and because members of the committee are writers they have decided not to interfere with upcoming programming by asking scheduled writers to make statements or boycott. "We're all writers, and we want to support writers," Ulin said. He also stated: "ALOUD is so important. It's free, it activates the library as a cultural center. The level of the writers, the diversity of the programming, and even the extra, non-literary material, like the Oaxacan murals, all of it – ALOUD has contributed to the unity, history, complexity and overlapping narratives of Los Angeles. It's really necessary."

Top image: Howard Bryant, Dr. John Carlos, in conversation with Dr. Todd Boyd, Professor of Cinema and Media Studies, USC, June 19, 2018. Photo by Gary Leonard.

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