READING WHEN THEY DON'T HAVE TO: INSIGHTS FROM ADULT COMIC BOOK READERS

by

STERGIOS BOTZAKIS

(Under the Direction of Donna E. Alvermann)

ABSTRACT

This interview study set in a southeastern U.S. city used de Certeauian (1984), Foucauldian (1972/1969, 1979/1975) and Bakhtinian (1981, 1986) theories to investigate how twelve adult comic book readers' in- and out-of-school literacies affected how they developed lifelong reading practices as well as how they incorporated reading into their lives. Participants described (1) what the act of reading comic books provided for them, (2) reasons they gave for engaging in lifelong reading practices, and (3) how their literacy choices affected their lives socially and academically. Data gathered in a series of interviews, including an individual interview, a focus group interview, and a follow-up interview, were analyzed using meaning interpretation (Kvale, 1996) to examine readers' utterances, particularly the discourses, strategies, and tactics that were intertwined in their reading practices. Participants described a variety of functions that reading comic books held for them, including entertainment, an artifact for cultural inquiry, a focus for critical reflections, a temporary shelter from worries, and/or a companion when lonely. The analyses of my participants' particular reading practices as poaching and the attention to reading practices called into question the definitions of texts, readers, and school, concepts that have been central to education practice and research. This

research project produced a different version of reading than much of the cognitive psychological work that has historically made up reading education research (Hruby, 2001), providing an example of how social constructionist and postmodern theories could be combined to explore literacy in ways that pay more attention to practices than processes.

INDEX WORDS: Education, Popular Culture, Comic Books, Reading, Social Constructionism, Bakhtin, Foucault, de Certeau, Adult Literacy, Lifelong Literacy, School, Discourses, Fan Cultures, Qualitative Interview Research

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DEDICATION

For Dad who bought me my first comic books and Mom who didn’t throw them out.

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CHAPTER ONE

SCHOOL, POPULAR CULTURE, AND READING

As a middle school teacher at an urban Mid-Atlantic middle school, I noticed a pattern in my classes. Although a number of my students stated that they hated reading and showed little or no interest in completing schoolwork or in reading anything assigned for class, I noticed that they did read things outside of the curriculum and that they often brought these items to school to read at lunch time. They read magazines such as *GamePro*, *Vibe*, or *Field and Stream*, and some were avid comic book readers. I began to engage the comic book readers in discussions about those texts, and I noticed that students who sat mute during classroom discussions of literature suddenly became animated and talkative when discussing the adventures of their favorite comic book characters. Although it was not recognized or valorized in typical academic settings, they were engaged in literate activity.

Comic books are not largely regarded as acceptable reading matter by many teachers and curricula, so they are not part of the recognized literary canon in schools (Hermes 1995; Versaci, 2001). Additionally, reading comic books can place students in marginal positions regarding social and academic status, especially as they grow older (Jones, 2002; Norton, 2003; Pustz, 1999). Because other students may perceive comic book readers as immature, they may be picked on or shunned by peers. Students I taught smuggled comics books into school and covertly read them behind a textbook or notebook. Certainly, students were not permitted to use them in any

academic sense; it would be unacceptable to use comics for book reports or other school activities.

Comic books have long been considered a form of low culture, something which has no place in the classroom because they have little or no value as literature (Wertham, 1953; Wright, 2001). However, recently there has been a move toward bringing them into school curricula in various ways, as content area texts (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Frey & Fischer, 2004), as a genre for student composition (Bitz, 2004; Dyson, 1997; Khurana, 2005; Morrison, Bryan & Chilcoat, 2002) and as motivational texts for reluctant readers (Freeman, 1997/1998; Norton, 2003; Toppo, 2005; Xu, 2005). In Maryland, state superintendent Nancy Grasmick has instituted a pilot project incorporating comic books into the curriculum in order to tap into students' interests and motivate them into becoming enthusiastic readers (Mui, 2004). Content area texts such as Ottaviani, Barr, Fleener and Fradon's (2003) *Dignifying Science,* a graphic compilation of stories celebrating contributions of women scientists, were accompanied by teacher-directed and skill-based activities and assessments. I obtained one example of such an assessment at the 2005 International Reading Association (IRA) Conference in San Antonio, Texas (Newkirk, 2005, see Figures 1 & 2).

Steve Geppi, president of Diamond Distributors, opened up the IRA session (Newkirk, 2005) with a tale of how comic books had motivated him to read when he was a child. Although there had been an attempt to connect to students' popular culture interests with attractive reading material in this session, the assessment presented by Jennifer Palmer and Alberta Porter, two Maryland public school

teachers, reverted to school as usual and missed the point of having comic books included at all. The features that were intended to be accessible and engaging were put aside, and comic books were treated like any other school text, reduced to a multiple-choice format. This disconnection looks like another case of what Ronnie, a participant in my pilot study, described, namely that "popular culture is something that school didn't know what to do with" (Botzakis, 2004).

Background of Problem

My research topic came out of a conversation about texts and school that occurred one Friday afternoon when I was still a middle school teacher. As some fellow teachers and I were talking over beers at happy hour, one of my colleagues asked me, "When was the last time you finished a book and said, 'All right, now I am ready to make a diorama?'" This question struck me as silly at the time, but it made me reflect on the ways that school affects how people interact with texts.

Although usually undertaken in the interests of teaching some point or skill, typical pedagogical reading practices often warp how students perceive reading as an activity and can significantly alter interactions with texts. For instance, Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) conducted studies that focused on the talk that occurs during classroom book discussions. They demonstrated that even though teachers intended to structure classroom discussions where students could analyze and relate texts to their own lives, classroom talk was more teacher- or text-centered, more like the initiate-respond-explain (IRE) format (Mehan, 1979). Marshall et al.'s (1995) point was not to denigrate the IRE pattern, as they acknowledged its usefulness for some pedagogical practices, but to point out that engaging in texts predominantly in

that manner put an emphasis on a certain mode of reading where texts were treated as sources of information to be mined and then put aside. IRE discussions were not particularly conducive for getting students to connect texts to their lives or make meaningful personal connections, just to answer questions and move onto the next text. Marshall et al. (1995) found that the IRE discussions were not encouraging students to interact with texts in extended ways.

Marshall et al. (1995) also examined other contexts where book discussions took place, including adult book clubs. In the interactions between adults, they found that more personal connections were made, more debate occurred than in the classroom IRE discussions and more questions were generated by participants themselves. There were also more evenly distributed patterns of participation, and not a situation where one person dominated the talk. What Marshall et al. (1995) underscored in their analyses was that conventional, expert-driven discussions of texts were not the eventual outcome of every literate interaction. Different modes of interaction were possible, and they suggested that the practices that they highlighted might be included in school settings to promote reading engagement.

Reading has often related as a life-changing experience; the notion of reading having a profound impact on people's lives is not a new one. Some researchers have interviewed people about the texts that influenced their lives the most, getting varied responses about what features of books made the most impression (Sabine & Sabine, 1983). Sumara (1996) took a slightly different angle in his analysis of lifelong reading practices, looking not at specific texts but at the act of reading with particular attention to "an inquiry into the relations among forms, readers, and overlapping

contexts of reading" (p. 1). His conception of reading literature was a series of small, transformative moments over time, embodied experiences that depended greatly on relationships among people, texts, and contexts. Sumara (1996) indicated that what he was studying was "life that includes the practice of reading" (p. 1).

My dissertation project was an examination of how one group of readers, adult comic book fans, incorporated various types of literacy in their lives and defined literacy for their own purposes. It is a look at how literacy practices have played out in adult comic book readers' lives, and I make connections from their practices to how texts are used in scholastic settings. In a similar vein to Sumara (1996), I want to look into what constitutes a "life that includes the practice of reading" (p. 1) to suggest how textual interactions in schools might be conducted, but including texts that are not privileged as literary.

Problem Statement

Lifelong literacy is an oft-cited goal of literacy education, one appearing in multiple textbooks and pieces of research literature. One educational textbook, Smith and Headley's (2004) second edition of *The Lifelong Reader*, divided reading into three main areas: the first part made reference to reading strategies such as identifying main ideas, making inferences and acquiring new vocabulary; the second pertained to reading in disciplines. That part included chapters on "Techniques for Remembering Textbook Information," "Reading in the Humanities," and other "how-to read" sections on different subject areas such as science and business disciplines. The last part, entitled "Reading in Everyday Life," covered a wide array of reading materials, with chapters offering strategies on how to read graphics, print media, electronic

media, contemporary fiction and nonfiction, and even personal mail. Many study questions were incorporated into the text, and the authors created a prescriptive portrait of lifelong reading as a process that can be laid out, systematically taught, and mastered. Implicit in Smith and Headley's (2004) book was also the idea of a canon, that certain books were important merely because they were part of the curriculum.

The systematic teaching of reading education as distinct skills has been delineated by educational policies, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), and often encouraged if not required to the detriment of students and teachers (Meyer, 2002). In this context, education is driven by "a very narrow view of competencies that can force many students to leave knowledge of their homes and neighborhoods—the discourse they know with confidence—at the school door" (Tyner, 1998, p. 30). Requiring students to put aside their home discourses and to read texts that might not concern them or their lives can be detrimental and set those students on a path to failure (Gee, 1991, 1996). To address these potentially detrimental situations, Hull and Schultz (2001) advocated awareness and combinations of in- and out-of-school literacies to honor students' home discourses while also schooling them in academics. In my dissertation project, I identify how combinations of in-and out-of-school literacies have been practiced by adults and examine how they might be useful to inform educational practices. This interview study set in a southeastern U.S. city used de Certeauian (1984), Foucauldian (1969/1972, 1975/1979) and Bakhtinian (1981, 1986) theories to investigate how adult comic book readers' in- and out-of-school literacies

affected how adults developed lifelong reading practices as well as how they incorporated reading into their lives.

Research Questions

Specifically, I sought to address questions of what roles texts have played in the lives of self-identified comic book readers in terms of their academic and social development. Put simply, why did people read when they were not required to? I explored what guided participants' text selections while also looking at some of the outcomes of their choices in terms of school and community relations. I investigated how reading comic books affected their academic or social endeavors to see what reading comic books had to offer in pedagogical terms of traditional positive outcomes, such as increased vocabulary or content knowledge, and what comic book reading offered in terms of their readers' scholastic or personal growth. I examined how reading comic books affected their social relationships because social dimensions of development were at least as important as people's academic growth (Dewey, 1916/1997).

Implications of my project add insights to conceptions of what motivated adult comic book readers to read and why some became lifelong readers. These considerations were examined via these questions:

1. What does the act of reading comic books provide for these readers?
2. What reasons do they give for engaging in lifelong reading practices?
3. How have their literacy choices affected their lives socially and academically?

Theoretical Framework

In the course of my dissertation work, I drew on the work of three major theorists, de Certeau, Foucault, and Bakhtin, because I saw their works informing the meaningful use of language. I saw de Certeau's (1984) idea of strategies and tactics, Foucault's definition of *discourse* (1969/1972), and Bakhtin's (1986) notion of a *chain of utterances* playing large roles in my theorizing and in my data analyses.

De Certeau and the Practices of Everyday Life

For me, the life that includes reading is related to de Certeau's (1984) "practices of everyday life." His work contained metaphors of conflict that drew on Marxist views that there were two forces at work, one "powerful" and one "weak," much like the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The powerful controlled the means of production; they tried to get the weak to go along with their views. They practiced "strategies." That is, they tried to propagate what Lyotard (1984) called metanarratives, ways of thinking that center around some ideal such as God, Man, or Transcendental Truth. The powerful did this because it was in their best interest to get the weak to support their power structure and to maintain the status quo so they could keep their higher position.

In order to maintain control, certain spaces were created such as "cities, shopping malls, schools, workplaces, and houses" (Fiske, 1989, p. 32). Through controlling the physical spaces where people interacted, the powerful set limits on what could be done, the paths that could be traveled, the areas where congregation was possible, and the types of activities that could take place. The powerful disciplined the weak in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1975/1979). They tried to

inculcate into the weak that the system was right and true, that this was the only way to live a life, and that the existing power structures were justified, natural, and decreed. However, the weak were not powerless in this hegemonic environment. They had recourse to the strategies of the powerful in the form of "tactics" of their own. Recognizing that people could be "sly as a fox and twice as quick," de Certeau (1984) spoke of how people "made do" (p. 29) with limited resources or spaces. People could have been given spaces in which to live, work, and play but still subvert the prevailing culture. Students in school sat and appeared docile but were engaged in passing notes or in defacing textbooks or desks; office workers appeared busy but took company time to write personal letters or to take company materials such as paper and use them for non-work purposes. Various social groups engaged in tactics when they used spaces for purposes other than those for which they were designed.

De Certeau (1984) identified reading as a tactic when he called it a form of poaching and explained that "readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write" (p. 174). Texts were tools for readers' use in this conception. Words on pages were not simply the province of the author. Readers were not just the simple recipient of the transformative material from texts; they had agency to act on their own behalf, using texts (or not) in the course of their lives.

Foucault and Discourses

Discourse has been usually used in references to linguistics, with an emphasis on oral language. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1969/1972), discourse was not simply limited to the use of language although it was situated in language and

was often conveyed through that medium. Foucault's way of looking at discourse was as "a field of strategic possibilities" (p. 37). In a manner of speaking it was like the rules of a game, with a finite number of actions a person can take within a particular social system. Social institutions, including religion, class structures, and gender roles were credited with the creation of wide scale *discipline* (Foucault, 1975/1979) that enforces societal rules and concretizes discourses in ways that constricted people's behaviors. These systemic structures made certain ways of thinking and acting possible and guided people's choices to a certain degree. In this conception of disciplining (Foucault, 1975/1979), discourses were involved in decisions people made in relation to others and also in reasons why people said particular things or acted in particular manners. Also, because of the variety of social structures that affected people's lives, Foucault also recognized that there was not a unitary discourse that guided all human beings, rather there were a number of discourses at play in social systems.

Foucault (1969/1972) defined discourses in a negative space, telling the reader what they were not. Discourses were not defined by reference to a "principle of unity of laws," to "the situation of the speaker," to "the primary ground of experience, nor to the *a priori* authority of knowledge: but we seek the rules of its formation in discourse itself" (p. 79). Discourses did not create themselves but were "always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized" (p. 25). Discourses were what came about through human interaction, and whereas the origins of discourses were largely out of the control of the people taking part in them, there were ways in which power relations could be

manipulated in oppressive or unjust manners. In this dissertation, I examined some of these configurations of discourses concerning how language and literacy were constructed around their textual interactions.

Foucault and his theories on power relations in society focused specifically on the issues of power and discourse. The idea that social practices contribute much to the formation of a person's identity was very persuasive to me, as was the notion that much of what we do was dictated by discursive structures. I have thought much of what we do was disciplined behavior, which made it important to examine the social institutions that participated in propagating discourses, particularly given that these institutions could be oppressive to certain groups in terms of race, gender, social class, sexuality, or any other number of factors. Discourses have a large role in such examination, because they "are tactical elements or blocks in the field of force relations," but simultaneously "there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy" (Foucault, 1969/1972, p. 102). Through my analyses, I looked for the ways that language pointed toward how social structures functioned and also at how language was used in supportive and/or contradictory ways.

Bakhtin and Chains of Utterances

Foucault wrote about the contradictions that existed in discourses, and I found in the work of Bakhtin a satisfying explanation for the existence of those contradictions in his theories of language. Bakhtin's (1986) unit of language use was the utterance, a meaningful language interaction of varying duration, and "any utterance is a link in a very complex organized chain of other utterances" (p. 69).

Utterances, which included texts, have effects on each other as well as social actions; the chain spread in a horizontal fashion, creating complex web of connections. Because of the connections between time, space, participants, and place, the context in which language was situated became very important. What was acceptable in one context may not be in another, and meaning can be greatly affected as well. For example, my saying something such as, “It’s cool,” could have very different interpretations, depending on with whom I was speaking, what was happening, and where I was at the time of the utterance. Because all meaning was contextual in Bakhtin’s conception, the attention was simultaneously called to local uses of language and the larger situations in which they occurred.

Throughout Bakhtin’s work, the contexts of words were not simply isolated and subtractive, but connected and additive. Bakhtin (1981) noted that words have “tastes,” that “contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) were inevitable in the word” and that any individual word smacks “of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions” (p. 293). The contextual features of language were what made interpretation and various meanings possible. The links Bakhtin created between language, context, and social activity were also applicable to addressing everyday practices, such as classroom pedagogy (Fecho & Botzakis, in press), and were the groundwork for the data collection and analyses used in my study.

Because utterances were replete with references, “every conversation is full of transmissions and interpretations of other people's words” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 338). This opened up the possibilities of connecting multiple contexts through the process

of interpretation because multiple discourses were always at play simultaneously. This broadened conception of language allowed researchers to examine social institutions and practices and also allowed for a variety of interpretations and theorizing to occur. Pertaining to my research, the contexts of my participants could not be removed from their words, and those multiple contexts brought with them their own sets of meanings and understandings.

A contemporary educational research project that used Bakhtinian theories in conjunction with a postmodern framework to analyze data was Tobin's (2000) work on children and media literacy. In speaking about how the children he interviewed spoke, Tobin (2000) noted that "all speech carries echoes of the voices of others, [and that] language is inherently citational, hybridized, and double-voiced" (p. 20). As a result of that, when he wrote about the often contradictory and complex things his participants said, he did not attempt to completely rectify what they said with his analyses and instead gave a number of possible interpretations. He saw the children's responses as reflective of the mixed opinions of the broader culture in response to media images, adding that "given our society's intellectual confusion, ideological divisiveness, and hypocrisy about media effects, why would we expect what children to say on this topic to be otherwise?" (p. 22). He resisted the typical research convention of presenting very specific findings, preferring to leave the messiness of his participants' responses in his work. He adhered to his theoretical framework in analyzing and representing his data, leaving the multiple “tastes” (Bakhtin, 1981) intact. In my own analyses and representations of the data, I also tried to preserve differences and complexities.

Summary and Conclusion

The theories of de Certeau (1984), Foucault (1969/1972, 1975/1979), and Bakhtin (1981, 1986) contributed to the theoretical basis of my study. De Certeau's (1984) notion of strategies and tactics gave me a means to examine individuals' social practices, here particularly in relation to reading practices. Foucault's (1969/1972) discourses provided a larger frame for the discussion of strategies and tactics, as they spoke to larger societal structures that preceded and informed the practices of everyday life. Bakhtin's (1986) chain of utterances provided an even wider frame, where context, defined by time, space, people, and events, spoke to individual language acts while simultaneously connecting them all. I took these theories together to create a context for the study of language via a chain that connected language experiences. Then I moved to a more specific description of societal influences via discourses that spoke to how structural institutions affected language experiences. Finally I shifted to a more local level where individuals' actions in relation to structures could be examined via the ideas of strategies and tactics.

The analyses I performed using these three theorists' work dealt with the reading practices of adult comic book readers. Encouraging students to read and include reading as an integral part of their lives has been an explicit goal in education, but the manners in which textual engagement has occurred can be stilted, discouraging, and even arcane. Efforts to include popular genres of text in school would not be particularly motivating in terms of encouraging long-term engagements if the practices surrounding activity and assessment were not also modified (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

I endeavored in this study of adult comic book readers to see how these individuals have maintained their interest and involvement in reading. Speaking to how schooled reading practices might be modified required an exploration of how reading has been theorized and practiced, and a review of the research on scholastic and popular culture reading constituted my Chapter Two. Chapter Three delineated how I took up language theorists, including Gee (1996), Bakhtin (1981, 1986), and Sumara (1996), and coupled social constructionist and postmodern theories in my interview research methodology. I discussed how my participants used reading for multiple functions in Chapter Four, with close attention to how reading was both part of their identity kits (Gee, 1991) and tactically (de Certeau, 1984) deployed. Finally, I concluded in Chapter Five with a discussion of how adult comic book readers' practices spoke to the field of language and literacy education. Common features of their reading engagement could speak to practices that could be considered in creating pedagogical spaces and practices (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In the next chapter, I will review research on how people have chosen to include reading in their lives.

CHAPTER TWO

THE USE OF PLEASURE READING

"Reading anything, basically, is good for a person" (R. Antilles, Interview, April 12, 2004).

In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault (1984/1985) described a history of particular western experiences by detailing how certain terms and practices have intermingled to create many commonsense notions, such as sexuality, insanity, or justice. He examined how the ideas of self-improvement and self-awareness have played out over time and become taken for granted. Although Foucault's (1984/1985) work on the use of pleasure focused primarily on sexual practices, the practice of developing self-awareness and self-control through moderation has been incorporated into western discourses in many ways. Greco-Roman culture involved practicing "arts of existence" where people created "rules of conduct" and also sought "to transform themselves" into the best possible versions of themselves (Foucault, 1984/1985, p. 10). Accompanying these arts were the moral goals of trying to become self-aware while also changing the self into an "ethical subject" (p. 28) who would be the optimal citizen. These goals required that people "monitor, test, improve, and transform" themselves (p. 28) much in the same way that more recent practices of democracy have espoused (New London Group, 1996; Tyner, 1998).

Key within these "arts of existence" was the practice of moderation; maintaining a mastery of one's appetites and pleasures was especially important so

that a person would not get carried away and become unproductive but would "rule the desires and the pleasures" (p. 70) in their lives. Reading books for pleasure and self-improvement (Farr, 2004; Long, 2003; Nell, 1988) has become one of the social practices closely associated with the arts of existence. Furthermore, many thinkers and writers have delineated what should count as meaningful and productive reading material for legitimate reading purposes (Hirsh, 1988; Plato, 390 BCE; Rooney, 2005). R. Antilles's (Interview, April 12, 2004) statement about the "good" in reading linked up with the idea of reading as a worthwhile, self-improving activity but in a more generically inclusive way. He represented a contested viewpoint in the debate about what counted as productive reading practices when he spoke about the arbitrariness of text choices. Typically, discussions about texts have included tastes and hierarchies of worth (Fiske, 1989; Long, 2003; Rooney, 2005).

In the review that follows I explored another side of the debate about textual worth. I reviewed research about the roles reading has played in people's lives. From there, I focused on research about people engaging in nonrequired reading. I then examined how those two bodies of research applied to comic book readers, a loosely affiliated group that engaged in largely ill-regarded reading for its own sake. There was a good amount of research that spoke to Antilles's claims about reading; readers have found productive uses for typically denigrated texts. The research on reading comic books had many features that dovetailed with descriptions of other, more typically acceptable, types of reading. Reading popular culture texts, including comic books, can have moral outcomes similar to more typically respected literary reading. Because of these similarities, I began this review with an exploration of different

iterations of reading before moving into the more specific topic of comic book reading.

Reading, Social Practices, and Identity

Writing about the role reading plays in peoples' lives requires a definition of what reading is. Reading has been associated with the concept of literacy, but literacy itself has had a number of different incarnations, each bound up with social relations. Literacy has been defined variably as being the ability to speak and sing, the ability to orate publicly, the ability to sign one's name, and the ability to read a sentence (The University of Kansas Students Tutoring for Literacy, n.d.). The latter abilities of writing and reading were especially bound into public practices such as land ownership and voter registration, and those definitions were used to limit access to those practices. Just as culture can determine what counts as literacy, so too can culture "construct what counts as reading and who counts as a reader" (Alvermann, 2001, p. 676). Variously, reading can be used for scanning or comprehending print text, tracking animal footprints, recognizing a person's expressions and gestures, divining a fortune by examining tea leaves or palms, determining the age of geographic formations using rock strata, distinguishing amino acid patterns in DNA, and understanding the world (Freire, 1970; Manguel, 1997). Reading, for me, is bound up in identity and social practices. Reading is a practice where people use texts and to explore, experience, question, and gain advantages in their social worlds. For my dissertation study, I used the works of Gee (1991, 1996), Purves (1998), Sumara (1996), and Fiske (1989) to delineate further what I meant by the term reading.

Reading and Identity Kits

Sociolinguistics has been a field where a number of theories of language and literacy have been examined with an eye toward social practices and identity. Gee (1996) contributed insights into sociocultural connections in language and literacy research. He gathered examples of spoken and written language from a variety of sources, including school activities with teachers and young students, young adults speaking to their parents and partners, various interviewees, and his own child. He performed discourse analyses on these various texts, examining their grammar, syntax, and semantic features with an eye to social, political, and cultural contexts. Comparing and contrasting the analyses of these multiple texts, Gee (1991) developed theories about how language functioned in society, a notion that revolved around his conception of D/discourse.

Gee (1991, 1996) expanded on Foucault's (1969/1972) notion of discourse as a set of rules that linked language, institutions, and social relationships and also incorporated features that spoke to de Certeau's (1984) notions of strategies and tactics. Gee (1996) divided the concept of discourse into two versions, one lower-case, the other upper-case. Lower-case discourses were described as specific behaviors, "ways of being in the world" (p. 127) that included language, gestures, clothing, values, and beliefs. Abstractly speaking, they were specific actions and features stripped of their meaning. In conjunction with lower-case discourses, upper-case Discourses were the sets of rules that dictated "how to act, talk, and often write" (p. 127). These rules were tied to notions of identity and related to a complex system of social connections. Discourse involved following certain social conventions to

"'pull off' being a culturally specific sort of 'everyday' person" (Gee, 2005, p. 7). Discourses included the myriad rules that constituted social identities. Gee stated that practicing a Discourse included being a convincing member of a social group, whether it is a regular at a bar, an award winning physicist, or an avid hip-hop fan. These rules gave meaning to and also dictated how to use various discourses.

D/discourses were always bundled together. Gee (1996) emphasized that the division of lower-case and upper-case was artificial and only separated the terms to make his academic arguments. An example of the intertwining of D/discourse can be seen in making eye contact. As a behavior, making eye contact is an example of a discourse that belongs to a number of Discourses. Depending on the context of the person making eye contact, the Discourses that constitute her/his social identity, making eye contact can be used variously to insult, ask a question, indicate attention, or show sexual interest. Gee (1991) likened Discourses to "identity kits" (p. 3). In a manner of speaking, big D Discourses were kits that contained the little d discourses.

Gee's (1991, 1996) concept of Discourses as "identity kits" resembled Foucault's (1969/1972) use of discourses in that both spoke of how language was used to order social worlds and affect people's actions. This conception of "identity kits" included the functions that social institutions played in constructing what counted as literacy as well as in affecting how people spoke, wrote, and took on social roles. Discourses were not quickly assumed however; they could not simply be learned. Rather, they came to be formed by the process of acquisition, "a process of acquiring something (usually, subconsciously) by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching" (Gee,

1996, p. 138). The acquisition of a primary discourse took place from a very early age and continued over time. One learned about customs, common household items, and the other mundane features of their lives. By extension, "learning to read [was] always learning some aspect of some discourse" (Gee, 1991, p. 6), and literate activity was very much bundled up in identity. Learning to read in one's primary discourse could lead to difficulties if those practices were not consistent with reading practices performed in formal school settings. Acquiring secondary discourses was described as being more difficult, as certain ingrained behaviors, feelings, and thoughts might be at odds with learning and acquisition.

In speaking about the variety of Discourses, Gee (1996) also gestured toward de Certeau's (1984) notions of tactics and strategies when he wrote of the existence of multiple "primary discourses" (p.7, 1991) and social conditions where non-dominant groups had to develop their own practices to get by. Gee's (1996) upper-case Discourse was defined as

> a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts', of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network", or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful "role." (Gee, 1996, p. 131)

Gee's (1996) definition accounted for multiple Discourses in the world, with some more privileged in certain circumstances than others. There were Dominant Discourses that led "to social goods in a society" (p. 132); those Discourses allowed more access to capital, power, and prestige. This disparity could be advantageous for

some. A person familiar with the Dominant Discourse more likely found success in school; scholastic success typically led to later achievements in higher education; those achievements commonly led to a good, well-paying job and more options of what to do with the earned wealth. Dominant Discourses were similar to de Certeau's (1984) notion of strategies; they were the institutionally acceptable social practices.

The notion of tactics arose in the disparities between social practices in home and school which placed students at a disadvantage because they were not so conversant in the language of power practiced in school (Heath, 1983; Moll, 1992; Nieto, 2002). Non-dominant groups had to figure out ways to exist with dominant cultural situations, and sometimes these situations required taking up features of the Dominant Discourse. De Certeau (1984) called such activities "making do" or poaching. Instead of poaching, however, Gee (1996) used "mushfaking," a prison term meaning "to make do with something less when the real thing is not available" (p. 147). By mushfaking a Discourse, Gee meant that members of non-dominant social groups assumed some of the outward qualities of the Dominant Discourse, while retaining their primary Discourses as well.

Anarchic Reading

Categories of dominant and non-dominant have been questioned in an examination of how hierarchies have created many taken-as-granted practices and institutions. Purves (1998) explored the concept of text in the western world historically, with particular attention to the roles of religion and technology. He examined the current state of "anarchy," a time when religions were multiple, splintered, and often questioned, when there were many more options available in

terms of worship. This seeming lack of order may have seemed ominous, but Purves held this anarchy in a positive light because it revealed more options and choices for people. These choices and options were always present before; there was an illusion of “right” ways to do things because there was little awareness of alternative ways of looking at the world.

Looking at reading with such ideas in mind, Purves (1998) recognized that the more openly interactive conventions of hypertext allowed more possibilities for authorial agency on the part of the reader than in traditional print literacies. Where it appeared that reading hypertext gave the reader more control over the reading experience, he pointed out that that had always been the case. Reading every word in a text, scanning from left to right, and other reading conventions were actually choices people made in engaging with both traditional texts and hypertexts. People could choose not to read in these manners, but by and large they did not because it gave them no social advantage to read differently. In Purves’s (1998) conception of reading there were no strategies. All reading was tactical, because in his conception it was the reader, the user of the text, who made choices in the end. Building on de Certeau’s notion of reading as poaching, Purves (1998) noted that reading has always been tied into the manner in which people chose to interact with the world as well as the ways people incorporated texts into these interactions.

This stance towards the disruption of more traditional reading conventions was not cause for despair; instead, the anarchic state was “the chance to assert a new authority by being authors ourselves" (Purves, 1998, p. 212). The reader had part (if not all) of the authorial role when reading. The author may have put the words down

on the page (or on the screen), but it was the reader who chose how to read and use them. Purves applied this authority to the mechanical act of reading and to social worlds as well. Reading for him was not merely passive reception but part of self-determined activity. Assuming authorial roles, readers “are not the audience of mass media (not a public), but the cocreators of the non-mass media (a community)" (Purves, 1998, p. 211). Because "language is the way in which we inhabit the world and, by inhabiting it, take on a degree of authority" (p. 31), Purves extended the anarchic situation not only to the manner in which people read but also to the ways reading affects people’s lives. Like Gee (1996), he saw reading as one of many practices that were part of a person’s identity kit.

Literary Reading

In western culture, literary reading has especially come to the foreground as a productive social practice. Sumara (1996) examined literary reading practices as they related to schools. He conducted and took part in a book club with four high school literature teachers, and he gathered observational data during those meetings. Those teachers had many years of experience reading and discussing literature, both as students and teachers. The group met every two or three weeks for eight months. He also interviewed high school students, and observed some of their classroom discussions and activities. The last part of his data set included vignettes of his own teaching experiences. In the course of analyzing all of this data, Sumara (1996) developed insights into the functions of literature in a school curriculum and also the overlapping and changing relationships between texts, readers, and contexts.

When readers read a text they create connections between their experiences and also between other texts. Sumara (1996) extended the works of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) when he wrote of the relation of texts to other texts. In many ways, reading was an example of what Bakhtin (1986) called an utterance, a meaningful language interaction of varying duration. “Any utterance is a link in a very complex organized chain of other utterances” (p. 69), and utterances, which include texts, have effects on each other as well as social actions. The chain spread in a horizontal fashion, like a complex web of connections. "Because texts are always read alongside other texts, other experiences, and overlapping contextual details of location and circumstance,” interpretation was not made from reading merely one text; “rather the 'play' of reading must be understood to exist within the overlapping and intertwining relations of reading” (Sumara, 1996, p. 31). Reading combined with other experiences over time to create a unique sense of interpretation and understanding. Sumara’s description of reading literature also dovetailed with Foucault’s (1969/1972) observation that a text was “a node within a network” and that “the frontiers of a book [were] never clear-cut” (p. 23). One individual reading experience developed from multiple sites.

Sumara delved into the effects of reading literary fiction, and he stated that reading such works meant “being prepared to have the order of one's life rearranged … because it require[d] the invocation of the reader's imagination, allow[ed] the reader to eventually perceive and interpret her or his world differently" (1996, p. 9). Sumara saw the complexity of literary fiction as contributing to a different conception of the world, a conception that has the potential to have strong interactions with the reader, one deeply involved with life itself. When literary texts became part of

readers' "lived worlds" through such interactions, those texts began "to function as [material extensions] of that world" (Sumara, 1996, p. 21).

With its palpable effects on people's lives, Sumara's conception of reading resembled a way to poach (de Certeau, 1984) ideas and use them as tools that could be incorporated into an identity kit (Gee, 1991, 1996). For Sumara (1996), reading was "more than a transaction between reader and text" (p. 87). Reading was more profound, enacted in a complex network of relationships between readers, texts, and contexts. As a "focal practice" (p. 9), reading was not simply an item added into people's lives. Reading rearranged their lives, and they became "involved in a life" (p. 9) that included reading. Reading texts transformed people, places, and relationships and was not a discrete, predictable undertaking. Being a reader constituted a different identity than being a nonreader, just as other activities might mark a person as a gardener, a dog-lover, or a dancer. Focal activities were bound up in intimately identity.

Unlike Purves's (1998) interpretation, there was no primary locus for interaction in Sumara's (1996) description of the act of reading. Neither text nor reader was privileged as both were involved in the reading, in shifting, mercurial ways. Sumara wrote largely about what went on in secondary English classes, noting that "the classroom is the site of complex, interwoven relationships: between teacher and students, students and each other, teachers and texts, students and texts" (p. 6). The individual players could not be parsed out neatly from the practices of reading that occurred.

Popular Culture Reading

Although Sumara (1996) spoke primarily of reading as literary experience, his conception of reading could be applied to other types of texts as well. Literary readers were one type of lifelong reader, but there were other types. Fiske (1989) has conducted textual analyses of a number of popular culture artifacts, including jeans, tabloids, shopping malls, popular music, and television programs from around the world. Reading has had a prominent place within popular culture practices, and Fiske (1989) noted that "popular culture is to be found in its practices, not in its texts or their readers, though such practices are often most active in the moments of text-reader interaction" (p. 45). Fiske's words resembled the manner that Sumara (1996) spoke about classroom reading interactions with the emphasis on practice as a whole entity and not on separate parts of the interactions; however Fiske (1989) applied his theories to the various ways that people viewed popular media, factors people used in choosing television shows to watch, and even the ways that people chose to wear their blue jeans.

Using blue jeans as an example, Fiske (1989) spoke of the seemingly monolithic waves of fashion but pointed out that people wear their jeans in nuanced ways, just as they read in contextual, nuanced ways. The ways people wore their jeans were made by choice. Some chose to wear them with designer labels; some wore them off-the-rack; others preferred to weather their jeans and tore them or decorated them with patches or spangles. People acted as authors by choosing to wear jeans in a certain manner, to project an image, maybe to say that the wearer was being casual, stylish, artsy, or anti-establishment. Jeans invited reading; they were an

example of a non-print text. Jeans wearing was another discursive practice, another part of an identity kit (Gee, 1991, 1996).

Summary

Just as people exercise choice in wearing their jeans, they also exercise choice in the ways that they read. The researchers I have discussed in this section spoke to how reading was intertwined with social actions in people's lives. Reading was an activity for them that had social implications and applications; it was part of social activities and their identity kits (Gee, 1991, 1996). Other researchers have done work examining specific functions of reading in people's lives, including what worth they got from reading when it was not required, discussing books with others, and engaging in different media texts. In what follows I reviewed research on such nonrequired reading, including research on comic book reading, to look more closely at particular groups of people who engaged in nonrequired reading.

Nonrequired Reading

I called the type of reading I reviewed *nonrequired reading*, a term I got from Egger's (2002) edited volume of periodical articles and short stories. Cart (2002) used the term to highlight that this type of reading was done "for pleasure" (p. xi) and not for some school or work assignment. I used the term here in a similar vein, referring to a type of reading done for its own sake. I chose this term to draw attention to the sensations and effects these reading practices held for readers, some of which could not necessarily be called pleasurable.

Nonrequired practices have often been conflated with unauthorized or rebellious practices. Worthy (1998) used the term "renegade reading" (p. 509) to

indicate the dichotomy between reading that was acceptable in- and out-of-school. Her research revolved around literacy practices of two adolescent boys, her son and a classmate, who reveled in reading books, particularly horror stories that were unacceptable in school. Although Worthy's term was helpful in differentiating certain types of textual interactions from those she observed occurring in schools, it also has an aspect of being exceptional and disruptive. Renegade reading was positioned as being outside of the formal literacy system, but the reading practices Worthy described, including discussions of plot and favorite characters and scenes, were examples of typical readers' responses. Nonrequired reading, for me, was a better term because it spoke to the function of the reading material while not indicating that the activities surrounding those texts were extraordinary or abnormal. The boys she worked with did not read because they could get away with it; they read horror books because they liked horror stories. The texts Worthy described might not have been acceptable in school, but the types of textual interactions they had about those texts would have been.

Nonrequired reading has been the focus of some education research (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003), but larger inquiries into this type of reading have been performed by psychologists and cultural studies experts. In this section, I reviewed research about a variety of nonrequired reading experiences, which included explorations of individual reading habits and tastes as well as of more social manifestations of reading such as group formations and interactions. Later on, I used some of the findings and observations from these studies of literary and popular book reading to speak to the research on comic book literacy.

Ludic Reading

Reading has been practiced in a number of contexts and situations, and reading has been described as a solitary act or a withdrawal from social activity. In one of the few research projects focusing on pleasure reading, Nell (1988) studied the psychology of pleasure reading by interviewing hundreds of people individually and in groups, conducting laboratory experiments, and gathering survey responses. He used the term *ludic readers* to describe his participants; that term is derived from the Latin word *ludo* (I play) to highlight that the type of reading he was studying was primarily a play activity that people engaged in for its own sake. The types of books did not factor much into the definition of ludic readers, and they typically read just as much "trash" (Nell, 1988, p. 5) such as westerns, fantasy, or romance novels, as they read more traditionally highly regarded pieces of literature. Also, per Nell's (1988) definition, ludic readers read at least one book a week. Adult comic book readers who have long kept up their reading habits on a daily or weekly basis fit Nell's definition of ludic readers.

In his laboratory studies, Nell (1988) attached nodes to monitor physical features such as heart rates and facial expressions of ludic readers who were engaged in reading extended texts. He found that ludic readers went into a state resembling a trance or a dream and also that they experienced moments of physical arousal when heart rates rose or facial muscles twitched into slight smiles or frowns. Using these data and responses from interviews and surveys, Nell (1988) concluded "that consciousness change is eagerly sought after and that means of attaining it are highly prized" (p. 225). He equated the ludic readers' experiences with drug or alcohol

highs, mystical experiences, or meditative states. What all of these states have in common was what Nell (1988) called *alternate states of consciousness*, and he noted that ludic reading was the most accessible means available "of changing the content and quality of consciousness" (p. 225). Ludic reading also offered the most individual control among the various mind-altering options.

Nell (1988) pointed toward the issue of control when he described books as the "dreams we would most like to have" (p. 2) and coupled this statement with participants' descriptions about sinking into the "world of the book" (p. 216). Individual control came in reading at one's one rate, choosing to skip over certain sections, or deciding to save a certain part of the book for a later time. The book was treated like a time-released drug, and the ludic readers sometimes described themselves in terms of "addiction" (p. 250). Ludic readers did not experience such alternate states with every book that they read, but they frequently stated that when they found a book that provoked such a reaction, they frequently went back to it and reread it in order to relive the first experience. Some of the readers described reading the first time through a book at a very fast rate, what Nell described as "reading gluttony" (p. 238), to get the main plot points and evaluate the book, and then they went back to read the book at a more leisurely pace so they could enjoy the text differently.

Ludic readers were described as belonging to one of two groups in terms of what they got out of the alternate states of consciousness in their reading experiences. Nell (1988) described two types of readers, Type A who wanted to "dull consciousness" and Type B who wanted to "heighten it" (p. 227). Nell made a further

point that these two types were not exclusive and that the same person could be a Type A or a Type B depending on circumstance. Type A reading was akin to escapist reading in that it was a type of escape from self-consciousness, where high levels of anxiety or trauma cause a person to want to leave their troubles behind and go somewhere else. Nell (1988) described this behavior as a mode of keeping busy where instead of engaging in some physical task, these readers engaged in a mental one, and he also found that Type A readers typically read many books but only found involvement in a small number of them (p. 232).

Type B readers in comparison read fewer books but found involvement in nearly all of them. Nell (1988) described Type B reading as a type of involvement that "lead to self-exploration through the awakening of personal memories and aspirations" (p. 229), and he related the books they read as being like people who are ready "to engage [the reader] in precisely the kind of conversation" that is wanted in "that moment—fiercely intellectual, pleasantly discursive, informative or vacuous" (p. 233). Type B reading helped the reader focus on social situations, and it was characterized as a type of "covert rehearsal of real-life coping strategies" (p. 245) where the reader could vicariously experience emotions of love and loss or imagine themselves in a different social space such as being older or in a particular job or situation. For these readers, the rehearsals were an important part of their developing identity kit (Gee, 1991, 1996).

Even though Nell (1988) spoke of ludic readers withdrawing from social world and isolating themselves, "getting lost" in books, there were still elements of social activity in their solitary activities. Many Type A readers passed time reading in

order to relax and ready themselves for social interactions. They perceived reading time as down time. The Type B readers engaged in types of rehearsal and reflection when they read. For them, reading was preparation for social activity as well. Ironically, readers who Nell (1988) described as cutting themselves off from the world did so, in part, to make social connections at a later time.

Genre Readers

As Nell's (1988) research noted, most readers have particular tastes and have been drawn to certain genres of reading. Researchers in the area of cultural and literary studies have concerned themselves with how readers have incorporated such texts into their lives. Radway (1991) explored the genre of romance novels and its impact on the women who read them. She conducted her research in the Midwestern US community of Smithton, taking part in two four-hour discussions sessions with sixteen regular romance novel readers. She followed these sessions up with five individual interviews, day-long bookstore observations, gathering forty-two questionnaire responses from regular romance novel customers, and member checking interviews. She gathered multiple types of data to lend nuances to her analyses of the reading practices of romance readers.

Radway's (1991) study revealed a series of complexities and seeming contradictions within this community of romance reading women. On one hand, romance stories reified traditional patriarchal conventions via narratives of heterosexual love, but these stories also caused some readers to compare their personal relationships with those of the novels' protagonists and to come to different conclusions about how love relations were constituted. Also, the act of reading these

novels was characterized as a time of escape for readers, and traditional women's roles were pushed aside during the act of reading. Additionally, there was an element where readers could "vicariously fulfill their needs for nurturance" (Radway, 1991, p. 84) by identifying with the heroine and her romantic pursuits. She called romance fiction *compensatory literature* (p. 95) that provided readers with emotional release that eased their daily lives. Although she herself did not make the connection, Radway's (1991) analyses matched up with Nell's (1988) categories of Type A and Type B readers. Her readers used reading as an escape where they could slough off their everyday concerns temporarily, but they also focused on themselves from time to time when they reflected on their lives using romance narratives as hallmarks.

Fan Cultures

Jenkins (1992) extended from Radway's (1991) work to explore other media texts. He examined connections between television programs and practices of fan groups, particularly made up of women. Jenkins gathered his data from a number of sources, including observations of fan conventions and group meetings as well as individual interviews. The fans he worked with came from various parts of the U.S., England, Iceland, Australia, and New Zealand. Additionally he also gathered artifacts from these different fan interactions, including newsletters, publications, fan fiction, and personal letters. Finally, he offered drafts of his analyses to his participants and incorporated their suggestions, insights, and critiques into his revisions.

Jenkins performed his analysis foregrounding de Certeau's (1984) poaching metaphor, delving into how particular television viewers incorporated media texts into their lives. Jenkins (1992) noted that "like other forms of popular reading," fans

of other media types were not always exclusive to one type of text but that they "take pleasure in making intertextual connections across a broad range of media texts" (p. 36); they "made do" by combining texts in ways unintended by their authors. The fans that Jenkins studied wrote original narratives extending the plots of television programs, composed songs based on specific characters and events, and also organized themselves to convince network executives not to cancel their favorite shows. Jenkins (1992) was similarly applying Nell's (1988) reader types, although unknowingly, when he detailed how viewers used programs like *Star Trek* and *Beauty and the Beast* to explore their personal relationships, political issues, and philosophical matters. What is more, the fans Jenkins (1992) studied organized themselves into fan groups that simultaneously celebrated media texts while providing them with an avenue for socializing.

Participation in fan culture was not merely consumption of various media texts; it was also shown to be productive in the sense that fans did not just passively absorb texts but also applied them to their own knowledge, critical thinking, and creative impulses. Storey (1996) made this point when he extended upon the work of Jenkins (1992) and de Certeau (1984) in his own examination of fandom. This theoretical view was observed by Alvermann and Hagood (2000) in their exploration of the fan practices of two adolescent students involving their musical interests. Although the fan practices of Sarah and Max were quite different, they both exhibited the types of complexity that Jenkins (1992) and Storey (1996) described. They listened to songs and artists repeatedly, applying critical skills to those different instances. Sarah was more analytical of lyrics, and Max, a musician, tended to focus

more on musical techniques and composition. Alvermann and Hagood (2000) contended that such textual interactions might prove fruitful in classroom contexts, where students would be encouraged to use their critical thinking skills in conjunction with their popular culture interests. They saw how productive practices might be brought into schools. They also commented that Sarah and Max's uses of fandom were quite different, further backing up Storey's (1996) point that there was no unified audience. Fans were unique individuals, and fan cultures, while useful in terms of discussion and analyses, were not monolithic entities.

The idea of fan groups has been reworked into research about specific and general fan cultures. Hills (2002), a media and cultural studies scholar, further developed the idea of fan cultures drawing on case studies of Elvis impersonators and X-Philes. He attended fan group meetings and collected texts from fan publications, online fan forums, and personal accounts. From these artifacts and data, Hills (2002) made the Bakhtinian (1986) point that such cultures have connections to the past, present, and future when he wrote that "fan cultures are both found and created" (p. 113). This phrase pointed to the dialogue that fan cultures engaged in, where chains of people, institutions, places, and events from the past were taken up to inform contemporary practices. People who participated in fan cultures were depicted in a way that resembled Nell's (1988) Type B readers who delved into texts to find tools and knowledge to use in "real-life." These practices also could be linked into Gee's (1991, 1996) and de Certeau's (1984) ways of linking reading with social identities and actions. Further, the ways that Hills described fans incorporating media texts into

their lives resembled how Sumara (1996) spoke of readers using literature for similar purposes.

These textual practices Hills (2002) described were meaningful to fans in a manner similar to religion, a feature that lead to deeply devoted fan groups being called *cults*. Hills (2002) recognized that although fan culture was meaningful, "fandom both *is* and *is not* like religion" (p. 118, italics in original). The similarities lay in the fact that there were social tools and ideas taken from media texts that informed social interaction; the differences lay in the arbitrary, interchangeable, and disposable characteristics of media texts. Fan cultures were far less institutionalized than religion, but they were constituted of their own kinds of social connections. Such cultural extensions in terms of reading have been fairly common historically, and probably the best known example of the phenomenon of social reading is the book club.

Book clubs

Book clubs, particularly women's book clubs, have existed from British colonial times in the United States (Long, 2003). According to Long, they were a place for women to gather, read, and reflect, and early book clubs were run much in the same way a contemporary university seminar would be, with speakers, formal papers, and many opportunities for reflection and intellectual jostling. Moreover, these women's clubs were active in the development of public libraries and also in driving various social movements, including abolitionism and the temperance movement. With the increased availability of university educations and the accompanying professionalization of literary criticism, some of these clubs dissolved

while others assumed new purposes over time and became different forums for various women's groups. Long (2003) found that book club members came from many different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups but that specific book clubs tended to be homogeneous. She also found that there were more book clubs in existence than previously thought, 121 in the greater Houston, Texas area alone (2003, p. xiii), and it was particularly difficult to count them exactly as they could be short-lived or very private groups that would be unnoticeable except by someone who belonged to a particular social circle.

Long's (2003) research focused on interviews, observations of group meetings, and survey research on a number of book clubs over a twenty year period. Her participants were mostly middle class women, and almost all of the book clubs she observed were composed only of women, although she did also work with a few mixed gender clubs as well. What she found was that "for many, joining a reading group represent[ed] in itself a form of critical reflection on society or one's place within it" (p. 92). Many of the women who took part in book clubs were in similar social situations, such as suburban women who found themselves isolated with small children, married women who worked at or were married to someone who worked at a university, women going through divorce, or women who were making the transition into professional careers.

Sometimes the book clubs supported members in a form of escapist reading, similar to what Nell (1988) called Type A reading, where books of a particular emotional tenor were selected (p. 160); other clubs promoted more of a Type B (Nell, 1988) experience in their meetings, with short discussions revolving around a book,

as well as the values associated with it, followed by a quick move to speaking about personal experiences that could lead into a process of "critical and creative reflection" (p. 187). These latter groups were characterized by a sense of fellowship that began with engagement with a particular text but developed into "time spent for self-improvement, for personal fulfillment, and for exploration of personal identity" (p. 73). This process provided a sense of companionship, but "at its best," Long (2003) wrote, "this kind of discussion [was] profoundly transformative" (p. 144). Oftentimes these book discussions take a turn to more personally relevant topics such as work, parenting, schooling, taking care of oneself, coping with marriage or divorce, or dealing with the loss of a loved one. Book clubs which existed ostensibly for textual discussions became forums for dealing with transitions and other life situations.

The western tradition of reading books for self-improvement (Farr, 2004; Foucault, 1984/1985; Long, 2003) has been replicated in the largest recent manifestation of the book club, Oprah's Book Club (OBC). The novels Winfrey selected for the OBC were typically very readable, although sometimes complex, and often they dealt with topics that could be conflated with the topics of her popular show, such as spousal abuse, parenting, divorce, or racism. Even with difficult topics, most of the books selected for the OBC could be termed "pleasure reading" (Farr, 2004, p. 11) because of their compelling plots and/or characters. Farr (2004) and Rooney (2005) have both elaborated that Winfrey was being deliberate in her selections to draw in and retain as many readers as possible. To use another term from Nell's (1988) research findings, Winfrey set out "to create a few addicts" (Rooney, 2005, p. 192). Episodically Winfrey portrayed book club experiences on her

television program and reinforced that the purpose of the OBC was to get people reading again and to experience books on a personal level, “focusing less on the novels themselves and more on how [readers’] own life stories could be understood and improved in the process” (Rooney, 2005, p. 24). Winfrey encouraged her readers to engage in texts as Nell (1988) and Long (2003) found many readers had in the past, namely to use the texts for a means of self-analysis. Long (2003) called this common feature between the books Winfrey selected for the OBC and the books that other clubs select “discussibility” (p. 118), and she underscored the importance of using a text that dealt with a controversial topic, a unique format, or that otherwise had the potential for provoking personal responses.

Discussibility (Long, 2003) was in some ways the final factor used in selecting a book for book club discussions, and Long found that by and large the starting point in the selection process was typically very traditional. Book club members usually chose books that were considered classic works, had received some sort of critical praise, or had either been suggested or promoted by bookstores. In the end, however, the book club members became the final critics, as they usually rated a book’s worth by the amount and quality of discussion that accompanied its reading, by how much they could “’spin the ideas out’ by themselves” (Long, 2003, p. 145). Nell (1988), Radway (1991), Jenkins (1992), and Hills (2002) also pointed to ways that various readers assumed hierarchies of taste and who performed their own versions of elitism in their book selection and criticism.

Summary

Nonrequired reading, as practiced by the various ludic, genre, fan culture, and book club readers discussed above, was an activity that entailed as many of the complex and involved features that Sumara (1996), Purves (1998), and Fiske (1991) described in other types of reading. Far from being a slight, insubstantial activity, nonrequired reading played some weighty roles in how readers navigated their social worlds. Readers used texts such as romance novels, television shows, or pulp fiction to augment their identity kits (Gee, 1991, 1996) in numerous ways, whether to take a break from their busy lives, to reflect on their personal relationships, or to examine political or social situations. Like many connoisseurs of literature or research texts, people who engaged in nonrequired reading also had their own tastes and hierarchical ratings of texts. For all of these groups of readers, there existed texts that could be considered "good" and "bad." Speculating about the role of reflection and discussion in reading, Long (2003) asked, "may readers not find something worthwhile even in a 'bad' book" (p. 30)? I addressed this question in the next section where I examined the social practices surrounding a historically denigrated medium, the comic book (Wright, 2001).

Comic Book Culture

Comic books have long been described as "trash" (Nell, 1988) reading that was either frivolous or, at worst, corrupting (Wertham, 1953). Rooney (2005) outlined a hierarchy of tastes where she included "comic books and pornography" on the "first and lowest level" of contemporary fiction (p. 18). However, the community of comic book readers has also been a place where a wide spectrum of reading

experiences has been detailed by researchers in a number of fields that will be discussed below. Underlying the practices of so-called "trash" readers were some complex social features not unlike those of more traditionally valued reading groups.

Using the conception of anarchic reading (Purves, 1998), hierarchies of taste were leveled, and distinctions between low culture and high culture deferred to the roles texts and reading played in people's lives. This leveling could be stated in practical terms, such as it was by Jim Jonard, a participant in Sabine and Sabine's (1983) interview study of 1,400 people's book preferences. Sabine and Sabine asked two questions of a range of people throughout the United States, "What book made the greatest difference in your life?" and "what was the difference?" (p. ix). Jonard credited comic books as the most influential type of reading he engaged in because it was his love of comic books that led him to academic and, later, business success (Sabine & Sabine, 1983, pp. 98-99). Taking up Nell's (1988) metaphor of addiction, comic book reading acted as a gateway drug that led to engagement in socially productive learning and behavior.

Comic book readers, like the media fans Jenkins (1992) described, engaged in a greater variety of literate activities, including collecting, reading, writing fan fiction, corresponding with comic creators, creating their own comic books, and holding their own club meetings. The practices of comic book readers manifested in complex, socially-situated manners. Some readers were driven to recreate the drawings, others to come up with original characters and create their own comics. Some people who were interested in comic books become involved in the phenomenon of comic fandom. One such person was Bill Schelly (2001), who created newsletters, acted as a

historian of the medium, and organized meetings with other fans. He also attended comic book conventions where he could meet creators, interact with other fans, and buy items, such as back-issues, to which he would otherwise have no access. Eventually, he turned his interest to enterprise by opening his own comic book shop.

Some people took their interactions with comics and their creators and become professionals in the field themselves, such as writer Mark Evanier (2002) who has worked in comic books and cartoons for three decades. Some particular comic books, such as *Katy Keene*, which was published in the 1950s and 1960s, pertained to a particular topic and encouraged readers to participate creatively. *Katy Keene* depicted the life and times of a fashion model, and the series' creator invited readers to submit designs for outfits which were either incorporated into stories or included separately as paper dolls. Some of the fledgling designers who submitted to this forum were Betsey Johnson, Willi Smith, and Calvin Klein, who all became successful fashion professionals (Robbins, 1999, p. 16). These comic book readers would appear tactical (de Certeau, 1984) when they poached certain aspects from their readings and incorporated them into different life activities. This conception of reader response went beyond traditional print literacy.

Changes in technology have altered how some people look at once taken for granted actions. Purves's (1998) description of reading was an example of technological change making it easier to view an activity in a different light. The proliferation of technological change in the past one hundred years has been called a move into an "attention economy" (Lanham, 2001) or "fast capitalism" (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996) where being able to filter important knowledge from inundations of

information, keep up with technological change, and make links between different, important pieces of information. Learning using this model did not involve learning a series of discrete facts but a number of adaptive abilities and skills. In a manner of speaking, the aims of such pedagogy were to prepare people to respond to their environments. In order to prepare people for this different conception of learning, the New London Group (1996) recognized a need to integrate multiple technologies and literacies into people's lives, In order to make such learning relevant to learners, they called for educators to encourage students to use technologies to create and take part in their own lifeworlds. Their call privileged scholastic activities but also sought to incorporate the lifeworlds that students already engaged in every day that were not honored in school.

In some ways, this call pointed at some activities already undertaken by some comic book readers. Comic book readers have built networks of communication among themselves through the phenomenon of fandom. "After attending conventions and getting involved in the fan circuit, [comic book readers] learn that there are many others out there like us, and that there is nothing to be ashamed of," stated Dan Tyree, a columnist for the *Comics Buyer's Guide* (in Pustz, 1999, p. 107). Other adults described the camaraderie at comic book stores as instilling the same kinds of feelings, of being able to speak a certain language. Such an association loosely resembled how some book clubs have operated (Long, 2003). Such interactions around comic books have kept many adults interested in reading them.

Such community activities have been happening for some time now; what was new in the New London Group's (1996) conception of literacy was their naming of

these multiple phenomena as multiliteracies. Such practices were evident in the letters pages of comic books and the ways that people such as Schelly (2001) and Evanier (2002) interacted with other fans and comic creators. Just as Purves (1998) identified the already-existing anarchy in reading through examining hypertexts, changes in technology have made the process of interaction much more immediate and have brought some formerly subterranean activities to the surface. Although the Internet has greatly facilitated the interactions, there has been a long tradition of interactions within the community of comic book readers.

Comic book readers sometimes practiced what some authors call "curatorial consumption" (Tankel & Murphy, 1998). Tankel and Murphy (1998) conducted survey research at the two comic book stores in a midwestern US city, gathering responses from thirty-eight participants. They based their work on Radway's (1991) study of romance readers, but they found that their comic book readers were a different population, all men in their sample, and that their mean age was twenty-six years old. They observed that some comic book readers took particular care with their purchases, placing them in special plastic bags with cardboard backings to protect them over time. They acted liked museum curators preserving artifacts against the ravages of time. Most of Tankel and Murphy's (1998) comic book collectors began at an early age and simply continued as they grew older. Their selection criteria for collecting comic books were various. Some collectors only collected books containing a certain character or that were by a particular writer or artist. Most of the collectors described comic collecting as an extension of their pleasure reading practices. However, a few of the collectors engaged in "speculating" (Pustz, 1999),

buying books that were likely to become valuable in the future, sometimes without ever reading them.

Comic book readers have been attributed with certain types of characteristics that matched up with Gee's (1996) idea of Discourses. Pustz (1999), a historian specializing in American studies, conducted a series of individual interviews over the course of a year with comic store employees, customers, and graduate students involved in a comic book reading club. He also distributed a questionnaire to a group of *Comics Buyer Guide* readers and gathered responses over a three month period. Additionally, he gathered postings from online fan forums.

From these various data sources, Pustz (1999) cataloged some of the possible discursive categories for comic book readers: fanboys, true believers, speculators and snobs. Fanboy was used to speak about a reader easily swayed by comic book self-promotion to buy what was "hot" (i.e. new or trendy) at the moment. A true believer was a devoted fan of superhero comics who more discriminating tastes than a fanboy. Speculators bought comic books that they thought they could make money on, treating the comic book industry like the stock market. Snob was a term used to speak about fans who had very sophisticated tastes that went beyond "childish" concepts such as superheroes. Throughout these depictions, there were unstated assumptions regarding the background knowledge of the readers. Comic book literacy included "specific knowledge about a huge body of texts with stories, information, characters, and even genres" (Pustz, 1999, p. 124). There was also a historical element in "continuity—the intertextuality that link[ed] stories in the minds of both creators and

readers" (p. 129). These complex intertextual relationships tied in with how Sumara (1996) spoke about the role reading could play in a life.

Pustz (1999) stated that oftentimes older comic book readers, such as comic book columnist Dan Tyree, felt "a sense of separation from others because of their involvement in a hobby that's supposedly for younger people" (p. 107). I heard the same trepidation from adult comic book readers I interviewed for a pilot study about whether or not they learned anything from reading comic books. At the end of each separate interview, the participants thanked me for looking into this topic and for trying to bring some legitimacy to this much maligned form of reading. The fact that they felt so compelled made me think about how we look at reading, specifically in schools.

Gender, Reading, and Education

One feature that stood out from the research on comic books when compared to research on other nonrequired reading was gender. In terms of readership, comic books have an almost completely male audience according to market research. Fetto (2001) noted a 94% male audience in his demographic data on comic book readers gathered from a comic book publication. A more recent survey, conducted by Diamond Distributors (Chee, 2004), who distribute 95% of the comic books sold in the US, found a slightly smaller percentage but still noted that 87% of comic readers were male. The content of comic books may be part of the reason for the attracting mainly male readers in the United States. Superhero comics have historically been the most prevalent type in the US (Wright, 2001), and they were typically structured around the exploits of a few characters who engaged in various heroic feats or crime

fighting. At their best, these comic books have been described as a modern mythology (Bongco, 2000; Reynolds, 1992) and, at their worst, as fascist power fantasies (Fingeroth, 2004; Wertham, 1953). Regardless of such interpretations, the predominance of male characters in superhero comics may account for gender disparities in comic book readership in the U.S.

From prior research, such a predominantly male audience is unusual in terms of reading, particularly in the western culture. In terms of book clubs, sales, and reading (Farr, 2004; Long, 2003; Rooney, 2005), females have been noted as being much more active than males. Differences in gender and education have affected social roles from ancient Greek times (Gaskell, 1992), and reading in general has become associated as feminine activity, as an action typically performed (Butler, 1990) by women. Associations of gender with reading have led to complicated navigations of identity. In school settings, boys have been noted to take actions not to appear girlish (Millard, 1997; Newkirk, 2002; Paley, 1984). According to Newkirk's (2002) research based on classroom observations, adolescents' interactions, informal interviews, and classroom artifacts including student writing and progress reports, these actions have been often read—or in Newkirk's terminology, misread—as disruptive or insubordinate.

More recently, researchers have undertaken research examining the reading practices of males. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) conducted a series of interviews with forty-nine male students about factors that motivated these students to become skillful in activities that interested them. They also collected reading logs and essays as artifacts as additional data sources. Their analyses included thematic and protocol

analyses. Smith and Wilhelm were primarily interested in the students' views on reading and school. Their participants came from urban, suburban, and rural US schools, grades seven to twelve, and they were racially and academically diverse. They were also from a variety of socioeconomic classes.

Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) findings about male readers pointed to the actions many males take to integrate notions of masculinity and literacy. What they found pointed to how reading was incorporated into their participants' identity kits (Gee, 1991). The feature that the young men found most attractive in their choices of reading material was immediacy in terms of being able to make textual connections to their lives. Most of the students wanted to read things that related to their lives, that interested them, or that someone they knew had suggested. They wanted to read texts that they could recognize themselves in, find passages to share with their friends, or to find funny parts to make them laugh. Involvement and interaction were what most of those readers sought, and they also sought to incorporate the texts into their everyday practices. What turned them off about school reading was that whatever they were asked to read typically was required by an authority with no regard to their own tastes or desires.

Their observations may also address the attraction between comic books and males. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that the male readers also wanted texts that sustained engagement, particularly series books that continued a certain theme or that followed a certain group of characters, and shorter texts that "were less daunting and more enjoyable" (p. 196). These last two observations in particular seemed to me to

speak to features of comic books that would make them generally more appealing to male readers.

General comic book reading has been shown to be more popular among young people in Scandinavian countries, France, the Netherlands, Japan, and Belgium than in the U.S. (van Ours, 2006). In most of these countries, comic book reading was similarly gendered as in the U.S., with males being more likely comic readers. The only exception to this observation was Japan where both male and female readers were as likely to read comic books. In Japan, Allen and Ingulsrud (2003) conducted survey research, interviewing with twenty students, and document analyses of student reading journals to examine the phenomenon of Japanese comic book reading. They indicated that comic books, there called *manga*, had both male and female readerships, although there were gender divides concerning genre, as females tended to read romance stories and boys more action and adventure oriented ones. Further, *manga* accounted for 40% of book and magazine sales in Japan. Allen and Ingulsrud delineated the reasons 297 male and female *manga* readers gave for reading that medium in four categories. The first reason, to pass time or relax, resembled Nell's (1988) Type A reader. *Manga* readers also cited stated that they read "for pleasure" to escape from exam pressure, much like Radway (1991) described some of her romance readers doing. These Japanese readers also stated that they read to learn something new, such as turns of phrase or how to deal with social situations; this reason seemed to me much like the rehearsing done by some of Nell's (1988) Type B readers. The final reason given for reading *manga* given was because the picture/text format made them accessible. In Canada, Norton's (2003) interview study with

elementary students demonstrated that the comic book format was popular to a range of young readers for similar reasons. Glazer's (2005) observations about fluctuating book sales have pointed to the growing popularity of *manga* in the United States, especially among female readers.

In part, gender disparity in comic book readers has brought popular culture texts such as comic books to the attention of U.S. educators (McTaggart, 2005; Newkirk, 2005), because boys have been more likely to be designated as struggling readers in school settings (Brozo, 2002). However, being a struggling reader is not a gender specific category, and what has been written in regards to males may also be applicable to female readers. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) recognized that speaking in discrete categories of gender limited the scope of their observations and that much of what they wrote about male readers could also be applied to females.

Troubling the binary between school and popular culture discourses has been taken up as a potential solution to this situation in terms of male and female students (Alvermann, 2001; Gee, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; New London Group, 1996), but such co-opting and combination has also been described as a complex undertaking that should include attention to texts, audiences, and practices (Sutherland, Botzakis, Moje, & Alvermann, in press). Simply inserting different types of texts into a curriculum without treating them as different could lead to the thoughtless, potentially disengaging types of practices such as the science assessment related in Chapter One (Newkirk, 2005). Such practices were not likely to be assimilated into one's tool kit (Gee, 1991). Hull and Schultz (2002) wrote that "evidence of abundant, diverse forms of out-of-school literacy…certainly enrich[ed] our definition of literacy" (p. 44), and

research done about such nonrequired reading practices had the potential to yield insights into academic practices that engaged and motivated students to read and learn.

Summary

In this chapter I have described how researchers (Fiske, 1989; Gee, 1996; Purves, 1998; Sumara, 1996) have described the interactions between reading, culture, and identity. Reading has been a "focal practice" (Sumara, 1996) that was a vital part of the lives of the people who chose to include reading as part of their lives. Being a reader meant living a life in certain ways that related to Foucault's (1984/1985) "arts of existence," sets of rules that encouraged people to maximize their potential and be the best possible versions of themselves. In terms of western thought, reading was frequently associated with the art of self improvement (Long, 2003) through developing one's intellect and engaging in thoughtful reflection. At other times, reading was treated more as an exercise that allowed people to enter an alternate state of mind that refreshed them, allowing them to approach their lives with renewed vigor (Nell, 1988). Reading texts, even denigrated popular texts such as romance novels (Radway, 1991), "trash" fiction (Nell, 1988), science fiction fantasies (Jenkins, 1992), or comic books (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003; Pustz, 1999) affected people with material connections made with textual worlds. Reading was a practice that engaged people and allowed them to engage in their worlds in various ways. In the following chapter, I explain how I gathered data that spoke to how such engaging conditions were created in the lives of adult comic book readers.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERVIEWING POSTMODERNLY

From a social constructionist viewpoint, the world has been shaped by multiple interactions through language, history, social actions, and culture (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hruby, 2001). The theorists I have relied on in framing this study, Bakhtin, Foucault, and de Certeau, have all contributed to my thinking about social constructionism, and their works informed each other and my own work. Bakhtin (1986) theorized how *chains of utterances* linked all of these things together in a complex web. Foucault (1969/1972) further elaborated on how *discourses* were developed in and through those linkages, leading to large cultural and institutional expectations and roles for people. Foucault (1976/1978) commented on how there was some freedom of movement within institutional discourses, and de Certeau (1984) dubbed these institutional discourses *strategies*. In his conception, people exercised freedom regularly in the form of *tactics* that twisted or subverted constricting social roles and expectations. I did not see these theorists as if there was one progression from Bakhtin to de Certeau through Foucault, but their works all contributed to a complex version of how language and activity functioned in everyday life.

The works of these three theorists have been assimilated into other concepts that I found useful in situating my study in social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Gee (1991, 1996) has amalgamated aspects from all of these

theorists in delineating his social linguistic definition of D/discourse. He wrote about how people acquire primary discourses that helped them navigate social worlds, similar to how Foucault (1969/1972, 1975/1979) wrote about discourses providing rules that disciplined people to play certain social roles. Gee's (1991, 1996) discourses were socially, historically, and culturally situated, just as Bakhtin (1981, 1986) had noted language was. Further, Gee, like de Certeau (1984), recognized that people had a certain amount of freedom in their behavior and use of language. He wrote that

> speakers and writers use the resources of grammar to *design* their sentences and texts in ways that communicate their perspectives on reality, carry out various social activities…, and allow them to enact different social identities…We are all designers—artists, in a sense—in this respect. Our medium is language. (Gee, 2005, p. 5)

Social constructionism has been a large part of the theoretical frame that has guided my thinking about literacy, and further it has influenced the research design of this study, my analyses, and the choices I made to compose this report. As Gee (2005) related, people have constantly acted as designers or artists, creating different contexts through actions that were bound up with language. The choices people made in speaking and writing allowed them some measure of authority and simultaneously positioned them in their social worlds. Researchers were not exempt from such considerations; they were not above societal conventions but interact by, in, and through discourses (Foucault, 1969/1972; Gee, 1991, 1996). Even though they typically have the last word on research, via the written report, the creative and

discursive aspects of research have come into greater focus more recently. Research texts have come under more scrutiny, with researchers such as Van Maanen (1988) and Wolf (1992) commenting on the relationship between theory, analysis, and writing, and pointing out how the complexity and messiness of conducting research has been elided often in published accounts.

There have always been choices involved in creating written reports, from the selection of a topic for study and designing a research project to the analysis of data and writing up reports. The choices made at various times affect the entire process, but people only typically have access to the end product, the report, and so have been unable to see how choices have affected the work. Authorial strategies in written reports can be used to create different texts, even using the same material to write. Although I do not think that the obscurity which has been manifest in research reports has been intentionally created, there have always been and always will be gaps in such reporting. An example of this phenomenon from a comic book artist's viewpoint can be seen in McCloud's (1993, 1998) "Carl" strips, a series of fifty-two individual panels that can be accessed from his website to tell the story of Carl, a young male who dies in a car accident (see Figure 3). McCloud (1993) introduced the original versions of these strips with the phrase, "Here's a story" (p. 84-85). His point in showing so many versions of the same story was that comic book creators had to perform a balancing act when they made decisions about how much or how little information to include in their work. Including more or less detail affected the narrative, and such affects carry over to other genres of writing, including research reporting.

Although there will never be one "true" report that objectively reveals every nuance of a research project, I agree with a number of researchers (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002; Peshkin, 1988) that information must be provided to sketch out research agendas, subjectivities, and processes in order to inform those who read or use the research report. Kvale (1996) cautioned against under-reporting methods and creating a "black box" (p. 255) that obscured the activity of the researcher and unduly privileged positivist modes of inquiry. The timeline in Table A was meant to give a stripped down, simply factual version of my research. This version served the purpose of giving an overview of everything I did, but I also wanted my research report to reflect how I had used typical research practices such as creating interview guides, conducting interviews, member checking, and writing the report and how I critiqued and adapted these practices as well. In other words, I wanted to delineate how I saw myself poaching (de Certeau, 1984) research methods and engaged in an assortment of activities I called interviewing postmodernly. Including those details was the purpose behind what I wrote in this chapter. Before I detail what I did for this research project, I describe a pilot study I performed prior as well as the thoughts and considerations this study raised that I used in designing the present study.

Pilot Study and Refining My Research

In the spring of 2004, I obtained permission from The University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB), overseen by the Office of The Vice President for Research, to conduct a pilot study as part of the course requirement for ERSH 8410, Designing Qualitative Research, taught by Dr. Linda Gilbert. I designed and conducted an interview study where I interviewed three comic book readers who had

achieved an undergraduate degree about their reading practices. I selected the study participants through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), and the study consisted of one individual interview and a member check. The purpose of this study was to examine how these readers used reading in their lives, with a focus on the links between their in- and out-of-school literacy practices. During this project, I gained experience creating interview questions, conducting interviews, transcribing, analyzing data, and writing up a research report. In Appendix A, I have included my research questions from this pilot study.

Mining and wandering. My pilot study caused me to examine the interview process I performed. Kvale (1996) spoke of the roles of interviewers using the metaphors of miners and travelers. Miners used interviews as accounts of pure experience where data nuggets could be extracted, polished up, and displayed as an "unpolluted" version of "the subjects' interior" (p. 3). This metaphor positioned interviewing as a positivist activity in the sense that this interaction was a direct experience where following a scientific method yielded truth. The researchers' observations were the sole evidence that proved or disproved theories. In contrast, travelers used interviews in the course of their journeys, interacting and transacting with people, in the sense that the traveler was both a teacher and a learner. The interview process in this instance led to "a tale to be told upon returning home" (p. 4). The traveler conception of interviewing was more constructionist than the miner metaphor, because the meanings created through research were jointly built. The research findings were developed in dialogue and not by sole reference to scientific method.

Kvale's (1996) two metaphors combined in my own conception of interviewing research, with activities associated with both occupations speaking to what researchers did. In part, researchers acted like miners and parsed data, as part of their analyses, but they also had to recognize and interact in the contexts where they gathered their data, much like the travelers did. People were not inanimate hunks of metal but socially, culturally, and historically situated beings caught up in a complex web of connections (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Foucault, 1969/1972). Addressing these complex connections required using complex theories to explore and construct my new research project.

Interviewing Postmodernly

I viewed my reflections on my initial research process as an opportunity for exploring possibilities and not as espousing any method as being the gold standard of interviewing. Differing methods of interviewing yield different results, many of which are helpful in their own rights, but I found great use in postmodern theories for the purposes of researching. A postmodern interview would ask different types of questions than a positivist interviewing. The postmodern interview questions driving the interview process would resemble those of Bové (1995), namely

> How does discourse function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social functions? How does it exist - as, say, a set of isolated events hierarchically related or as a seemingly enduring flow of linguistic or institutional transformations? (p. 54)

From this viewpoint there was no use in searching for primary meaning, and the interviewer would be more interested in learning about the conditions that made

certain modes of thinking and acting possible as well as what the effects of those thoughts and actions were.

A postmodern interview would be an exploration of practices, not the reasons they occurred. But, as Fontana (2002) noted, there is no such thing as a postmodern interview. The entire notion of delineating a specific process and creating a new category of activity ran counter to the works of many postmodern theorists who critiqued hierarchies and other frameworks that resulted in lopsided power relations. In attempting to interview in a postmodern fashion, what I called interviewing postmodernly, there was an eye to the slipperiness of language and awareness that there would be no pure transmission of Meaning or Truth.

Finally, for me, doing any activity postmodernly involved being aware, smart (Lather, 1991), and critically engaged with the world. A number of researchers have examined education research with similar concerns in mind. Scheurich (1995) has looked at the power relations involved in conducting interviews; Hollway and Jefferson (2000) commented on how researcher roles could be loosened to allow for more movement; Lather (1991), alone and with Smithies (1997), has explored how participants can be differently involved and represented in the research process. Keeping in mind the hierarchies and power relations that were always bound up in such interactions, I sought to construct and conduct another research study where I addressed concerns about the clinical nature of research, designing research projects, crafting interview questions, dealing with participants, and analyzing and reporting data.

Deemphasizing the clinic. There have been a number of suggestions to address the hierarchies that accompanied positivist research. One way was deemphasizing the clinical/medical aspect of interview. Foucault (1997) complicated hierarchical notions of power and noted that power relations were in constant flux; "they [were] mobile, they [could] be modified, they [were] not fixed once and for all" (p. 292). He also noted that "in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides" (p. 292), that no one party can have total control over another because resistance was always possible. Applying Foucauldian theories to education research, Scheurich (1995) critiqued the typical research interview process as it was portrayed in Mishler's (1986) *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*, a common text used to carry out interview research. Scheurich (1995) pointed to uneven power relationships between the interviewer and interviewee that complicated the relationship between meaning and language and affected the interview process. Interviewees might be trying to please the interviewers and just saying things that they thought they wanted to hear, or they might have acted with hostility toward the research project.

Additionally, language itself was a slippery notion, with possibilities of miscommunication abounding. Context could radically alter meaning. Questions could mean something entirely different to the interviewer and interviewee; the answers to these questions could change over time; the setting of the interview could change responses; changing an interviewer might also have an impact on the answers. As Scheurich (1995) said, "even holding people, place, and time constant, however, will not guarantee that stable, unambiguous communication occurred in all or even

most of the interview" (p. 240). The interview was just a fraction of time where a certain meaning was expressed, but it could not be distilled into something which was unconditional and applicable to all other situations. This was not to say that the process was worthless or that there was nothing useful that can be culled from an interview, but Scheurich (1995) was stating that one cannot extrapolate fixed Truth from an interview because great ambiguity and ambivalence existed in the use of language.

This critique of interviewing as a mining event led me to reconceptualize how I conducted my own interviews. I was not seeking to create a context where I would be extremely impersonal and treat my participants as opportunities for me to collect data and leave behind. Creating a more personal approach meant having to treat participants in an ethical manner throughout the research process. In what follows, I detailed concerns that I sought to address in my research design and questions. I wanted to adapt how I used interview guides as well as how I involved participants in my research.

Research questions. As Foucault (1969/1972) and Gee (1996) noted, discourses were integral in the relationship between thought, meaning, and action. Discourses defined and sometimes constricted activities via language choices and uses. Discourses created conditions that were socially constructed and disciplined, such as sexuality, crime, perversion, insanity, sanity, and gender (Foucault 1969/1972), but they simultaneously made it appear that those concepts were innate, inevitable, and even biologically founded. Certain characteristics seemed ingrained,

essential, and natural, but they were really attributes that came about through social functions.

For instance, Foucault (1969/1972) detailed how speaking about madness transformed over time when it was taken up by clinical medicine. When madness was conflated with medical terminology there were several effects; two of the most obvious were that madness became rooted in biology and more apt to be treated as pathology and second that madness took on more definitions and delineations for diagnostic purposes. It was not enough to be termed mad; one had to have a specific type of madness so treatment could be determined. New terms, such as ego, id, neurosis, and phobia were used to discuss, diagnose, and define people and their conditions. Even though similar behaviors had been recorded at various points in history, how they were named and treated changed over time. A variety of treatments were developed, from confinement to Freud's talking cure to various types of therapy. As Foucault (1969/1972) stated about those treatments, the doctors were "not dealing with the same madmen" (p. 32); they had different ways of conceptualizing and defining with those same behaviors. Medical discourses had profound effects on social practices; Foucault (1976/1978) spoke of how medical discourse crept into delineations of people, so that they were clinically classified as being deficient, freakish, or sick. In some cases, it was a thin line between a person being eccentric or pathological, being allowed to walk free or to be institutionalized.

Diagnostic discourses have become part of other social institutions such as schools. Language played a powerful part in classification; people have been objectified by the way they have been categorized. Calling a person intelligent, or

poor, or old, or "at risk"—a favorite in the field of education—was a practice of discourse where a simple label was accompanied by a great number of assumed characteristics, ones which created real boundaries for the people categorized and the ones making the categories. Statements in the form of labels such as "lazy" or "unmotivated" have been often assigned to students, and these categories have been harmful because they set up these students for failure and made them easily objectified and dismissed. Such labels could also affect how teachers and other authority figures dealt with such students. Not much was expected of such deficient students and they were apt to fail tests, classes, and school (Nieto 2002; Moll, 1992). This tendency to privilege medical practice above other modes of thinking was somewhat troubling to me and played into the intersections of research interviewing and postmodern theory.

Because there was no one essential origin for ways of being in the world, many postmodern theorists do not concern themselves with looking at causes or psychoanalytical sources but at functions, such as Bové (1995) did in reference to discourse. Research questions such as, *Why do poor students fail school assessments?* would be bypassed for questions such as, *What are the functions of school that allow a student to be called a failure?* In the current study I began my research by asking about what were the functions of reading in my participants' lives instead of asking about why they were successful readers. Examining functions and effects of reading was a different enterprise than searching for origins of good reading practices and reinstating a limited conception of literacy.

Interview guides The clinical portrait of the rigorous interviewer in many research texts (Mishler, 1986; Patton 2002) was one where the researcher provided "a framework within which respondents can express *their own* understandings in their own terms" (Patton, 2002, p. 348), while establishing rapport (to encourage sharing) and maintaining neutrality (to discourage biasing the interviewee). Having a good interview guide allowed for uniformity in questioning while simultaneously leaving open possibilities for further probing, but this practice also heavily favored the actions of the researcher in the interaction. Following this structure allowed for greater validity and reliability on that the data extraction would be highly structured practices that, in theory, would yield comparable results.

Although having a set of questions was necessary, postmodern critiques of empirical research downplayed the necessity of highly structured protocols for conducting interviews, as Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1994) implied when they said that "we require[d] just a little order to protect us from chaos" (p. 201). Using this line of thinking, there was still the need for using an interview guide, but in a more cursory manner. Not using one on the pretense of wanting to be without bias or intention was simply misguided; there was always going to be an agenda on the part of the researcher, otherwise there would be no purpose to conducting the interview. Their implication was that the guide should not be totally fixed but should allow for some freedom of motion. I decided to use a semi-structured format for my interviews where I would have a fund of questions to assist me and my interviewees, but we would also have the chance to follow tangential thoughts or alternate lines of inquiry

if we wanted. Using this format for setting up the interviews was one of my first steps in deemphasizing the clinical aspects of my research.

Revising participant roles. Although I was seeking in part to leave behind certain clinical practices, I also found some use in altering clinical practices as suggested by Hollway and Jefferson (2000). These two researchers used therapeutic practices in their research, recognizing the power relations involved in interview research and also the need for the researcher to abdicate some power to participants and create contexts where they dictated the flow of the interview. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) spoke of the way that building a sense of trust and rapport with interviewees by not acting as "the researcher" could prove beneficial in conducting an interview. For example, Hollway broke from her traditional researcher role when "Jane" started talking about "man trouble" in her talk surrounding crime in her neighborhood. While she would normally "censor [this intrusion] as inappropriate," Hollway encouraged and sympathized with her participant (2000, p. 51). This moment changed the tenor of the interview, with Jane sharing some very personal stories with the researcher. The notion of feelings could play a huge part in the research process, starting with the interview itself.

Researchers such as Kvale (1996) have strongly cautioned against using therapeutic practices in interviews, so to avoid questionable ethical situations where participants would be faced with uncomfortable thoughts, statements, or analyses. Although I saw the value of such warnings, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics or volatile individuals, I also agreed with Hollway and Jefferson (2000) that there should be some component of caring and sensitivity in the interviews I

conducted. For me, being able to move beyond the interview guide and speak about other concerns that came up were worthwhile activities. Because I felt that knowledge was socially constructed, I did not want my interviews to be solely driven by my questions or research agenda. I wanted to treat my participants as people and not simple lodes to be mined. Although my participants spoke much more than I did within the context of the interviews, the interviews were structured more like dialogues or conversations.

Data analyses and reports. There has been a tradition of research literature on the topic of perceived misrepresentations on behalf of research participants who were not included in the multiple parts of research processes (Alcoff, 1991-1992; Borland, 1991). For me, the researcher's role was not to lull people into security so that I could take their stories and do what I wanted with them. Taking part in co-construction of data was not a simple one-sided affair. The concern here was not a one-time affair but continuously applied to the data collection, analyses, and reporting. Ethical treatment of participants should contain opportunities for participants to see the products of interviews and other interactions so that they could offer some feedback, even though that would be potentially disastrous or more complicating for the researcher.

Other researchers have explored the possibilities for participants to take part in research as co-constructors. A central question of Lather's *Getting Smart* (1991) was "How do our very efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance?" (p. 16). Lather saw the strict scientific model of research in social sciences as too constraining. Because qualitative research methods took up models from traditional scientific inquiry, their results only continued a tradition that elevated certain groups

over others. Even in emancipatory research, the role of the researcher in assisting others to recognize their false consciousness and empower them to seek better conditions for themselves often fell into this constructed binary, with the researcher having dominance over the unenlightened other. The emancipatory action was accomplished by one group imposing its will on another. Lather's work extended Freire's (1970) notion of praxis when she wrote that the view that an oppressed group had no agency was an illusion perpetuated by such acts of "liberation." Lather (1991) prescribed no methods for performing correct research; there was no attempt made to spell out the right way. The research process was too complex for such facile description. She did not want to create a new "orthodoxy" and rather offered that research be "a more collaborative approach to critical inquiry" (Lather, 1991, p. 69) where knowledge did not belong to a privileged party but was shared and developed through joint effort. Not simply imposing one's will on others, the research process became more of a dialogic experience where many people became involved in the creation of meaning. There was no telling people that they were being oppressed, only conversation around the topic of their situation which might or might not lead them to that point of view. This research relationship could also shift the balance of power relations mostly to the side of the participants; this conversation might transform the researcher as much as or more than the subjects of the research.

Lather and Smithies (1997) carried out research in this vein about and with women who had HIV/AIDS. Lather (1994, 1996, 2000) has written about the collaborative process that was used to produce this work. Lather collected data with a research partner, sought the input of the research participants (women who belonged

to support groups), and then extended the process with multiple perspectives from graduate students who took Lather's classes. In conventional qualitative methodology, all of this input would have been used as a form of member checking or of triangulation, ensuring that the findings were justified and that the Truth came out. That was not the case with this study, because the presence of so many viewpoints was intended to add a multi-voiced aspect to the data collection. The data were various and complicated to reflect the complex make-up of the issues surrounding these women's lives as well as the topic of HIV/AIDS.

Although my own project does not use the complex representations Lather and Smithies's (1997) text did, I did take a cue from them to practice research where I involved my participants in multiple roles, as interviewees, interrogators, fact-checkers, reviewers, and editors. Below, I detail more precisely how these different roles were enacted and how my participants worked with me to analyze and report the data from our interviews.

Refining My Research

Even though I have presented my concerns about interviewing in a certain order, I was not implying that these concerns were chronologically specific. These considerations were operative throughout the interview process. For example, concerns with categorizations and representations applied to framing the study, crafting the questions, conducting the interviews, analyzing the data, and also creating the written report. Using Foucault's (1969/1972) and Bové's (1995) emphasis on the functionality of discourse meant that I could not frame my research by reference to a commonsense concept of good reading practices. Taking up a different starting point

where I looked at how reading functioned, and not how effective it was, profoundly affected how I crafted my research study and interview questions. Putting an emphasis on the social practices bound up in discourse also caused me to view data collecting more in the sense of data constructing opportunities that were more dialogue than digging for meanings. My data analyses were similarly inclusive, with input from my participants weaved together with my own thoughts to produce the written report. Although I know that I could never include every detail involved in my research process, I represented how I enacted and modified typical research practices by addressing the critiques and concerns of others in the report that follows.

Here's a Report

The following paragraph was my version of a three panel "Carl" story (McCloud, 1998) (see Figure 3), containing minimal details about what I did. Following this paragraph is a more detailed account of my research project.

Like many qualitative research projects, my data collection centered on interviews, fieldnotes, a researcher's log, and artifacts (postcards, comic book images, written notes) collected from my participants. First, I conducted a pilot interview project as part of a class project. Using insights developed from the pilot project, I designed another, more ambitious project. I planned an interview cycle consisting of three components. Initially, participants took part in a one-hour interview with me. After transcribing those interviews and asking for participants to check over their interview transcripts, I planned for each participant to take part in a focus group interview. I selectively transcribed these focus group interviews. Using the data collected, I selected five participants from the twelve using theory-based sampling

(Patton, 2002). I analyzed their interview data using Kvale's (1996) meaning interpretation method. Finally, there was a third individual interview with each of these five participants where they commented on the research process as well as the written reports I had generated. I transcribed these interviews, and integrated their comments into my reports. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and the data transcribed by me. I also videotaped the focus groups interviews with participants' consent to aid with transcription.

Here's Another Report

Phase One: Revising My Study and Participant Selection

With considerations from Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987), Foucault (1976/1978), Kvale (1996), Scheurich (1995), and St. Pierre (1997) in mind, I modified the interview questions and design from my pilot study to structure the present study. Instead of a one-time data collecting session, I created a project with three separate interviews. The first was an individual interview about my participants' literacy life histories and uses of reading, the second a focus group interview about a common text and the concept of comic book habit. A final individual interview followed about pseudonym selection, the research process, and other questions and comments that came from the first two interviews. Further, I dropped any formal mention of schools or education, so that I would not be leading my participants into discussions that directly related to schooling.

My dissertation project was approved by my dissertation advisor and committee in September, 2005, and I submitted a proposal to conduct human subjects research to The University of Georgia IRB. In November, 2005, two months later, I

received approval in November, 2005, and began selecting participants for my study. I had the following two criteria for participant selection: participants had to be over the age of eighteen and lifelong comic book readers.

I gathered participants using a combination of purposeful sampling and snowballing. I selected to purposefully sample participants because I sought to gain access to "information-rich cases whose study [would] illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 2002, p. 230), and I used snowballing as my approach for locating those cases. My study focused on lifelong reading practices, so I sought out adult comic book readers, people who had engaged in reading a particular genre over a large portion of their lives. Soliciting the assistance of participants from my pilot study, I gathered participants. A worker at a local comic book store led me to Kyle, Nelson, Peter, Roger, and Salty, all of whom either worked at or were regular customers at the store. I met Slam at a different local comic book store (there were three in town), and he led me to Hal, Mike, and Trey. I met Walter through a colleague, and Weetanya, another colleague, took part in the present study and also led me to Aaron.

In total, I selected twelve people for this study. I arrived at this number by referring to Morgan's (1997) suggestions for focus group research. He stated that focus groups as small as three were generally productive in projects where participants were interested in the topic, and three separate groups are typically "adequate for saturation" of data (Morgan, 1997, p. 42-43). By having four participants in each group, I allowed for the situation where I could still conduct a focus group in case one participant could not attend.

The Participants: Adult Comic Book Readers

In total, I interviewed twelve participants for this study (see Table B). In the course of gathering data I found that in order to address my research questions with appropriate depth I needed to focus on a smaller number of participants to discuss how they had incorporated texts into their lives. Because of this concern, I used theory-based sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 238) to select people who represented a certain theoretical construct, in this study people who used reading in their identity kits. In the current study, I selected five participants who were representative of readers who used reading for a variety of purposes. These five participants spoke to the overall descriptions of reading as a multi-faceted and -purposed activity.

Aaron. Aaron was about to begin completing his undergraduate degree in cultural anthropology at the time of our initial interview. He described himself as a thirty-six year old, white, married male, and he was also a father. In the past he had worked as a web designer and as a cook. Aaron's interests included watching Asian movies, playing role-playing games, playing computer games, reading, cooking, and playing with his child. Aaron's reading interests ranged across a number of texts, including magazines, *manga*, online comic books, fiction, histories, science and anthropology books, and role-playing game books.

Kyle. Kyle described himself as a single, twenty-nine year old, Caucasian, American male. He had been a police detective who earned an undergraduate degree in psychology and criminal justice, and at the time of the initial interview he was employed as an assets protection specialist at a local department store. By the time of the second interview, he had switched occupations and was employed as a property

manager. He described himself as a “nerd” who “got all As” in school. He also described himself as an “avid reader” of comic books and longer works of literature, and he was also involved in customizing and collecting action figures and other toys.

Peter. Peter was employed as a prep cook at a local restaurant. He described himself as a single, twenty-nine year old, European-American male. Peter’s reading interests were mostly tied up in shorter texts like comic books, newspapers, and magazines. He surrounded himself with reading material in his apartment and workplace. Aside from collecting comic books, he also described himself as a collector of toys and action figures. Peter belonged to a trivia team and a dart throwing league, and he also said that he watched baseball games and movies frequently. Additionally in his spare time he played role-playing video games.

Roger. Roger described himself as a thirty-one year old, single, Caucasian, European-American male who worked as a clerk, splitting time between a local comic book store and a record store. His interests in the local music scene and comic books largely motivated his employment choices. He had achieved a degree in fine arts and taught a biweekly class on drawing and cartooning to adolescents at a local community art center. Roger described himself as someone who enjoyed reading, preferring shorter texts like comic books. He also enjoyed watching movies and television shows such as *Lost.*

Walter. Walter worked as a library assistant for a large university. He described himself as a thirty year old, married, Caucasian male. He had achieved a graduate degree in literature and had taught undergraduate literature and composition classes in the past. Walter described himself as having an endless list of hobbies,

which has included playing massively multi-player role playing games, collecting comic books, juggling, singing, and playing guitar. At the time of the initial interview, he was interested in cooking, baking bread, gardening, and playing with his two dogs. He said that he had spent more of his life reading than doing anything else, and he preferred reading science fiction and fantasy novels.

Researcher Subjectivity

I was a doctoral student at the time I collected the data for this project. I was a thirty-two year old, Caucasian, European-American, single male working at a large research university. I had a number of hobbies, including drawing and reading comic books, and I also worked as an editorial assistant for a major literacy journal and an editor of an online, student-run journal. As researcher I was a fixture in the research project and my actions, attitudes, and thoughts were part of the entire enterprise.

My choice to examine comic book readers was a personal one. Comic books involved me in reading in ways that books in school did not. They propelled me into more literate activity where I became a more savvy reader and a better student. From almost failing kindergarten, I have come to the point where I am working on a doctoral degree. I know that other people, events, and contexts were involved, but comic books had an impact on my life and helped me get to where I am today. I read comic books voraciously, picking up new vocabulary words, learning some rudimentary science and social studies terms, seeing references to mythology and some history. I feel like I have gotten much out of comic books, but I immersed myself in them to a point where I did not know others might. And I wondered if whatever I learned might have gained status by its eventual inclusion and

reinforcement in the curriculum I studied. I wondered if I might be overstating what comic books can do. Because of this concern, I examined how comic books were used by other readers.

Many people were involved in this dissertation project. I was affected by feedback from my dissertation advisor, committee members, colleagues in my writing group, and participants. Part of what I was doing in my project was being an ethical researcher. I saw my work as expanding the labels and definitions of literacy to think about adult comic book readers and the activities they engaged in differently, so that others would see a more complex picture of these people and be less likely to try to dismiss them. Instead of areas of weakness, I would hope that others could see some potential areas of usefulness or strength in non-mainstream literacy practices. Educators, in turn, might then be encouraged to build upon these easily dismissible practices.

I did not view my proximity to the research project as prohibitive. Haraway (1991) has stated that knowledge was always situated and that there was no "god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (p. 189) and that knowledge was always situated. My positions of both fan and researcher colored my role in the research project. As Hills (2002) has pointed out, the activities of researchers resembled activities of fan cultures such as developing followings for certain genres or types of research, organizing groups devoted to studying particular texts, and consuming texts to use them in the creation of other texts. Fan cultures interacted with specific genres or texts related to various media, attended conventions or local group meetings, and used texts to write fan fiction, critical responses, or as material for RPGs. Academic

researchers read certain genres and texts related to their disciplines, attended professional conferences and workshops, and used texts to write research articles and books. One major difference between the two groups was the privilege that accompanied their text choices; research was considered serious and essential while popular culture was considered frivolous and extraneous. Even though research has been valorized where popular culture texts have not, researchers and fans have been shown to engage in similar practices. As a researcher and a fan of comic books, I felt that I had an insider's knowledge of both sets of practices.

Phase Two: Individual Interviews

I conducted individual, semistructured interview (Kvale, 1996) with each participant. Each interview took at least forty-five minutes, with most lasting between an hour to an hour and a half. The structure of the interview was found in the thematic layout of topics and questions (see Appendix B for a list of interview questions), but the interview was conducted with open-ended questions where alternate topics could be raised by the participants or myself in the course of discussion. I gave each participant a copy of the same interview questions prior to the interview, and several participants read and thought about the questions before our formal interview. Having the interview questions beforehand allowed some participants to make independent links between questions and bend the interview to their ways of thinking.

The purpose of this interview was to establish a rapport with each participant and to obtain what I called a "literacy life history." During this interview, participants spoke about their early experiences with texts, how they learned to read, what types of texts they have read and continue to read in their lives, their family members'

involvement in reading, and also if or how they saw reading functioning in their lives. In the course of these interviews, several participants assumed the role of questioner, asking me about my research agenda, how I defined certain terms, and about my own comic book reading. A specific discussion about comic book reading followed the general life history and their questions, with participants speaking about how they have used comic book reading in their lives.

During the interview and immediately following the interview, I took fieldnotes where I noted the setting of the interview, questions that occurred to me, a physical description of each participant, and any outstanding impressions about the interaction that had just taken place. I used these fieldnotes later in my data analyses and in creating questions for the follow-up interview.

Phase Three: Focus Group Interviews

The second interview was focus group format, with three separate groups of four participants. I tried to space these interviews within a month after I have transcribed the first interview, but scheduling conflicts and the timetable for collecting data in individual interviews made such timing untenable. During the focus group activity, participants discussed an Internet cartoon about the "comic book habit" that came up in several of the individual interviews (see Figure 5) and also a specific comic book, *All Star Superman* #1 (DC Comics, 2006) (see Figure 6), a mainstream comic book written by a creator mentioned as a favorite by almost all participants. All participants were informed about the comic book to be read before the meeting, and if a participant did not already own the book, one was provided.

The focus groups were semistructured with a set of suggested, open-ended questions (see Appendix C). They were more like pointed conversations than formal interviews. The first focus group lasted over three hours, but the other two were just over an hour each in length. I audio- and videotaped the focus groups, with participants' consent, not for viewing by others, but to ease the transcription process. My initial planning to have four participants per focus group turned out to be valuable when other obligations prevented a participant, Salty, from attending the interview. Out of the twelve participants intended to take part in second and third interviews, he was the only one who was unable to attend the focus group.

Phase Four: Data Analysis

Initial analyses. The first analysis that I performed occurred in the course of the interviews when I took fieldnotes. In those instances, I noted significant statements, questions that I wanted to pursue further, or feelings that accompanied the interviews. The second analysis happened when I transcribed the interview, listening and re-listening to our talk and typing up what I thought was being said. In the course of interviewing, I also added details about expressions, vocal affectations, actions, or gestures made that were important to me in understanding what was being said. Additionally during transcribing I would replay the interview mentally, inevitably thinking of questions I should have asked or seeing avenues where I did not follow up enough. I made a note of those questions and avenues in my field notebook so that I could incorporate them into my follow-up interview. After each transcription was completed, I either emailed or printed out a copy of the transcription for each participant to review and comment on. Each participant readily took part in this

activity, and in most cases only minor changes, spelling and clarifications, were made.

Composing my research. After receiving feedback from my participants, I revised their transcripts and then read their transcripts individually. Because I had heard the interviews at least twice, I was able to visualize scenes and remember moments from our interactions. While reading and rereading the transcripts, I pondered how I was practicing my own type of reading. I made notes on the transcripts, noting places that stood out for me because of seeming non-sequitors or moments of intense feeling or emotion. I was examining how these participants used reading in their lives and also questioning my own practices. While trying to make meaning out of the transcripts, I recalled Smagorinsky's (2001) article about a cultural definition of reading and how meaning was constructed. I was struck by how he described reading as an act where readers "compose[d] a text of their own… This composition, this new text, [was] what [became] meaningful" (p. 149). I realized that in reading these transcripts and applying my own thoughts and theories, I was constructing a different text, something that was more ephemeral but contained elements of me and my participants' talk. In order to report my data I had to reign in my thoughts and the multiple theories that I saw being enacted in and through the text. Instead of letting my reading lead me to many conclusions, I felt the need to focus my reflection and to compose my reading more purposefully.

Meaning interpretation. As Gee (2005) advised, "No set of research tools and no theory belongs to a single person, no matter how much academic style and our own egos sometimes tempt us to write that way" (p. 5), and I modified Kvale's

(1996) method of meaning interpretation to suit my purposes. In meaning interpretation, the researcher worked from a "theoretical stance, recontextualizing what [was] said in a specific contextual context" (Kvale, 1996, p. 201). Put differently, the researcher made connections between the contexts of the language of the interview and the contexts of theories in order to create interpretations and different kinds of meaning. Meaning interpretation was an additive exercise.

I used meaning interpretation to analyze the interviews. As Kvale (1996) described, meaning interpretation "recontextualizes[d] the statements within broader frames of reference. The context for interpretation of a statement may, for example, be provided by the entire interview or by a theory" (p. 193). This method of analysis combined theories and contexts used to analyze the statements in an interview. Using a contextualized and connective definition of language (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) and discursive practices (Foucault, 1969/1972; de Certeau, 1984) as my starting point, I developed how the reading practices of adult comic book readers related to larger conceptions of literacy.

My analyses used the theories of Bakhtin, Foucault, and de Certeau as touchstones, but not in the "deeper" interpretations that Kvale (1996) mentioned. The theories of Foucault (1969/1972) and de Certeau (1984) did not make reference to deep meanings but were more related to surfaces. My theoretical framework relied on the functionality of discourse (Bové, 1995) not on essences or innate meanings to be found in language, and my analyses reflected my participants' practices, not the reasons behind them.

In my version of meaning interpretation, I used the theories of Bakhtin (1981, 1986), Foucault (1969/1972), and de Certeau (1984) to theorize around my participants' words. Bakhtin (1981) provided the theoretical platform for my study, with his idea of a chain of utterances (1986) connecting language and practice in historical, cultural, and social contexts. Foucault's (1969/1972) conception of discourses, sets of rules that define social roles according to language, put a finer point on the connections that Bakhtin described. Foucault attributed the use of certain practices to specific social identities. De Certeau (1984) put an even finer point on the connections between language and activity, with delineations of global practices of strategies and the tactics undertaken by individuals who seek greater freedom of movement within institutional structures. The purpose of my analyses was to describe how adult comic book readers were tactical readers who poached (de Certeau, 1984) as they read. Chains of utterances and discursive connections would be used to delineate just how these tactics were practiced.

Meaning interpretation (Kvale, 1996) resembled discourse analysis as defined by Gee (2005), in that it was bound up in "what we [meant] and how others [interpreted] us" (Gee, 2005, p. xii). Discourse analysis here hinged on the performative definition of discourse as "what people [were] doing with their talk or writing, what they [were] trying to achieve" (Burr, 1995, p. 47). Discourse came from social realms and was linked to language and social activity. I enacted meaning interpretation as a kind of discourse analysis that used the theories of Bakhtin, Foucault, and de Certeau to examine my participants' utterances. The purpose of my analyses was to explore the identities my participants enacted through language, the

connections they made via language, how the language they used privileged specific sign systems, and also how language worked when it was put into action.

Utterances. The unit of analysis for this study was the utterance, Bakhtin's (1986) primary unit of language, which was defined as a turn someone took in a conversation or a text someone had written. Bakhtin (1986) described an utterance as a meaningful language interaction of varying duration, ranging from a single word to an entire novel, and further noted that "any utterance [was] a link in a very complex organized chain of other utterances" (p. 69). Utterances had effects on each other as well as social actions. They created a metaphorical chain that spread in a horizontal fashion, creating complex web of connections. In this conception, words were not isolated but connected and additive. Bakhtin (1981) pointed to the interconnections of utterances when he noted that words have "tastes," that "contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) [were] inevitable in the word" and that all words smacked "of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (p. 293). Utterances connected to each other in chains and referred to a number of contexts such as specific events, interactions, genres, or social groups.

Contexts could not be removed from words, and those multiple contexts brought with them their own sets of meanings and understandings. For instance, if speaking about a common concept like learning, even in talking about entirely different activities such as riding a bicycle, reading a book, or programming a computer, there would be some common points of reference. Because utterances were replete with references, Bakhtin (1981) stated that "every conversation [was] full of transmissions and interpretations of other people's words" (p. 338). In performing my

meaning interpretations, I was looking at how my participants' utterances related their everyday reading practices. I was also looked for how those utterances contained the "tastes" of various discourses (Foucault, 1969/1972).

How do you recognize a discourse when you see it? According to Foucault (1969/1972), discourses were classifications, ways of ordering the world. Race, class, and gender were three major categories created through discourses, and any terminology that categorized people constituted a discourse. Foucault (1969/1972) stated that every discourse was "controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures" (p. 216); every discourse came about via some type of social production and, in turn, those social institutions instrumental in the creating discourses might be determined through discourse analysis. For example, talking about a book and referring to themes or symbolism referred back to schooling institutions, and aspects of this type of talk pointed to features of the institutions that affected the speakers, in this case perhaps a focus on literary criticism in education. Language included discursive categories, and those discourses were constituted and carried out through social relations.

In other words, discourses were not concrete. Identifying discourses was a complex task that involved being reflective or aware of social institutions. There was a large variety of discourses, those involved in identity categories such as age, race, gender, class, sexuality, or mental state and also those involved in institutions such as school, law, family, work, city, or nation. Discourses were wrapped up in social roles, and knowledge of social institutions was necessary to demarcate specific discourses, although such demarcations were ephemeral and contingent. A person performed

many social roles and those roles were defined by others in reference to others' relationships to that person. Identifying a discourse involved being situated in a social system and being able to connect language and activity to specific roles. In a manner of speaking being able to identify a discourse was bound up in being a member of an interpretive community (Fish, 1980) that retained and exercised specific definitions about social roles.

Recognizing discourses, for me, was as much an emotional as a rational exercise. Historically, emotions and rationality have been discussed as separate, as if they were discrete entities, but more recently both have been described as interacting with and affecting people's lives (Damasio, 1995). Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) conflation of researcher and therapist blurred lines between thoughts, emotions, feelings, and reason, and opened up opportunities for interesting and fruitful research in these under-studied matters. Researchers typically have focused on words rather than feelings, and "researchers [did] not usually regard it as important to record their feelings and fantasies in their field notes," Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 46) stated, but they also emphasized that a combination of both thought and feeling were typically necessary in interviewing. I recorded feelings and emotions that I felt in the course of my interviews in my fieldnotes. I mapped these moments of feeling and emotion onto the transcripts as part of my analysis.

For example, during my interview with Roger, the beginning of the interview was marked by a series of awkwardness and hesitation, which I denoted. At those instances, Roger appeared nervous, would trail off, or look at the floor, and I experienced fears that we might have to stop talking because he was so

uncomfortable. At other moments, I reacted to his sense of humor and felt surprise, sympathy, and sometimes confusion.

Analyzing my participants' utterances, I found that the ones that contained striking confluences of discourses were also moments where I experienced some other sensation, feeling, or emotion, whether it was laughter, confusion, headache, or gooseflesh. In part I conflated varieties of discourses with sensations that could not be quantified as hard data but that affected me, and in turn my thoughts and analyses as well. In identifying my data I took a cue from St. Pierre (1997) who questioned the decontextualized and disembodied view of qualitative research. St. Pierre (1997) complicated the positivist conception of data and fieldnotes by considering possibilities for emotional, dream, sensual, and response data. She described how all of these data were influential in the process of research and strongly affected the form of her reports. There was a fear of including references to nebulous forms of data because they were not tangible or recordable, and their use might result in being taken less seriously by the field of educational researchers. However, I felt the power of her definitions of data in identifying units of analysis from the twelve interviews.

An example: Roger, French kissing, and the Gospel According to Matthew.

Listening to Roger, I went through a range of feelings and thoughts, including sympathy, confusion, amazement, and laughter, as we had the following exchange:

Interviewer: Do you ever get comments from people because you read comic books?

Roger: No, not any more. It's weird because I, at a certain age, I remember in middle school, when I became particularly conscious of the desire to kiss girls,

and I want girls in my bedroom, I want girls around my stuff. But, if, you know, they see my comics, they're going to be out of there, because I realized early on that girls do not like comics. Or at least, American girls do not like superhero comics. Not in the 80s. American girls seem to like manga comics now just fine. So, I, again, I spent whatever years being Batman's agent in S___, promoting Batman. DC never sent me the check for that, go figure. [Both laugh] So, then I realized that, wait a minute, I am OK to hang with my neighbor's kid brother, but the older neighbor wants to start tongue kissing boys and somehow I'm not on that list. Well, that sucks. Maybe this comic thing is coming between me and the French kissing, so I instructed all my friends, all the little brothers, OK, any girls ever ask if I collect comics, tell them no. I keep thinking of Jesus being denied. [Both laugh] [Affects voice] Do you know who Jesus is? No, no. [Waves hands] Do you know who Spider-Man is? No, no. [Waves hands] [Laughs] Um, so I denied it for a while, and then I realized that I was never going to kiss a girl and I might as well enjoy my comic. So, I talk about it a lot now, but I do realize while comics are irrelevant to most of what I deal with in my life, I, it takes the verbose transmogrification of my anecdotes to make them relevant. I don't know. (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005)

At various moments, I laughed at how Roger joked and also sympathized with some of his youthful interactions. When he started speaking about denying Spider-Man I was confused partly and wondered how that connection was being made. After transcribing and re-listening to this account I began to make more sense of it.

I used meaning interpretation to analyze this utterance. Beginning with the idea of a chain of utterances (Bakhtin, 1986) I identified how Roger assumed the Biblical story of Peter denying Jesus to his own denial of Spider-Man. Roger had replicated the discourse (Foucault, 1969/1972) of religion in this instance, and he had also applied it in a novel situation, elevating a popular culture text, a comic book character, to a level comparable to a revered, holy text, the Gospel of Matthew from the Bible. Roger had poached (de Certeau, 1984) the story of Spider-Man and used it tactically to subvert common belief systems with his own practices. Roger used his comic book reading to enact certain social identities, as a philosophical thinker, a male, and a proselytizer; he used materials found in those texts as tools in his identity kit (Gee, 1991, 1996). He used comic books in similar ways that others used the Bible, to find information that he could use to find his way in the world. In addition to religion, there were other discourses at work in this utterance, including considerations of gender roles, sexuality, popular culture practices, and economic markets. Each of these discourses was a viable context for further analysis, but for the purposes of this section they will be left for now. For a more complete analysis of this utterance see Chapter Four.

Theory-based sampling. As can be seen from Roger's utterance, the explanations of the practices bundled up in adults reading comic books were complex and inter-relational. In order to do a thorough job explaining the varieties and intricacies of those reading practices, participants were further narrowed down using theory-based sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 238). Using Gee's (1991, 1996) concept of identity kits and de Certeau's (1984) notion of poaching as touchstones, I

purposefully read through the transcripts, noting how my participants described their functions of reading. I made a list of those functions and then constructed a table matrix (see Table C) where I recorded whether or not my participants referred to reading in those various categories. By going across and determining which participants made the most references to different functions of reading for them, I selected participants who used reading for multiple purposes so that I could examine the relationships between the various types of reading for those individual readers.

Writing as a method of inquiry. My data analysis continued throughout the process of writing. Just as Smagorinsky (2001) stated about the active theorizing done during reading, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) have also described writing as an intensive, creative process where theories, beliefs, and thinking were enacted in seemingly invisible ways. Trying to make sense by writing cast different light not just on data and analyses but also on theories and relationships with social worlds. Writing was a confluence of thoughts concerning researchers, participants, theories, practices, and the world. Arranging and juxtaposing all of these features could lead to written products but also different conceptions and ways of theorizing.

While writing up a report on Roger's reading practices, I was writing about how he read texts to make connections between his life and comic book narratives. As I began citing Bakhtin to speak to those connections, I realized that the way the Roger spoke about theorizing his life and the world resembled Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) own theorizing and that both of them had come to those thoughts via their reading. Bakhtin (1981) had used pieces of literature, notably the works of Dostoevsky and Rabelais, to develop and refine his theories on language and human interaction. Roger

had come to similar conclusions largely using comic book texts, notably the Marvel Comics written by Stan Lee. The comparison of Roger and Bakhtin added another facet to my conception of how poaching was practiced through reading. This implication had not occurred to me until I was engaged in writing.

It was important to note that when these various analyses were composed, they were not automatically definitive but still in the process of being thought. Completing a written report was not the end of data analysis. Revising and editing took place with feedback from colleagues and advisors, and I also consulted with my participants. Following up on my written reports was a large component of a second individual interview with each participant.

Phase Five: Follow-up Interviews

The third interview in the cycle was conducted after the focus group interviews were completed and partially transcribed. These interviews were semistructured, with a set number of questions about the research process included with more specific follow-up questions for each participant (see Appendices D, E, F, G, H). Participants were also given written data analyses I had performed. I did not view this interview as much as a member check as a co-construction of knowledge.

The member checks I performed during my pilot study contributed to my changed practice for the third interview. Those follow-up sessions were brief and yielded little feedback other than simple affirmations that they were content with my written reports. My intent in this interview was to get the participants' feedback and additional comments to clarify any positions or theories that they saw as problematic or lacking. I shared my writing with participants in an attempt to conduct research

that was “a more collaborative approach to critical inquiry” (Lather, 1991, p. 69), where knowledge did not belong to a privileged party but was shared and developed through joint effort. I also crafted more specific questions pertaining to the written report for each participant. Participants offered their thoughts as another layer of analysis, and I incorporated that feedback into my analyses by revising my written reports.

Reflections on My Research

Initially in recasting my research process for this study I chose to perform data collection over a series of interviews to create layers of meaning, seeking interview data from several sources because of warnings that people from similar backgrounds were “caught in the same discourse” (Alvesson, 2003). I was approaching my research project as a positivist enterprise where I would gather data that would point to some objective truth. I feared to contaminate this truth by projecting my biases and by poor sampling techniques. Later, I realized that bias was not a consideration in the theoretical framework I was using; as there was no conception of data as pure, there could be no bias. Patton (2002) described that such sampling procedures were “representative of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 238), and that the specific focus of the research topic sidestepped concerns about bias. Additionally, by reference to the theories of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and Foucault (1969/1972, 1975/1979) there were always going to be connections between language, history, culture, and practice; confronting the “same discourse” was inevitable with the umbrella quality of institutional discourses.

But discourses, no matter how constrictive or prescriptive, did not dictate the entirety of human action; there would always be options for movement, such as de Certeau noted (1984) with his concept of tactics. The research enterprise was not divorced from such considerations. Personal interactions were difficult to keep under wraps completely, as noted by Scheurich (1995). Lather (1991) also has commented about not knowing the outcomes of conducting research and the unpredictability of what rejoinders written reports might yield.

Interviews were like rhizomes, vine-like weeds that spread horizontally with various nodes but no center. As Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) expanded, “The rhizome operate[d] by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots;" it [was] composed of "directions in motion”; "it neither [had] beginning or end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it [grew] and from which it overspill[ed]" (p. 21). As any gardener could attest, dealing with rhizomes was a troublesome and laborious process. One never knew when and how they would appear. Such unpredictability accompanied the social construction of knowledge I undertook with my participants in this project, not just within the local interactions in interviews but also in more global contexts.

The aim of this project was to explore people’s lives, and in doing so, relationships were formed. Getting to know my participants meant sharing my own experiences and thoughts; I felt that was only fair because I was asking the same from them. The reciprocal sharing led to moments where I was invited out for a bite to eat or to see a movie. Before long, people with whom I had ever just interviewed became

more than participants; we became friends. Along with these relationships also came investment in my dissertation project in ways that I could not have predicted.

Aside from being eager to share their stories and thoughts about reading and the world, my participants were also excited to know how the project was shaping up and how far my analyses had gone. When the time came for the follow-up interviews, people were quick to read the reports based on their interviews and comment on what they thought, but they also wanted to exchange papers with each other and read the other reports. Instead of this project being about a series of individual stories, my participants became interested in a more collective project, our story. They read their section of the reports and commented about how surprised they were that there were researchers that had studied textual practices of people like them in the past. They asked for updates about my progress; they were serious about keeping the focus group interviews on track and on topic. Roger in particular became almost more concerned about the progress of my work than I was, making sure that interviews were going on as planned, inquired about how specific interviews went with people he knew, and asking if I needed any further input or clarifications from him. He and Kyle would also stop by the local coffee shop where I wrote much of my dissertation to see how I was doing.

Such consideration and collaboration could have been fostered by the structure of studies where participants were called on to take more active roles. Lather and Smithies (1997) also reported on such eagerness and proactivity from their participants. These connections eased some research practices, such as the follow up interviews. I had little difficulty in getting people to agree to spend their time

reviewing my writing or talking to me about how my report matched up with their own thinking. The personal connections we made facilitated the contexts for jointly constructing knowledge. They worked as hard as I did in explaining themselves during the course of the interviews and revision process.

Geek community service. Lather and Smithies (1997) worked with a marginalized group, women living with HIV/AIDS, and although my participants were not in such severe situations they were also somewhat marginalized by their interest in comic books. Most participants voiced appreciation to me about paying attention to the topic of comic book reading. Aaron told me that I was performing "geek community service" (A. Burr, Interview, May 24, 2006) by bringing people together socially for the focus groups and also for valorizing texts such as comic books through study and discussion. Other participants spoke as if my study was validating their comic book reading, and they were eager to be taken seriously by someone who did not look at comic books as mere "kid stuff." Even Peter who stated that I had made him "sound smarter than he really" was (Interview, May 21, 2006) told me that I had accurately described how he used comic books in his life. My paying attention to their reading practices granted a type of approval, and in many ways being regarded with seriousness led some of my participants to become invested in this project more than I could have hoped. And in the end this project intrigued them because they wanted to know what all of our work together would amount to; they wanted to know what the implications would be. But before there could be implications, data had to be analyzed. That was the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

GEEKS, SNOBS, FRIENDS, THINKERS, and EXPERTS

I endeavored to study adult readers of comic books because they were a group who has engaged in a specific literacy community for an extended period of time; typical comic book readers have been identified as being in their mid twenties (Chee, 2004; Fetto, 2001; Tankel & Murphy, 1998). These readers were participating in the practice of lifelong reading, choosing to read a medium that sometimes brought censure into their lives—some older comic book readers felt "a sense of separation from others because of their involvement in a hobby that's supposedly for younger people" (Pustz, 1999, p. 107). I investigated how these adults used literacy in their lives. I see comic book reading as an example of the out-of-school activities that "enrich our definitions of literacy" (Hull & Schultz, 2002, p. 44), pushing the theoretical boundaries of what constitutes literacy.

Looking at the life experiences of individuals who have dedicated a portion of their lives to specific types of literate activity, in this case adult comic book readers, could have rich implications for literacy practices of other populations, with insights into how lifelong reading practices evolve, how people interact with others in textual communities, and how people use texts in the course of their lives. Social practices of individual groups often spoke to those of the society where they were situated. As Foucault (1984/1985) stated, "A history of 'moral behaviors' would study the extent to which actions of certain individuals or groups [were] consistent with the rules and

values that [were] prescribed for them by various agencies" (p. 29). In other words, studying people's actions was a method of determining how they matched up with the standard "arts of existence" that were valued by that society. In terms of the larger U.S. population where this study was situated, arts of existence were mostly based upon common western ideas of self improvement and moderation; being a citizen was mostly wrapped up in being democratic and in maximizing one's potential. By studying the literacy practices of adult comic book readers, I tried to see how these individuals acted in ways that upheld and clashed with commonly held assumptions about literacy. Put differently, were adult comic book readers bucking the system by reading typically maligned texts or in reading these texts were they practicing the kinds of activities that were promoted by the system?

In examining comic book readers, however, it was important to note that being such a reader did not define an entire identity, just as being a member of any fan community did not entirely pigeonhole or categorize a person (Jenkins, 1992). Cultures are containers that define and separate, but they also "leak" (Alvermann, 2001, p. 678). Because comic book reading was only one activity among many others, comic book readers should not be essentialized by their choices of reading material. In the course of this chapter, I discussed utterances from five participants, Aaron, Kyle, Peter, Roger, and Walter (all participants' names are pseudonyms).

Aaron, an "Omnivorous" Reader

Interviewer: How would you describe yourself as a reader?

Aaron: Omnivorous, I guess.

Interviewer: What does that mean?

> **Aaron:** I read lots of things. I'm always, I always have a book that I'm reading. I read lots of different kinds of things. I read a little bit of fiction, a little bit of history, science, some anthropology, lots of RPG [role playing games] books, magazines. (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005)

From the onset, Aaron took up a particular discourse when speaking about his reading by using the word omnivorous. Omnivorous is a scientific term, typically used by biologists or zoologists to describe the eating habits of animals. An omnivore is a type of animal that eats a variety of food, a combination of plants and meat. By using this technical term, Aaron created a context where he set himself up as an expert, a knowledgeable person who used specialized vocabulary. This term pointed to a tactic he used when discussing popular culture texts; he melded the use of technical language and popular culture language to create a situation where both were of equal value.

Saying that he always has some text he was reading, Aaron likened reading as an activity that he engaged in as a matter of course, because he needed it for some purpose in his life, just as he needed to eat on a regular basis. He very clearly positioned himself as a consumer of books, but, as Fiske (1989) has noted, a consumer wasn't always a passive being. Being omnivorous pointed to the great variety Aaron had in his diet of reading material, which he indicated as ranging from pleasure reading in various forms, to reading for a specific activity, to play role playing games, to more formal scholarly works of science, history, and anthropology. Bundled within Aaron's descriptions of his preferred reading materials were a variety of functions reading served for him. In many ways, how he described reading

throughout his life resembled de Certeau's (1984) conception of poaching, a practice of taking from a text only what was useful to the reader and where authorial intention fell by the wayside. What mattered more was not the content of texts but how readers took up and used that content to suit their own purposes. Depending on the context, Aaron found different uses for texts. He described the functions reading served for him in more depth throughout our interviews.

Reading's Different Functions for Aaron

Aaron talked about how at various points in his life he used reading for different purposes. Although he did not make the explicit connection, he talked about his life in some ways resembling Foucault's (1984/1985) "arts of existence" in that he sought to find the best ways to function in the world. "Arts of existence" were bound up in the discursive practices that shaped a person's identity, the behaviors that he/she chose to enact in order to be a certain type of person. Reading in particular was an activity that Aaron used to perform his various roles better. The particular purposes of those "arts of existence" necessarily shifted over time as Aaron took on different social roles. The shifts from child to student to worker to parent to university student were accompanied by different sets of behaviors and expectations. One constant across these shifting roles was reading. Aaron described himself as a lifelong reader; some of his earliest memories were his father reading to him. However, the role of reading "has come to mean something very different" for him than it did ten or fifteen years ago (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). In what follows, I detailed some of these various functions of reading for Aaron.

Inspiration

> Describing what he got from reading comic books, Aaron responded, Mostly distraction. Occasionally inspiration. Like, *Transmetropolitan* is very inspiring. When I am done reading it, I just want to start a blog that comments ferociously on government or media or something like that. I mean, I guess there's, I guess inspiration. Worse case it's just some good times or some fodder to chat with other people about or game fodder. (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005)

Aaron described *Transmetropolitan* (See Figure 6) as “Hunter S. Thompson in a transhumanist setting.” The lead character, Spider Jerusalem, was a gonzo journalist in a cyberpunk, futuristic world where grafting multiple body parts and technology together was a norm. One storyline followed the outcomes from a presidential election, and the storylines in general had libertarian political overtones. This reading experience appeared to be an instance where fantasy materials often seen as inferior to “high culture” were incorporated into a life meaningfully, in ways that mirrored the reflections and explorations of book club members (Long, 2003), literature readers (Sumara, 1996), and *ludic* readers (Nell, 1988). It offered Aaron an opportunity for reflection on the political world, analysis of plot, characters, and symbolism, and a temporary diversion.

Chabon (in Jones, 2002) described that this incorporation worked because readers were “quite adept at taking the crappy material of the world-retailers and cobbling together, syncretizing them into something authentic and good" (p. 229). Jones (2002) spoke of how “every successful children's action fantasy, like Pokémon,

like Superman, [was] also an *organizing fantasy*" (p. 223) that played a role in helping them make sense of their world. He saw the need for children to become interested in different fantasies as they grew older to suit their changing needs. The lifeworlds Jones (2002) described were inhabited by adults as well as by children. Aaron's reading of *Transmetropolitan* was described in a way that pointed to how that narrative became enmeshed in Aaron's political views, and how a fantasy world became infused with happenings in his lifeworld.

Aaron used the inspiration he got from pleasure reading in other ways as well. It was "fodder" for various types of personal interaction, from idle discussions to more creative moments of game playing. Aaron described how comic book stories sometimes "would be entirely their own inspirations for games, for the feeling of a game. Sometimes characters. Sometimes I'll steal a character entirely for a game, especially superheroes" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2006). His "stealing" was an unequivocal example of poaching (de Certeau, 1984). The characters and settings some stories offered him the materials for creating a different environment, one adapted one from the intended original, where he and his peers could engage in social activities and creative story telling. He used comic books as raw materials just as many of the fans Jenkins (1992) described used various media texts to create their own individualized texts. At other times in his life, Aaron described using texts for another purpose, as shelters.

A Hiding Place

Aaron's reading tastes as a child revolved around fantasy and science fiction texts, and he mentioned especially being a fan of the X-Men, Spider-Man, and Alpha

Flight (See Figure 7), superhero comic books published by Marvel Comics. As he got older, he became more engrossed in novels, particularly Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books. He described being introduced to comic books around the age of eight, but he also said that he was twelve when he "started always having a book around to read" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2006). As a child, Aaron said that "the person that I was then was the person that needed the safe place, the fantasy to hide in" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). He indicated here that they type of reading he was engaged in then was a necessity; he said that it was something he "needed." Reading as a sanctuary was a much different conception of an activity that many other students, particularly those who were limited in their ability to read, have found to be threatening, frightening and something to avoid (Lee & Jackson, 1991). His familiarity and comfort level with reading caused it to be something reliable, even protective for him. As he stated when I asked him what role reading played for him, "when I was reading a whole lot, it was my escape, my protection place" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). At a negative point in Aaron's life, as he transitioned from private to public school, reading served a protective function. In the present, Aaron noted that he could have chosen different options instead of retreating into books, such as seeking out different social relationships, but that he was unaware of alternative options at the time.

When I asked him what he was hiding from, he responded that "I was a geeky sensitive boy going to a public elementary school and a public high school. Hiding from social pain [Laughs], that was probably it. Hiding from failures, social failures, academic failures, hiding from academic failures, hiding from arguments with my

family" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). In this description, reading for him resembled Nell's (1988) Type A reader who used reading as a refuge from the world. In this sense, reading was not merely a solipsistic act of withdrawal but a coping mechanism that provided Aaron with something to help him navigate his social world; reading was a remedy for various hurts. Aaron used it medicinally to alleviate the "pains" that he associated with school, his peers, and his family situation. Time spent reading was a respite from social realities that troubled him. Tactically speaking, reading fantasy material helped Aaron reposition himself from being the "geeky sensitive boy." Reading took him to a realm where he had more control over situations, and that control allowed him to explore issues of social behavior and masculinity. While he was reading, he was not the same boy he had been in other contexts.

Popcorn

Even though he did not describe himself as requiring so much protection in the past ten to fifteen years, Aaron did describe another way in which he still used reading as a reprieve from other activities and situations. Periodically he engaged in reading particular texts, including comic books, as a combination of entertainment and relaxation. In describing his current reading habits, he looked ahead to his return to college coursework stating that "because a large chunk of my cognitive power is going to be taken up by reading the stuff for school, and I will just need my entertainment, my popcorn" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). No longer seeking as much refuge from social pains, Aaron has shifted to using reading as a

shelter from mental taxation of his coursework. Reading comic books was described as a comfort food that was light, fluffy, and mostly devoid of substance.

Aaron likened the activity of reading for pleasure to television watching. “We don't really watch a lot of TV,” he stated, “so the reading popcorn fills the same role” (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). Comic books were particularly attractive to him as diversions “because they're fun. They almost entirely fall into the popcorn. They are purely entertainment, they're mindless fun mostly” (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). Despite the figure of a vacuous practice, popcorn was not merely an empty filler; reading texts like comic books created the context for an alternate state of consciousness. Even though he called popcorn reading “mindless,” Aaron also talked about how it occasionally sparked his thoughts in productive ways. It wasn’t so much that he wasn’t thinking while reading; it seemed rather he was thinking differently. Occasionally going into this alternate state of thinking helped him deal with other, more taxing activities and roles. Consuming popcorn was part of Aaron’s regimen in maintaining his productive everyday practices.

Consumer and Consumed: The Comic Book Habit

In Aaron’s descriptions of how he has used reading, he positioned himself at times being as much the consumed as the consumer. This consumerism came up particularly when he spoke about beginning to read comic books.

> **Interviewer:** Do you remember when you started reading comic books?
>
> **Aaron:** I remember being a kid, 10, 8, 10, 12 years old, and being visiting my mom's mom in Baton Rouge and going to the dime store and she buying me a couple of comics books. I wasn't reading reading comic books then. I wasn't

collecting them. I didn't start my habit until I was in high school, when I had some money coming in on my own that I was buying them. I got pretty scary. I had a habit habit.

Interviewer: You were buying tons and tons of them?

Aaron: Yeah. Thirty bucks a week kind of thing. And this was back in the 80s. Thirty bucks a week was serious. [Laughs] Comics were, even the expensive ones only cost $1.75 back then.

Interviewer: That's impressive.

Aaron: That was scary. I quit when I went to college.

Interviewer: Why did you quit?

Aaron: Because I didn't have any money.

Reading and buying comic books became a habit for him. Aaron at one point felt the need to buy a lot of comic books and he spent a good deal of money on his habit. Part of his experience as a reader was linked to economic concerns. He had to support himself independently in terms of money, so he learned to prioritize products differently.

The term habit called to my mind Nell's (1988) conception of reading as an addiction. Aaron's habit was an addiction to obtaining and consuming comic books, texts that he read in order to escape into different states of mind. In his usage of the term, the habit seemed pathological. Buying comic books precluded him from getting other things; it was a consuming drive. In using these texts to hide from particular happenings in his environment, Aaron ran the risk of becoming too disconnected from social situations. Being addicted to a particular kind of text has resulted in certain

stereotypes about fans being divorced from reality to the point of being socially inept. Figure 4 is a manifestation of this view. Instead of leading to a broad disconnect between his personal predilections and his public functioning, Aaron's experiences with his comic book habit were a learning experience in dealing with finances. Eventually, he forewent buying comic books in order to buy other items. His needs for these texts were diminished, although he described still continuing to peruse comic books that his roommate owned. In his present circumstances as spouse, parent, and student, Aaron described buying a very limited amount of comic books, typically preferring *manga,* graphic novels, and trade paperbacks. He still read individual comic books by downloading scanned copies from the Internet. Aaron has learned to put other concerns ahead of his comic book habit. Instead of using reading as a retreat, he has moved more into a place where he was able to use his pleasure reading as a balance to his various taxing responsibilities. He still "poached" (de Certeau, 1984) certain value from reading to help him in his everyday life. His reading, instead of being a habit, was more a salve that enabled him to use more energy in other avenues. One of these avenues involved learning about the world around him.

Teacher

Looking forward to completing his undergraduate degree and moving into graduate work, Aaron foresaw an opportunity to link his in- and out-of-school reading behaviors.

> I fully expect, when I go back into school actually, I 100% expect if I study what I want to be studying, cultural anthropology, in grad school, that comic

> books will be [included in my academic reading], because one of the things I am interested in is how we view Japan. And basically, what people I know know about Japan, we know about Japan from *manga* [See Figure 8], *anime* and movies. Pop culture, that's what we know. I've read a few novels, and maybe a few other people have read novels, but really we don't know much else about, I mean, that's how we know about Japan, the culture, about how people live. But that's something I want to study is how, I'm learning this thing, I'm learning about Chinese culture that way, or expatriate Chinese culture, because almost all of the things, the comics, the movies, and the novels that I am reading now are from post-1949 China. So they are from Taiwan and Hong Kong and Singapore and they are from places where the Chinese who did not become the communist Chinese went to live. (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005)

Aaron attributed reading in a variety of contexts as a large part of his learning. In describing his past reading practices Aaron said that "when I was reading a whole lot, it was my escape, my protection place," but more recently he added, "It plays the role of, I guess, teacher maybe, mostly now" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). His description pointed to a more authoritative role of texts, and the learning he described took place both inside and outside of school contexts. "I kind of read where my interests are going," Aaron told me, explaining that on his own he studied Japanese and Chinese cultures through reading *manga*, watching *anime* and kung fu films, and studying historical and anthropological works as well as novels from and about those civilizations. His conceptions of reading and texts dovetailed with those

of Jenkins's (1992) views about media texts in that a number of different media types were conflated. For Aaron, reading was described as an intertextual activity, involving a variety of texts and a variety of media. Reading was intertwined with a number of other activities; it was part of a larger conglomeration of information, media, behaviors, and pastimes.

Within this student/teacher conception of reader/text, Aaron displayed an awareness of a number of roles. "Now [being a reader's] much more, it's just part of how I process information, how I gather information, and actually even in reading things how I expel information or regurgitate information or meld different pieces of information" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). A reader entailed a number of different activities, combinations of being reception, creative, and connective. Being a lifelong reader was akin to being a student who has a number of activities to perform, and outcomes shaped textual interactions. Sometimes, he found it necessary to absorb and expel texts for papers and exams, but there was also a component of integrating texts together into a larger body of knowledge; Aaron described this type of reading as taking up "a large chunk of [his] cognitive power" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005).

Reading was also an opportunity for him to usurp the authority of texts to gain his own version of authority in a community of scholars. Aaron described his reading as research that contributed to his perceived role as an anthropologist. He used what could be considered frivolous, popular culture readings to construct an identity as an intellectual authority, one who conversed in a circle of peers. Aaron wasn't simply reading comic books and watching movies; he was studying and

analyzing cultures. He was an unaccredited academic, a consumer of texts who bended them to his purposes. Aaron had a name for such experts: geeks.

Geeks

> I guess, I define, there are different kinds of geeks. But a kind of catch-all, somebody who might show up at Dragoncon. A fanboy about something that is not mainstream. Like, you know they put on television shows that make money for the companies. *Buffy* [*the Vampire Slayer*] would be a great example. That lots of people don't watch, but if you watch *Buffy* you're a geek. That's how I define it. A geek would be somebody who likes something a whole lot and is kind of unashamed about liking it, but it's not something that would be brought up at any party. At a party you could talk about it with another geek, even if it's not something, if it's something you don't like. (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005)

Implied within Aaron's description of geeks was an element that shame was involved. Part of what could be considered shameful was acting like a "fanboy," a kind of naïvely devoted fan (Pustz, 1999). The activities and affections that these fans show can seem childish or immature, as if they were not developed. In Aaron's terms, being a fanboy was not something that one made public; it was not information that would be offered up willingly in a social gathering such as a casual party. Paradoxically, however, Aaron also mentioned how geeks somehow found each other in these settings and how the common experience of being a fan, regardless of the object of interest, created a social bond.

Aaron's definition of geek implied being a marginal type of fan. Being a reader, then was tied into geek behavior where people exercise their popular culture choices (Fiske, 1989). He referenced Dragoncon, a science fiction/fantasy convention annually held in Atlanta. Dragoncon has attracted a variety of fan groups including comic book readers, science fiction aficionados, role game players, fantasy fans, movie buffs, and bondage fetishists among others. Many fans come dressed up as characters; actors and actresses from TV and movies come to speak and sign autographs, and vendors come selling specialty items from toys to rare DVDs to foam weapons to arcane jewelry and costumes. Dragoncon has been a general gathering place for a number of different fan groups. Many of the behaviors Jenkins (1992) described in his work on fans, including singing, sharing fan fiction, and engaging in discussion panels, occurred at Dragoncon (See Figure 9). It was a type of party where geeks could unabashedly share their fandom.

Part of the attraction of Dragoncon, and of speaking with other geeks, was in the great crossover Aaron observed in geeks. Jenkins (1992) also observed this crossover when he noted that being a particular fan did not define someone completely because fans engaged in multiple texts and did not merely pigeonhole themselves. As Aaron put it, "when you hang out with gamers, you can pretty much guarantee that they've all read *Lord of the Rings*, they all keep on some comics, and they've all seen *Star Wars* and the *Matrix*" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). Being a geek, according to Aaron, involved a certain amount of connoisseurship and common knowledge. This description of being a geek was the result of a process of acquisition much in the same way Gee (1996) described people acquiring secondary

discourses. This acquisition also led to developing *intensive* and *extensive* knowledge (Gee, 2003, p. 192) that Gee described as being features of *affinity groups,* people involved in a common endeavor. Members of affinity groups engaged in similar activities and behaviors that marked each other as "insiders" (Gee, 2003, p. 27). Aaron spoke about how this process of acquisition sometimes was taken too far.

"There's a movement in the RPGs, in the RPG realm, circles, to discuss RPGs in an academic way. And I think that it, it almost saddens me to see people do that" (A. Burr, Interview, December 12, 2005). Being a geek was likened to being a type of scholar, but not totally equated with legitimate scholarship. He saw taking something like role playing too seriously as sad because it attributed too much status to a slight practice. He used the example of the professor who invented the field of "Hitler studies" in DeLillo's (1985) novel *White Noise*. Aaron spoke about how that "joke realm of study" was taken too seriously in the novel and unnecessarily elevated as scholarship. The manner in which some academics studied and spoke about RPGs reflected the pomposity played out in the novel. According to Aaron, it seemed like "geeks trying to make themselves socially acceptable" at his proverbial party.

Staying true to his definition of geek, Aaron added that "I don't think there's any reason we have to make ourselves acceptable. We're socially acceptable within our society." Geeks, in other words, were invited to the party; they were not crashing it. There was no need for shame within this society, as it was not limited to a particular group of fans. The presence of multiple fans meant that geeks were "our little society, but I mean it's all over the place." In other words, there were multiple types of geeks at the party. He spoke of fan groups almost like parallel discourses

(Gee, 1991, 1996) that operated throughout social worlds. Geeks were like academics except that they were experts of disreputable knowledge. Hills (2002) made a similar link in his exploration of fan groups when he observed that academic analyses of readers and fan cultures revealed "cloaked versions" (p. 54) of academic researchers themselves. Different iterations of "geek" existed in multiple contexts in western culture. The major difference between them was the particular status in the type of knowledge each was expert. Geek has also entered into common parlance in similar terms as a kind of expert, particularly in relation to technology (See Figure 10). Being a certain kind of geek, for example a computer programmer or a college professor, actually had social benefits. To use Aaron's example, it was generally more socially acceptable to be an anthropologist of Asian cultures than it was to be an expert in RPGs.

Summary: Reading for Expertise

As an omnivorous reader, Aaron consumed a great variety of texts. His consumption had a number of functions for him, including inspiration for thought and action, fodder for personal interactions, popcorn to relax with, a teacher to relay him knowledge, and a habit that he had to learn to deal with. He took up various types of knowledge from texts in a way that de Certeau (1984) might have called poaching. He used *manga,* movies, magazines, and comic books to inform himself about other cultures, an endeavor that frequently led him to further research. Most of his inquiry took place outside of school, and only recently has Aaron incorporated his interests into a formal school environment, as he reported in our follow-up interview along with the news that he had achieved straight As for the first time ever in the first

semester of his work in cultural anthropology (A. Burr, Interview, May 24, 2006). In addition to artifacts, he also used texts as shelters, reprieves, and fodder for social interactions as well as RPGs. Aaron likened his actions not to being a poacher but a geek, someone whose specialized knowledge helped her/him to function in certain social arenas. I likened Aaron's becoming a geek to Gee's (1991, 1996) notion of acquiring a discourse. Both Aaron and Gee spoke to how reading provided the materials, tools, and fodder for crafting a certain way of living. In this manner, being a geek resembled poaching materials and tools for an identity kit (Gee, 1991, 1996). Reading gave Aaron a certain cache; it was an intimate part of his social context. It was through reading that Aaron got an invitation to the party.

Kyle, "Not a Big Library Guy"

Interviewer: What do you get out of reading comic books?

Kyle: Just happiness. Just joy. There is a collectible aspect to it that I like. I like picking up a book, reading it, enjoying the story, enjoying the artwork, and then having it, kind of like forever. Maybe. Maybe I'll trade it for a different story, or sell it for a profit to get even more stories. There is an aspect to that I like. It's the same with toys and having a collection. I guess comics is one of the older things that people have collected. Or at least for my, for the past several generations. It's become sort of a collectible type thing, to own it for years and years and years and watch the value of it go up. And then suddenly you've got this thing that was once just a 10 cent, you know, some pulpy paper, a shiny cover and some staples, you know, 2 staples, and it was a dime or a quarter, and all of a sudden it's a down payment on a car. And it's,

> not everything's going to be like that, but there is some kind of a fascination about owning what you read. And it goes for novels as well. I like having it as well. I am not a big library guy. I don't check out a lot of books. I like to own. (K. Ives, Interview, December 19, 2005)

Kyle's description of what he got out of reading comic books exhibited joy, happiness, and also a tactile pleasure of ownership. These pleasant sensations were also accompanied by an eye to economic concerns, including recognition of market value and a manner of determining worth and engaging in exchanges. Kyle associated a confluence of discourses with his comic book reading, and his descriptions spoke to his amassing wealth both in the form of positive experiences and material objects. The "collectible aspect" Kyle mentioned positioned him as a consumer who went to the market in search of specific feelings and goods.

Economics and Collecting/Consuming

When he stated that he was not a "big library guy," Kyle was speaking about the importance of ownership in his reading experiences. The library he was referring to was the public library, an entity where no one person owned a book, where people could take out and read books but had to give them back. There were limitations on what could be done with a borrowed book. On the other hand, owning a book opened up opportunities to sell or trade it, to have it more readily available for reading, and also to contribute to the owner's personal satisfaction. Ownership had its privileges.

In part, Kyle used a capitalist discourse to speak about his comic book reading. As goods that have been collected and traded "for the past several generations," comic books have their own economy and a pre-existing market. As

such, collecting was tied a tradition where value was determined by collector interest, rarity, and landmark events (Pustz, 1999). Kyle's use of comic books was somewhat tied up in their status as collectible objects. What could be worthwhile about reading comic books was that sometimes they appreciated in value and could be sold in order to obtain other goods. For Kyle, those goods were typically other comic books, but he was also aware of instances where certain comic books were worth amounts of money comparable to the down payment on a car. Kyle spoke about this transformation as being almost alchemical, with a small amount of base material, "pulpy paper" and "shiny staples" sold for a pittance, became a valuable treasure. Kyle treated texts as commodities in talking of his decisions to either keep or trade away particular comic books.

Although he spoke of texts having monetary value in this economic system, Kyle also pointed to another source of value. He did not refer to comic books by title but rather by story. Part of what Kyle described being attractive about comic books were that they gave him the chance to read "a great story," to the point where the art in a particular comic book became "less and less important to me." Kyle's consumption of comic books was not merely speculating (Pustz, 1999); he was not buying comic books to appreciate in value and not to read them, although he was definitely aware of the process of appreciation and sometimes took advantage of it. He wanted to own stories that particularly touched, moved, or excited him. He was consciously thinking about buying specific comic books that he wanted to own in a form where it was easier to revisit them. Kyle described buying individual comic books and then sometimes selling them in order to get those same issues in the

collected form of a trade paperback. He spoke of multiple comic book stories that he owned and had revisited on a regular basis, including *The Dark Knight Returns, The Watchmen, Batman: Year One,* and *Kingdom Come* (DC Comics, 1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1996). Kyle described himself as a reader with discerning tastes who collected a certain caliber of texts that met with his approval. Doing so, he demonstrated his own hierarchy of value and standards. He was a self-admitted snob.

Snobbery

> Just curling up with a book or a comic and reading it, and. There's just something about having it. I guess I'm a snob in a way that I like to have a shelf full of books. Where some people might like to have a library of information on the Internet, it's a virtual library of books, but I would like to have a real library of books. I don't know, I like that. There's just something about that, that I like it. I like seeing. (K. Ives, Interview, December 19, 2005)

A snob has been associated with owning a large quantity of possessions as well as haughtiness about those items. Kyle acts snobbish in that he wanted to own a large quantity of books. He wouldn't be satisfied with a small library or one that existed virtually, as in an online space. He wanted to own "a shelf full of books," indicating a larger amount. Part of the snobbery was also tied up in getting and keeping nice copies of the books. So it was like Tankel and Murphy's (1998) curatorial collecting in that sense. He wanted to own copies of comic books and other texts that were in good condition, and he strove to maintain his books in as pristine as state as possible. In discerning higher quality texts from others, he exercised a sort of haughtiness. Some books were not in good enough condition for him to own.

Kyle's pointed use of the word snob suggested a tactical aspect of his behaviors. Snobs were traditionally considered having greater socioeconomic status and refined tastes because they had amassed wealth that gave them access to more expensive and finer goods. Being a snob has an air of being highly discerning or of having good taste (Fiske, 1989); snobs were toward the top levels of social hierarchies. Kyle was a snob because he was amassing his own sort of wealth in the forms of books. The books he collected were indicative and constitutive of his status as snob. The amount of books he owned spoke to his snob status, but his exercising discernment in deciding what would further items would be incorporated into his collection cemented it. He was creating a library that would be worthwhile for the monetary value and content of its books. His library was not intended to be so much a lending library but a personal archive. He liked "to own" his books. He did not want to borrow then and have to give them back. Although he was not a big public library guy, he was very interested in creating his own private collection.

Describing owning the books in his collection, Kyle spoke about the sensations of curling up with a book, of holding it, and being able to touch it. He put more importance on the "real" as opposed to the "virtual" in terms of his collecting. Tactile experiences, such as the touch and ownership, were an important part of his reading in general, and his comic book reading specifically. Although he spoke of reading news and other texts online, he reserved a more intimate kind of language to describe his reading experiences with tangible texts. He pointed to that intimacy when he stated that "I guess there's the reality of holding something in your hand is, I don't know, maybe more romantic, or nostalgic" (K. Ives, Interview, December 19, 2005).

Although Kyle bought and read comic books with some capitalist intent he also had emotional interactions with them. In some cases the emotional interactions made certain texts more valuable than others.

Love

Kyle's description of the transformation where comic books, masses of pulpy paper stapled between glossy covers, became valuable seemed almost magical. Before he described the transformation and his other economic uses of comic books, his first responses about what he got out of comic books were "happiness" and "joy." These two words seemed particularly apt when listening to and reading Kyle's utterances. He frequently used words like "fantastic" or "awesome" when describing a particular author, story, or comic book character. His descriptions called to mind Schelly's (2001) "sense of wonder" about comic books, a kind of awe about the concept of superheroes and the worlds created by comic book writers. In describing what drew him into reading comic books, Kyle said that "I loved the colors and the characters, the character designs." The artistic features of comic books, with their vibrant colors and iconic character designs, were what captured his admiration and imagination, and they also contributed to the development of his aesthetic appreciation.

When asked about why he continued to read comic books, Kyle said that he had "always been in love with the idea of superheroes. Of a world in which bad things could happen, but there [were] those that can solve those problems, because they [were] superheroic." For Kyle, reading comic book stories were a chance to enter an alternate, pleasurable state where he did not have to be so reflective; it was

more of going into a fantasy world. He was engaging in a reading experience akin to Nell's (1988) Type A readers, using reading as a respite. He was engaging in a type of escapism into a world where there were heroes looking out for people. Superheroes engaged in similar activities to Kyle, who had been previously employed as a police detective and assets protection specialist. His job to protect people and belongings in addition to solving crimes would largely be irrelevant in the typical superhero universe where larger than life figures protected average people. In a way, this escape into a fantasy had an element of self-identification as well. Kyle spoke of his particular attraction to Batman, who has been described for decades as being the world's greatest detective. As a detective in his own right, Kyle found something worthwhile in immersing himself in stories where a fictitious character dealt with fantastic crimes and criminals. Such a reading experience was simultaneously strange and familiar.

Something unique to the comic book genre that particularly appealed to Kyle was its different iterations of heroes. Many comic book characters have existed for decades and have had different creators, both writers and artists, depicting them. Changes in social conditions, trends, technology, and creative direction have led to different versions of comic book characters, even though some specific features might be constant. Kyle spoke especially on enjoying a number of iterations of Batman and stated that

> I may see Batman as a detective, a dark knight detective [see Figure 11], and you may see him as Adam West, goofy, fun-loving lady's man Batman [see Figure 12]. Someone else may see him as hard-nosed, hard-boiled, kicking

> ass, kicking villains' asses Batman [see Figure 13]. Everyone's got their own interpretation of different characters and that goes for just about every comic character. (K. Ives, Interview, December 19, 2005)

Characters that could be adapted to fit in with the times had more general appeal, and specific versions could attract their own followings. The universality of some superheroes contributed to Kyle's love for them. The fact that their designs could be so attractive for so many and over a long period of time contributed to his awe and his affection for the genre.

Kyle's use of the word love to describe his textual interactions extended to at least one different media type. Kyle described himself as a movie buff, and he equated a few of his behaviors in reading comic books and watching movies. Speaking about movies and comic books made up a large part of his social activities. He spent time talking with friends or other customers at the comic shop. He also spent time going to movies with others. He reread enjoyable comic books to get a different perspective on them or experience them differently. He likened this behavior to his movie watching as well. He described rewatching movies to "get something awesome out of" them, to get a fresh perspective on what he had seen, or to notice things he had missed before. Faust and Glenzer (2000) described adolescent readers exercising similar behaviors when they reread favorite portions of books. Partly there was an aspect of trying to re-experience a positive sensation, and partly there was a drive to delve more deeply into a text. Kyle's love of certain characters and stories drove his rereading.

Summary: Reading for Love and Profit

Discourses of affection and finance ran throughout Kyle's descriptions of his comic book reading. He described reading those texts in part because he loved the characters and stories written about them. He also exhibited a sense of awe and wonder around the fictional universes created over time by accumulating and inter-relating storylines. In addition, he also liked the tactile sensation of holding and reading a book. Owning books gave him options for collecting, re-enjoying, selling, or trading them. He found profit in at least two senses, by monetary compensation or by the sensations he felt from using comic books to enter into fictional worlds. During his reading time, he could get away from his everyday concerns, relax, and find affirmation. He subverted typical hierarchies of taste in at least two ways as well: he created his own standards for what counted as a good or valuable text, and he exercised his tastes in snobbish ways, attributing behaviors associated with more dominant discourses to his own potentially marginal discourse. Kyle determined which texts were valuable and relevant, and then he set out to amass those texts in a library. From that point, he put himself in charge as the chief librarian of his own collection. He made himself some wealth and cultural authority using texts commonly regarded as practically worthless.

Peter, a Collector of "Friends"

Interviewer: Just a second ago you mentioned the way that people look at you. Do people look at you funny because of comic books?

Peter: Yeah. A lot of times just 'cause the amount of time I have been reading them and the amount of knowledge I have about them. You know, people will

> memorize sports statistics, and movie lines and stuff and that's not weird. Sports statistics are very close to comic books. It's names and numbers and years. But for some reason, comic books have some kind of stigma with them. Like I mentioned. If someone can know what Derek Jeter's batting average has been since 2001, but I can tell you everyone's that's written *X-Men* since 2001, they think that's weird. (Peter, Interview, December 13, 2005)

Peter spoke about comic books giving him a kind of stigmatized knowledge, but he also conflated comic book knowledge, "weird" cultural knowledge that might draw scorn, with the more socially acceptable discourse of sports knowledge. Both discourses have been traditionally considered domains of masculine expertise (Lesko, 2001; Tankel & Murphy, 1998), but Peter pointed out that sports knowledge was not considered strange. Peter described himself as being a fan of both baseball and comic books, but in comparison to popular manifestations of both pastimes (Derek Jeter and *X-Men*), it was more acceptable to be a knowledgeable baseball fan than a knowledgeable comic book fan. For Peter, both types of knowledge were important in their own rights, and he was involved in both pastimes.

Even though he saw that the social caches for comic books and sports were different, both were relevant to him. In a deconstructive move, Peter boiled both interests down to "names and numbers and years" and also likened them to knowing movie lines, another kind of specialized cultural knowledge. Comic books were regarded as being below sports and movies in a social hierarchy, and time spent on comic books was not as valuable as time spent watching movies or being involved in sports. Peter engaged in tactics (de Certeau, 1984) when he broke hierarchical order

and placed all three activities on an equal plane. What was tactical in his description was how he described using denigrated texts, comic books, to serve similar purposes for him as the more regarded texts of sports and movies. In describing his reading practices, Peter described how comic books were relevant to him, focusing on how they challenge him to be mentally active and also how they provide him more personal assurances.

Peter's Purposes for Reading

Peter described his reading practices as changing over time. At first he was reading texts that his father had at home, including *Mad* magazine and comic books, and reading was a shared familial activity. As he grew older, he began collecting comic books on his own when he found a series based on the Transformers, a popular toy line (See Figure 14). His interests in toys and reading dovetailed as he began to follow the exploits of his favorite characters. Simultaneously, he also moved into speculating (Pustz, 1999) where he bought many first issues of comic series that could become valuable in the future. His parents condoned this behavior because his collection could turn into a year of tuition money. Upon going to college, however, Peter made his parents swear not to throw away his comic books and also to keep them stored in a "cool, dry place" where they would not be damaged. In these activities, Peter was very much a curatorial collector (Tankel & Murphy, 1998). Although he deferred the payoff from selling his collection, Peter described other ways in which he found value in comic books and used them in his everyday practices. Just as memorizing sports statistics or movie quotes held value for some people, so too did amassing comic book knowledge for Peter. He particularly

described how comic books stimulated him mentally and also acted as touchstones in his life that helped him reflect on and cope through life experiences.

Keeping Busy

> **Interviewer:** Why do you say, if you had to give a reason why you read, why do you read?
>
> **Peter:** To keep busy. I get bored easily. One of the things I have to read while I am eating. I have to some kind of mental activity going on while I am eating. That's where the newspaper comes in. I'll get off of work and get my shift meal and read the paper while I finish, so yeah. I get bored really quickly. Even when I am sitting at home. After I get up in the morning, when I get up to get a glass of water to drink, I already have something in my hand to read. My apartment is littered with magazines and comic books. Wherever I happen to stop, I can just pick something up and read it. (Peter, Interview, December 13, 2005)

Peter described mental activity as being an important part of his reading in general, and comic books were a large component of his keeping busy. Keeping sharp mentally in the way Peter described was related to Foucault's (1984/1985) "arts of existence." Peter described his reading practices as having outcomes long associated with western ideas of self-improvement and regulation. He read to keep from getting "bored" when there was no other stimulation. In addition to mealtime, Peter described having the closed captioning switched on when he watched television, because he did not want to become lax or lazy when engaging in downtime. Keeping alert and mentally active was important to Peter, and he included reading in many of his

everyday practices in order to maintain a level of acuity. What was tactical (de Certeau, 1984) in Peter's reading practices were the texts Peter chose to keep active; most descriptions of reading as an enriching act involve reading literary works or a particular canon of literature (Hirsch, 1988; Long, 2003; Nell, 1988; Rooney, 2005) and not popular culture texts. Peter disregarded such hierarchies of worth when he used texts such as comic books, closed captioning, magazines, and newspapers as tools for self-regulation and mental stimulation.

Keeping his mind active was a constant necessity, and Peter's descriptions of how he used texts literally resembled poaching (de Certeau, 1984). He described just picking up and using texts whenever he could, from newspapers left by strangers to the piles of magazine and comic book "litter" he has around his apartment. The term litter pointed to how comic books, magazines, and newspapers were, in a sense, disposable or interchangeable. It also pointed to the low regard they typically entailed. What mattered for Peter was not so much the text but that he stayed occupied. Not that Peter was not at all discerning or always so singly purposeful in his reading. He described sometimes treating his reading as a time filling activity, but he also demonstrated preferences for particular texts and expressed how comic books engaged him in creative as well as mental activities. Just as Aaron found "fodder" in comic books for his gaming and other interests, Peter found material in comic books that he could use for other uses.

Along with reading comic books, Peter created his own stories. He has "notebooks" full of original character sketches and stories that he has been working on over a long period of time. His creative projects grew out of what he absorbed

from reading comic books. He began these creative practices when he was younger and aspired to be a comic book creator, and while he has not completely ruled out that job possibility, he also has not actively sought out commercial venues for his work. Even so, writing and drawing held a value for him. He described his writing and drawing as "mental activity that [kept his] creative mind working," and although he had not "made any money writing comic books, it's still something [he liked] to do." Being able to use his imagination and create yielded their benefits for Peter. Being artistic and creative tied in with the well-rounded type of citizen that was developed through "arts of existence" (Foucault, 1984/1985). Peter made this type of connection when he compared his reading and creative practices to more mundane activities that his parents enjoyed such as working on a car, doing home improvements, and interior decorating. He stated that he "probably [spent] just as much money on [his] comic books as they [did] on home improvement and interior decorating." He was equating what he chose to do with his time what his parents chose to do with theirs; all of these activities were similarly described as types of maintenance. His reading practices here were not simply related to compiling trivia such as sports statistics or movie quotes; Peter pointed to how his reading was connected more intimately in his life. From our interviews, Peter described how the practice of reading comic books was relevant to him in quite personal ways.

Comic Books as Friends

Peter: Comic books are my little escape.

Interviewer: Escape from what?

> **Peter:** I spent a long time with some severe depression. I'd lost my job, my place to live, my fiancée dumped me. You know, a lot of things had gone bad for me and then, at that time I wasn't really collecting comics, but I started to once I got a new job and place to live, I started getting back into comics. And it kind of helped. I didn't have that many friends or friends I wanted to associate with any more. I wanted to get out of that world of homeless and drugs that I had fallen into. This was kind of, you know, I could remember I used to collect comic books when I was younger and it made me feel good. The characters are still there. I can still go. I can still get an X-Men comic. I can still go and get Batman. You know, they are old friends and they're still there. It's not that I think that they're my friends or anything, but they're a constant, you know, knowing I'm, that I have to go to work every morning, Tuesday, knowing that it's just one of those things. (Peter, Interview, December 13, 2005)

Escape has been a recurrent feature in the descriptions of why people engage in nonrequired reading (Nell, 1988; Radway, 1991). Escapism has largely been a nebulous term that has negative associations with solipsism, but as Nell (1988) observed, escaping through reading could be an oblivious state (Type A) or also a reflective act that affected social behaviors and attitudes (Type B). Peter's description of his escapism encapsulated both of these features of Nell's Type A and B readers. Reading comic books was an escape from some grim realities into some pleasant sensations from the past. Peter's description seemed therapeutic to me. Comic books helped him when he was reeling from some major life events. Reading comics was

partly nostalgia, a connection to less troubling times that served as an anchor in the present time. The pattern of comic book publication was worked into a regularity that helped him structure his life. Just as Tuesdays were regular days for work for him, he could say that Wednesdays, the days that new comic books were put on the stands, were part of his routines. They were dependable for him, like good friends who were there for him when he needed help or to relax. Even so, Peter was sure to note that he was not totally divorcing himself from reality, that he knew comic books were not really friends; that would be taking the medium too far. Still, he did note that comic books functioned like friends did for him. They provided him with support and also relief from thinking about his troubles.

As constants, comic books contributed to how Peter was restructuring his life, but they did not simply serve as a reliving of the past, they also allowed for some reflection, rehearsal, and vicarious experience, behaviors associated with Nell's (1988) Type B readers. Peter's use of comic book reading acted in part as an "organizing fantasy" (Jones, 2002) for him, giving him some material to make sense of and navigate his social world. Peter noted that "comic books have grown up with me. You know, Peter Parker started out as a teenager, then he went to college, he got married (See Figure 15). He was progressing along with his readers" (Peter, Interview, December 13, 2005). The continuous narrative of the comic book ran parallel to his life, providing Peter with a fictional account of what growing up and going through life changes was like. He chose his pseudonym as a reference to Spider-Man's alter ego, Peter Parker. Spider-Man, for him, was a type of fictional friend, someone with whom he could identify.

Reading Spider-Man comic books provided a type of vicarious experience for him, which resembled other popular forms of narrative. He elaborated that

> [comic books are] science fiction soap operas. My Mom watched soap operas for a long time. I guess that's her comic book. You know, there's professional wrestling, which is comic books for rednecks [Laughs]. You know, there are all these weird little escapes. People with fake problems that you keep up with and watch. (Peter, Interview, December 13, 2005)

The separation that the fictional world afforded was particularly attractive to Peter. He described being able to experience events such as deaths and divorces in ways that did not affect him as much as real life events would. Meanwhile, he was able to observe the behaviors, actions, and repercussions that were bundled into fictional accounts. Seeing how fictional people deal with their problems gave Peter another view on how people deal with adversity, providing him with a type of rehearsal or vicarious experience that others may get from soap operas or professional wrestling. According to Peter, all of these narratives were simultaneously a blend of entertainment and experience, an opportunity to reflect upon social worlds by observing what he elsewhere called a “microcosm.” Being involved vicariously in these stories offered a layer of protection; while he could sympathize when Peter Parker and Mary Jane split up, he was not devastated. Because they were fictional, Peter could use these “weird” and “fake” narratives, texts routinely regarded as shallow or even harmful, to address various situations in his life.

Summary: Reading as Occupation

Reading was a matter of occupation for Peter, in two senses of the word. Reading was something to occupy his time, to keep his mind active so that it could function at its highest levels. Additionally he read comic books to occupy himself in a more personal manner, as if by surrounding himself with a group of people to keep him company. His reading practices were a combination of Nell's (1988) Type A and B readers with an eye toward self-improvement. Peter described reading to keep his mind busy and his senses sharp, but he also used reading to cope with stress and harsh life events by escaping into and/or reflecting on the extended comic book narratives. Peter's interactions with texts somewhat resembled visitations with friends, and he entered an alternate state of consciousness (Nell, 1988) that offered him a sense of familiarity and comfort. Texts such as comic books were especially involved in his entering this state because they were portable and easily accessible to him. He "littered" his surroundings with them so that he could just pick them up and read them whenever he wanted. The short, portable features of comic books made them convenient texts for him to poach (de Certeau, 1984) feelings of sympathy and succor.

Roger, a Critical Reader

Interviewer: Do you ever get comments from people because you read comic books?

Roger: No, not any more. It's weird because I, at a certain age, I remember in middle school, when I became particularly conscious of the desire to kiss girls, and I want girls in my bedroom, I want girls around my stuff. But, if, you

know, they see my comics, they're going to be out of there, because I realized early on that girls do not like comics. Or at least, American girls do not like superhero comics. Not in the 80s. American girls seem to like manga comics now just fine. So, I, again, I spent whatever years being Batman's agent in S___, promoting Batman. DC never sent me the check for that, go figure. [Both laugh] So, then I realized that, wait a minute, I am OK to hang with my neighbor's kid brother, but the older neighbor wants to start tongue kissing boys and somehow I'm not on that list. Well, that sucks. Maybe this comic thing is coming between me and the French kissing, so I instructed all my friends, all the little brothers, OK, any girls ever ask if I collect comics, tell them no. I keep thinking of Jesus being denied. [Both laugh] [Affects voice] Do you know who Jesus is? No, no. [Waves hands] Do you know who Spider-Man is? No, no. [Waves hands] [Laughs] Um, so I denied it for a while, and then I realized that I was never going to kiss a girl and I might as well enjoy my comic. So, I talk about it a lot now, but I do realize while comics are irrelevant to most of what I deal with in my life, I, it takes the verbose transmogrification of my anecdotes to make them relevant. I don't know. (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005)

Roger's Purposes for Reading

This utterance was full of discursive references, pointing to how much reading was linked into different aspects of Roger's life. Literate behavior has a number of gender dimensions here, with comic book reading in particular being an activity that detracted from a young man's sexual attractiveness. At that point in his life, Roger

saw his comic book reading as a hindrance to dating interactions with girls, with comic book reading being something associated with the "younger brothers" who were immature and not viable sexual options. Comic books were supposedly texts for young children not yet interested in the opposite sex. Comic book readers were not seen as candidates for "tongue kissing." There were also stages of maturity implied about reading tastes here, with the assumption being made that at some point people reach a certain age and put childish things aside. That type of discourse was included in the talk about comic book reading as an immature practice. Roger still engaged in comic book reading, and he received from it an alternative kind of enjoyment to the more visceral practice of French kissing.

Further, Roger's utterance contained religious discourses, including mentioning of being a spreader of a gospel, in his case being "Batman's agent," someone who tried to promote the positive sides of that particular superhero and encourage people to read and buy the comic book. The religious discourse becomes much more apparent when Roger draws a parallel between denying Jesus and Spider-Man. Although he stated that comic books were "irrelevant to most of what [he dealt] with in [his] life," referring to the fantastic aspects of comic books that were not real concerns of his, Roger has made connections between his comic book reading and a number of other discourses including ones of religion, gender, fan cultures, the comic book industry, and growing up. Although he found it hard to perform the "verbose transmogrification" necessary to explain how his comic book reading related to the rest of his life, he was making those links. He was having difficulty explaining them.

Later on in the interview, Roger actually contradicted himself when he spoke of how much he wanted to use comic books in his everyday conversations. “I can talk to people and not mention them, I swear, but I have to try. I don't read them in public because they'll get messed up” (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005). Here, he pointed to how he used comic books as the focal point for much of his reflection that he had to consciously not refer to comic books when he was speaking to people in general. There was also a feeling of trying to reign in his reading so that he would not appear to be overly fawning over comic books. By adding in his statement about why he does not read comic books in public, Roger deflected criticism that might come from others concerning his choice of reading material and shifted instead to a notion of his own “curatorial collecting” (Tankel & Murphy, 1998) and his desire to keep his comic books in good shape. Having other people picking up and potentially treating his books roughly was more of a reason to keep his reading private than the fear of taunting. As he said at the end of the utterance, he had made peace with enjoying his comic books.

Although he was acting in a fashion like de Certeau’s (1984) poacher, taking up raw materials and tools wherever he could, he also feels an amount of inferiority from this process. At different intervals, Roger apologized for getting so much out of comic books or said that he felt “bad” that he did not read more respectable texts like novels. Roger spoke about comic books as other people have expressed a sense of shame about their popular culture tastes, as if they should not be enjoying and getting anything out of such vulgar texts (Alasuutri, 1992). Viewing popular television programs such as nighttime soap operas became viewed as a “guilty pleasure,” and

Alasuutri (1992) described such tastes in terms of moral hierarchies, with vulgar, popular texts being toward the bottom of the pecking order. Hierarchies of reading tastes did not stop him from reading comic books, but Roger stated that he felt that comic books had made him a "lazy reader" because they were so short and lacked substance that more literary works were supposed to have. Nevertheless, Roger took up denigrated popular culture texts and used them to develop deeper philosophical thoughts.

Reading for Moral Purposes

Roger's utterance was linked to a Biblical utterance. Roger's dramatized denial of reading Spider-Man echoed the story about the disciple Peter's denial of Jesus from Matthew 26:70-71. This use was tactical (de Certeau, 1984) in that Roger used a low culture text, a comic book, to stand in for one of the most culturally central texts in the western world. Spider-Man was used to stand in for Jesus, showing how that comic book was used in as instructive a manner as the Bible. Roger subverted typical hierarchies of value to the point where a commonly denigrated text became equivalent to the Text of western civilization.

There was religious discourse in much of Roger's utterance. Roger had taken up a proselytizing role himself earlier in his life when he acted as "Batman's agent" and tried to get anyone who would listen to him to get interested in superhero comic books. He also saw Stan Lee, the writer of *The Amazing Spider-Man,* as a sort of prophet or instructor. He spoke of receiving "kind of instructions" from what he read, as Spider-Man's adventures held moral messages for him. He found it inspiration in

> Spider-Man willing to, finding the inner strength to lift a massive crushing weight on top of him that technically he is not strong enough to lift, but he finds the inner reserve to do it, because he runs down the list of everyone he's ever let down and everyone's that's depending on him, and he can't fail. Because he has to rise at this moment. [See Figure 16] (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005)

The scene Roger cited resembled that of the Biblical story of Samson who found great strength when he had none, although he relied on his faith in God whereas Spider-Man found his strength from his social obligations and from within. This scene was typical of Lee's writing in *The Amazing Spider-Man* that was frequently moral and aphoristic with statements such as "with great power, comes great responsibility" (Marvel Comics, 1962). Roger was aware of the "secret messages" imbedded in texts, his term for ideas or scenes that were particularly meaningful to him.

Experiencing meaningful sensations was one of the reasons he gave for reading, and he described being critical and reflective about such messages. He stated that "Some part of me is still searching for the pieces that will make the rest of the pieces of my life work. And, as superstitious as that sounds, that happens" (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005). Like de Certeau's (1984) poacher, Roger read texts looking for usable parts, and comic book stories were as viable an option for him as literary or religious texts. He was searching for answers from texts, particularly comic books, but like Spider-Man he also looked within himself to operationalize his found knowledge.

Critical Thinking

When asked what role reading has played in his life, Roger responded that "it certainly cause[d] [him] to focus [his] reflection" (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005). Comic book stories particularly provided him with "organizing fantasies" (Jones, 2002) that helped him make sense of life events. Like Peter had spoken about comic books as microcosms, Roger similarly viewed the comic books he read as a representation of social worlds. The interrelated stories and characters created contexts that helped Roger reflect on his own social world. This context for critical reflection was one of the most attractive features of comic books according to Roger:

> What I loved about the Marvel and DC superhero comics was that they had a universe, they had a structure. The characters would go back and forth across the books. Stories in one book would affect stories in another book, and that's, to me, seemed a very safe and workable model of the real world. And, you know, even beyond that, they would have stories from 20 years ago affect a story today, or vice versa. Something that happened today would go and change something that had happened decades ago. (Roger, Interview, 2005)

Although he did not make the connection, Roger spoke about comic book universes in a similar way that Bakhtin (1981, 1986) had written about social worlds. Whereas Bakhtin (1986) cited "chains of utterances" connecting social worlds, Roger spoke of the "continuity" that connected comic book worlds. Roger used comic books as theory-building tools and developed some ideas similar to Bakhtinian ideas developed from literary analyses. Both theorists used "safe and workable model[s] of the real world," works of fiction, to focus their investigations, and both arrived at

conclusions about the interconnections between history, events, and characters in the construction of contextual knowledge. A major difference between Roger's and Bakhtin's theory building was the source of materials for reflection and critical analysis. While Bakhtin used literary texts from authors such as Dostoevsky and Rabelais, ones that receive some credence as novels, Roger poached (de Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989; Jenkins, 1992) popular culture works to form ideas.

Reading "deconstructionist comics," comic books that play with genre and were "comics about comics, [or] comics made of comics" were especially helpful to Roger in terms of his thinking. Deconstructionist comics were ones where the characters seem to be aware they were in a comic book or where the artist became involved in the story or where the story was a direct commentary on another comic book series, story, or creator. Roger also called these comic books meta-fictions, fictional stories incorporating or commenting on other fictional stories. An example of this type of comic book was *Animal Man* (DC Comics, 1989), a comic book series where a long forgotten superhero asked philosophical questions, battled villains, led a family life, and eventually met his writer (See Figure 17).

He noted that reading these kinds of comic books stimulated "a kind of critical thinking" that made him want "to step outside of [his] life and be critical about the elements in [his] life;" then he could also examine "what's affecting [him] and how it's affecting [him] and how [he was] reacting to it" (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005). He was seeking out the kind of "self-awareness" that a comic book character who suddenly figured out he was in a comic book had. This activity was related to Foucault's (1984/1985) "arts of existence" that included a component of self-

awareness in a conception of what it meant to lead a good life. Knowing one's surroundings and capabilities were important within this conception of identity, and Roger here spoke about how he used comic books to help him focus his reflection in critical ways on himself. Like one of Nell's (1988) Type B readers, Roger used reading to examine his life and affect his social situation. Comic books helped him make more connections with social worlds, or in his words, engage in the "on-going discussion amongst people" (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005).

Connection/Validation

When I asked what he got out of reading comic books, Roger responded "a sense of connection. I mean I do feel as though I am part of some on-going discussion amongst people." This discussion took place between comic creators, with artist and writers responding to each other as in the aforementioned deconstructionist comic books. Also there was back-and-forth between comic book artists and fans in their interactions in letters pages, online message boards, and conventions. Discussion also was a part of the community of the comic book store, with Wednesdays, when new comic books arrived, being an active time for looking over and commenting on the latest issues. All of these interactions were part of this larger discussion, but the one aspect that Roger focused on most throughout our interviews was the personal involvement reading comic books afforded the reader.

Like Peter who stated that he read comic books because it was like revisiting old friends, Roger also make personal connections and found much to empathize with when he read comic books. When we were speaking about the "secret messages" in

comic books during our interview, Roger explained what those messages meant to him:

> **Roger:** I mean, for me, it's an immense personal validation. You know, I feel bad, I don't mean to keep rubbing the Peter Parker/Charlie Brown thing, you know, the lovable loser, but I mean on some level, I think this certain style of writing for these characters, partly because of the thought balloon, because of the consistent awareness of how they are feeling, gives you a kind of immediacy. And it, you asked what the message is. Well, you know, the easy this is the quote from uh, what's the movie? [Snaps finger] About C.S. Lewis?
>
> **Interviewer:** Oh, I know what you are talking about. Shadow? Shadow? Shadowlands?
>
> **Roger:** Yes. Where he says, we read to know we are not alone.
>
> **Interviewer:** OK.
>
> **Roger:** And in some ways that's kind of maudlin. I don't know. It's kind of that. It's about connecting with people. It's about whatever we gain from being at least mentally "in the present" of someone else. It's very much that. It's an affirmation. And kind of instructions. You know. (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005)

The immediacy of comic books, with the use of illustrations and balloons to express meaning, were attractive to Roger because it was being privy to characters' thoughts, and he found it easy to see common experiences with certain characters, "lovable losers" like Peter Parker (Spider-Man) and Charlie Brown. These characters were not ideals and had to deal with multiple problems; sometimes they made

mistakes, and he found them easy to relate to. This shared experience gave him a sense of validation, a feeling like he was not alone because there were others who had similar experiences and who persevered as well. Reading comic books could be an intimate experience because Roger could be in someone else's mental present, even if it was a fictional character. There was something about a shared human experience that Roger found attractive in comic books, and comic book characters created a kind of companionship for him. Reading was very much like engaging in a conversation or a dialogue for Roger, and he described it as being a vital part of his making sense of the world. He might not have been experiencing the kind of sensations that come from French kissing, but nevertheless he was building personal connections through and with texts.

Summary: Reading to Dialogue

When I asked Roger about whether he saw himself as a lifelong reader, he answered in the affirmative and added that

> You have to keep reading, you have to keep looking for more answers, for more tools. It is difficult for me as a person who wants to be creative, on some level I feel like I just consume. The reader as a consumer of other people's ideas. And I do somewhat want to state my own version or response to these things. To be a part of the dialogue. (Roger, Interview, December 15, 2005)

Although he was not aware of their theories, Roger described his reading practices in terms analogous to Bakhtin (1981, 1986), de Certeau (1984), Fiske (1989), and Jenkins (1992). He saw himself involved in a world, like Bakhtin (1981, 1986), where language interactions helped shape social realities and where dialogic

response was a fundamental activity. In order to take part in the dialogue, he saw the necessity for gathering “tools” and saw reading as a prime source for amassing them, just as de Certeau (1984) and Jenkins (1992) had described reading as instances of poaching. He found ideas, situations, terminology, and social relationships that he could reflect upon and use in his own social interactions. He also made the point, as Fiske (1989) and Hills (2002) did, that he was a consumer of existing ideas but that when he put them into practice, he made them his own. From his account of denying Spider-Man, he demonstrated that he was able to take seemingly inconsequential texts and use them in meaningful ways. Comic books could be as important to him as the Bible. Roger took up superhero stories and used them to create his own dogmas.

Walter, a Rereader

> When I was thirteen my parents were separated, and then it was especially important for me to have some space to retreat in, which was usually my room and a book or a role playing game or my friend's house, for extended periods of time. And I guess I would also say that reading is the way that I understand the world. Like more so than anything else. I prefer to read news rather than watch TV. And it's really how I've learned to interact with other people, is with reading. It's how I learned to empathize with other people, through the process of reading and putting yourself into somebody else's position. And that's why I think reading is so important in general, and I always used to tell my students that when I was a teacher [Laughs]. It's really been central to my life. (W. Rigby, Interview, January 9, 2006)

Walter's discourse about reading involved creating spaces. Through reading he described having the ability to create a safe space to retreat to when he was experiencing stress. This space served the same purpose as other activities such as game playing or visiting with friends; these activities helped him cope with changing life events, and they also fulfilled some kind of social role for him. At times, he described reading as going to a different space, more like a classroom, where he could learn about people and the world, gaining knowledge about news, alternative viewpoints, and social interactions. Even though it was a teacher's cliché, which here caused him to laugh, Walter had gained much from reading. He was sincerely describing how reading was intimately tied to his sense of self. Reading had provided him with much material he used in his everyday practices.

Walter's Purposes for Reading

Although his reading practices have changed over time and he was not the same reader at age thirty that he was at age thirteen, Walter's last statement about the centrality of reading in his life referred to how much he had incorporated reading into his everyday practices. Using reading as "the way… [to] understand the world," Walter developed his social interactions as well as empathy with others. Like the descriptions of Type B readers (Nell, 1988), his descriptions of reading included social rehearsals, in terms of textual interactions and connecting with others' thoughts. Walter frequently spoke of how his reading was like having a "conversation" with an author, how his interactions with texts were like exchanges with people. Reading was not an escape into a mental realm but more like the material extensions Sumara (1996) described; fictional worlds melded with Walter's world.

At various times, he spoke of reading not just as a solitary act but also as a shared social activity, when he was collecting comics with his friends or gathering raw material for role playing games. He was very involved in "inventing worlds and exploring them and everything. So… reading and role playing for [him] were intertwined as a kid growing up" (W. Rigby, Interview, January 9, 2006). Walter also used reading as materials for professional interactions later in his life when he was an instructor. He parlayed knowledge and sensations he gained reading into his own teaching when he taught undergraduate literature and writing courses for non-majors. He poached (de Certeau, 1984) various types of skills, knowledge, and sensations from texts and applied to a variety of social functions, two of which were his RPGs and teaching. Two of the first ways Walter described himself using reading were to create company for himself and also as an escape into different worlds.

Reading for Company

As Peter described, reading offered Walter something similar to companionship (See Figure 18).

> I think that when I was a kid, I liked, when I would read the X-Men, I liked that they were this bizarre sort of unconventional family that had a lot of people in it. And a lot of drama and everything. But I liked, when I was a kid, I really read for company a lot. Like you know, like I was part of, it sounds like a cliché, that I was part of that family while I would be reading. And that would be very comforting, that there was this sort of, that if you don't have any friends around in real life you go into a book, a comic book, and then you have all of these friends [Chuckle]. Sort of, but it's not really friends. Not

> necessarily friends but just like people around. I think that was a big thing for me when I was younger. And still now, I think. (W. Rigby, Interview, January 9, 2006)

Walter described his reading here as being similar to what Nell (1988) called Type A reading. He was using reading to create alternate states of consciousness that offered him a change from social realities. Calling the X-Men being "just like people around" called to mind Nell's (1988) description of the accessibility reading offered in terms of creating different mental states. Walter could escape from feeling isolated by visiting with the fictional family of the X-Men. While he noted that he knew that the X-Men were not real and that they were not his friends, they did play a role in his life similar to his friends, offering comfort and companionship. Ironically, Walter's search for company often involved him deliberately separating himself from his social world. In order to meet up with his friends who were in texts he had to escape, at least mentally, from this world.

Reading to Escape

Walter's family situation was instrumental in creating a context where he sought companionship. Walter described himself as "an only child" who had "never really been particularly satisfied with the real world" and "liked to escape from it with other, more interesting lives" (W. Rigby, Interview, January 9, 2006). His searching out companionship was linked to his desire to find temporary relieve from life situations such as feelings of isolation or anxieties associated with his parents separation. Reading allowed him to create spaces to escape loneliness and trauma.

Vicarious contact with “interesting lives” was a large part of escape, but it had other components as well.

Characters were not the only part of his reading experiences that affected how Walter read over time; his genre preferences also loomed large.

> **Interviewer:** What role would you say reading has played in your life?
>
> **Walter:** Well, it's been an essential, basically my entire childhood I used reading as an escape. And that's why science fiction and fantasy were my preferred genres. And as I got older, obviously more realistic fiction worked for me, too. And as I got older it got easier for me to escape into more sort of realistic things (W. Rigby, Interview, January 9, 2006)

Over the course of his life, Walter’s reading preferences changed, but how he sometimes used reading did not. He was a big fan of science fiction and fantasy fiction throughout his life, because they were easy genres for him to escape into, and he described over time how his tastes changed so that he developed preferences for more realistic, well crafted writing. He remained a science and fiction fan, but he read more challenging and complex texts in those genres as well as more typically literary works, like novels. Comic books were attractive to Walter with their blend of science fiction and fantasy, and also because they were texts that he and his friends could talk about. He got involved in reading comic books because he had a friend who collected them, but he became more interested when he started playing role-playing games that were based on Marvel Comics characters (See Figure 19).

Although he was not really a regular comic book customer, Walter enjoyed reading comic books in his collection from time to time. He described receiving a

"visceral sense of pleasure" from the colors, the art, and the immediacy of sound effects, because those unique comic book features could not be done in a novel. The graphic format of comic books gave him instant access to another world where he could easy escape. He described using similar criteria in selecting comic books as he did in his more literary interests, especially as he grew older; he sought out good plots, characters, and description that fostered him visualizing pictures in his head like a movie. Part of the reason why he gave for losing interest in comic books was that they provided him with ready-made images, and he enjoyed creating his own. While escape was immediate, he wanted to have more control over the place he escaped into. What kept him reading comic books for as long as he did was that he would make connections between the point system and ability rankings of the RPG and compare them with the action sequences in the stories.

As he grew older and sought out more sophisticated texts, Walter engaged in reading different types of comic books such as DC Comics' *The Sandman* (see Figure 20), an extended narrative about a family of immortal beings involved in running different sectors of the universe. This story combined elements of fantasy, mythology, literature, and history to tell about the exploits of the Endless, a family of characters who are almost archetypical, Destiny, Death, Dream, Desire, Despair, Destruction, and Delirium. These stories were more character driven and less dependent on the typical action sequences included in superhero comic books, and they included references to a great number of disperse topics, including the works of Shakespeare, Chinese poetry, the occult practices of Alistair Crowley, comic book continuity, Jungian psychology, and world religions. The more evocative, introspective stories

lent themselves better to the types of reading that Walter engaged in as he grew older, when he began to reread texts more and use books to reflect on his own life.

Rereading, Forgetting, and Reflecting

Walter told me that he liked to read and reread stories that he already knew for a few purposes.

> Obviously part of it is that you notice different things. But what happens is that the story remains the same, but you change. Basically, I think. So my take on something is going to be different. So in a way I am kind of reading myself rather than reading the novel. So it's the, the book remains static but I have changed. And maybe what interests me is how I have changed since I last read something. The other way of saying it is that you notice things that you haven't notice before, but that's not because there's something else there to notice, it's because you've, the way you perceive it is changed. And I guess I find that really interesting. Um, also, when I am reading, I always feel when I am reading I am sort of in communication with the author, because I only read things that, where I really understand where the person is really coming from. I mean, because those are the things that interest me. If I didn't understand where they were coming from, after making any effort obviously, then it's not going to be very interesting. Yeah, now that I am thinking about it, I wonder if that sense of communicating with someone, I grew up as a very lonely child a lot of the time, I was an only child, and I wonder if part of that communication is what drew me to reading so much. So, in a way, I always feel like I am in a

> conversation with the author of what I am reading. And the conversation always changes as I change. (W. Rigby, Interview, January 9, 2006)

Part of his rereading has to do with his familiarity with certain books he enjoyed and wanted to re-enjoy (Faust & Glenzer, 2000). He sought to engage in a kind of conversation with the author, partly which he described as seeking out companionship. Also he mentioned rereading to see if he noticed anything different, just as Kyle related. Rereading had dimensions of revisiting a certain textual world, much like watching a favorite movie multiple times. But rereading was not only a return to a fictional world for Walter or an opportunity to dialogue with an author. Noticing different features in a text was also an opportunity for self reflection.

Walter told me that he reread almost as many texts as he read ones that were new to him. In particular, he described reading certain series of books, such as Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide* and *Dirk Gently* novels or David Eddings's *The Belgariad,* as much as twenty times. He described the texts as being static features in the world, but that he views himself as constantly changing. So he reread in order to examine how he had changed, to reflect on the person he was in the past and the person he was in the present. Something he poached (de Certeau, 1984) from reading were memories of himself from another time. Walter treated books as objects that did not contain transcendental truths in themselves, but that he could use to focus his thoughts and develop his own thinking. His reading choices were not typically considered examples of fine literature, and he focused on more denigrated genres of science fiction and fantasy. Nevertheless he used these more vulgar texts for analytical purposes, as others (Sumara, 1996) have described using more literary

works. He very much spoke of them as tools, and while he had his favorite texts, what he took from them were tools that assisted him in critically examining his place in the world.

Reading was tied into Walter's conception of an ever evolving, cumulative self that navigated social worlds. Rereading texts gave him touchstones to work from. Walter further elaborated on this point,

> What I was saying before about how I have changed and how a lot of reasons why I reread things is to see how I've changed since the last time I read it, so I guess for me there would be this sense of continuity from, even though the things I read when I was a kid might not have, it's sort of a narcissistic kind of thing, because even though the things I read as a kid might not be as interesting to me any more, I'd still be interested in why I liked it as a kid or it would have meaning for me now because I would look back at it and think about what it meant to me then. And so, I guess in a way, it's about self knowledge and [Pause] I mean even though your tastes are going to evolve and change there's, I mean, I don't know. You are always a sum of all of your previous selves, and you never really lose any of those selves, and in a way what you've read and what you've liked to read presents you with, both those things describe the person that you were. I don't know, I'm not a terribly self reflective person, and I don't have a good memory. I don't have a very good long term memory, and so maybe reading for me partly allows, it's sort of a mirror that sort of lets me go back in time and lets me remember better than I would have otherwise. (W. Rigby, Interview, January 9, 2006)

In a material sense, texts functioned as external memory banks for Walter, which he found particularly helpful as he described his own scanty long term memory. Reading helped him refine his "self knowledge," one of the crucial components of Foucault's (1984/1985) description of "arts of existence." Although he was not very self reflective in general, Walter was when he reread texts. Rereading provided him with the tools and context for reflective activity that he would not ordinarily engage in and which he viewed as assisting him develop self knowledge.

Reading also helped Walter shift away from painful situations, and at times his control over reading experiences took precedence over his own memories. He described rereading as an "agent for purposeful amnesia" (W. Rigby, Personal Communication, May 19, 2006) where he used reading to block out painful happenings in his life and separate himself from the world much like one of Nell's (1988) Type A readers. The flight into textual worlds was a tool that he used to cope with social realities, a tool that he found very important in maintaining himself. Rereading provided him with experiences he used in lieu of self knowledge.

The mirror image he invoked at the end of his utterance pointed to a material role reading played for him, a use that he poached (de Certeau, 1984) from literate practices. This use resembled one of Sumara's (1996) focal practices, an instance of contemplation that was not an external link to a life but that was part of a life. Reading was not something that he engaged in frivolously; it was an additional feature in his reading that helped him operate within his social world. The image of a mirror also pointed to a kind of fantasy element, as in the magic mirror of Snow White's stepmother, and also a kind of funhouse effect where mirrors were used to

show an infinite number of people. The latter type of mirror effect spoke to Walter's conception of a cumulative self made up of self iterations over time. It was also a common trope in comic book covers (see Figure 21).

Bundled into those multiple selves were personal tastes, memories, and historical contexts. This conception of self dovetailed with Bakhtin's (1986) conception of a chain of utterances, a series of connections between people, events, history, place, and time. Walter saw himself as a being always in progress but who still retained features from past experiences just as Bakhtin (1986) saw language as constantly evolving but infused with past meanings. Reading and rereading allowed Walter to recognize those connections, to see who he had been and who was in the present. Through such textual interactions, he determined more about where and how he worked in the world.

Summary: Reading to Reflect

Similar to how Roger had described using comic books to develop theories that resembled those of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) in terms of the interconnections of language, history, and lived worlds, Walter spoke of how he used reading and rereading fantasy and science fiction texts, including comic books, to help him engage in his own theories of self formation. Reading afforded him many benefits, including the visceral thrills of fiction done well, a sense of vicarious companionship that helped him cope with difficult life events and loneliness, and a focal practice (Sumara, 1996) that helped him amass self knowledge. Reading was ingrained in his life intimately, and although his reading practices had changed over time, he did not view those changes as a simple progression of taking up new activities and casting

aside old ones. Walter added more dimensions to how he used reading in his life and did not completely discard older uses. The manner in which he described practices suggested practices associated with both Type A and B readers (Nell, 1988). He read books as a form of escape or diversion, but he was simultaneously seeking personal insights from his reading. Sometimes he sought to escape from the world and to purposefully forget events; sometimes he used reading to focus his reflection to a high degree. Reading was something fully integrated into his life; it helped him see how he had rearranged himself over time. It played a central role in his world.

What is the Worth of Reading Comic Books?

"And again when I talk about reading, I always think of comic book reading. I apologize. It's broader than that" (Roger, Interview, December 12, 2005).

Even though Roger felt the need to apologize for his description of his reading practices, overall my participants' descriptions of their reading practices did not point to "renegade reading" (Worthy, 1998); they did not seem to have anything to apologize for. Reading contributed multiple kinds of tools to my participants' identity kits (Gee, 1991, 1996), but the functions they described reading having for them did not seem particularly out of the ordinary. Aaron described reading for a variety of purposes including for diversion and also as research; Kyle wanted to create and maintain a library; Peter sought to keep mentally active and occupied; Roger was seeking for answers that would give him meaningful explanations about life events, and Walter read to gain self knowledge and to escape from certain life situations. What marked them as different in terms of social hierarchies was that they chose to read texts that were not regarded highly by society as a whole. Comic books have

been long associated as texts that were vacuous, harmful, or childish (Wertham, 1953; Wright, 2001), and they have not been regarded as being appropriate for study or appreciation (Hirsch, 1988; Rooney, 2005), but the adult readers in this study found various features that appealed or were meaningful to them in comic books. If these readers stated that they had performed these practices with literary novels, they might have been regarded as a particular kind of academic and as more mainstream readers.

Reading has been an integral part of these my participants' lives. Aaron said that he always had a book that he was reading. Another one of my participants Nelson made an even more explicit statement about the role of reading in his life when he said that for him reading was "as natural as breathing" and that he could not "really imagine how things would be if [he] weren't always reading" (N. Vomit, Interview, December 16, 2005). Reading was not just an activity these people participated in from time to time, their reading practices were built into their everyday lives (Sumara, 1996). Their reasons for their reading so much were partly explained by Walter when he said that he had never been "particularly satisfied with the real world" (W. Rigby, Interview, January 9, 2006). Like Walter, my other participants described reading in terms of giving them something that they were not getting from other interactions. Aaron got an escape from stressful situations; Kyle was able to visit a world of benevolent guardians; Peter got a chance to visit with vicarious friends, and Roger found a substitute for romantic relations. Reading gave these men a gateway to an alternate state of consciousness (Nell, 1988). Some of my participants read because it gave them something that they could not get from other sources, but another one of my participants, Salty, went so far as to say that his "excuse for never

taking drugs was, [he] forgot. [He] seriously forgot to take drugs in college" because he was so caught up in reading comic books (S. Toro, Interview, January 8, 2006). In other words, reading took the place of some behaviors, practices, and relationships. Reading led to an alternate state of consciousness that was bound up in their social worlds, and, as a practice, reading was intimately bound up in who they were and what they did.

Although the worlds they entered were fictional, they had very material effects for the readers I interviewed. Like the features of reading that Smith and Wilhelm (2002) had noted being attractive to male readers, links to social relationships was an important part of my participants' literate practices. Their reading became a source for social interactions, from friendly discussions with their friends to more critical discussions at the comic store (see Figure 22), and from material to be used in RPGs to knowledge displayed in trivia contests. The trivia contests in particular yielded concrete material benefits. Both Peter and Slam described regularly taking part in such contests, but Slam talked about how he had supported himself with them in college. He stated that "trivia [was] basically how I made my living. Because [he]'d go to just about every restaurant and place in town" on the separate days that ran their contests to "play trivia and win [his] dinner" (S. Bradley, Interview, January 29, 2006). Just as profit could be made from amassing a collection or speculating on certain individual comic books, displaying comic book knowledge could pay off in trivia contests.

Aside from playing a role in social interactions or gaining material wealth, comic book reading also contributed opportunities for reflection or study. Aside from

the popular culture knowledge that Peter and Slam used in trivia contests, other participants describes how they used comic books for similar purposes as others used more culturally acceptable texts. Aaron spoke about using comic books along with other kinds of media in terms of anthropological study. He studied Asian cultures through *manga, anime,* kung-fu movies, and novels; he used these texts as artifacts or primary sources. Even though Aaron denigrated his practices when he called himself a geek, he described how he was engaged in scholarship and developing himself as a cultural expert. Roger and Walter took more esoteric approached to developing knowledge when they took up these texts and used them for more reflective or philosophical functions. Walter used his reading as a mirror, an opportunity to look back on himself, his tastes, and his experiences to situate himself in the world. Roger acted more as a hermeneutical scholar, looking for various meanings and connections between texts and his life. The roles that these readers take up when reading, as experts, researchers, scholars, and interpreters, were accompanied by a certain kind of social status. Academic expertise was usually highly regarded, with professions requiring a large number of years of study in academia, law, and medicine having a relatively high level of prestige. Prestige also has an element of being a knowledgeable and a connoisseur. Kyle fit more into the latter category in his role as a snob and a collector. His terminology was more tied into economics and the status that can accompany amassed wealth.

On the whole, my participants spoke to how being a comic book reader gave them a certain social cache. Reading was instrumental in the creation and maintenance of their social positions. In the field of education, reading has been

continually emphasized as self-building in terms of a pathway to academic and life success (Brozo, 2002; Smith & Headley, 2004). In the next chapter, I discussed how the descriptions of reading practices by adult comic book readers spoke to school practices and education research.

CHAPTER FIVE

READING, POACHING, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practices of adult comic book readers by reference to their utterances about reading, the discourses they used to describe reading, and the tactics that they exercised through reading. This investigation entailed a look at how reading functioned as part of the identity kits (Gee, 1991, 1996) of the people I interviewed. These three questions drove my research:

1. What does the act of reading comic books provide for these readers?
2. What reasons do they give for engaging in lifelong reading practices?
3. How have their literacy choices affected their lives socially and academically?

In regard to my participants utterances, reading was not an activity done discretely or in isolation from the rest of their lives, but it was more a focal practice (Sumara, 1996) that was bound up in the intersections of their practices and identities. My participants described a variety of functions that reading comic books held for them, ranging from leisure reading to more intense, reflective practices. For some, reading was a temporary shelter from worries, a companion when lonely, and/or a mirror that allowed them to view themselves and the world differently. Using these focal practices, my participants were endeavoring to achieve outcomes such as expertise, connoisseurship, mental development, or enlightenment that tied into “arts of existence” (Foucault 1984/1985) where people tried to be the best version of

themselves they could be. Reading, for my participants, was tied up in practices of self-actualization, -regulation, and -knowledge.

Reading and literacy practices were "not typically invented by their practitioners" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 339). Foucault (1975/1979) explained how discourses played a role in disciplining people in regards to what constituted proper arts to follow, and his concepts highlighted how religious, governmental, and community structures functioned similarly to how Berger and Luckmann (1966) described institutions creating the social realities of individuals. Institutions provided the rules that bounded much of what could be said, thought, or done, My participants displayed the influence of institutional discipline when they made reference to the benefits of education, the need for mental and contemplative activity, and hierarchies of taste. For example, Aaron described being expert as a desirable attribute, and Kyle likewise found it worthy to amass specific objects and experiences.

My participants' reading practices pointed to institutional discourses and described how typically honored attitudes and activities were replicated even when people read texts that have been regarded as vacuous or potentially harmful (Wright, 2001). Comic book readers maintained hierarchies of worth among texts, as Kyle described in how readers preferred certain writers, artists, or iterations of Batman (see Figures 11-13) and Walter mentioned in how he frequently chose to read books based on a sort of literary merit. Roger performed complex textual analyses and tried to connect his readings with his experiences in profound ways. All of these behaviors pointed to overarching discourses about literacy and learning. Institutional discourses, whether based in communities, schools, or elsewhere, dictated if and how texts

should be used, and "when [people] use literacy, [they] also get used" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 350). Moreover, even when people attempted to adapt or subvert institutionalized manners of reading their uses of texts retained the "tastes" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293) of the discourses in which they learned to read.

Although institutional discourses, which de Certeau (1984) termed strategies, delimited and affected people's social actions, they did not totally dictate practice. It would be a facile statement that the adult comic book readers I spoke with merely replicated institutional roles as readers because they also demonstrated nuanced manners of reading. The various functions that these readers described (see Table C) dovetailed with de Certeau's (1984) theories about reading as poaching, a practice where readers used texts for a variety of purposes depending on their own needs. Although bounded somewhat by the discourses of literacy they first acquired, people made decisions about how to enact institutional strategies in ways that suited their local situations. My participants displayed degrees of freedom in how they read comic books, texts ostensibly meant as simple entertainment. They poached texts with more philosophical, aesthetic, critical, or academic intents, according to their purposes and preferences, even when they read comic books, popular culture texts read mainly for entertainment and considered by and large to be either slight or childish. Aaron performed cultural anthropology using *manga* and kung fu films; Kyle acted as a connoisseur who amassed a collection of comic books and graphic novels; Peter used texts to occupy his mind and himself; Roger found messages that he applied to his behavior and worldview, and Walter used comic books to reflect on himself and his world. Far from being superficial or insubstantial readings, the literate

practices of my participants were involved and complex ones that were intimately intertwined in their lives.

What was more, they poached ideas, experiences, and expertise from comic books. Reading comic books and *manga* helped Aaron examine social relationships in other cultures when he compared characters' actions and motivations and found that they were framed differently in texts from different cultures. Roger and Kyle described how comic book continuity helped them to grasp the idea of how historical events were related to and affected one another. The poaching my participants described could also be quite personal, such as the vicarious experience of companionship that Walter and Peter described, where they used comic books as company when they felt lonely or isolated. And the cultural knowledge amassed from comic books could be exercised in numerous manners such as displaying knowledge in trivia contests, using content knowledge for academic purposes, building a comic book collection, or discussions on-line or in-store. They were caught up in global practices of literacy, notions that literacy allowed access to specific social goods (Delpit, 1996; Gee, 1996), but they also amended them to their situations.

A feature that marked these readers' practices as different from traditionally valued literary reading was that they chose to read popular culture texts like comic books and not more literary texts such as novels. My participants read texts in ways that could be considered expert or refined, ones that dovetailed with Foucault's (1984/1985) arts of existence and seemed institutionally approved. Their text choices subverted hierarchies of taste and worth, and in this sense might have seemed arbitrary, but the practices that surrounded those texts were not. What was tactical in

their reading practices were not their practices but their choices to apply those reading practices to texts some consider the lowest kind of literature (Rooney, 2005). They simultaneously marginalized themselves and carved out their own spaces with their textual choices. For whatever reason, it behooved them to be "geeks" or "snobs," alternative kinds of experts that might not be recognized as such by any but a select few.

Poaching proved to be a useful metaphor with which to approach and analyze the data in my dissertation project. In what follows, I will detail implications of the current study for education research and practice. The research methods used in this study combined social constructionist and postmodern perspectives to explore literacy in ways that pay more attention to practices than processes. Additionally, the analyses of my participants' particular reading practices as poaching and the attention to reading practices called into question the definitions of texts, readers, and school, concepts that have been central to education.

Poaching as Methodology

My own research project was another example of poaching. I took ideas, theories, and practices from the variety of texts I read. From Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) work I took a conception of a chain that connected social, historical, ideological, and textual utterances, giving me the utterance as an object of analysis. Among the texts in that chain was Kvale's (1996) work on research interviewing, particularly the analysis method of meaning interpretation, which I used in conjunction with the theories of Foucault (1975/1979) and de Certeau (1984) to analyze those utterances. I poached utterances from my participants that demonstrated how discourses and

tactics interacted in their reading practices. Taking their statements about their purposes for reading and transforming them to serve my own research purposes, I performed my own brand of poaching. Poaching worked as a metaphor to delineate both their reading practices and my research methodology.

A common assumption in education has been that "knowledge is socially constructed in communities" (Hruby, 2001, p. 58), but "there has been little of methodological substance" (p. 58) that spoke to reading education in particular because literacy education has been lacking in empirical studies that draw on social constructionism and poststructural critiques. With this dissertation I have endeavored to address this situation and developed a methodology to analyze reading practices that combined theories about language, social activity, social institutions, and education. My specific kind of meaning interpretation was designed to look at the discourses that were used to define social activity concerning literacy and the ways that people took up and also adapted those discourses to suit their situations. This research spoke to how literacy was constituted and used by people in reference to global and local contexts.

The theorists I used to perform my analyses articulated how individuals and institutions interacted within social worlds, and one in particular focused on specific matters of reading. De Certeau's (1984) conception of reading as poaching described not just individual practices but general resistance that individuals exercised in forming their own social worlds. Although he stated that people were wily and tricky, he provided little in the way of examples of how their reading practices reflected those characteristics. Jenkins (1992) used poaching to explore the practices of fans of

various television shows and movies. Jenkins (1992) examined fans' productions in various forms and extended de Certeau's (1984) notions about the agency of consumers. Jenkins's (1992) fans confronted media producers, produced their own amalgamations of media products, and formed social groups around specific texts. His work described the practices of fans but did not make specific references to local reading practices. My dissertation study extended the research on poaching, focusing on the textual practices of adult comic book readers, people who engaged in reading texts over an prolonged period of time.

My research brought concepts from sociology, philosophy, and culture studies to bear on education topics. As Hruby (2001) has noted, such a combination of social constructionist and postmodern theoretical work produced a different version of reading than much of the cognitive psychological work that has historically made up reading education research. Rather than speaking of reading as a process, I used the idea of poaching to examine the functions of reading and found that my participants spoke to a variety of ways they used and were used by texts. They spoke of a number of functions for reading, ones that were not necessarily cognitive. Many spoke of reading comic books in terms of an appreciation for the combination of art and words. Others also spoke to how texts were somewhat proxies for personal interactions; for those readers, texts were more like friends or family than information lodes to be mined. For other readers, the texts were touchstones or material for other interactions, such as role playing games, discussions at the comic store, or trivia contests at local restaurants.

Implications for Further Research

When I looked at practices more than processes, I found that my participants did not speak about reading using typical cognitive psychological descriptions (perhaps because they were not literacy educators or researchers) and that their descriptions were varied and detailed nevertheless. Using their descriptions, reading was not a matter of simply focusing on vocabulary, fluency, reading comprehension, or pronunciations. They used the term reading for a number of purposes, some of them quite intimate. These adult comic book readers had close relationships with reading, and as Sumara (1996) had theorized about literary readers, reading was bound up in their worlds and in who they were.

The view of readers as active participants in their worlds who bent texts to their own purposes holds implications for literacy research in regards to the focus of research. Although all of the practices that my participants described may not be quantifiable or practical in terms of education practice, they spoke to the complexity of reading and how reading practices have been somewhat simplified for the purposes of determining specific reading processes. Results were for this one group and could not be generalized beyond them, but the findings that these readers were multi-purposeful in their reading led to other questions that could not be answered at this time but that could be productive avenues for future study. Knowing how certain students take up and use texts could provide insights into how to approach literacy pedagogy; this knowledge could also shed light on what practices students are adept, novice, or competent. Such observations might not be generalized to students

everywhere, but such observations could assist teachers working with similar students or student groups.

There were a number of limitations in my study, and those limitations pointed to areas for further study. I could not ascertain how my participants learned their reading practices or if school was involved in such learning. Additionally, this study focused on a specific demographic group, with most being white males between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-seven, and all being ardent readers. Further research on different age and demographic groups might yield different results about how reading texts like comic books does or does not function for other groups of people, perhaps most notably K-12 students. Insights into how younger people perceive and practice reading might yield insights into how reading is taught, learned, and practiced in different environments. With ever changing definitions and technologies for literacy (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Lanham, 2001; New London Group, 1996), such observations might be informative or valuable to literacy researchers, educators, students, and other share-holders in literacy education.

Using my theoretical framework gave a different view of what reading was, a conception that was not bounded by discrete processes and that lacked a certain precision, but one that showed complexities and connections of social practices (Street, 2003). The concept of literacy practices contained the notions that social institutions and contexts dictated specific uses for reading, and people locally took up those uses but also sometimes adapted them. My participants' descriptions reinforced Street's (2003) conceptions of literacy practices as socially based and also de Certeau's (1984) description of reading as poaching, an "art" that was "anything but

passive" (p. xxii). De Certeau described being a consumer as one of the prominent social roles, but for him consuming was not the same thing as pure transmission. People did not blindly and unthinkingly absorb institutional discourses. They were more than banks to be filled (Freire, 1970); when they acquired social knowledge they also added subtle nuances (Gee, 1996). For many of my participants, reading was not a simply analytic or cognitive process but an activity that was bound into their social interactions and identities. They read so they could engage in discussions, keep their minds occupied, feel connected, be entertained, and/or collect desirable objects and experiences. These observations suggested that attention also be paid to readers in terms of education research, not just on texts or institutional structures.

Poaching and Education

The poaching metaphor might provide an alternative view of reading compared with typical cognitive psychological studies, and although the observations made during this research project cannot be generalized to the population at large (Patton, 2002), the different conceptions and purposes described by my participants supported the view that reading was poaching, which in turn spoke to educational practice. De Certeau (1984) described readers as active consumers who poached texts and who were situated in their own social worlds. The reading as poaching metaphor relied on altered definitions of readers, texts, institutions, and the purposes of reading, and all of these conceptions have been implicated in how education has been theorized, planned, carried out, and assessed.

Poaching conflated readers with consumers, active participants who took raw materials from the texts around them to "make do" in ways that were advantageous to

them. Texts were seen as collections of tools to be taken or left as needed. Texts were important only as much as they were useful to readers, and readers owed nothing to the intentions of an author when reading. Because texts were not as privileged as readers in this conception, the purposes of reading as well as institutional strategies also came under scrutiny. The purposes of reading were tied more to readers' intentions. Institutions, although still recognized as having power and influence over people's lives, could be subverted by tactical uses of texts. For instance, the Protestant Reformation might be seen as a historical instance of poaching, as Martin Luther and other scholars took Biblical texts and used them to frame their arguments against institutions connected to the Roman Catholic Church. In a sense, scholarship itself was also an example of poaching. This dissertation is an amalgamation of numerous texts and theories that I have read and combined in the interests of academia and myself. Students, on a different scale, have been and will be required to read and use texts for many scholastic purposes; thus the characteristics of texts, readers, and institutions as related to the metaphor of poaching had effects on educational practice.

Poaching and Reading Processes

Poaching, much like Berger and Luckmann's (1966) sociological work, used theories of Durkheim and Goffman to define how both institutions and individuals were involved in constructing social realities. Social constructionism, with its

> focus on how knowledge [was] socially constructed in communities…[stood] in conceptual opposition to traditional work in reading education, informed by cognitive constructivist psychology, that attempted to explain text decoding

> and reading comprehension by way of models of mental operations. (Hruby, 2001, p. 58)

My participants did not read strictly to comprehend texts or to learn new vocabulary words, although those activities did take place in their reading. Even though many of them also read to be informed, just as often they read because it made them feel occupied or thoughtful or entertained.

My participants' descriptions of reading caused me to reflect on the *Dignifying Science* assessment (See Figures 1 & 2) I had received at the IRA convention (Newkirk, 2005). The descriptions of reading that my participants shared with me did not match up well with the assessment activities, highlighting some of the differences between cognitive psychological and social constructionist views of reading. The conception of reading set forth in that assessment was focused on specific aspects of the reading process determined through a long tradition of cognitive psychological study, reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Those two aspects were basic, concrete, and even fundamental to reading ability, features that have led to reading comprehension and vocabulary being included among the five domains of elementary reading education (National Reading Panel, 2000). However, reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, as important as they were, did not speak to the multifaceted conceptions of reading that my participants mentioned. In all of the descriptions of their reading practices and what they got out of reading, only two participants, Kyle and Slam, mentioned vocabulary acquisition, and none mentioned reading comprehension. The reading practices most spoke of were complex and involved multiple outcomes and social situations and

could not be localized in an isolated manner as a recall question. For my participants, reading involved understanding texts, but even more so reading involved using texts.

My thinking about the assessment was complicated because I knew it was intended for elementary students who were beginning readers, but the people I was interviewing for my dissertation study were more practiced and skilled readers. Elementary school students were intended to read *Dignifying Science* (Ottaviani, Barr, Fleener & Fradon, 2003) and no one could expect these students to read in the same ways that my participants who had had spent decades engaging with comic books, but nevertheless my participants' utterances about reading had something to say to educational practices, namely that reading was a practice that included but also entailed more than reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. To look at reading as poaching involved recognizing the complex web of social and historical contexts as well as institutional and individual intentions and relationships. My reflection on the assessment and my participants' observations about reading also called to mind my colleague's question from Chapter One, namely "When was the last time you finished a book and said, 'All right, now I am ready to make a diorama?'" The assessment that was presented at the IRA conference (Newkirk, 2005) with its focus on discrete reading skills had the potential to be as arcane as a person deciding to create a diorama as a reading response out of the blue. Both activities seemed removed from social contexts and was being done for their own sake as a school assignment, not something people typically did in the course of reading. Poaching rebutted a simple transmission model of education where learners

were taught to absorb material unthinkingly because people were constantly negotiating between what they were being taught and what they knew.

Learning was an example of "unrecognized" production (de Certeau, 984, p. 34). It occurred to me as an educator that many of my participants' practices were not only critical and reflective but also involved making a vast number of connections between expertise, experiences, and history. In short, the reading practices my participants described exhibited the kind of higher level thinking skills many teachers sought to promote in their own students (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). The adult comic book readers I spoke with did not undertake these practices for the purposes of school, however; they described reading for the purpose of getting temporary shelter, occupation, enjoyment, or material to use socially. I could not say where they learned to read in these ways; there was no way for me to determine where my participants had learned those skills or if school had any role in their learning. What I could say was what their observations about reading stated to me about the institution of school

Poaching and School

Education research has suggested that regular and frequent engagement in reading has positive effects on learning and scholastic performance (Brozo, 2002; Schwanenflugel, Hamilton, Kuhn, & Stahl, 2004), but for my participants being able and involved readers did not always equate to school success. As students, my participants ran the gamut in terms of scholastic success, from "nerds" who "got all As" like Kyle to students like Aaron who had experienced some academic failures to others like Nelson who lost interest in school and "more or less sat it out" (N. Vomit,

Interview, December 16, 2005). My participants might have been avid or involved readers, but their reading did not necessarily translate into scholastic success. However reading did pay off in other arenas for them. They were able to cope with traumatic or troubling situations; they could examine themselves and their lives; they gained expertise and knowledge that they incorporated into social activities.

Many of my participants said that part of the reason for the disparity between the uses of reading in- and out-of-school was that their interests often were not recognized in school, and the set curricula were an unattractive alternative. Poaching was an exercise in using advantages, and if education did not seem particularly attractive or advantageous, even skilled and able readers did not use their abilities to achieve school success. Although some of them sought out scholastic achievements, my participants chose to undertake to create and develop their roles as expert readers outside of the context of school or other formal institutions.

The adult comic book readers I interviewed did not read simply for understanding or to do well on assessments; they read for their own purposes, whether to provide themselves with company, to reflect on their lives, to gain insight into other people's thoughts or lives, to accumulate a personal library. School was not the end-all, be-all for them, and they sought success and validation in other places. Schools and other social institutions influence people's interactions with texts, and in part my participants reflect those global influences. When participants read to find meaning or do research, they were taking part in mental exercises that have been valorized by various institutions for millennia as being part of a balanced "arts of existence" (Foucault, 1984/1985) in the western world. But the practice of poaching

shifted the centrality of institutions toward a greater role of the agency of individuals; people's concerns and actions became as important as those of the institutions, including churches, governments, and schools. The activity of the people in schools, the teachers and students, took on a more active role than simply carrying out the dictates of a curriculum. Many of my participants did not speak about school much, perhaps because most were finished with formal school. However, the complex and involved reading practices they described referred to the importance of other institutions and contexts. Contrary to much literacy research, school was not at the center of their reading practices.

Poaching and Social Futures

"Designing social futures" (New London Group, 1996, p. 60) has been suggested as the starting point for some current discussions about the goals of literacy education. Given the speed of technological change (Lanham, 2001) and its effects on reading (Purves, 1998), the New London Group (1996) described how more than a single notion of literacy be considered in teaching and learning. Changing times required being adaptable to new situations, contexts, and technologies, and multiple roles of students were placed as the foci of education. Simultaneously, there has also been a call to "leave no child behind" (U.S Department of Education, 2002) that brought with it a call for national benchmarks in the U.S., standards to determine what students ought to be taught. The call for standards has placed curriculum as the focus of education with students being encouraged to learn a set of core skills that will prepare them for later school success (National Reading Panel, 2000). Although well intentioned, the call for strict standards has led to situations where material has

been taught for the sake of coverage (Meyer, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) in ways that do not connect to students' lives. Blind adherence to standards could lead to seemingly esoteric exercises as creating dioramas after reading or having to answer factual recall questions after reading a comic book. Teaching in these cases was done without reference to students' social presents let alone their futures. Such activities smack of standardization, like assignments that were either packaged in textbook series to ensure a uniform delivery of content or that were being propagated as part of traditional school practices. Those activities were not tailored to any specific context, and although they might be helpful or productive to some students, they might be just as harmful or unproductive to others.

In my view, although teaching should include moments of unease or discomfort (Fecho & Botzakis, in press) when teachers and learners move into unknown spaces and learning unknown knowledge (Delpit, 1996), teaching reading also requires having a conception of what is being taught and why. My participants provided a glance at different versions of what those futures might be with their descriptions of what readers did. They did not speak to mental operations but made reference to reading's functions, and those functions spoke to long-term engagements in reading and lent insight into what the goals of lifelong literacy could be. Reading was somewhat dictated by typical social definitions of literacy; and although they chose to read comic books, my participants were hardly "renegade" (Worthy, 1998) in their reading practices. They took up some traditional literacy practices when they engaged in reading to keep their minds active, to reflect on their lives, and to amass knowledge. All of these behaviors have been part of what constituted a conception of

a life lived well that has been promoted by institutions such as governments, churches, and schools for thousands of years in the West.

But coupling de Certeau's (1984) observation that people were not "fools" (p. 38) with Freire's (1970) observation that they also were not mere vessels to fill up with knowledge, I also wished to point out that reading was not something disconnected from people's lives on a local level. Reading was germane to my participants' interests, social connections, and activities. They continued to read and get something out of reading because it had some worth to them, and what was worthwhile was partly determined through their individual needs or social interactions and not simply dictated from an authority. By looking at reading as a set of practices and not a discrete set of processes, I hoped to shed some light on how reading was something acquired and taught but also something that was adapted through social practice.

Currently, the type of scientifically based research (Shavelson & Towne, 2002) being endorsed in the United States has shifted pedagogy and research about literacy to more global conceptions of reading that discount local influences. As Brandt and Clinton (2002) pointed out, literacy is "neither a deterministic force nor a creation of local agents" (p. 338) but is the product of social practices that draw from global and local contexts (Gee, 1996; Street, 2003). My participants spoke to the complexities and gradations of reading, and even though those features might need to be pared down in the interests of education from time to time, it would behoove educators and learners to not let those pared down versions become definitive.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions from Spring, 2004 Pilot Study

Did you like school? Why or why not?

Could you describe yourself as a student? As a reader?

Could you tell me about when you started reading comic books?

Could you describe to me why you continued to read them?

What types of comics did (do) you read?

Where did you typically read comic books? With whom?

Did you share social activity around reading comic books?

How were comic books viewed in school?

How did your peers treat your choices of reading material?

How were comic books viewed at home?

Did you ever get comments from people because you read comic books? If so, from whom? What kind of comments?

Did you ever try to draw images from or create your own comics? If so, which ones? For what purpose?

Did you ever dress up as a comic book character? Which one(s)?

Could you tell me if comics affected your schoolwork?

Do you think that comic books have anything beneficial to offer students?

Appendix B

Initial Individual Interview Questions

General Information

1. Name (A pseudonym)
2. Age
3. Occupation
4. Marital status
5. Hobbies/leisure activities

Literacy Life History

6. Could you describe yourself as a reader?
7. What role has reading played in your life?
8. What do you remember about learning to read?
9. How does your family view reading?
10. What are some texts you typically read?

Comic Book-specific Questions

11. Could you tell me about when you started reading comic books?
12. Could you describe to me why you continue to read them?
13. Has the types of comic books you read changed over time?
14. Where did you typically read comic books? With whom?
15. Do comic books play a role in your social activities?
16. How did your peers treat your choices of reading material?
17. How were comic books viewed at home?

18. Did you ever get comments from people because you read comic books? If so, from whom? What kind of comments?
19. Did you ever try to draw images from or create your own comics? If so, which ones? For what purpose?
20. Did you ever dress up as a comic book character? Which one(s)?
21. What do you get from reading comic books?
22. How do you define the term lifelong reader?

Appendix C

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What are your thoughts about the phrase “comic book geek?”
    A. Is it founded in any reality?
    B. What would you tell people to understand this fan group?
2. What do you think about the comic book we read for this meeting?
    A. Is this the type of thing you would normally read?
    B. What kinds of comic books appeal to you?
    C. What kinds of comic books do not appeal to you?

Appendix D

Follow-up Individual Interview Questions for Aaron

1. Ethnicity?
2. What do you get more out of, your reading for work or for leisure?
3. Are you a comic book geek?
4. How does your view of reading compare with my written report?
    a. Have I overstated anything?
    b. Is it pretentious?
    c. What parts stick out particularly for you?
5. How did you come up with your pseudonym?
6. Has anything that has occurred since our first interview, including things said in the focus group, changed your thinking about texts?
7. What did you think about the focus group interview?
8. Is there anything about the research process you would like to change?
9. Is there anything that you haven't had the chance to say so far that you would like to add?

Appendix E

Follow-up Individual Interview Questions for Kyle

1. Ethnicity?
2. How does your view of reading compare with my written report?
3. Are you a comic book geek?
4. Did school teach you to read like you do now?
5. Have participant review and discuss information from the transcription of their interview.
6. How did you come up with your pseudonym?
7. Has anything that has occurred since our first interview, including things said in the focus group, changed your thinking about texts?
8. What did you think about the focus group interview?
9. Is there anything about the research process you would like to change?
10. Is there anything that you haven't had the chance to say so far that you would like to add?

Appendix F

Follow-up Individual Interview Questions for Peter

1. Ethnicity?
2. Is comic book reading better than newspaper reading?
3. Are you a comic book geek?
4. How does your view of reading compare with my written report?
    a. Have I overstated anything? Understated?
    b. Is it pretentious?
    c. What parts stick out particularly for you?
5. How did you come up with your pseudonym?
6. Has anything that has occurred since our first interview, including things said in the focus group, changed your thinking about texts?
7. What did you think about the focus group interview?
8. Is there anything about the research process you would like to change?
9. Is there anything that you haven't had the chance to say so far that you would like to add?

Appendix G

Follow-up Individual Interview Questions for Roger

1. Ethnicity?
2. How does your view of reading compare with my written report?
3. Are you a comic book geek?
4. Did school teach you to read like you do now?
5. What can Spider-Man do that Holden Caulfield can't for you?
6. Do you consider yourself a lifelong reader?
7. Has anything that has occurred since our first interview, including things said in the focus group, changed your thinking about texts?
8. How did you come up with your pseudonym?
9. What did you think about the focus group interview?
10. Is there anything about the research process you would like to change?
11. Is there anything that you haven't had the chance to say so far that you would like to add?

Appendix H

Follow-up Individual Interview Questions for Walter

1. Ethnicity?
2. Do you still read for company?
3. Are comic books silly?
4. Are you a comic book geek?
5. How does your view of reading compare with my written report?
    a. Have I overstated anything?
    b. Is it pretentious?
    c. What parts stick out particularly for you?
6. How did you come up with your pseudonym?
7. Has anything that has occurred since our first interview, including things said in the focus group, changed your thinking about texts?
8. What did you think about the focus group interview?
9. Is there anything about the research process you would like to change?
10. Is there anything that you haven't had the chance to say so far that you would like to add?

Table A

Research Timeline

Participant	First Individual Interview Date	Focus Group Interview Date	Second Individual Interview Date
Aaron	12/12/05	4/14/06	5/24/06
Peter	12/13/05	3/30/06	5/21/06
Roger	12/15/05	3/30/06	5/17/06
Kyle	12/19/05	3/30/06	5/18/06
Walter	1/9/06	4/14/06	5/19/06

Table B

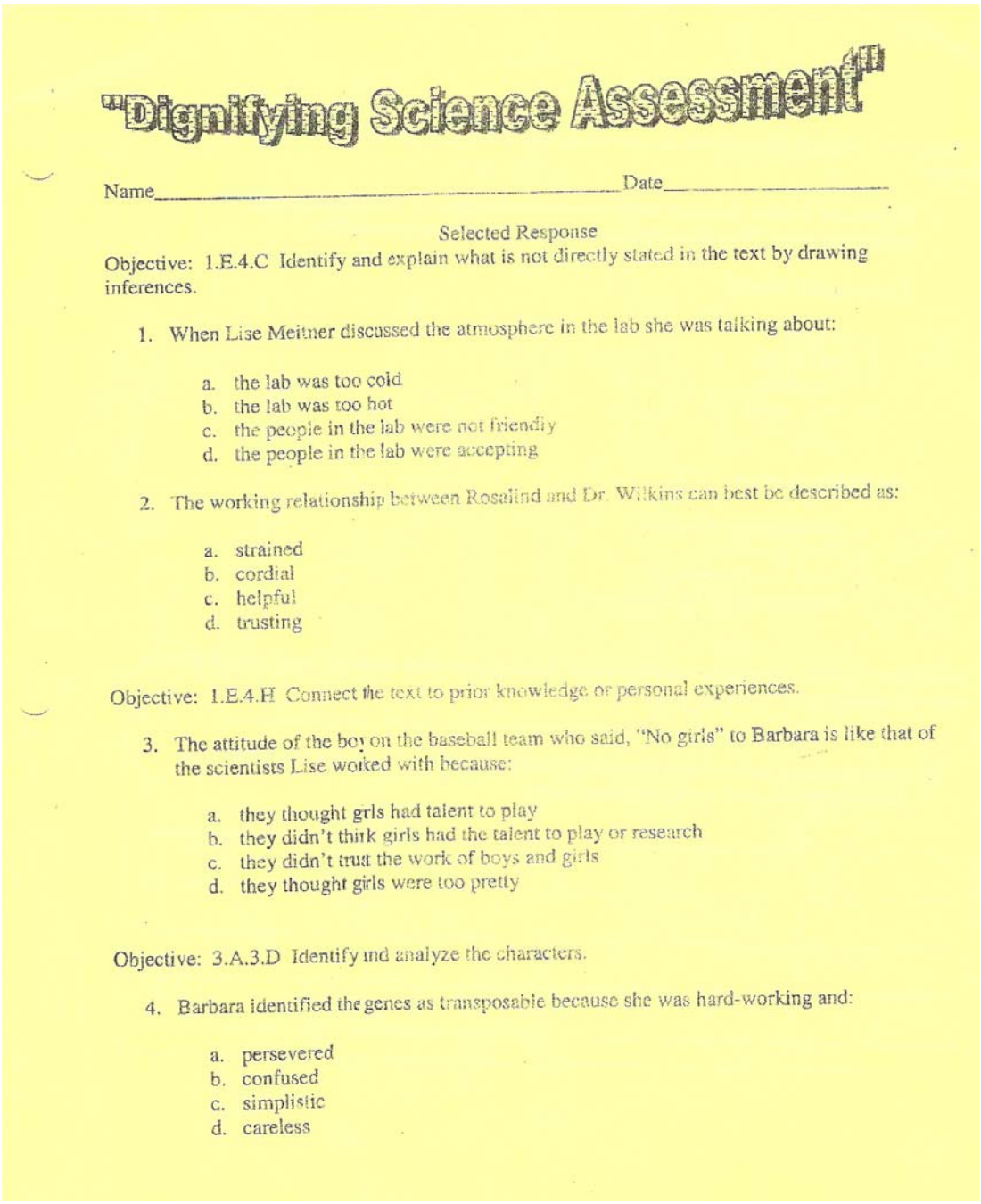
Participants

Participant	Age	Age when started reading comic books	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital status	Occupation
Aaron	36	8	Male	White, European-American, Palestinian background	Married	Student
Hal	28	6	Male	Caucasian, American	Married	Clerk
Kyle	29	5	Male	Caucasian, American	Single	Assets protection specialist
Mike	35	7	Male	Caucasian, American	Married	Comic store manager
Nelson	37	<2	Male	Caucasian, American	Married	Comic store manager
Peter	29	11	Male	Caucasian, American	Single	Prep cook
Roger	31	7	Male	Caucasian, American	Single	Comic store clerk
Salty	29	4	Male	Caucasian, American	Married	Graphic designer
Slam	27	6	Male	Caucasian, American	Single	Unemployed
Trey	26	9	Male	Caucasian, American	Single	Student, Clerk
Walter	30	12	Male	Caucasian, American	Married	Library assistant
Weetanya	32	9	Female	Asian-American	Married	Student

Table C

Reading Functions for Each Participant

Participant	Functions of Reading Mentioned	Total
Aaron	Entertainment, escape, friends, habit, interests, mental activity, reflection, socializing, study	10
Hal	Aesthetics, collecting, entertainment, habit, reflection, theorizing	6
Kyle	Aesthetics, collecting, entertainment, escape, habit, interests, love, reflection, theorizing	9
Mike	Collecting, entertainment, interests, reflection	4
Nelson	Aesthetics, collecting, habit, love, reflection, theorizing	6
Peter	Collecting, company, entertainment, escape, friends, habit, love, mental activity, reflection, socializing	10
Roger	Aesthetics, collecting, company, entertainment, escape, habit, love, mental activity, reflection, study, theorizing	11
Salty	Aesthetics, collecting, entertainment, escape, habit, interests, love, socializing	8
Slam	Collecting, entertainment, habit, love, reflection, socializing	6
Trey	Collecting, entertainment, escape, reflection, socializing	5
Walter	Aesthetics, company, entertainment, escape, habit, interests, love, mental activity, socializing, study, theorizing	11
Weetanya	Entertainment, habit, interests, reflection, socializing	5



"Dignifying Science Assessment"

Name_____ Date_____

Selected Response

Objective: 1.E.4.C Identify and explain what is not directly stated in the text by drawing inferences.

1. When Lise Meitner discussed the atmosphere in the lab she was talking about:

   a. the lab was too cold
   b. the lab was too hot
   c. the people in the lab were not friendly
   d. the people in the lab were accepting

2. The working relationship between Rosalind and Dr. Wilkins can best be described as:

   a. strained
   b. cordial
   c. helpful
   d. trusting

Objective: 1.E.4.H Connect the text to prior knowledge or personal experiences.

3. The attitude of the boy on the baseball team who said, "No girls" to Barbara is like that of the scientists Lise worked with because:

   a. they thought grls had talent to play
   b. they didn't think girls had the talent to play or research
   c. they didn't trust the work of boys and girls
   d. they thought girls were too pretty

Objective: 3.A.3.D Identify and analyze the characters.

4. Barbara identified the genes as transposable because she was hard-working and:

   a. persevered
   b. confused
   c. simplistic
   d. careless

Figure 1. Page 1 of *Dignifying Science* assessment.

Objective: 1.D.2.B Identify and explain word relationships, to determine the meanings of words.

5. Choose the word or group of words that means the same, or about the same, as the underlined word. Then mark the space for the answer you have chosen.

Posthumously means:

a. in a lab
b. later in life
c. after death
d. with a group

Rehabilitating means:

a. restoring life in a camp
b. finding shelter
c. identifying protection
d. restoring life in the wilderness

Objective: 5.A.6A: Choose one of the woman scientists you read about in Dignifying Science in order to complete the following question.

6. What lesson could someone learn about pursuing your goal from this character? Use details from the story to support your answer.

Figure 2. Page 2 of *Dignifying Science* assessment.


PROMISE ME YOU WON'T DRINK AND DRIVE, CARL.
I PROMISE.
R.I.P. CARL
END


PROMISE ME YOU WON'T DRINK AND DRIVE, CARL.
I PROMISE.
HMM...
ONE BEER WON'T HURT.
GLUG! GLUG!
BUD


R.I.P. CARL
END


PROMISE ME YOU WON'T DRINK AND DRIVE, CARL.
I PROMISE.
I BETTER GO NOW!
I SEEM TO HAVE LOST MY KEYS! CAN I BORROW YOURS?
THANKS!


BRUM!
HMM...
I'LL TAKE A SHORT-CUT!
HERE I AM!


HI, CARL!
HI, DAISY!
I'M SORRY, CARL, BUT I CAN'T GO OUT WITH YOU TONIGHT.
AWW!
HOW ABOUT TOMORROW NIGHT?
TOMORROW IT IS!

Figure 3. Three versions of “Carl” (McCloud, 1998).

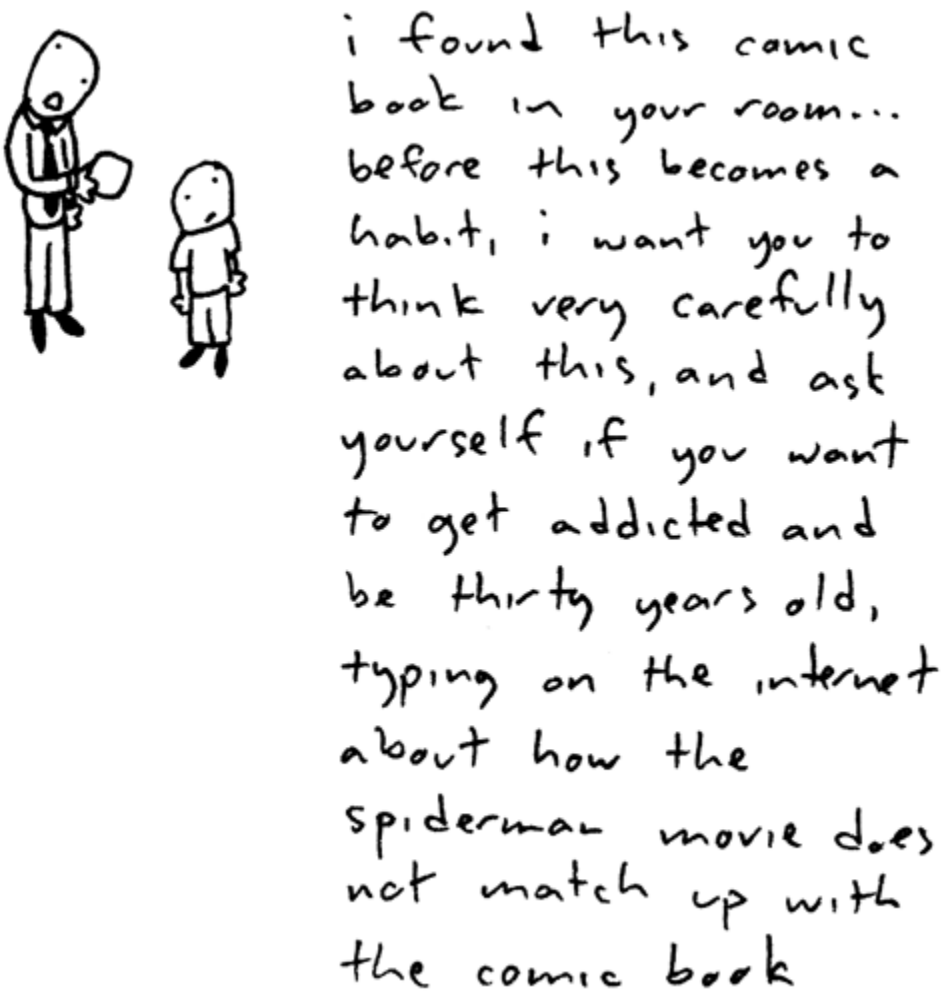


Figure 4. Comic book habit cartoon (Drew, 2005, December 8).

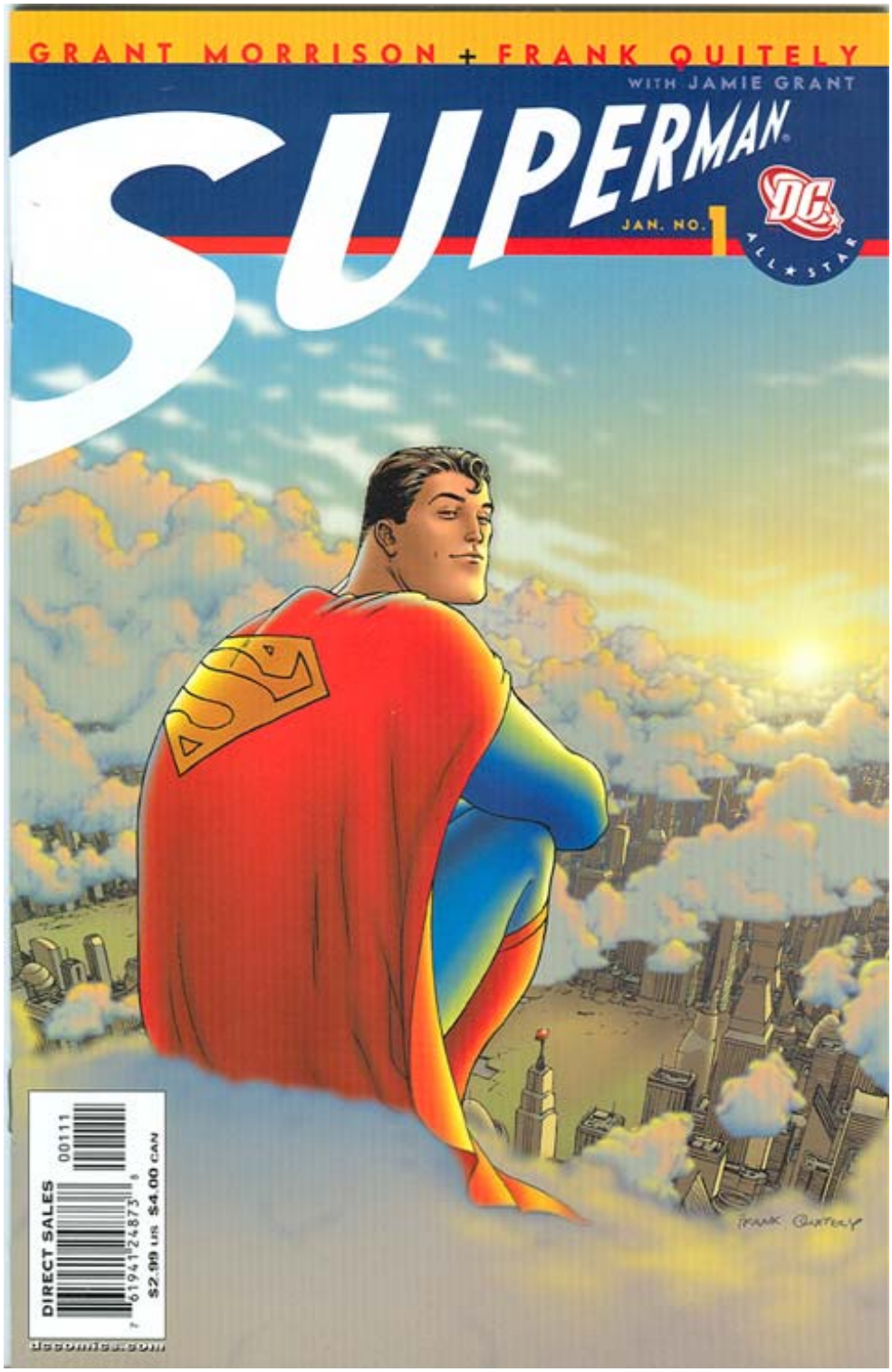


Figure 5. Cover for *All Star Superman* #1 (DC Comics, 2006, January).

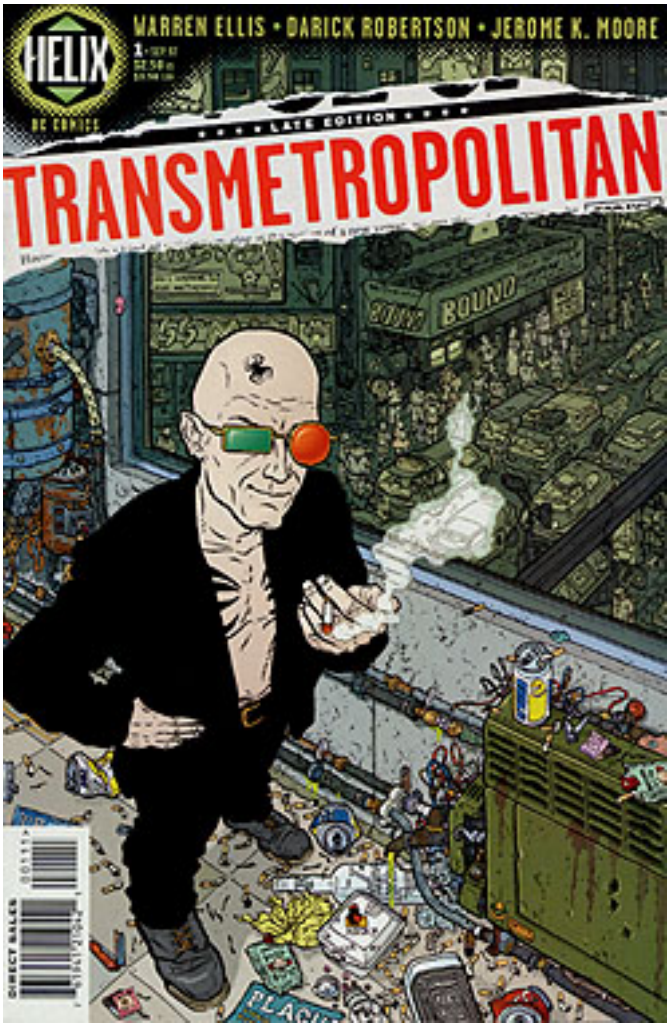


Figure 6. The cover of *Transmetropolitan* #1 (DC Comics, 1997, September).

Figure 7. The cover of *The Uncanny X-Men* # 121 (Marvel Comics, 1979, May).

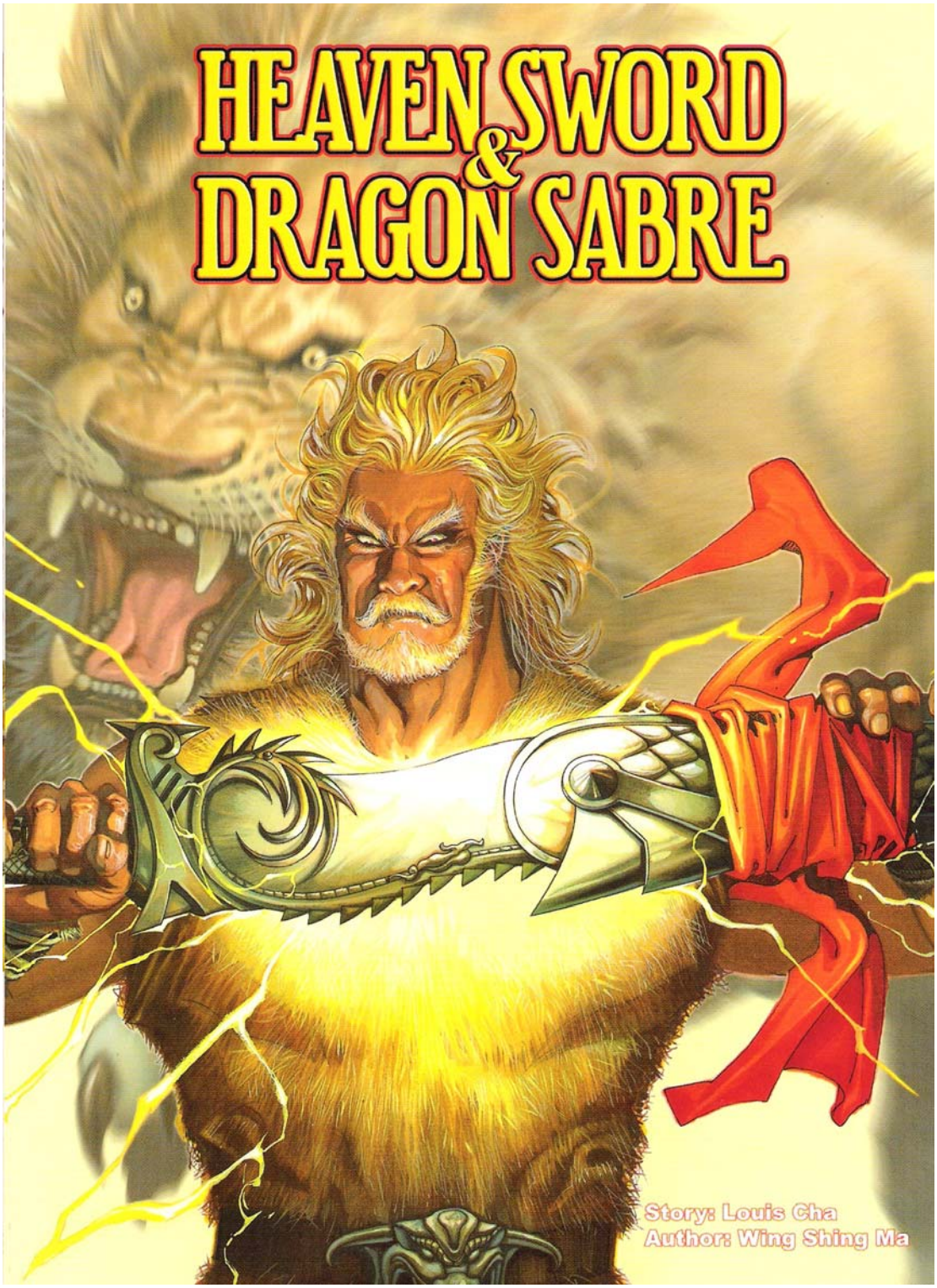


Figure 8. The cover of *Heaven Sword & Dragon Sabre* (Cha & Ma, 2002).

Figure 9. Picture from Dragoncon.

Figure 10. Geek Squad picture from a Best Buy advertisement.

Figure 11. Batman and Robin from *The Dark Knight Returns* (DC Comics, 1986).

Figure 12. Adam West as Batman in the 1960s TV show.

Figure 13. Cover art of *Batman* #533 (DC Comics, 1996, August).

Figure 14. Cover of *Transformers* #1 (Marvel Comics, 1984, September).

Figure 15. Cover of *The Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #21(Marvel Comics, 1987).

Figure 16. Panel from *The Amazing Spider-Man* #33 (Marvel Comics, 1966, February).

Figure 17. Cover of *Animal Man* #5 (DC Comics, 1989).

Figure 18. Cover for *Excalibur* #46. (Marvel Comics, 1991, January).

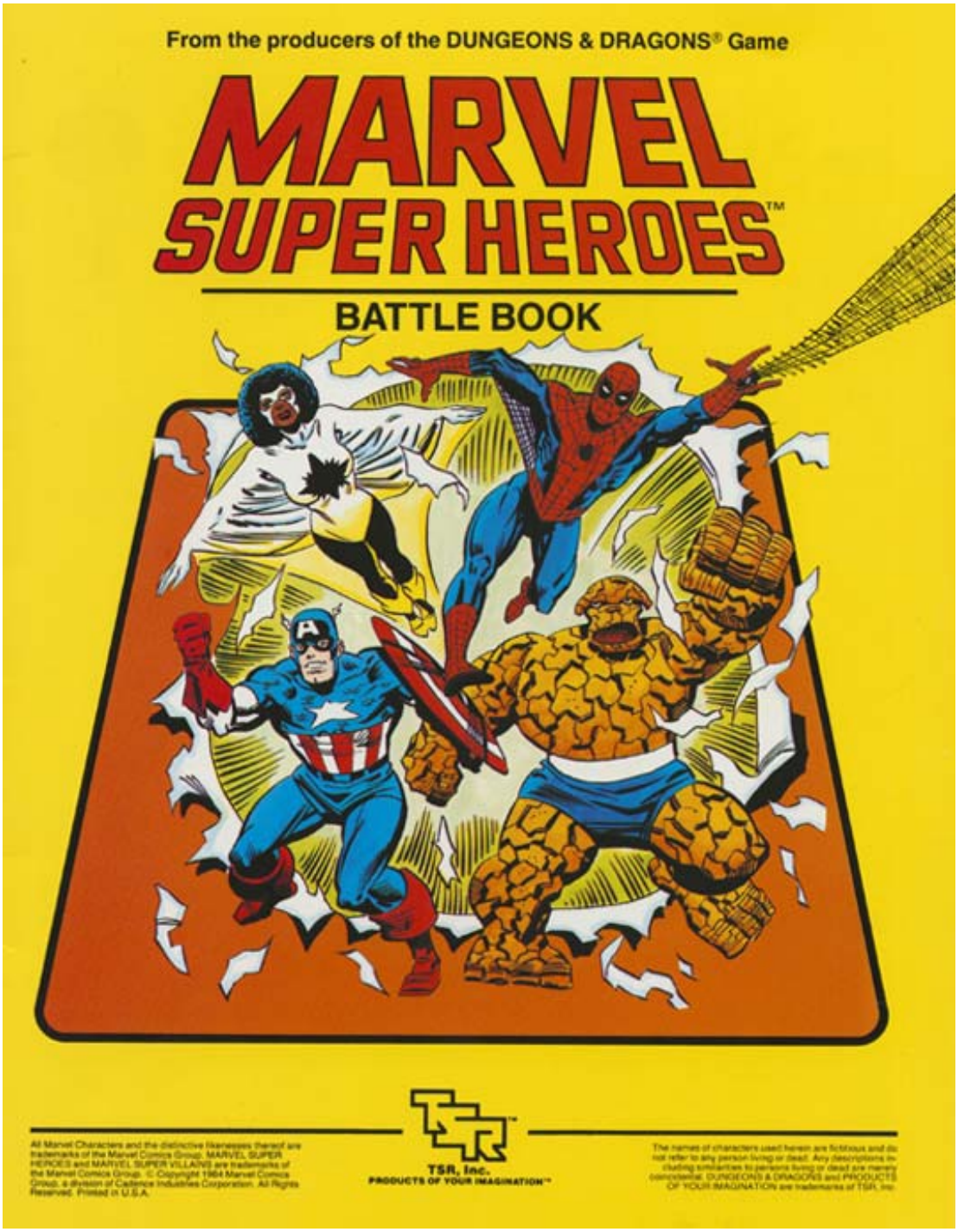


Figure 19. Cover of the TSR Marvel Superheroes game Battle Book (Grubb, 1984).

Figure 20. Endless Poster (DC Comics, 1992).

Figure 21. Infinity cover of *Fantastic Four* # 282. (Marvel Comics, 1985, September).

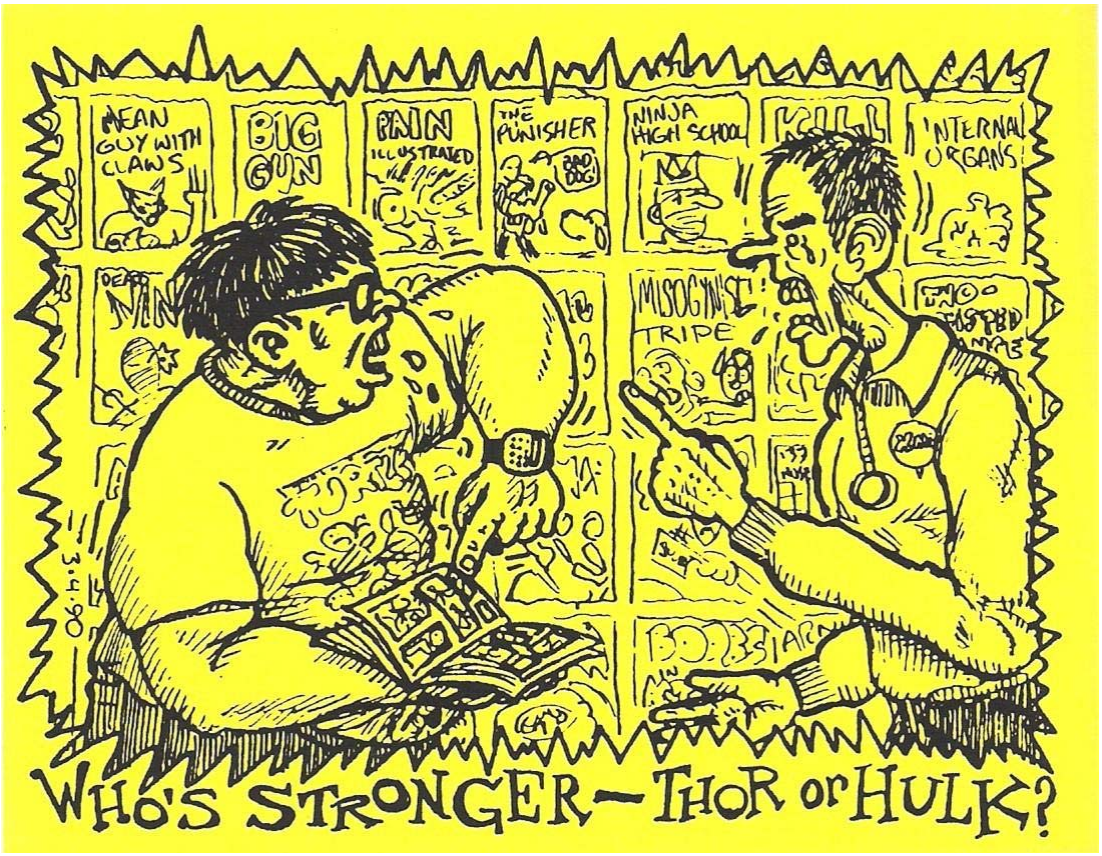


Figure 22. Advertisement postcard from local comic store created by Nelson.