

Reception: texts, readers, audiences, history

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Jennifer Nolan-Stinson, "Toward a Life History of Reading"

"My notion of hell is not having something to read"

Despite its simplicity, this statement from one of the readers with whom I work elicits the most frequent, spontaneous, and strongest responses when I present my research. Perhaps the reason it resonates so deeply is that, at its essence, it succinctly encapsulates the essential nature of reading within the lives of those of us who count ourselves as readers. In the last twenty-five years, our understanding of reading as a social and cultural process has been greatly expanded by scholarly work that takes studies of reading beyond the academy and into the everyday lives of readers. The research of scholars such as Janice Radway and Elizabeth Long, who work with actual readers, has been essential in establishing the legitimacy of studying a broader array of readers and readings, and these studies have helped reframe our understanding of reading as a social, rather than solitary, phenomenon.¹ However, by structuring their studies around communities of readers, whether they be physical (as in the case of the book groups Long studied) or based upon shared interests or backgrounds chosen by the researcher (such as the romance readers Radway worked with), and thereby privileging the category over any individual reader, these studies have elided the fundamental ways in which individual acts of reading are socially and culturally inscribed.

Recently, scholarly interest has grown in groups of readers who participate in book clubs that meet physically (or in an increasing number of cases, electronically) on a fairly regular basis and focus their discussion around a commonly agreed upon book or author.² This work in

general, and Long's work in particular, has been essential for helping to dispel the conception of reading as a solitary activity limited to the interaction between a single text and its single reader. As Long explains, viewing reading as an isolated activity suppresses its socially situated reality in two ways. First, it ignores the social interactions that surround reading, from our earliest encounters with books as children to reading with Oprah and in book groups. Second, it elides the "collective and institutional processes [that] shape reading practices by authoritatively defining what is worth reading and how to read it," which in turn determines what is published, reviewed, recommended, and taught (194). Long's response to the hegemonic image of this solitary reader is to study the ways readers interact in the decidedly social environment of book clubs, and her approach largely does not consider the individual readers beyond these groups. My work argues that her conclusions are also applicable to studies centered on individual readers, even those who may not participate in group reading experiences or discuss their reading with others.

Much of the work with living readers has been focused on less formalized communities, unified primarily by the choices of the researcher to focus on readers who share cultural traditions and/or aspects of their social location.³ As the first critic to identify that "American studies needed ethnographies of reading," Janice Radway challenged the prevailing primacy of the text and academic ways of reading and asserted the legitimacy of studying the reading practices of actual readers (*Reading 4*). Particularly significant is that she realized *through her work with the readers* that she would need to privilege their reading experiences over the text: "I soon realized I would have to give up my obsession with textual features and narrative details if I wanted to understand their view of romance reading" (86). However, as she herself noted in her

later article “What’s the Matter with Reception Study?” her decision to begin with a particular category of reader in mind shaped her study in ways that she had not foreseen:

The initial decision to begin with genre--and with a genre that is specifically about gender relations--tends to produce the readers at the center of the study not only as “romance readers” but also for the most part as individuals who are saturated by their gender. What this effect means is that, to a certain extent, the book answers the question it poses at the outset precisely because it cannot take seriously readers’ identities as classed, raced, or ethnically diverse subjects, nor can it very effectively study how the individuals who are its focus negotiate the contradictions among the many social and cultural activities that engage them (337).

Any study that begins with a category of readers makes the implicit (if not explicit) claim that the category should be considered central in the reading experiences of readers who fall into that category. The danger in privileging the category over individual reading experiences is that it elides the ways differences in content, place, and time influence what aspects of a reader’s identity are most relevant to any particular reading experience. Thus, rather than begin with a book group or a category of reader, my work begins with the idea that reading must be understood as one cultural component within the larger context of the everyday lives of readers.

In his introduction to *The Ethnography of Reading*, Jonathan Boyarin notes that, despite the contributions of the authors included in his anthology, “we still need an ethnography of that ‘solitary reader’ whose stereotype we decry, but who we spend much of our waking time being” (7). Despite the important contributions of the authors mentioned above, I argue that Boyarin’s pronouncement still holds true almost two decades later: we *still* need an ethnography of

individual readers. In this article, I intend to expand the “reader-centered model” promoted by Elizabeth Long by returning to the individual, though not the solitary, reader. I will illustrate how using a life history approach that considers social, cultural, spatial, and temporal influences on reading, readers, and the researcher reveals problems with some of our categories of and assumptions about reading and offers a new model for understanding it.

Life History and Reading

Ethnographer Geyla Frank defines life history as “an ethnographic method used to study cultural phenomena by focusing on the personal experiences over time of one or more individuals” (705). Through conducting life history research with avid readers, I study the ways readers use and make meaning from reading in their daily lives. Thus, the object of my research is neither the interactions that occur between a text and the reader, nor interpretations that readers create through their interaction with specific texts; that is, my research takes neither a semiotic nor text-based approach to studying reading. Rather, I explore reading as a cultural practice situated within the context of each individual reader’s life, which means paying “attention to the socially situated nature of readers, as well as to what they are looking for in each reading experience,” as Long suggests in her study of Houston book clubs (28). In her 1994 article outlining the increasing number of scholars working on “the practice, variability, and multiple effects of reading as social process” (279), Radway has a useful way of thinking about reading in this vein: “To think of reading in this context-specific way is to stress its hybrid nature as well as its social character and to render it eminently visible as a practice, that is an activity, a set of deliberate and complex strategies engaged in by communities of people” (276). My goal is to understand how individuals, rather than communities, engage in this cultural practice, as Radway calls for at the end of her article: “To do this we will need not only ethnographies, but what I

would like to call micro-ethnographies--that is, an attempt to survey and understand human processes we cannot see, which we can only reconstruct by inferential interpretation, such as, what do individuals do with texts in the context of their daily lives?" (294).

In *Culture and Truth*, anthropologist Renato Rosaldo offers an apt metaphor for thinking about the culturally-situated nature of individual subjectivity: "More a busy intersection though which multiple identities crisscross than a unified coherent self, the knowing person not only blends a range of cognitive, emotional, and ethical capabilities but [also] her social identities" (194). Two conclusions are inherent in this conception of identity. The first is that we cannot understand a person's relationship to a cultural practice or tradition without exploring how that person negotiates between it and her other cultural and social influences. The second is that different people experience shared cultural traditions and social locations differently, as Greg Sarris has concluded in his ethnographic work with the Pomo Indians: "A Kashaya individual's ethnicity or sense of identity as a Kashaya Pomo Indian is dependent on how the individual in personal and social situations, consciously and unconsciously, negotiates and mediates a range of cultural and intercultural phenomena to establish and maintain a sense of self" (179). In much the same way, an individual reader's identity as a reader also depends upon the negotiations the reader makes within the social and cultural contexts he or she travels within. If we wish to understand the ways readers use reading, we must attend to cultural and social differences on an individual level, as John Caughey has argued concerning media relationships: "The interplay of these systems at the level of individual consciousness is crucial to an understanding of the actual complexities of media use" ("Gina" 129).

Since the reflexive turn, ethnographers have recognized the necessarily partial nature of their accounts and the ethical obligations this recognition brings.⁴ As Rosaldo explains, "the

social analyst's multiple identities at once underscore the potential for uniting an analytical with an ethical project and render obsolete the view of the utterly detached observer who looks down from on high" (194). To realize this potential when employing a method such as life history, which is based largely in the interview experience, the ethnographer must be constantly aware of her background and presuppositions and of the power dynamics inherent in the interview situation. By the mid-1990s, even introductory texts on fieldwork exhorted potential researchers to "build your theoretical analysis on what you discover is relevant in the actual worlds that you study" (Charmaz 335) and cautioned that "instead of forcing one's own categories on the data," qualitative studies that attend to cultural distinctions should instead analyze "how people--or texts--themselves classify and construct things" (Alasuutari 67-8). Applying this type of analysis on the level of the individual reader, combined with a self-reflexive ethnographer whose voice is present in the text, will allow studies of reading to fully realize the potential identified by Rosaldo.⁵

I first became aware that I was asking different questions about reading and literature while completing my Master's degree in English, which led to my seeking a doctoral program that would allow me to explore literature from an interdisciplinary standpoint. Although reading Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* during my first year in my new program was a revelation, I found myself wanting to know more about each woman in the study and her individual reading experiences. As I read additional contemporary accounts of reading experiences, each of which seemed to be organized around a category or group of readers, the same questions presented themselves to me: Who were each of these readers who made up these groups? How had their personal histories shaped their reading experiences? How had their

reading experiences changed over time? While the works often stressed similarities, I was interested in the differences. What made each reader's experiences unique?⁶

To begin to address these questions and insert the voice of contemporary individual readers into our inquires, I decided to conduct life history research with people who self-identify as avid readers, which I define loosely as anyone who considers reading to be an important part of her or his life. In order to avoid what I saw as some of the limitations placed upon considering the individual reader, a self-definition as an avid reader was the only criterion I used to determine which readers I would work with in all cases but one, and is now the only criterion I use for finding new participants.⁷

The readers I worked with in my initial study, upon which this article is based, were all found through personal connections in the greater Washington, D.C./Baltimore metropolitan area and were chosen primarily for practical considerations. In each case I had a contact who helped me find eligible readers, including the owners of an independent bookstore (now sadly closed) closely linked to my university department, professors at nearby universities, an acquaintance met at a holiday party, and a colleague in a book group. Practical considerations aside, from a methodological standpoint choosing participants from a social milieu similar to my own and with whom I have a personal connection can also lessen the potential for problems arising from the inequities inherent in the interview situation. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, through increasing the likelihood that the researcher will connect with and understand the person being interviewed, "social proximity and familiarity in effect provide two of the social conditions of 'non-violent' communication" (20). It goes without saying that my finding people in this manner will result in a closer connection with academia than the general public, but while many of these links were facilitated through academic connections, only one of the participants is directly affiliated with

the academy. More noteworthy, perhaps, is that each of the places I initially used to find readers can also be thought of as a site focused on book reading, which may reflect my predilection to define avid readers as those who read books, something I became aware of as I progressed in my research.⁸

My research with each reader is primarily conducted through a series of open-ended interviews, each lasting one to two hours, over an approximately six-month period.⁹ While I begin with a basic set of questions for the first interview, the information gathered during the research process determines the questions in each subsequent interview. Each interview is recorded (with the participant's permission) and fully transcribed. The location for each interview is determined by where the reader feels most comfortable, and thus in all cases but one, the first interview took place in a restaurant, while later interviews often moved to the participants' homes. I also ask each reader to keep a reading log for the duration of our initial series of interviews, and I read texts that they identify as central to their identity as a reader so that I can follow up with questions about these as well. After the initial interview period, I periodically communicate with each reader and plan to conduct another lengthier interview five years after the initial interview process with those readers willing to do so.

Participant observation also has a central role in my research and takes two forms. During my initial interviews, I noted that each reader placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of her or his personal books, which resulted in adding to my research an exploration of the organization of each reader's books, reading materials, and reading spaces in her or his home. Additionally, some of the people I work with identify sites beyond their homes as important to their self-construction as an avid reader. Thus, I accompanied one reader to one of her tri-

weekly visits to her independent bookstore and another to his book group and the annual GLBT science fiction conference he attends.

Because participants are chosen based solely upon the fact that they consider reading to be an important part of their lives, my research simultaneously emphasizes the socially and culturally contextual nature of reading, as well as how individualistic this cultural experience is for each reader. For example, with one reader, the intersections between his social location as a gay man and his participation in the science fiction community are very prevalent in his reading, while with another the negotiations between her position as an English professor and a lover of mystery novels is an important theme. Were I to begin by privileging any of these categories for everyone I worked with, I would miss what reveals itself to be important for each individual.

Through providing detailed examples of the intersections between reading and cultural influences, focusing on individual experiences of reading corroborates and complicates the conclusions reached by other scholars, makes clear the centrality of materiality to reading, and suggests new areas of research, such as the influences of space and time on reading. For example, attention to individual differences supports the conclusions of scholars such as Erin Smith, who emphasizes the significance of individual cultural differences in the ways women interact with mystery fiction, and Elizabeth Long and others who focus on how readers work within and against social hierarchies. Yet, even more promising than the ways my research enriches the arguments of such scholars are the new conclusions about reading that this method facilitates, which I will now articulate through an examination of my work with one reader, Jim.¹⁰

The Culturally Situated Individual Reader

Jim, the source of the quotation I use to open this article, is a white man in his late fifties who spent several years in the Peace Corps and now works in international development. Reading plays an important role in his life, from the way he defines himself, to what he does with his personal time, to his chosen profession. Most of his days begin and end with reading. He reads most mornings with breakfast, as well as periodicals “all the way in every day” and back during his commute on a train.¹¹ After dinner in the evenings, he settles in to read a book downstairs in his chair from “eight to ten, thereabouts” and finishes with “not more than fifteen minutes immediately before going to sleep” in bed. Yet, despite this schedule, he had the following to say about his current reading patterns: “How I would characterize my reading today? Well, first of all, I would say that I’m only reading a fraction as much as I care to. The work schedule is hectic and, you know, I’m lucky if I can devote two hours a day.” His schedule, which suggests that he generally reads between three and four hours a day, seems to contradict his assertion that he is “lucky” to be able to read two hours a day, but the idea that he is not reading as much as he would like came up repeatedly during our conversations.

As we can see, Jim’s current reading practices are intricately linked with the times and spaces he has available for reading and his practices shift to accommodate his current situation. Nowhere is this link clearer than during the three years he spent in the Peace Corps, which came up frequently in our conversations as an idealized period of time in his reading life. Though his reading resources were limited, his time for reading was copious, and this gave him the freedom to engage with reading in a way that is unique in his adult life. Jim’s description of his daily schedule in Gabon emphasizes why he feels that his opportunities for reading are now lacking:

There was a phase the first time I went to Africa when I was in the Peace Corps. I was building schools out in remote areas way, way out in the bush in central Africa. And, the typical work routine was up at sunrise, get out to the worksite, which is usually walking distance, get the crew going, put in a good solid four to five hours, and by noon shut it down because of the weather. Because the sun, it was just getting too hot. And after going to the river and getting cleaned up, I would then spend the rest of the day reading and writing. I'd have four to six hours of concentrated reading on a daily basis and I was reading lots of literature then. I amassed what I think was probably the largest library in Gabon in the late seventies/early eighties. And because I had so much time that I could devote to reading, I was able to read a much wider variety and went back to some of the types that I had enjoyed in high school and college, primarily literature as opposed to popular fiction.

Not only did he have more time for reading during this period in his life, but he was not trying to squeeze it in between other events. This daily period of "concentrated reading" enabled him to engage with different types of fiction than he usually does now or did during most other periods of time in his life, as he explains: "And I think because I did have the more concentrated time, it was easier to deal with a different level of reading, more difficult reading."

An analysis of the reading materials he brought to Gabon and collected while there makes it clear that he was not the only volunteer to consider this an ideal location for reading literature. Jim took his choice of reading materials seriously: "I brought over the dozen books that I was sure I could read and reread for the rest of my life if there was nothing else available." Though his space was limited when he returned, he also returned with these "original dozen." While he

does not remember what they all were, the ones he does remember are clearly canonical literary texts:

I can remember a couple of them. Ah, I think I've still got them. One was a collected works of Shakespeare. Then there were a couple of collections of e. e. cummings' poetry. And what else, let's see. [pause, thinking]. I think I also had a collection of possibly three works in one volume of Conrad. Yeah, yeah, yeah, there was the Shakespeare, Conrad, e.e. cummings.

As mentioned above, while in Gabon, Jim amassed a fairly substantial library collected from the books of other volunteers:

Most people had friends and family shipping them the odd book. On travels they would tend to pick up the odd book and, and everybody over the years would amass these small libraries that were then passed down to other volunteers. . . . I brought over the dozen books that I was sure I could read and reread for the rest of my life if there was nothing else available. Well everybody else had done the same thing, and I was able to travel around a lot while I was in Gabon, and whenever a volunteer was leaving, more often than not, I'd end up there and claim the library. And I would bring these back to my village. So, by the time I left, now extensive is certainly a relative term, but it was large in the local context. I don't know, I might have had, I would think I could have had 600 books by the time I left. And then I passed those on to volunteers.

Given this tendency, he had a fairly good idea about what other volunteers had brought with them, which seemed to mirror his choices in many ways:

Most of us loved to read. Most of us had done a few similar things, you know, we'd all been to college, we had all lived abroad, we all spoke another language, we were all interested in international affairs. We were all interested in construction. We had, there was a large overlap of interests. So, they were also, people were reading a lot of things that I would have chosen otherwise even had I had a much larger selection. As it was, they did a lot of the work for me. They did the triage and I just grabbed the books and then enjoyed them.

In Jim's experience, volunteers seemed to bring over more literature than whatever was popular at the time, just as he had, and among the individual authors he mentioned are Faulkner, Camus, and Hemingway. While more research would have to be done to establish that this trend goes beyond his experience and, if so, why other readers tended to do this as well, his experiences alone suggest that we must consider the combination of space and time if we want to understand how and why people choose to engage with literary, or any other, texts.

An exploration of Jim's life history also makes clear the complicated ways that reading intersects with his other cultural traditions, as his career in international development exemplifies. His work and reading are intricately linked in space, time, and content: the spaces he has available for reading depend on where his work takes him; his time for reading is restricted or increased depending on his work situation; and his reading in preparation for "going out" to a country also spills over into his leisure reading, belying the idea that work and leisure reading are easily separated. As we saw with his experiences at home and during the Peace Corps, the type of reading he is able to engage in depends heavily on how his time is divided when he is working:

In the course of almost three weeks out there [in Egypt], the first five or six days I was at this conference and was too busy to get more than fifteen or twenty minutes a day, I just wasn't able to, and then it dawned on me, I thought "well, why is it taking so long to move through these books?" And then I realized "oh well, I also have three *Economists*, and four *New Yorkers*, and, and two or three other things that I'm reading.

Here we see a mirroring of his choice of reading materials while at home; when this particular work situation limited his reading to a few minutes a day, he tended towards periodicals, as he does during his commute, and not the books that he tends to read when he has lengthier times for engagement. This conversation also reveals some ambivalence on his part about how to classify his periodical reading. As we saw earlier in his discussion of his daily reading habits, though Jim typically reads four hours a day, he seems to privilege two of these hours. A closer look at his enumeration of his daily reading habits reveals that these two hours map almost directly onto the amount of time he has for daily book reading. It may be common sense that readers would classify periodical and book reading differently, and perhaps prioritize one over the other, but to understand how and why they do this and what these distinctions may reveal about contemporary reading practices requires a methodology that provides access to the nuances of how readers define and work through these distinctions.

Of equal importance are the intersections between Jim's choice of career and his identity as a reader, which he sees as intimately linked: "I'm conjuring up images of people and names and virtually everyone I can think of, particularly those I know best in the field, are all avid readers." He then offered the following to explain why:

If you're interested in this kind of work, by definition you have to be interested in the world, history, geography, current events, languages, cultures, politics, anthropology. You've got to be interested in all that stuff. If you're not, what on earth do you do it for? People aren't in it for the money. . . . They're into it because they have an appreciation for those eight or ten or twelve areas that I just ticked off, and I think if you're interested in those, you're a reader. You have to be. You have to read.

Working with readers like Jim, who choose professions based in part upon the opportunities they offer for reading, forces a reconsideration of the efficacy of relying on the distinction between work and leisure reading, particularly in light of the fact that many in these professions consider their jobs as important components in defining themselves as readers. Further, while reading can be clearly specified as work- or leisure-oriented, the middle ground is also significant, as suggested by some of the materials Jim reads before starting and after returning from his work in a new country. For example, he frequently uses his leisure reading time to "revisit" countries he has worked in and to prepare for going to new places.

A brief overview of Jim's primary domestic reading space also provides a vivid visual example of the connection between reading and other cultural influences. All of our interviews were conducted at Jim's home in the room where he does most of his reading. The shelved books in this room are primarily those he has read recently and histories, particularly of Africa, and it is the fiction that goes when he has to reorganize for space reasons: "The Tom Wolfe, things of that sort, might move that out and try to keep more of the history and in particular, the Africana, nearby." His interest in Africana is also reflected in the artifacts he exhibits in his

entrance hall and in this room, and his shelves contain a mixture of books and these artifacts (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Reading Chair & Bookshelves

When I asked him why he chose to keep the books on Africa nearby, he responded, “I think it is probably just because of my familiarity with Africa. I feel at home there--in a few countries, anyway. And having the books nearby just feels comfortable and reminds me of places I enjoy.” Looking at the way Jim has arranged his most commonly used reading space to surround himself both with writings on Africa and with Africana helps us see their importance in his life and

emphasizes their significance in his reading life. He has continued his connection with Africa through his current work and returns there also through his reading interests. That he maintains his ties to Africa, the place of his halcyon days of reading, largely through his collection of Africana in his living and reading spaces and through reading itself indicates how intricately linked his reading is to his other cultural practices. Jim's experiences make it very clear that studies of reading as a cultural practice must be contextualized within the day-to-day lives of readers.

Conclusions

Through simultaneously allowing for a culturally and socially situated reader while emphasizing the individuality of each reader's experiences, life history methods offer us a way to understand how individuals use reading in their daily lives and a protection against recreating the myth of the solitary reader. While past studies have privileged the importance of genre or shared cultural traits, beginning with individual readers reveals space and time as significant factors in what is read and why. At different times in his life, what Jim primarily reads has differed, from a preference for literature during the Peace Corps, to periodicals and popular fiction, including mysteries, while traveling for work, to a combination of many fiction and nonfiction genres at home. Exploring his reading habits without a consideration of how space and time influence them would give us an incomplete picture, as would privileging any genre he enjoys or book reading over periodicals. Further, as his primary reading space reveals, our understanding of Jim as a reader would be limited by privileging any one of his cultural traditions, current or past, over another. Jim's involvement in the Peace Corps is just as important as his current job in international development in understanding how he constructs himself as a reader. As these

examples show, what life history methods make most apparent is the contextually situated nature of reading--Jim is no lone reader oblivious to the world while isolated in his book.

Our understanding of reading has benefited tremendously from the work of scholars who focus on groups of readers, formalized or not, but the fact remains that most readers do not belong to any formalized groups structured around reading, and the tendency to categorize readers for academic purposes limits our ability to understand their individual differences. As we continue to consider how cultural definitions of reading are shifting in this era of increased critical attention to social aspects of reading, of large-scale national surveys on the status and future fate of reading, and of the profound impact new technologies are having on practices of reading, we would be wise to listen to the voices of individuals whose reading practices we seek to understand.

Notes

¹ Besides Radway, *Reading the Romance*, and Long, see Berggren, Bobo, and Reed, among others.

² For further discussion of physical book clubs in the United States, see Long and Gregory. In the United Kingdom, see Allington and Swan. For a discussion of participants in both “face-to-face” and virtual book clubs, see Sedo.

³ The concept of cultural tradition, which is commonly used among ethnographers, is usefully summarized by John Caughey as “a system of meaning that includes its own vocabulary and beliefs and its own set of rules for acting in the world. But it is a smaller-scale system, one among many ways of thinking and acting that individuals encounter” (*Negotiation Cultures* 14 and elsewhere for further explanations). As is the case for the readers included in my study, individuals often participate in multiple cultural traditions with conflicting meaning systems and must negotiate between them. For examples of studies of readers focused on a shared cultural traditions, see Radway’s work with romance readers and Reed’s more recent work with members of the Henry Williamson literary society. Studies organized around aspects of readers’ social location include Bobo’s work with black women readers.

⁴ See Clifford for further explanation.

⁵ In part one of *A Feeling for Books*, which presents an “ethnographic account of the editorial practices employed by the in-house editors at the [Book-of-the-Month Club] during the years of 1985-1988” (14), Radway takes steps towards this type of analysis by situating herself in relation to the Book-of-the-Month Club, but her analysis still tends towards looking at the editors as a group rather than as individuals.

⁶ While contemporary individual readers are largely absent from scholarship, book historians have explored the reading histories of individual historical readers through the use of both public and private documents. For a classic example, see Carlo Ginzburg's study of Menocchio the sixteenth-century miller. In his more recent work on the reading history of seventeenth-century gentleman Sir William Drake, Kevin Sharpe had a remarkable amount of personal data to work with, including "commonplace books, a journal, and annotated manuscripts and printed texts" (75). Yet, as Gordon Kelly argued in "Literature and the Historian," "the act of reading in our society does not typically generate systematic written records that are likely to persist and that may be available for the use of future historians" (101). Though many of the goals of scholars working with historical readers and mine are similar, the exceptional nature of the evidence necessary to produce such work is what most distinguishes it from mine. Using life history methods to explore contemporary reading practices can help us capture the ephemeral aspects of most daily reading practices, which are unlikely to be recorded even by the most meticulous readers.

⁷ The one exception to this was my choice to work with an English professor, which was motivated by my desire to examine how professional and personal reading intersected for members of this profession. As is commonly acknowledged by a growing number of scholars interested in reading practices, theoretical conceptions of reading are often based on the professional reading practices of those in the academy. See, for example, Livingston, who argues in his analysis of the critical work produced by the academic community that "for the critical community, discoveries of reading are, inextricably, discoveries concerning how the community reads, and theories of reading are, inextricably, theories about those practices of reading" (145). See also the introduction to *Reading Sites*. While this did turn out to be a fruitful

area of inquiry, I had to be particularly vigilant against allowing my presuppositions about the importance of this distinction to influence my interpretations.

⁸ Indeed, all of the avid readers I have worked with thus far are book readers, but this finding may reveal more about my research processes than any inherent connection between avid reading and book reading.

⁹ Like Barton and Hamilton in their study of literacy in Lancaster, England, I found that while initial interviews are useful for pointing to future areas of inquiry, one interview alone is insufficient, and sometimes misleading, if we wish to understand the complex ways people use reading and make it meaningful within their everyday lives.

¹⁰ As with all of my participants, an alias has been provided to protect Jim's identity.

¹¹ All quotations from Jim have been transcribed from oral interviews

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