

**"Beyond CanLit(e): Reading. Interdisciplinarity. Trans-Atlantically."**

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“Beyond CanLit(e)” is an exploration of the methodological challenges of investigating reading as a social practice.<sup>1</sup> My aim in this paper is to articulate problematics, to formulate some questions, and to share some critical reflections about the process of working on a collaborative, trans-Atlantic project which involves non-professional readers and cultural workers.<sup>2</sup> I believe in interdisciplinary scholarship involving the humanities and social sciences, and view its various and potential formations, including collaboration with practitioners outside the academy, as essential pathways for future research about Canadian literatures.<sup>3</sup> However, I wish to complicate the apparent taken-for-granted ease with which the terms “interdisciplinary” and “collaborative” are often employed by academics, funding agencies and university managers (at least in the UK, where I am employed). My analysis is grounded in my recent experiences of collaborative interdisciplinary team-work and in the insights offered by some of the readers and organizers who have contributed to the “Beyond the Book” research project. This research is on-going and the document that you are reading offers a snap-shot taken at a moment when its subjects are moving into the beginnings of data analysis and the complex intellectual work of figuring out how to make sense of the knowledge that their research participants have articulated. In my experience, such a process takes time, and, given the large amount of material generated by our multi-site project, there are many conversations ahead of us.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge and to sincerely thank my colleagues, Dr DeNel Rehberg Sedo and Dr Anouk Lang, for a series of productive discussions about our research methods, as well as for the huge amount of time, energy and intellectual effort that they have committed to Beyond the Book. The primary funder of Beyond the Book is the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK; grant number 121166). Funding for the pilot study was provided by the British Academy, the Canadian Government via Department for Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Foundation for Canadian Studies in the UK, and by Mount Saint Vincent University.

<sup>2</sup> The Beyond the Book core team consists of: Danielle Fuller (principal investigator/director), DeNel Rehberg Sedo (co-applicant/co-director, MSVU, Canada), Anouk Lang (Postdoctoral Research Fellow), Anna Burrells (part-time Administrative Assistant). For an overview of the project, visit: [www.beyondthebookproject.org](http://www.beyondthebookproject.org).

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Marjorie Stone for a stimulating email dialogue in February 2007 and for her on-going support of my work, and to Julie Rak and Lynette Hunter for their intelligent comments about method, particularly during the “Beyond the Book” conference (31 August-2 September 2007), and their encouragement of my less-literary tendencies.

The purpose of this paper, then, is not to offer a polished final account of a research project, or, indeed, a full treatise on the topic of “interdisciplinarity.” Rather, following a practice frequently enacted by feminist social scientists, and one that I have recently witnessed and admired at two interdisciplinary conferences in which I have participated,<sup>4</sup> I present this paper in the hope that it will encourage collegial discussion and the sharing of experiences. Working out the way forward for CanLit has to happen in ways that are dialogic, social and respectful to difference: not only difference as it is culturally and discursively constructed, while being viscerally – sometimes violently and traumatically – experienced, claimed or resisted by situated subjects, but also differences in educational training and institutional environments which often obscure the common grounds upon which knowledge and trust can be built.

### **BEYOND CANLIT(E) – Re-positioning myself.**

#### *Canada Made Me: Canada Paid Me*

My job title, Senior Lecturer in Canadian Studies, currently violates the UK’s Trades Description Act – at least, in terms of teaching responsibilities. I have not taught significant amounts of either Canadian Literature or Canadian Studies since the end of March 2005 and am unlikely to do so again until January 2009. Instead, the next generation of under-paid sessionals (unfortunately known in my department as BITS, or, Bought-In-Teachers) and the post-doctoral research fellow on *Beyond The Book* (Dr Anouk Lang) “relieve” me of the teaching I most enjoy. This “enables” me to teach outside my main areas of interest and training, to project-manage *Beyond the Book*, and (in common with other “senior” members of my department) to undertake vast amounts of administration, including the organization of our Study Year Abroad Program (a job which manages to combine being a travel agent with academic advising, advanced table-making and rigorous, frequent e-mailing). Hopefully, no one from the Canadian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade or the Canadian High Commission in London is reading this, since, until summer 2007, they were paying approximately 10% of my annual salary. In June 2006, Stephen Harper decided to save a few bucks by cutting all funding for Canadian Studies activities outside Canada. After protests from various quarters, including Canadian government workers who value the teaching and research of Canadian culture, partial funding has been re-instated, but with the provisos that DFAIT is no longer interested in “nurturing Canadianists” (Greenshields 2007), and wishes to concentrate its resources for Academic Relations “on priority areas. These areas include peace and security; North America partnership (including key Canada-US bilateral issues); economic development and competitiveness; democracy, the rule

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<sup>4</sup> “Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading” at the University of Birmingham, 31 August-2 September 2007, and “Regions and Regionalism in and Beyond Europe” Lancaster University, 17-19 September 2007. Both conferences involved academics from at least 10 disciplinary backgrounds, as well as participants from outside the academy.

of law, and human rights; managing diversity; the environment.” (Lawton 2007).<sup>5</sup> No more boxed sets of CanLit then (Billingham and Fuller 2000).

*Oh heed my rallying cry! (Time to eat my own words?!)*

We [Canadian Literature scholars within and outside Canada] need to be prepared to shift our ground in terms of our disciplinary training, and in terms of our relationship with and attitude to “non-academic” readers. Investigating and reaching a better understanding of contemporary book cultures and events like “Canada Reads” may enable us as “professional” readers to participate more directly, more provocatively, and more creatively in popular readings of Canadian Literature. (Fuller 2007)

### **READING Matters**

Here is a very small selection of voices from just a few of Beyond the Book’s research sites, but I think that it suggests a series of reasons why reading books still matters in the digital age, as well as indicating some of the ways that readers outside the academy encounter, re-encounter and share books. Many – although not all – of the experiences described by these readers are more or less invisible to professional literary academic readers if they employ exclusively text-based methods.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chris Greenshields is Director, International Education and Youth Division, Foreign Affairs Canada and is based in Ottawa. Bill Lawton, was, until June 2007, the Academic Relations Officer in the UK based at Canada House, London. Both have, in fact, fought hard to retain funds that would “nurture Canadianists” through offering small grants to scholars wishing to develop new courses as well as small research grants. I would also like to acknowledge here the work of the former Academic Relations Officer in the UK, Michael Hellyer, and his colleague, Vivien Hughes. Vivien’s sincere belief in and passion for the study and teaching of Canadian culture informed her explicit resistance to the Canadian Government’s recent funding decisions in her retirement speech at the BACS conference. These cultural workers complicate, through their actions and words, the notion that they are simply passive instruments of nation-state structures and dominant ideologies, as Marjorie Stone eloquently argues (2007), and as the non-academic contributors to *Accounting for Culture* (2005) demonstrate.

<sup>6</sup> There are, of course, many scholars investigating both contemporary readers and historical readers. A good cross-section of those working on contemporary cultures of reading was represented at the Beyond the Book conference (see [www.beyondthebookproject.org](http://www.beyondthebookproject.org) “conference” for the programme). While SHARP’s website gives an insight into those working on historical reading and readers (see [www.sharpweb.org](http://www.sharpweb.org) and its Canadian sister organization Canadian Association for the Study of Book Cultures, <http://casbc-acehl.dal.ca/main>). The work of Janice Radway and Elizabeth Long has influenced my own methods and theories profoundly. Within Canada very interesting work is being undertaken by, among others, Julie Rak [cultural studies/literary studies] (how readers negotiate genres in various spaces inc. bookstores); Margaret McKay [Education] (how reading competencies develop across media); David Miall [literary studies] (empirical – lab work – studies of reading); Paulette Rothbauer [Library and Information Science] (rural teens and LGTB urban teen readers).

“Reading is the new rock n’ roll.”

Mary Worrall, librarian, Solihull public libraries, West Midlands, UK at Birmingham Book Festival Readers’ Day, October 2003.

“The event puts me in touch with the real person behind the book. I like to know more about the author and the ‘why’ behind the book.” Questionnaire respondent, Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge, ON, September 2004.

“I really enjoyed [*The Stone Carvers*] and the bus tour really brought that book alive.... because you went to places that were described that were part of the book and somehow it seems real, you know – I know it was a novel, but just, you know you could see the characters, you see the places...you felt that what was described could have happened and you were where it, you were where these places were.” Trudy, KWC, focus group participant, September 2004.

“One Book, One Chicago makes reading social without destroying the relationship between the book and the individual reader.” (Stuart Dybek, Writer, Interview, Chicago Oct. 2004).

[“What type of book is the best choice for Canada Reads? Why?”] A book that says something about Canada and Canadians, who we are, what is important to us, what we want others to know. It must be well written, but not necessarily a best seller. (“Canada Reads” Questionnaire respondent, April 2006)

“Ones about Canadian life. It is so varied across the country and books can give the readers more insight into Canadians.” (“Canada Reads” Questionnaire respondent, April 2006)

“[Being read to] calms us down, cos, like, we’re normally dead loud. We’re normally dead loud outside. And it does calm us down. ...So when we go home we’re dead chilled...” (Emma, “Get Into Reading” group member, Wirral, UK, February 2007)

“Let’s not sanctify books.” (Jonathan Davidson, Artistic Director, Birmingham Book Festival at the Beyond the Book conference panel, “Creating Communities of Readers”, Sept. 2007)

Even this small range of voices offers a series of entry-points into the study of reading and the meanings constructed about and through the reading of literary fiction in the early twenty-first century in North America and the UK. The experience of reading print books, not to mention those involved in sharing reading through mass reading events, are various, and require further, in-depth analysis in order to generate new critical

vocabularies of pleasure, for example. Among the pleasures articulated above, there is a desire to learn about the author’s creative process and biography or experiences lying outside those of the reader; the fun of affective identification made possible by a literary bus tour; the legitimacy of vernacular forms of reading that One Book, One Community events can encourage, including mimetic identification between textual representation and the physical environment and local or personal histories. Partly through this identity work, the Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge readers move from an abstract textual world (a bookish space familiar to literary critics but not comfortable for all readers), to a more material relationship with the text that is capable of impacting their everyday lives. The responses from the “Canada Reads” questionnaire evoke Canadian nationalism, referring to an imagined national community that the reader can access through (shared) reading. The ideological work that Canadian Literature may perform for the reader through hermeneutic encounters with representations of difference is referenced by these readers and will not surprise Canadian Literature scholars. But it might be instructive for us as students of CanLit, to examine further the relationship between the “materializing” of the book experienced by particular groups of readers (KWC quotations), and the cognitive-imaginative text-reader encounter described by the CR readers.

Significantly for *Beyond the Book*, a project which is focused on the contours, purpose and meanings of shared reading, are readers’ desires for the connection and a sense of community – often ephemeral – that can be built via public reading events. Similarly, the hint from Stuart Dybek, that solitary and shared reading are not mutually exclusive to a reader’s enjoyment or understanding of a text, raises questions about the respective value of these different types of textual-social encounter. Adding a further dimension (and complication!) to our potential understanding of reading as a social practice, Emma, the teen-aged “Get Into Reading” group member, movingly articulates the therapeutic possibilities activated by a model of shared reading that does not depend on print literacy but on re-animating the text through orality. The reader-text encounter that Emma describes involves her physical body as well as her emotions, and enables her to achieve relaxation and, by implication, better mental health.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Jonathan Davidson’s caveat, addressed to an audience of academics, public librarians and community activists,

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<sup>7</sup> “Get Into Reading” is a project that was begun by Jane Davis who is also founder-editor of *The Reader*. For more information about this community activist project, see [www.getintoreading.org](http://www.getintoreading.org).

all of whom are heavily invested in promoting and/or investigating readers reading and print books, might be extended to apply to us as Canadian Literature specialists. We might usefully ask ourselves: In what ways do our various activities as teachers, researchers, readers and students of Canadian Literature “sanctify books” – to what ends, and at whose expense? How can we de-familiarise what we do with, and in the name of, Canadian Literature?

Certainly, I view collaborative, interdisciplinary work that crosses the humanities and social sciences in terms of its methods, as one strategy that is capable of de-naturalising what “I do” as a person trained in (Canadian) literary studies, in ways that (if I can hold my nerve!) will be generative of methodologies for investigating reading as a social practice in the contemporary moment. In the second half of this discussion paper, I would like to offer you a (necessarily partial) account of *Beyond the Book*’s research process. My commentary is inflected by a key methodological question: How can a researcher hear the voices and attend to the analyses that non-academic readers and cultural workers –such as those quoted at the beginning of this section -- are making? My belief is that humanities cannot provide all the tools for this purpose, and my aim here is to indicate how mixed method research conducted as an interdisciplinary investigation may help us to “retool”.<sup>8</sup>

## **INTERDISCIPLINARITY**

*Beyond the Book: project design and methods*

*Beyond the Book* (BTB) is a collaborative, interdisciplinary research project that aims to produce a trans-national analysis of mass reading events and the contemporary meanings of reading in the UK, USA and Canada. As indicated above, BTB examines reading as a social practice rather than privileging the investigation of reading as a hermeneutic or interpretive practice (while recognizing that these practices are imbricated: shared reading is also, in part, an interpretive process of re-reading).<sup>9</sup> The project focuses upon

<sup>8</sup> I am deliberately evoking here the title and focus of the seminar organized by Smaro Kamboureli and Daniel Coleman, “The Culture of Research: Retooling the Humanities,” 20 October 2006 at the University of Guelph. See [www.transcanadas.ca/transcanprojects.html](http://www.transcanadas.ca/transcanprojects.html).

<sup>9</sup> The project was conceived in late 2002 and designed in mid-2003 by myself, a British North American Studies scholar with a humanities training in literary studies, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, an American who works at Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada as a communications scholar and who trained as a social scientist. Since autumn 2005, the BTB team has expanded to include Dr Anouk Lang, a postdoctoral fellow originally from Australia, who has a literary studies training and a particular interest in Canadian and Australian modernist literary culture. Anna Burrells, who is completing a PhD in the English department at

mass reading events: nation-wide reading groups initially inspired by Oprah’s Book Club and the proliferation of shared reading programmes that employ the “One Book, One Community” (OBOC) model. Over 500 of these community-wide reading events are now held each year in a number of countries including Australia, Singapore and the Netherlands, while the broadcast events (e.g. the UK’s TV “Richard & Judy’s Book Club”) can increase sales of featured books by 1000%.

Our fieldwork focuses on 10 sites across three nation-states.<sup>10</sup> Recognising the cultural specificities that inflect class, race and gender formations and attitudes to literary culture, we decided to undertake context-specific case studies of reading events. We chose sites either because we are familiar with the local print cultures in the selected locations; or because of their significance to the OBOC “movement”; or to establish a range in the scale of events and communities studied. Guiding our project design was our commitment to feminist standpoint epistemology which, in terms of research process, advocates a continual “back and forth” movement between theory and practice (Stanley and Wise 1990). Feminist standpoint theory also emphasizes the importance of beginning analysis from your research subjects’ own accounts of their everyday lives (e.g. Smith 1987; Code 1991). Within BTB, this means that we use the readers’ and cultural workers’ own articulations and analyses of their shared reading practices and event experiences as a starting-point from which to analyse the cultural work that mass reading events perform and enable. In doing so, we are also seeking to understand and to analyse dominant and subordinate knowledge; that is, knowledge created, informed by, and sometimes resistant to, the ruling relations of power (Smith 1987; 1991). This epistemological approach to the study of shared reading enables us to identify and theorize the ways that readers negotiate the meanings of reading within the contemporary

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University of Birmingham, is our part-time administrative assistant and she joined us as an active researcher in the participant observation work at the ‘Birmingham Book Festival’ in October 2006. Additionally, the project has employed temporary fieldworkers local to the research sites who have been graduates in a range of disciplines, including Education, International Development, and Theology; various transcribers and translators who were graduates of American & Canadian Studies, Hispanic Studies and French Studies; and, most recently, two Canadian graduate students, Linsay Engles and Amelia Chester, who hold degrees in Psychology and Cultural Studies, respectively. They are currently assisting us with quantitative data analysis and coding of interview transcripts.

<sup>10</sup> Our research sites/selected mass reading events are: (Canada) – Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge “One Book, One Community”; Vancouver Reads; Canada Reads; (USA) “One Book, One Chicago”; “One Book, One Huntsville”; “Seattle Reads.”; (UK) “Great Reading Adventure” (Bristol); Birmingham Book Festival; “Richard & Judy’s Book Club” (Channel 4 – TV); “Liverpool Reads.”

“matrix of communication” (Long 2003). Within this matrix, the mass media possess tremendous symbolic power, while the more traditional ruling relations of power, represented by educational and governmental institutions, for example, lend particular social meanings to shared reading that do not always coincide with reader experience.

Our interdisciplinary approach draws upon our combined research expertise in textual and empirical methodologies: the result of our training in the humanities (Fuller) and social sciences (Sedo). For this project we have developed a multi-layered investigation involving: qualitative interviews with event producers, focus groups with event participating and non-participating readers, participant observation of activities, and the collection of quantitative data through a tri-lingual online questionnaire that we have adjusted for use in each site. To use the vocabulary of mixed methods research analyst, John Creswell, DeNel and I chose to adopt a methodology somewhere between a concurrent triangulation strategy and a concurrent nested strategy (Creswell 2003, 217). Simply put, we decided to collect qualitative data “in the field” within each research site, while running our quantitative questionnaire at the same time – so our research practice was “concurrent”. Findings generated through one method are used to “attempt to confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings” arrived at through another method (217) – hence, “triangulation.” However, we have put much more effort into our qualitative research, and have, in fact, employed multiple qualitative methods (participant observation; focus group interviews; interviews with cultural workers; collection and analysis of event artifacts). In this sense, our mixed method has looked more like a “nested” strategy in which the quantitative data (gathered from our questionnaires) is given less priority than our qualitative methods during collection and analysis. As Creswell notes, very little analysis of concurrent nested strategies exists (218), and so we hope that one of the ultimate outcomes of our interdisciplinary collaboration will be a critical account of our methodology’s strengths and limits.

#### *Problematizing the Interdisciplinary Methodology of BTB*

In practice, undertaking the type of research methodology described above is difficult, because it is time-consuming, labour-intensive, and energy-draining, although it is also occasionally exhilarating. It requires more money than traditional humanities methods



which are text-based, and demands that its researcher-subjects assume and enact ethical and social responsibility that can not only be proven to institutional authorities, but also demonstrated towards research participants in ways that make sense to them. Success of such multi-layered mixed methods, which involve so much face-to-face interaction with human beings, also depends on the development of trust among team members and the facility and ability to take risks – intellectual, social and emotional. The researcher must step beyond her comfort zone, whether that involves the challenge of talking to people from a wide variety of backgrounds, grappling with new software programmes, or “groping” towards knowledge while learning new methods (Bal 2002, 20). In this section, rather than dwelling on the pragmatic difficulties arising from our choice of research methods, I would like to focus on the issue of paradigm clashes and philosophical tensions. These inevitably occur when humanities and social sciences methods are merged in order to study shared reading in event-based cultures, and I have chosen just two problematics among many possible examples, to support my contention that transformative interdisciplinary is tricky but important work.<sup>11</sup>

*Problematic 1: What is evidence?*

As Linda Hutcheon has noted, “Disciplines have different notions of evidence” (2001, 1366) and “different standards of evaluation” (1365). Social science demands high standards of evidence, so methodology has to be designed to achieve those standards (e.g. via triangulation and by achieving saturation). In literary studies (as in the humanities in general) “evidence” is usually provided through textual interpretation and sometimes supported by the analysis of contextual material (historical, cultural, social, political). If, as teachers of Canadian Literature, we say to a student, “where is your evidence for this comment?” or, (one of my own default essay comments) “Don’t just state: demonstrate!”, we are usually seeking proof via the close textual analysis and interpretation of a text. We may, depending on pedagogical context, require a demonstration that the writer can draw upon concepts from specific literary and/or cultural theory in order to make their

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<sup>11</sup> If you attempt transformative interdisciplinary, you intend to generate not only new knowledge about the subject of investigation but also to generate new methodologies – and thus to “transform” the methods and theories that each team member learned within their original disciplines. Some meditations on “Interdisciplinarity” from the perspective of the humanities that I have found useful in the past include Hutcheon (2001); Hulan (1998); Moran (2002).

analysis more nuanced and convincing. However, we rarely dwell upon our conception of “evidence,” or, indeed, question the validity (appropriateness) of using our textual methods to generate evidence.

Within most social science disciplines, students are explicitly taught to address issues of validity and evidence by learning about different research methods. Using an appropriate type or types of method to investigate your research question (validity) has to be a consideration, otherwise your fellow social scientists will not consider your eventual findings or your analysis of them to be reliable evidence. In turn, reliability depends upon hearing and identifying consistencies across research subjects, case studies, etc. and confirming or complicating these consistencies through at least one other form of investigation. Further, whereas in literary studies we are always already in interpretive mode, social science students are encouraged to think self-reflexively about whether they wish to take an interpretative or realist world-view to their research practice (roughly equating to and translating into qualitative and quantitative methods) and to understand the philosophical and practical consequences of doing so. Although we do consider these world-views within literary studies, it is usually as philosophical standpoints. We may, in fact, use our philosophical reflections upon these standpoints as a means to identify dominant and resistant ideologies and their articulation within a literary work (maybe also within other cultural forms such as visual art or performance). This is a useful and important method used extensively within cultural studies, as well as by many literary scholars, but it is one that depends heavily on the authority of the academic critic and their deconstructive (interpretative) skill. To a social scientist, wherever they would locate themselves along the quantitative-qualitative/positivist-relativist continuum, this textual approach, used in isolation from other forms of investigation, cannot generate reliable evidence.

Given that *Beyond the Book*'s research questions include, “why do people come together to share reading?” and “Do mass reading events attract marginalized communities, foster new reading practices, and enable social change?” we could not rely (in all senses of that word) upon the analysis of text (even upon the analysis of interview transcripts) as our only way of producing evidence. Investigating social practice demands methods that can

engage with that set of social practices as lived, embodied experience, rather than only relying on narrative or textual accounts of it. Hence, the employment in our investigations of participant observation techniques and face-to-face interviews with groups of people (sometimes known to each other, but often strangers) actively making sense through dialogue of why they share reading, do or do not participate in events etc. Even though we selected a series of methods including the design of a quantitative questionnaire (which includes open-ended questions and thus is in itself a “mixed method”), we have to continually recognize the limitations of each method and the relationships among them, as we work towards an understanding of the data that we have gathered. Recruiting to our focus group interviews has been a recurring problem, for instance, and the membership of groups has been neither as full nor as cross-cultural as we would have liked. Added to this, is the complication of the frames (institutional, contextual and even moral) of our project which involves a practice (reading) of an object (print books) which are heavily inscribed with various cultural meanings and value within the nation-states in our study. Given that all interviews are a type of performance, by all parties (researcher and subject) (Fuller 2002), what status does the data gathered through this method have in evidential terms?

In Chicago, our second research site, my response to DeNel’s concern about the size and demographics of our early focus groups, was “hey, it’s all qualitative to me!” At the time, I meant that I could take the narratives offered by the participants and analyse them, no matter how few of them there were. (On reflection, this was rather an arrogant assumption on my part). For DeNel, my textual-analytic skills were not good enough in and of themselves, and she was not about to let me run wild with a clutch of interview transcripts. Her communications training demanded that we work with several groups of people in each research site, so that we would begin to hear certain phrases, desires, ideologies and pleasures articulated, and analyses or attempts at analyses (e.g. of the role reading plays in people’s everyday lives) repeated – albeit with context-dependent variations. About two research sites later, I recall her saying with relief, “we’re getting saturation!” (my immediate thought was: “but it’s not raining!”) However, even this is not the end, but the very beginning of being able to say that we have some evidence of, for example, why people come together to share reading. Any consistencies, hints and

analytic clues generated from focus group or individual interviews must be cross-validated with data from the questionnaires, insights drawn from our participant-observation work at event activities, and complicated by our analysis of event artifacts. And all of these efforts at triangulation must include a critical account of frames and the practical problems which have produced a very particular data-set about groups with specific demographics, despite various efforts to alter how we recruited participants in later sites. Only then, may we say that we have “evidence” to support our findings and analyses.<sup>12</sup>

### *Problematic 2: Interpretation*

“Interpretation” haunts the preceding discussion of standards of evidence and the differences in research methods across the humanities and social sciences as an additional – yet related - problematic. Once again, working with a social scientist has encouraged me to think about it in terms of research process and methods. DeNel’s professional training as a market researcher and professional communications researcher leaned towards the positivist model of social science, so that interpretation involved making sense of statistics gathered via quantitative methods: “this is what the respondents said; this is what the stats show us; ergo, this is the finding.” I am going to highlight, but put aside, the problem of objectivity, which has been helpfully interrogated, debated and re-conceptualised e.g by feminist epistemologists working within social science and the natural sciences as “strong objectivity” (e.g. Harding 1991; 1993). My point here is that the positivist model demonstrates much less faith in the researcher’s knowledge and analytic ability than modes of interpretation that are bound up in qualitative and text-based methods. Our employment of a multi-site on-line questionnaire and the SPSS software through which the datasets can be managed, manipulated and interrogated has foregrounded the different paradigms of interpretation operative within our particular humanities and social science trainings.

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<sup>12</sup> Some of the practical limitations within fieldwork help to make visible formal and informal networks through which culture is made and evaluated. For instance, the difficulties of recruiting to focus groups also indicated to us which groups have most cultural capital within particular cities, and who has the time, leisure and social confidence to participate in cultural activities (as well as our focus groups!).

SPSS is a statistical software program that enables you to process data quantitatively, so the questionnaire responses, which include answers to both “tick box” type responses and open-ended questions (data that could be described as a mixture of quantitative and qualitative in both its method of collection and in its expression), had to be grouped and boxed up into “crunchable” units so that the program could assign values and locate consistencies. In order to prepare the data so that you can run queries, any open-ended responses need to be labeled (or coded), that is, put into some type of category. The coding categories that we have been using to date, are partly derived from earlier data collected during the pilot study, but they are also functionally descriptive in a way that feels very strange and restrictive to Anouk and me (both of us literary studies scholars by training). One day we sat down with a list of categories prepared by DeNel, and re-worked them by applying our close reading skills to that particular set of open-ended responses. Our impulse was to add more and more categories, in order to account for the various interpretations we produced as we attended to the variations in language-use and narrative strategies across the range of respondents.

A very brief – and relatively simple -- illustration of our “humanist interpretive impulse” will have to suffice here. One of the open-ended questions asked respondents to comment on what they thought the best book choice would be for the reading event in question (e.g. “Canada Reads” or “Liverpool Reads” etc.) and to explain why. Even isolating one out of nearly 900 responses to this question within the “Canada Reads” dataset foregrounds our dilemma:

That is difficult to answer because I wouldn't want just one type. My preference would be a book that combines history/suspense/good character development/--and that one can thoroughly enjoy without having to feel virtuous for having read it.

While this response can be coded under the category label “Variety of genres”, none of the initial categories captured the resistance of this reader’s response to the implied moral imperative of the show (“[a book] one can thoroughly enjoy without having to feel virtuous for having read it.”) It was easy to suggest that we might add a category “book with good character development” (or similar) and there were certainly other responses that merited that addition. However, adding a category “resistant response” opened up a whole other can of (book?)worms around definitions of resistance. Anouk and I tended

to examine the open-ended responses for not only implicit meanings, but also ambivalence, but, in doing so, DeNel felt that we were sometimes over-interpreting or using our own critical frameworks rather than those of the respondents.

In practice, in order to capture all the nuances that our textually-trained minds desired to preserve and deemed to be valuable, Anouk and I altered the entire list of categories for “Book Choice” – giggling together as meanings proliferated and the list of categories (labels) grew in length. Some of those we added included complicating the descriptor “Challenging” by creating two categories: “Formally or Stylistically Complex” and “Content/Ideas Complex.” Our discussion – and ever-extending “nuanced” list of labels - around the categories “Prize Winner”, “Classic” and “Middle Brow” I will have to leave to your imaginations! DeNel accepted only a handful of our alterations and rejected many of them because, from a quantitative standpoint, we were in danger of rendering the data un-usable, and, thus, meaningless, not least because some of the categories would only contain 1 response. The saving grace for the literary-trained mind, is that you can recover the string (open-ended) responses, and treat them as qualitative material should you wish to do so, at a later date.

So, why use this method within our research design, if, from the standpoint of my own original training, it seemed to be constructed upon a reductive notion – even a dismissal -- of textual interpretation? First, mixed methods research demands that the researchers should not rely on their statistics alone, especially if convenience sampling is used (as we have done), and even when the total dataset reaches a statistically valid number of responses (as ours, at about 3000, does). So, for me, the employment of mixed methods promotes a practice of interpretation capable of complicating and problematizing data, whether it takes the form of words or numbers. The practice may proceed in ways that are somewhat unfamiliar to me, but the attention to complication satisfies my desire to decode and critique signs. I recognize and trust that these methods, used extensively within different branches of social science, can produce a nuanced analysis of how specific groups of people value books, or how they define and practice shared reading.

Second, being able to produce some stats offers us a language which can assist the practitioners (librarians, community activists, reading event organizers) whom we have

met during our research. Stats about what people read and why help them to make a case to funders and policy-makers for whom qualitative data is useful, but not easily translatable into dollars and pounds. While, strictly speaking, ours is not a “solution-focussed” piece of research, we always envisaged our work as being useful not only for academics (in various fields: cultural studies, book history, sociology of culture, literary studies) but also for cultural workers. To that end, we have continually tried to communicate our preliminary analyses via short reports (an example is posted on our website); consultation meetings with organizing agencies (e.g. OBOC organizing committees or members thereof in Chicago, Liverpool and Huntsville) and related organizations (e.g. the UK’s The Reading Agency); and via presentations to practitioners (e.g. the public librarian’s professional conference at North York 2005; the 2007 Canadian Library Association conference). We also invited a range of practitioners to participate in our recent conference, both as part of the plenary panels, “Reading and/as Social Change,” and “Creating Communities of Readers,” and as presenters within parallel sessions. I claim no originality in our research practice or politics by offering these examples: many feminist scholars within humanities and social science would also understand these communications as integral to their work as feminists.

Third, interpreting numbers alongside language is one of the most intellectually exciting and potentially generative aspects of our mixed methods work. Since BTB is also employing textual analytic methods, for example, to deconstruct the rhetorics of promotional materials and the branding of mass reading events, we are not ignoring the value of textual methods but re-situating them within our toolbox of qualitative and quantitative approaches. As researchers whose work is shaped by feminist standpoint theory, we are continually trying to generate explanatory categories from the field and from our research participants so that our theories will be induced from our empirical data, rather than deduced from pre-existing hypotheses. As Klaus Jensen suggests, feminist standpoint and grounded theory, have “attract[ed] renewed attention to the practical, lived categories of understanding with which people engage media and other social interaction.” (261). The process of becoming an attentive listener within this type of investigation requires a range of skills, and a critical-sceptical understanding of how

meanings are made and the discursive work that language is made to perform, can be a very useful part of that skill-set.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: BRINGING IT BACK HOME TO CAN LIT**

I began this paper by stating that I believe in interdisciplinary scholarship involving the humanities and social sciences. I view its various and potential formations, including collaboration with practitioners outside the academy, as essential pathways for future research about Canadian literatures. I have outlined one project which attempts to combine methods from different disciplinary traditions and have identified some of the practical challenges and philosophical tensions that have arisen to date. I set out to complicate the terms “interdisciplinary” and “collaborative” through a discussion of research process and a reflection on methodological problems, for several reasons. First, because not only funding agencies, but also Canadian Literature specialists (see the Call for Papers for both TransCanada conferences, for example), invoke these terms repeatedly. However, I do not think we have yet given enough time or credence to discussions of method within our own field or to collaborative discussion with scholars and practitioners with different trainings, to be able to understand or to identify all of the different modes of “interdisciplinary” investigation available to us.

Second, as anyone who has undertaken any type of collaborative and/or interdisciplinary work will know, it is intellectually, physically and emotionally demanding. Frequently it requires a great deal of human and economic resources. We have to become more practical scholars and benefit from the management experience of colleagues such as Marjorie Stone and other senior academics attending TransCanada who have acquired knowledge about planning, team-building and large-scale strategic thinking. Third, if, as CanLit specialists, we do want to move further into interdisciplinary work (and I fully accept that not every literary-trained scholar does) we have to become more “sociable” human beings. If we want to move beyond our textual methods, our books and computer screens, we can begin by drawing upon our best-practice classroom skills. But we also need to retool in ways indicated in my paper, and in others that I have not been able to discuss here. We need to do so in order to investigate the proliferating social and cultural formations of Canadian Literatures – their readers and listeners; the institutions that play



roles in producing and evaluating them; the political economies of the global publishing structures that have made “Can Lit” not only “fit for export” but a prestige brand (at least, in some parts of the world) (Billingham and Fuller 2000). Lastly, whatever type of collaborative, interdisciplinary project we choose or are able to practice, we must continually ask ourselves: “Whose knowledge is this? Who is this knowledge for?” The stakes can seem high: we love books but they are being re-configured by non-print media and new technologies; we are paid with public money and need to consider how we can be “accountable” to various audiences without compromising intellectual endeavour; many of us desire a more equitable world and want our paid work to contribute to that project, however modestly. At the same time, we have to be mindful of – and humble about -- our relatively privileged role as knowledge-producers. We can only begin from our recognition of our situation within the discipline – and the Canada-- that made us.

### *Coda*

Thinking about interdisciplinarity and collaboration for this paper has been difficult, even upsetting. It has stirred up all of the various emotions that, for me, are entangled with the process of this research project: sadness, frustration, anger, feelings of good fortune, feelings of failure, excitement, humility and pride. When people and the social are the subjects of research, you have to 'do' investigation as an embodied subject: you cannot only be cerebral /intellectual. Humanities scholars are not, on the whole (and with the possible exception of theatre studies), trained to deal with flesh-and-blood human beings, rather we are taught to engage with language, text, and creative artifacts – and to engage with these skeptically; to attend to ambiguities and multiple significations; to endlessly un-pack words and interrogate meanings. So, it is not surprising, and I'm certainly not claiming any originality here, in stating that ‘doing interdisciplinarity’ that brings social science methods into dialogue with those in the humanities is unsettling. It involves taking risks that are not only intellectual, but also social and emotional, and it involves facing your own fears and inadequacies in order to establish trust with both colleagues and research participants. Also, I have learned that it is hard –harder than I anticipated -- to take others along with you, and to support other people in their feelings of un-settlement. Universities are not, in my experience, working environments where much attention or validity is given to emotions, particularly feelings of anger, grief and distress. Sure, ‘the institution will never love you’ (Roy Miki, *TransCanada* 1), but I sometimes think that the people inside could do with some group therapy, or, (and maybe this is a peculiarly British institutional phenomenon) ‘Skills for Emoting Responsibly 101’.

There are, then, a slew of emotional and interpersonal skills as well as intellectual skills involved in the management of an interdisciplinary team and research project. I know I have not been wholly successful. I hope that I haven't caused anyone harm.

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