

12

MIXING IT UP

Using Mixed Methods Research to Investigate Contemporary Cultures of Reading

Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo

Understanding complex cultural phenomena such as the widely adopted “One Book, One Community” (OBOC) model demands a methodology that can generate a series of standpoints on the social, ideological, material, economic, and political aspects of what we might term “formally organized” shared reading, or mass reading events (MREs). How, then, might reading studies researchers attend to these standpoints and the relations between different agents—readers, event organizers, institutions including libraries and schools, publishers, and the media—to produce a nuanced account of contemporary shared reading as a situated social practice? The investigative methods we used for the Beyond the Book project help us to understand what happens when people come together to share reading, and can be categorized as mixed methods research. This chapter examines our use of mixed methods in our multisite project, including an intentional mixing of language and concepts from realist and interpretative paradigms,¹ and a combination of quantitative survey methods alongside qualitative focus group and individual interviews, participant observation of mass reading events, and textual and content analysis of promotional materials and event ephemera. We make a case for the employment of similar methodologies within reading studies scholarship, particularly in the study of shared reading as a situated social practice in the northern industrialized countries of the early twenty-first century.²

After contextualizing our study within recent scholarship about reading, we examine three significant aspects of our research design and process by focusing on a question that recurs across several of our methods, and the responses to it that we gathered: “What type of book is the best choice for an MRE?” We consider, first, the identity-work evidenced by research participants in some answers to this question, alongside their articulations of knowledge

about taste hierarchies, notions of literary value, and the intended purpose of MREs. Second, we illustrate how the interactive use of qualitative and quantitative methods, combined with paradigm clashes within an interdisciplinary research team, created epistemological problems in coding and understanding the questionnaire responses to our book choice question. Third, we discuss the extent to which our mixed methods research captures the ideological, structural, institutional, and discursive complexities that inflect the ways readers and event organizers make sense of the books chosen for mass reading events. Finally, we reflect on some of the benefits and limitations of our methodology.

Reading as a Social Practice

In 2005 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) announced “The Big Read,” its OBOC-modeled “solution” to the findings of *Reading at Risk*.³ Though at least one scholarly electronic listserv (Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing) debated the merits of this report, its coverage in the mass media reflected the anxious tone of the NEA’s press release. “The NEA’s landmark 2004 study, *Reading at Risk*, showed that literary reading in the U.S. is in steep decline,” NEA chair Dana Gioia stated in a press release. “No single program can entirely reverse this trend. But if cities nationally unite to adopt The Big Read, our community-wide reading program, together we can restore reading to its essential place in American culture.”⁴ Gioia’s plan to “unite” the nation illuminates some of the reasons why we consider reading to be a social activity. When people read, not only do they do so with and within themselves, but also they come to the reading, in part, as members of an audience. As Virginia Nightingale and Karen Ross argue, readers are themselves reflections of the complex social and cultural nature of the audiences they help to constitute.⁵ Readers as a group, however, are not homogeneous. While Catherine Ross, Lynne McKechnie, and Paulette Rothbauer’s meta-analysis of reading studies illustrates how the NEA study and other quantitative projects link readers to active social engagement through correlation of responses, they also warn that taken alone, large-scale quantitative studies are unable to elicit nuanced details of individual reading practices.⁶ Furthermore, such large-scale studies also fail to recognize how reading and discussing a text with others influences individual readers as social and interpretative subjects.

Attention to the social aspects of reading is most evident in scholarship focusing on communities of readers, such as research into Oprah’s Book Club

and face-to-face and online reading groups.⁷ These studies tell us a great deal about ideology- and identity-work. Particularly relevant to our own study of shared reading are the processes of acquiring, representing, and articulating cultural capital, cultural literacies, and cultural tastes—processes influenced by social and educational structures as well as by the media and publishing industries. To access these, we combined quantitative and qualitative methods, including participant observation and textual analysis, to reveal examples of individual and collective agency, and to determine levels of access to texts and events. We also explored readers' own narratives about social and cultural factors—such as gender, ethnicity, and age—inflecting interpretative practices. Each of these methods brings a degree of insight to our analysis of contemporary cultures of reading.

Readers, Books, and Identity-Work

Gathering quantitative data about readers' involvement in MREs enabled comparison within and across our ten selected case studies in Canada, the United States, and the UK.⁸ One striking consistency across many of our fieldwork sites was the way readers articulated their attachment to place and locale, and the consequent pleasures to be had in reading and sharing a book that refers to one's own city, region, or nation. Nevertheless, quantitative data from our online survey revealed a significant difference between those who identified themselves as participants in Canada Reads (CR) and Richard & Judy's Book Club (R & J) in the UK, with regard to their perception of the national, regional, or cultural relevance of the books chosen for these broadcast MREs. Questionnaire respondents were asked: "What type of book/s is/are the best choice for [name of MRE]? Why? (feel free to write up to 50 words)." While 25 percent of the CR participants cited national, regional, or cultural relevance as their first mention (that is, in the initial part of their textual response to the question), fewer than 1 percent of the R & J participants did so in their first mention. Instead, 30 percent stated that the chosen book should be accessible to a wide range of readers. Accessibility was also cited as one of the top two desirable qualities for an MRE book by participants in Canada Reads (21 percent). These figures are suggestive about readers' preferences for the type of books chosen for these events, but additional data of a more qualitative nature are required in order to expand on these preferences and to further nuance the ways that readers understand their relationship to the books and the events.

The responses to this particular survey question indicated various forms of reader engagement with—and motivations for preferring³⁴a local book selection. Across all research sites (excepting R & J) the question yielded responses that illustrated readers' desire for mimetic identification between their own experiences of daily life within a place and the selected book. One Huntsville, Alabama, reader, for example, preferred "books about life, and living here in the South" (May 2007), while a Liverpool respondent thought that a good book choice was "something that a community can relate to where they can see something of themselves or a family member" (February 2007). Other survey respondents indicated that reader identification with a local connection could take various forms or operate through different factors including themes, setting, or authorship, for example, "a Chicago author, a regional book, urbanism" (October 2005). Usually respondents did not elaborate on their answers, and indeed, not all survey respondents chose to answer this question, but a few readers offered rationales for their preferences and tantalizing insights into their reading lives. One Vancouver reader, expressing what she understood as the potential social and educational function of a local book choice for One Book, One Vancouver (OBOV), articulated a preference for "books that have a strong local connection . . . that 'introduce' different sections of the population to each other" (June 2006). Meanwhile, in Huntsville, another respondent approved of the 2007 program's selection, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, on ideological grounds, because of its proximity to living memory and familiar places, and also because of the people she encountered through the library's event program: "[It] didn't hurt that people here know Alabama, even some knew the author, and her town. The book was an edifying, thoughtful experience towards tolerance and being tuned into community. One person I met went to school with Nelle [Harper Lee] and Truman [Capote]—we had an amazing conversation. I also enjoyed talking to Mary Badham's [the actress who played Scout in the film adaptation] brother—I think he lives around New Hope area" (May 2007).

This necessarily brief set of examples offers a series of analytic clues that can be considered alongside data gathered through qualitative methods, such as the research team's participant observation of events and focus groups with both event participants and nonparticipants. Through this cross-referencing, we sought not only to "confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings arrived at through another method,"³⁹ but also to enrich and complicate the themes and issues nominated by survey respondents. Such an approach is broadly accepted by proponents of mixed methods research, even while it enacts a slippage between the triangulation and synthesis of data. As Ravi Kanbur notes,

using qualitative and quantitative methods in conjunction can generate findings through “examining, explaining, confirming, refuting, and/or enriching information from one approach with that from the other.”¹⁰ In Huntsville, for example, when we attended book discussions and formal talks about the film adaptation and Harper Lee’s life, we repeatedly observed senior participants recalling their initial encounters with both the book (published in 1960) and the film (released in 1962). Such memory-work frequently involved speakers locating themselves geographically, sometimes citing familial connections to Lee’s family, offering commentary on aspects of the social context such as race relations, describing their enjoyment of the text, and then reflecting on how a recent rereading had differed from earlier readings. An older man at the last presentation and discussion of the film recalled for the audience the omnipresence of heat in the book. He said he felt the hot southern sun as he read. Yet he did not remember having felt, as a young person growing up in the South, the intensity of the heat that Lee was able to evoke in the book and that, he believed, the film also represented effectively. Other participants explored what had and had not changed about small-town life in Alabama in the intervening years since their first encounter with the novel. The organizers of the Huntsville events created an interactive format, allowing plenty of time for questions and discussion, serving refreshments, and providing a space for the audience to meet and talk together beforehand and afterwards. The combination of this hospitable atmosphere, a much-loved “modern classic” book choice, and an Alabama setting and author encouraged readers to engage in personal storytelling. Their articulations resonated with, and expanded on, the comments provided by the survey respondents quoted earlier.

During the participant observation work in Huntsville, then, the social dynamics of one type of shared reading practice became visible. Various forms of individual and place-based identification were articulated, validated, and made collective through the exchange of stories. Some narratives were conservatively nostalgic or even sentimental in tenor and content (participants recalled being able to play outside safely as children, or the simplicity of life in the 1930s and 1940s), while others hinted at painful experiences such as racial segregation, poverty, and the isolation of rural living. Most reminiscences, whether they were personal histories or related to a first reading of the novel, tended to prompt reflection on how economic and social circumstances in Alabama had changed for the better, although several participants in our focus groups lamented the fact that the public discussions had not led to any real debate about contemporary racism. One middle-aged white man felt that the book afforded a real opportunity for such a discussion, given how effectively, in

his words, “Harper Lee really captures something about the South: the way that kindness sits alongside violence” (May 2007). Huntsville librarian Cleareaser Bone, who runs an African American book club, reflected on the reasons why the events attracted a predominantly white audience:

So . . . as far as the blacks go, like I said, “What’s in it for me?” It’s not a great ending. And I think the attitude is, “Well, not that much has changed.” And I think the take on [*To Kill a Mockingbird*] is a bit different than whites, who feel that “yes, it [civil rights issues and racial equality] is better.” And I’m not saying it’s not, but it’s not where it could be, or not where it should be. And even in Huntsville, it’s not where it could be. So I think that was why there was a little less involvement, I think, on the part of blacks participating in this [program].

This comment complicates the notion that a book with local relevance will generate reader engagement, for it demonstrates that forms of identification produced by such a book can also result in a lack of engagement. Such commentaries, offered in the smaller, more intimate setting of interviews and focus groups, not only enrich and deepen data from surveys and participant observation work but also problematize the key themes emerging from other material. Cross-validating with material from other sites adds a further challenge, because the social and political contexts within which other MREs take place are necessarily different. Cross-validation, however, a concept borrowed from a realist paradigm, is important because it compels us to situate the specificities of the local site within the wider social structures that are constitutive of MREs.

When Problems Are Productive: Paradigm Clashes and Generative Consequences

Thus far we have illustrated how our employment of multiple research methods has “serve[d] the dual purpose of confirmation *and* elaboration of results.”¹¹ The multisite aspect of our research design enabled us to attend to criteria within both quantitative and qualitative traditions. Listening for repeated responses from readers on key themes such as book choice, we found that this repetition (or what the qualitative tradition of grounded theory might term “saturation”) allowed us to identify consistencies and discrepancies across different national contexts (which could be seen in terms of the realist concept of “reliability”) as readers expressed their experiences of shared reading. These

responses, gathered through different methods of data collection, enrich and complicate our knowledge of readers' engagement with the books selected for MREs. In this part of our discussion we move toward a more nuanced account of our version of mixed methods research, while demonstrating the generative potential of such an approach for reading studies through the example of a "paradigm clash."

The process of interpreting the textual responses to the book choice question in our online survey produced an interdisciplinary moment of philosophical difference within our research team, as well as a recognition that we were, in DeNel Rehberg Sedo's words, "slamming the qualitative up against the quantitative." Our questionnaire consisted of thirty-nine quantitative (check-box) and fifteen qualitative (open-ended textual) questions. Rehberg Sedo, the social scientist on the team, requested that these textual responses be coded to facilitate quantitative analysis using statistical software. Consulting the textual responses to the book choice question, she initially suggested thirty-three provisional coding categories, while the humanists on the team (Danielle Fuller and Anouk Lang) generated a longer list of forty-six categories. Our statistical consultant then requested that this be reduced to fifteen categories in order to facilitate the running of valid queries. Not surprisingly, given their training in textual analysis within literary studies, Fuller and Lang approached the task by employing close reading skills. Their impulse was to add more and more categories in order to account for the various interpretations produced as they attended to variations in language use and narrative strategies across the range of respondents.

Here is a small sample of these string responses drawn from different research sites. The annotations in brackets indicate how Fuller and Lang interpreted such responses in order to generate the coding categories listed in the middle column of table 12.1:

1. Canada Reads respondent: "Something that challenges popular visions of literature, like *Green Grass Running Water*, *Beautiful Losers*." [formally and stylistically complex; taste hierarchies and notions of "high" and "low" literary culture]
2. One Book, One Chicago respondent: "A book that stimulates the reader's intellect and imagination and can appeal to many different kinds of people." [content/ideas complex; accessible]
3. One Book, One Vancouver respondent: "Important, well-written pieces that stand to move large groups of people. Anything that takes the reader beyond a 'normal' novel into the realm of 'extraordinary.'"

[canonical? “quality” literature; writing with affective impact on reader; formally and stylistically complex; educates readers; notions of high/low literature]

4. Great Reading Adventure, Bristol, respondent: “A book which provides challenge for readers of different abilities, one which is not too difficult or too simple.” [challenges readers in an unspecified way; accessible book; not too formally complex]

Table 12.1 shows how the humanists’ and the social scientist’s coding categories were eventually condensed into a single category. To the humanities scholars, the textual responses suggested some intriguing—and recurring—ideological connections between what the respondents considered to be the best kind of book for an MRE and what they perceived to be the cultural work achieved by shared reading. This included bridging social divides, improving individuals morally and educationally, and encouraging people to read books they would not ordinarily choose. The kind of book capable of challenging a diverse group of readers thus became entangled in ideas about “quality” literature, and hence in negotiations about high and low culture. These analytic insights depended in part, however, on extratextual and expert knowledge. For example, as Canadian literature specialists, Fuller and Lang were familiar with the novels cited in the Canada Reads response (1) and the type of formal challenges they frequently pose to students in the classroom. By contrast, from Rehberg Sedo’s perspective as a communications scholar, the discipline of literary studies accords a great deal of authority to analysts and their interpretative abilities, which is in contrast to some approaches within the social sciences that encourage a realist rather than an interpretative approach to researching the social world. For her, the humanists were overinterpreting the data and—in line with the insights of feminist standpoint theory—needed to surrender some of their interpretative authority in order to respect the respondents’ voices. Working to code the book choice responses thus highlighted the different notions of interpretation and evidence within the research team.¹²

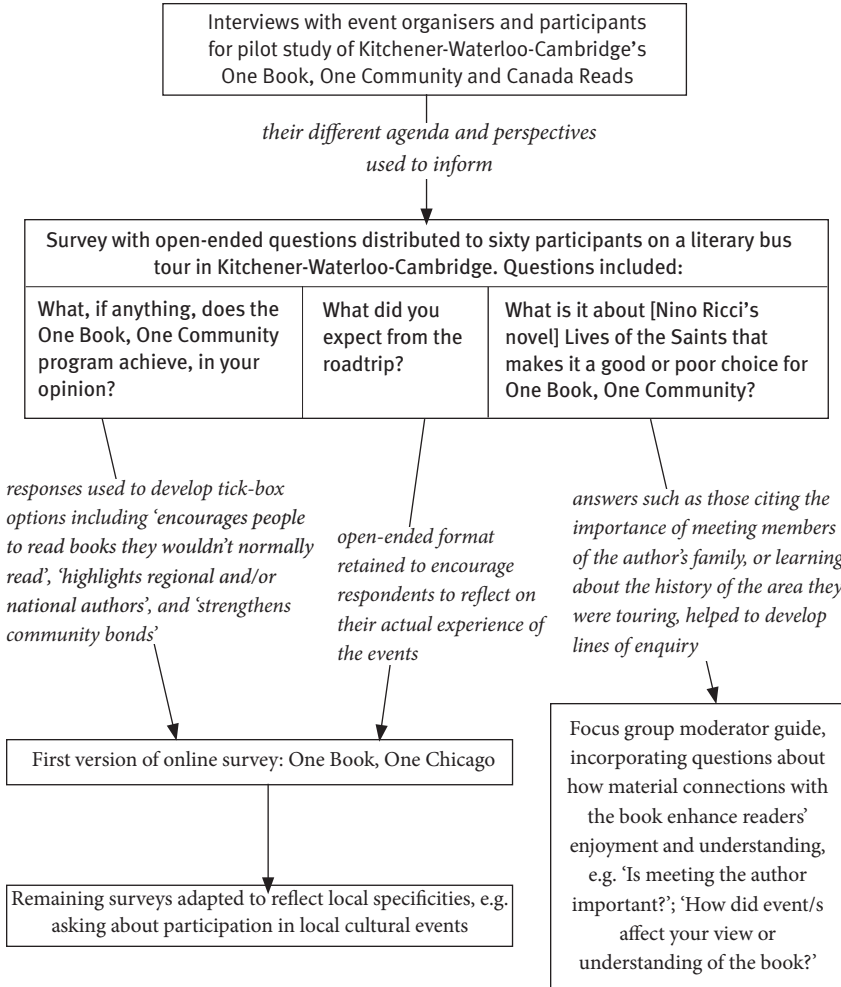
As we have argued elsewhere, differing concepts of evidence and practices of interpretation are not merely seen in the employment of different methods to gather and interpret data.¹³ They are also underwritten by ontological assumptions about the nature of the social world and epistemological differences about whose knowledge counts, the researcher’s or the respondent’s. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss these philosophical differences in detail, but our point here is to demonstrate how this “interdisciplinary

Table 12.1. Process of generating coding categories

SOCIAL SCIENTIST'S CATEGORIES		HUMANISTS' CATEGORIES		FINAL CATEGORY
challenging instructional	→	formally or stylistically complex complex content/ideas challenging subject matter challenges readers in an unspecified way educates readers	→	Improving/edifying/challenging

moment” of paradigm clash, and our attempt to resolve it—one outcome of which was the categories in the third column of table 12.1—became in its turn a generative aspect of our mixed methods process. The final coding categories for the book choice question were inflected not only by the exigencies of statistical analysis but also by discussions about the meanings and significance of categories such as “improving/edifying/challenging.” While “challenging” was a term used frequently by the readers themselves, and “improving” can be induced from the Chicago (2), Vancouver (3), and Bristol (4) responses, “edifying” captures the more ideologically freighted notion of moral uplift that the humanities-trained members of the research team interpreted as underwriting statements such as the Canada Reads (1) and Vancouver (3) responses. The final categories for the book choice question were thus the product of both interdisciplinary collaboration and mixing methods of qualitative, quantitative, and textual analysis. The research team worked to address the problems posed by the clash in order to reach a coding solution that retained contextual nuance alongside quantitative parsimony. The solution also represents and honors two different views of the social world underpinning two conceptualizations of interpretation.

The integration of mixed methods at the analytic stage is evident from the foregoing account, but these methods were also integrated within the design of our data-gathering processes, an approach described by Jennifer Greene as “intent of development (using one method to inform the development of another).”¹⁴ Figure 12.1 demonstrates how responses from earlier stages of the study were used to inform survey and focus group questions posed during later stages.



For the literary bus tour survey, which we conceived as a second-phase design stage, we deliberately used one method and its resultant data to inform and change another method, as well as to improve and refine our questionnaire. As we did so, we were aware of the imperatives of feminist standpoint epistemology to attend to the knowledge being articulated through the analyses performed by our research subjects, to move back and forth between theory and practice in ways that integrate some of the clues those analyses produced,¹⁵ and to explore how our research subjects were variously situated within ruling and nonruling relations of power.¹⁶ The next section of this chapter illustrates

how mixed methods research facilitates this last practice, thereby enabling a situated analysis that accounts for the position of particular kinds of shared reading within economic and institutional power structures.

Elucidating the Power Dynamics of MREs

Returning to the examples of readers' responses to the book choice question, we find that an interesting tension emerges between the notion of a "challenging" book and an "accessible" book. This tension can be expanded on and complicated by data from focus groups and event organizer interviews, both of which reveal diverse knowledge of these terms and ideological negotiations taking place around taste hierarchies, literary value, and understandings of genres. Different standpoints about the meanings of reading and the cultural work that MREs perform thus become visible within the material collected through these focus groups and interviews. Readers in one Bristol focus group, for example, discussed their experiences of reading the 2006 Great Reading Adventure (GRA) selection, Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873). One woman in her early forties enjoyed the book because it was "well-researched," while another woman felt that "old books" were "difficult" to read because of the language used and the unfamiliar social and cultural contexts they depict. In addition to these stylistic, linguistic, and temporal obstacles to accessibility, another reader in this focus group described Verne's novel as "a blokey book" because of the engineering details it includes, while another complained that the narrative was too slow. Significantly for a project investigating shared reading, the participants agreed that "difficult" books can become easier—and even "fun"—when shared with others in discussion, a view we heard articulated across several fieldwork sites.

While recalling their earlier reading experiences of the novel, this Bristol group reflected on the fact that the GRA book choice needed to appeal to young people as well as older adults:

GLYNIS: I didn't think it was very meaty. You know, if that was your introduction to reading, I don't know whether that would be the spur to do more of it really. It's very of its time.

LAURA: I think that it's quite good, that it's a sort of easy read, adventure story, because I think, like *Treasure Island*, it's not necessarily a book I would choose and say, "Oh wow, I must read this!" But it's quite easy reading and

it's quite fun and keeps you going, and it gets you involved a little bit, which wouldn't necessarily . . .

CATHY: . . . Don't you think as well that it will appeal to [different] ages? So that if you were ten and you read that, it's not really controversial. Whereas if you were fifty and you read it—you know, not every book is suitable for younger people and older people. Like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* was a book that was meant to be suitable for adults and children, and yet there was quite a lot [of] swearing in there. And if I was a parent I would say, oh you know, there's the f-word on the first few pages and I don't really think I want my kids to read this, so I think maybe it's probably quite hard to choose a book that's going to appeal across . . . And then parents and children perhaps talking about them—no doubt my mother will talk about them . . . [laughter] . . . Do you know what I mean? So maybe you're right, it's not that meaty, but . . .

The Bristol women perform a series of interesting negotiations in this extract. They identify what they believe to be the aims of the GRA (introducing individuals to reading, prompting people to read books they would not normally choose, motivating those of different ages to read and discuss a book together). They demonstrate different opinions about how “readable” they consider *Around the World* to be and why. They also consider what type of book choice makes for an “accessible” and suitable selection for the GRA: an uncontroversial book, one that is “fun” and an “easy read,” and one that tells a good story, even if it is not “meaty.” In discussing these matters, they engage with issues of genre classification (adventure stories and crossover books), with Cathy rejecting the marketing and packaging of Mark Haddon's novel as “suitable for adults and children” by drawing on her own reading of the book. Here, the interactive and dialogic processes that occur in a focus group context illustrate how readers can work together to establish their own understandings of book genres as well as MREs themselves. Moreover, these Bristol readers demonstrate their capacity to recontextualize their own literary tastes, preferences, and definitions of genre within what they understand to be the goals of an MRE.

Certainly focus group participants were aware that we were academics investigating the GRA, and thus their discussions were in part framed by our own research imperatives as well as by our questions and physical presence. Nevertheless, the focus group method offered a cognate context for the types of shared reading experience—book groups, or book discussions with friends and family—with which many of our research participants were familiar. For a

project investigating reading as a social practice, it was instructive to observe, and participate in, social interactions around reading such as focus groups and MRE programming. Without making these “live” social encounters part of our mixed methods, we would have been reliant on statistics combined with textual and content analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses and publicity materials. These latter methods are valuable for analyzing the rhetoric of organizing agencies and for identifying dominant knowledge about, for example, high and low culture or the “civilizing” intent that is frequently attached to reading in northern industrialized countries. Nevertheless, given the feminist imperative to analyze these categories as lived experience, methods foregrounding social interaction among readers were vital to the research process.

The final layer of our mixed methods investigation involved a top-down approach that combined the analysis of publicity materials—including websites, reading guides, advertisements, and ephemera—with interviews of event organizers and participating agencies. These agents varied from site to site but typically included booksellers, schoolteachers, city council employees working in the cultural sector, cultural workers within partnership organizations, and publishers. The aim of these interviews was not only to elucidate the meanings of reading that organizers attached to a particular MRE model but also to reach some understanding of how ideological standpoints on the significance of shared reading and the material practicalities involved in staging MREs are situated within ruling relations of power (such as governmental structures, educational systems, and capitalist economies).¹⁷

Concluding Reflections

In order to produce a nuanced analysis of this transnational cultural formation focused around shared reading, it is necessary to gather data by using a multilayered, multisite approach that honors the standpoints of differently positioned actors. The cultural workers who organize OBOC programs, for example, often invest in the model because they believe it can engender learning, social bonding, and even some of kind of transformation within their local communities. Their optimism about the capacity of shared reading events to build community or to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue derives in part from the ethics they developed through their professional training as librarians or arts administrators. But the ideological investment in reading as a social good also has a long history in all three nation-states of our study, and this history inflects the desires articulated by event organizers about the

aims and outcomes of OBOC programs. The same, often unquestioned belief in the value of reading books informs cultural policy and influences the cultural agenda set by the grant-awarding organizations and supporting institutions that help to finance mass reading events. Nevertheless, the potential for some degree of social change can be realized through the OBOC model, especially when organizers engage with different cultural groups and generations through already established social networks. Although the core audience for OBOC programs is often the same demographic of white, middle-class, educated women who participate in other arts events and belong to book clubs, the flexibility of the model enables organizers and readers alike to adapt it to fit local, community, or personal concerns. In this respect, our study has encountered examples of readers engaging with activities variously focused on addiction and recovery, immigration, local histories of “race” relations, and access to ethically produced food. As this small and by no means all-inclusive sample suggests, OBOC enables readers to have a literary experience that is social—in terms of its publicly staged medium—and perhaps political in its import. The model can occasionally afford locations of affective belonging. As we have explored elsewhere, it can even generate an understanding of citizenship aside from institutionally sanctioned ideas of belonging.¹⁸

In sum, our mixed methods enabled us to produce an analysis of a particular set of shared reading formations that, in turn, has informed our reconceptualization of reading as a social practice.¹⁹ Still, a brief outline of the benefits and constraints of our version of mixed methods is useful in highlighting areas for future development, as well as the limitations of our own knowledge and practice. First, despite attempts to vary our focus group recruitment techniques, some communities of readers were difficult to access, and our methods resulted in a data set with limited demographics. Second, it should be noted that focus group dynamics are inherently reflective of small-group dynamics more generally: inevitably, some people will speak more loudly, confidently, or frequently than others. One benefit of focus groups is that once comfortable with the setting and one another, participants often develop ideas together without reference to the moderator. As Daniel Allington and Bethan Benwell point out in chapter 11 of this volume with reference to book group talk, readers’ discursive negotiations about interpretation provide insights into reading “as a performative, interactional, and collaborative activity,” supporting our view that a focus group is a particularly appropriate medium through which to investigate the interactive aspects of shared reading as an enacted social practice. Third, as other scholars of reading have noted, talking about a book is one of the ways in which a reader’s thoughts about it become accessible to

investigators.²⁰ If researchers conceptualize this as a form of rereading, as we do, it is necessary to bring into visibility the frames within which this mediated interpretation occurs. Fourth, since we did not employ representative or random sampling for the survey, our findings are not generalizable, and this may limit their use for cultural policymakers who prefer statistical analyses. Nevertheless, our study draws on a large sample of readers who participate in MREs and those who do not, and our research has proved useful to event organizers who have combined it with their own knowledge to inform future program planning and reader advisory work. Often, organizers keep statistics of attendance but hear only infrequently from participating readers in any depth.

The mixed methods we employed moved us toward a more complex account of the dominant and emergent meanings of shared reading at the turn of the twenty-first century. They are especially useful for investigating the ideological aspects of shared reading and the material factors shaping the events. These include a series of commercial relationships with agents working within the contemporary book publishing industry, local economic realities such as the availability of public and corporate sponsors, and the nature of formal and informal collaborations with a variety of actors. More broadly conceived, our methods help us elaborate the role played by mass reading events in the contemporary field of literary production in an era when new technologies are impacting the ways that books are produced, disseminated, and received. The quantitative data generate a profile of keen readers, suggesting, for example, how the possession of higher education, time, and monetary resources informs motivations for participation and/or perceptions about what mass reading events might achieve. Combined with the various types of qualitative methods we selected, then, our attempt to “mix it up” was well suited to answering questions about who participates in mass reading events, who does not, and why.

While only offering glimpses into the shared reading practices of textual interpretation, our methods helped us build a critical account of some specific spaces, habits, and acts of shared reading. The same methods allowed us to investigate the cultural work that shared reading events perform for the readers, organizers, agencies, and institutions involved in them. In other words, our methods were oriented toward an interrogation of the structures and relationships among the agents who produce, disseminate, and participate in a dynamic contemporary formation of reading that crosses nation-state borders. Our study thus falls within the tradition of cultural studies research that aims to elucidate “*all* the relations among *all* the elements in a whole way of life.”²¹ The scale of our study meant that we could identify interesting continuities and differences in social attitudes toward the role that book reading is believed

to play in people's lives. By contrast, the methods employed by linguistics specialists often operate on a micro-level, providing, for example, a fine-grained analysis of the collaborative meaning-making processes and performative gestures undertaken by readers sharing a specific book in a reading group.²²

We are not claiming that our version of mixed methods offers a whole, true, or complete picture of reading as a social practice. Rather, we advocate mixed methods research as an approach that can benefit reading studies while avoiding the positivism of social science and the relativism that can characterize text-based humanities disciplines. Moreover, the ways that readers participating in MREs evaluate books and articulate the meanings of reading exhibit both complicity with and resistance to dominant knowledge. A mixed methods approach also, occasionally, enables the articulation of subordinate knowledge, something that may, for example, be seen in readers' analyses of their pleasure in reading genre fiction such as romance novels or science fiction. Our methodology enables researchers to attend to the voices of readers, and facilitates the delicate analytic task of teasing out the constraints of their structural positioning and the type of agency they may exercise. Mixed methods can also challenge commonly held ideas about reading, for instance, by encouraging the sharing of stories about books, and by providing readers with an opportunity to examine the role of various media within their own reading experiences.²³ Within ongoing methodological discussions around mixed methods, Jennifer Greene's assessment of this approach as an epistemology as well as a practice echoes our own feminist politics of research: "A mixed methods way of thinking . . . generates questions, alongside possible answers; it generates results that are both smooth and jagged, full of relative certainties alongside possibilities and even surprises, offering some stories not yet told. In these ways, a mixed methods way of thinking actively engages us with difference and diversity in service of both better understanding and greater equity of voice."²⁴ For scholars of reading who wish to engage with the fast-changing dynamics of reading cultures at the turn of the twenty-first century, and to attend to the voices of readers outside the academy, mixed methods research offers a very useful and flexible set of strategies.

Notes

1. In this essay, "realist" and "interpretative" refer to two of the dominant traditions of thought and practice within the social sciences. The "realist" paradigm, which, broadly speaking, underpins the employment of quantitative methods, conceptualizes the social world as knowable via the verifiable investigation of its properties and relations (as in the

- scientific investigation of the natural world). The “interpretative” paradigm, traditionally associated with the employment of qualitative methods, operates from the assumption that the social world is accessed via its (mediated) representations. Knowledge is thus contingent on and constitutive of particular contextual and discursive factors.
2. The main investigative phase of the Beyond the Book project ran from 2005 to 2008; the core team consisted of Danielle Fuller (principal investigator/director), DeNel Rehberg Sedo (co-applicant/co-director, Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada), Anouk Lang (postdoctoral research fellow), and Anna Burrells (part-time administrative assistant). Our primary funder was the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK (grant number 121166).
 3. Tom Bradshaw and Bonnie Nichols, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America: Research Division Report #46* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004). This report is based on four questions gleaned from the 2002 U.S. Census Bureau’s Survey of Public Participation in the Arts.
 4. National Endowment for the Arts, *National Endowment for the Arts Announces The Big Read: Ten Communities to Participate in Pilot Program to Promote Reading*, December 20, 2005, www.nea.gov/news/news05/bigreadannounce.html.
 5. Virginia Nightingale and Karen Ross, *Critical Readings: Media and Audiences* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2003), 2.
 6. Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Lynne McKechnie, and Paulette M. Rothbauer, *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries, and Community* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2006), 24.
 7. See, for example, Cecilia Konchar Farr, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); DeNel Rehberg Sedo, “Readers in Reading Groups: An On-line Survey of Face-to-Face and Virtual Book Clubs,” *Convergence: The Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 9.1 (Spring 2003): 66–90.
 8. Our research sites and mass reading events were One Book, One Community (Kitchener, Waterloo, and Cambridge, Ontario); Canada Reads (nationwide radio); One Book, One Vancouver; One Book, One Chicago; One Book, One Huntsville (Huntsville, Alabama); Seattle Reads; The Great Reading Adventure (Bristol); The Birmingham Book Festival; Richard & Judy’s Book Club (nationwide British TV); and Liverpool Reads.
 9. John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (London: Sage, 2003), 217.
 10. Ravi Kanbur, “Q-Squared? A Commentary on Qualitative and Quantitative Poverty Appraisal,” in *Q-Squared: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Poverty Appraisal*, ed. Ravi Kanbur (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 18.
 11. Abbas Tashakkori and John W. Creswell, “Editorial: Developing Publishable Mixed Methods Manuscripts,” *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1.2 (2007): 109.
 12. For more on this distinction, see Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, “A Convergence of Marriage: Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity,” *PMLA* 116.5 (October 2001): 1364–76.
 13. See Danielle Fuller, “Beyond CanLit(e): Reading. Interdisciplinarity. Trans-Atlantically,” in *Shifting the Ground: Nation-State, Indigeneity, Culture*, ed. Smaro Kamboureli and Robert Zacharias (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, forthcoming).

14. Jennifer C. Greene, "Is Mixed Methods Social Inquiry a Distinctive Methodology?," *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 2.1 (2008): 14.
15. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, "Method, Methodology, and Epistemology in Feminist Research Processes," in *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology*, ed. Liz Stanley (London: Routledge, 1990), 25.
16. For an example of this kind of analysis in relation to Canada Reads, see Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, "A Reading Spectacle for the Nation: The CBC and 'Canada Reads,'" *Journal of Canadian Studies* 40.1 (Winter 2006): 5–36.
17. See, for example, the analysis provided in Danielle Fuller and James Procter, "Reading as 'Social Glue'? Book Groups, Multiculture, and Small Island Read 2007," *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* 9.2 (2009): 26–40.
18. Danielle Fuller, *Citizen Reader: Canadian Literature, Mass Reading Events, and the Promise of Belonging* (London: British Library, 2011).
19. Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).
20. See, for example, Elizabeth Long, "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action," in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 180–212; Lynne Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (London: Arnold, 1997).
21. Lawrence Grossberg, "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press), 323.
22. See, for example, chapter 11 by Allington and Benwell in this volume; and Kieran O'Halloran, "Investigating Argumentation in Reading Groups: Combining Manual Qualitative Coding and Automated Corpus Analysis Tools," *Applied Linguistics* 32.2 (2011): 172–96.
23. See, for example, DeNel Rehberg Sedo, "'Richard & Judy's Book Club' and 'Canada Reads': Readers, Books and Cultural Programming in a Digital Era," *Information, Communication & Society* 11.2 (March 2008): 188–206.
24. Jennifer C. Greene, "Is Mixed Methods Social Inquiry a Distinctive Methodology?" *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 2.1 (2008): 20.