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The People Who Do '*This*' in Common: Book Clubs as 'Everyday Activists'

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Julie E. Tyler entitled "The People Who Do '*This*' in Common: Book Clubs as 'Everyday Activists'." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Amy J. Elias, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Kirsten Benson, Janet Atwill, Stergios Botzakis

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**The People Who Do ‘*This*’ in Common:
Book Clubs as ‘Everyday Activists’**

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Julie E. Tyler
May 2014

To the trifecta.

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I thank my parents and sisters for the love, prayers, and support throughout my time in this doctoral program, making sure that I was doin' alright, in the wonderful way that families do. I thank my best friends, Whitney Jones, Deidre Garriott, and Sarah Welsh for their beauty and brains, unfailing love and good humor, and for their professional collaborations and spiritual support. My friends at KnoxLife church, Janie and Turner Howard: thank you for cheering for me on as I “finish the race.” My fellow dancers in the SalsaKnox and EvoZouk communities: thank you for the great moves and tunes.

Lastly, I thank the members of the Books-N-Wine club who generously offered their time to participate in this project and who welcomed me socially into their close-knit community. With their fascinating and authoritative knowledge on book clubs and the experiences of reading, this project has a promising future.

ABSTRACT

This study of the Books-N-Wine club in Knoxville, Tennessee participates in a growing body of research on reading communities. Since the 1980s, researchers have investigated book clubs as social-intellectual phenomena whose history dates back to eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Intersecting with the development of the *public sphere* and even fueling concrete social movements, book clubs comprise a “shadow tradition of literature.” Current research suggests that contemporary clubs continue to advance this “shadow tradition” and have the potential to teach and transform their constituencies. Several areas remain unexplored in research on book clubs, including the ways in which particular categories of clubs are identified and described, the ways in which clubs operate in specific contexts, and the research methods that yield the most useful data.

To produce new knowledge on book clubs, this study is framed by theories from multiple disciplines as well as popular publications on book clubs, and investigates one club in Knoxville through observations of meetings and interviews with individual members. Findings suggest that Books-N-Wine is a situated, contextualized practice, exhibiting significant participation, on the part of its members, in other spheres. It is possible that this book club and other ones are comprised of “everyday activists” who negotiate among themselves the values and behaviors for use in domestic, professional, and other *counterspheres*.

Findings also suggest that researchers must reflect on their impact on the clubs they study and should address a crisis of terminology that emerges when describing the phenomena they discover. In addition, because book clubs are complex practices, studies are best informed by multiple, rather than singular, disciplines and by published material that book clubs themselves produce. This study concludes by recommending that the study be extended in the following

ways: (1) refining its theoretical and methodological underpinnings, (2) expanding the case study design to a study that compares several clubs, and (3) extending the time frame for collecting data.

PREFACE

This dissertation details a case study on a book club currently in its fourth year of operation in Knoxville, Tennessee—the Books-N-Wine club. Comprised of five core members, with occasional attendance by other readers, this club’s accomplishments have social, intellectual, aesthetic, and political significance that researchers and book club practitioners alike may find illuminating. Even though Books-N-Wine’s website is easily found online, these important accomplishments may very well go unnoticed by others. This club does not promote itself actively in the community, and, as is customary with many book clubs even in the age of social media, this club maintains a relatively private and insular practice.

At the beginning of my interactions with this book club, I built relationships with its members that were as congenial as they were professional. Members kindly welcomed me when I arrived at meetings. They graciously offered their time for interviews to share with me their perceptions of and reflections about the club. During the six consecutive meetings that I silently and (in)visibly observed, I often longed to join the club’s lively and thought-provoking discussions. I wanted to be *in* the club. Members’ candid and insightful comments about the reading selections corresponded to the value they ascribe to the life of the mind. Their range of emotional expressions showed their willingness to be vulnerable in the presence of others. Their deliberative dialogue, points and counterpoints demonstrated commitments to expanding their worldviews. Simultaneously, their witty humor and occasional disdain for reading selections revealed their capacity for irreverent attitudes towards traditional cultural values. Above all, their interest in each other’s daily life showed that within the safe space of the host’s home the well-being of friends trumped even the most intrepid explorations of a good book.

Over time and in the midst of the markedly unsocial aspects of conducting this study—hours spent in transcribing, coding, writing and rewriting—my relationship with members of the Books-N-Wine club evolved. As I expressed interest in the details of their personal lives, members demonstrated their enjoyment of my presence beyond surface-level hospitality, expressed curiosity about the progress of my work, and assured me they were “rooting” for me. One member’s observation highlighted additional dimension to this relationship, that our interactions during meetings and interviews prompted more self-awareness of his involvement in Books-N-Wine. It was like “holding up a mirror,” he said. I, too, experienced heightened self-awareness beyond what a researcher normally experiences navigating the field of someone else’s turf.

These social and emotional experiences of self-reflection as part of the research process correspond to several outcomes of this study that were interesting and unexpected. While I was recruiting the members of this club as participants in my study, they recruited me as a participant in the club. We all became researchers of each other, the selected literary texts, and of ourselves—gathering different data through different methods of course—but nonetheless cooperating on a complex social level that exceeds mere observation. Cultivating these levels of reciprocity and mutual self-disclosure, as many qualitative researchers have noted, are important actions for establishing trust and cooperation. Each party shared his or her life *as* others shared and more importantly *because* others shared. Each party valued his or her contribution to this project and to the success of the book club itself. We became, as this project’s title suggests, “The People Who Do ‘*This*’ in Common.”

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

This project on book clubs in Knoxville, Tennessee has been through many phases, from initial research questions, a literature review, and through data collection and analysis, but it began as a hunch that investigating literature's influence on the world would be well worth the efforts of organized scholarship. Indeed, the notion that certain works of literature have functioned as agents of social reform, changing readers' minds and transforming communities, continues to inspire authors and readers to represent the human experience on the page. The fact that the historically-consistent practice of literary censorship, of novels from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to those in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, still occurs in public schools shows that literature can incite fear in the minds of the powerful who might feel threatened by the changes such texts suggest. Literary enthusiasts who are indignant at censorship rally around such campaigns as the "Banned Books Day" sloganeering, touting the quality of those banned works of literature and suggesting that the banning is not only unwarranted but also that it ironically generates more interest and readership. A 2013 article in the *Miami Herald* demonstrates that the stakes for reading literature can climb even higher than the content of school curricula. Carol Rosenberg's article, "Books Provide Guantánamo Detainees an 'Escape from Darkness,'" drew attention to the unsurprisingly controversial practices of literary selection, access, and censorship that determine the holdings in prison libraries. At the maximum-security, politically-motivated, and military-operated detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, literary reading material sits behind barbed wire, Carol Rosenberg of the *Herald* explains. And while all donations from non-government donors are "processed" to "pass

inspection,” the library’s holdings exist, ostensibly, for the intellectual “escape” and emotional “solace” of detainees. Literature’s power to rouse readers’ emotions and aesthetic sensibilities and its transformative and controversial presence in the world mean that it will continue to occupy a space in the worlds of news, education, aesthetic and social movements, and scholarly investigation. This project investigates existing theoretical and empirical conversations on this subject regarding the systematic ways to measure, keep track of, and describe the relationship between literature and the world, a relationship that is both fascinating and consequential.

Theoretical and empirical research on interactions between literature and readers suggests that scholars do believe that literature can transform readers and communities, specifically readers’ perspectives, identities, literacies, and cultural authority. In fact, in Rosa Eberly’s *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (2000), the author makes the case that “fictional texts and the public discourses written in response to them can influence social practices by fostering public debate about values and actions” (3). Theories in aesthetics, rhetoric, education, and social science and empirical studies on reading communities explore the possibility that consumers’ encounters with art (or readers’ encounters with literature) occur in different environments that enable a range of responses, as suggested by John Dewey. In addition, readers can encounter literature by either internalizing its messages, as suggested by Kenneth Burke, or becoming absorbed within plot, character, or theme, as suggested by David Novitz. Empirical studies of book clubs as important venues for communal reading practices, by researchers such as Elizabeth Long, Kimberly Chabot Davis, and Keith Oatley, have noted literature’s transformative role in the lives of individual readers and in the practices of book clubs. These researchers and others suggest that transformation results in part from readers’ empathetic responses to literary works,

so that empathy in some cases causes readers to engage with groups and communities with which they do not identify.

As inspiring as these findings are, however, theorists and book-club researchers avoid stating that single works of literature can effect direct and measurable change in the world. Suzanne Keen's *Empathy in the Novel* asserts that literature-induced transformation cannot be taken "on faith," and must be verified in research, the claims from which will always be rife with potential consequences (xxv). Any change resulting from literature's influence is nebulous, immeasurable, and must be studied at the level of readers' stated reactions to it, by virtue of the fact that readers act as mediators between literature and the world or use literary texts as a mediating tool for their own agendas of personal enrichment or communal transformation. Studying readers and the texts they choose to read is no small task, given the number of and differences among communities of readers and given the multifarious ways in which readers publically or privately express their literary responses. However, field research into book-club culture as a recognizable socio-political phenomenon constitutes one possible site for finding answers to these questions about literature's function in the world, because this phenomenon is rooted in a unique history of readers' combining their literary interests with the ways in which they participate in the various *spheres* of their lives.

Just as it may be impossible to claim that a single work of literature can effect world-wide change, a review of current research raises the question of whether or not a single study, and for that matter, this dissertation, can realistically measure a change, positive or negative, brought on by literary texts and the book clubs that read them. While this dissertation may only be able to investigate a small part of book clubs' transformative potentials, this study and others should continue investigating literature's transformative work in the world, perhaps beginning by

defining and qualifying what constitutes the concept and reality of “transformation.” Can this concept include readers’ internal and social experiences with literary texts, both positive and negative, at the same time that it might include external changes alongside social movements or institutional changes at the levels of the print industry or academic discourse? If “transformation” can occur at all of these sites and in all of these forms, then it might be argued that transformation of some sort is an avoidable part of the reading and book-club experiences, whether readers accept or reject the agendas of the texts or clubs that they encounter. With these or other conceptions of “transformation” in mind, scholarly investigations of literary texts and book clubs must be conducted on local, small group, regional, or national scales, and should include studies on individual readers, book clubs, and the larger networks in which readers might participate.

In this spirit and in response to researchers’ claims that communal reading practices are powerful, this study’s research questions and methodological design expand an interest in literature’s role in the world to focus on the role of book clubs in readers’ experiences of transformation—including changes in knowledge, opinion, values, and behaviors, and including changes that readers perceive as either positive or negative outcomes. The notion that book clubs are themselves vehicles, alongside literature, of many kinds of transformation pervades each stage of this study and is explored in relation to the contexts in which reading and experiences of transformation occur. The notion of transformation is also considered alongside clubs’ history as sites for literacy initiatives and social action, as detailed in the literature review. The history of book-club culture and practice emphasizes the need to investigate current clubs’ potential to operate as sites of teaching, learning, and action. With these operations in mind, I offer two terms for considerations of book clubs’ significance, terms that may help to narrow future

investigations: clubs as “pedagogical communities,” or more provocatively, as groups of “everyday activists.”

Any one of the aforementioned factors—clubs’ transformative operations alongside works of literature, clubs’ operation within specific contexts, and clubs’ potential to function as pedagogical communities or as groups of “everyday activists”—would constitute a worthwhile focus for this study. However, I argue that it is necessary to investigate these factors in combination, rather than in isolation, because book clubs, like works of literature, are complex registers of meaning. On one hand, clubs invoke Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the political and literary “public spheres” by being sites where “private” citizens often discuss topics of public concern. On the other hand, book clubs are often overlooked by scholars or relegated to “popular” categories, and thus often operate out of a “shadow tradition of literature,” as described by Cecelia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker, who indicate that book clubs’ complexity and power lie partly in the fact that they have historically existed and in some cases currently exist under the radar of academic attention and that they can operate in some instances counter to mainstream culture.¹ Even while working from the “shadows,” book clubs for the past three decades have captured some degree of academic attention and occasionally transition into mainstream culture, through such means as Oprah’s Book Club or widely-accessed websites such as Goodreads.com. Thus, book clubs can be understood as producers of interdisciplinary theoretical knowledge relevant to the academy, as producers of cultural and aesthetic knowledge relevant to academics and non-academics alike, and as stakeholders in the commercial print

¹ Farr and Harker suggest that book clubs are significant in terms of the potential they have to provide their participants with experiences of social and intellectual exploration. While book clubs often operate outside of academic institutions and can remain unseen or unacknowledged researchers, forces such as social media and Oprah’s Book Club can usher book clubs into popular or mainstream culture. In all cases, Farr and Harker emphasize, book clubs comprise a “shadow tradition” that connects literary engagement to activist impulses and that can transform the lives of individuals and perhaps even the opinions and values of communities (4-5).

industry. Furthermore, they can be understood as providing participants with pedagogical, transformative, and enlightening experiences—perhaps reviving their history of activism or providing researchers and practitioners with new ways to conceptualize what activism means.

Statement of the Problem

As explored in the literature review, a number of empirical studies have been conducted on book clubs and have identified books clubs as communities that function in four primary and generalizable ways. Studies by Mary Kooy (2003, 2006) and Michael Smith (1996) suggest that clubs can establish themselves as pedagogical communities in which members learn from and teach each other, and in some case train themselves to teach others outside of the club. Studies by Elbieta Zybert (2011) and Linsey Howie (2003) suggest that book clubs enable members to experience different forms of transformation. Studies by Farr and Harker (2004) and Elizabeth Long (2003, 2004) suggest that cultural influence and the production of meaning are processes that are negotiated among individual readers and book clubs. Location-based studies by Long and Catherine Burwell (2007) and media-based studies by Hermes, Hile, and Frisbie (2008) and Cassandra Scharber (2009) suggest that book clubs develop unique praxis suited to specific contexts in which they are situated. However, several underexplored areas still exist, leaving openings for researchers to continue investigations of this fascinating subject. One underexplored area concerns what researchers can discover about context as a multi-faceted factor that determines book club function. For instance, context includes more than the time and place for a book club's meeting; it can also include the club's constituency of readers and their behaviors. Another underexplored area concerns what researchers can discover about diverse categories of clubs, such as clubs that identify themselves according to the genre of literature they read, or

location where its members meet, or by a religious or political affiliation, as well as by the age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or occupation of their members. A third underexplored area concerns the degree to which a club's members transfer the values and behaviors formed within the club to other areas of their lives and the degree to which members allow the values and behaviors of external communities to enter into and influence the club. A fourth place of incomplete knowledge concerns which research methods most effectively yield data for gaining insight into the operation of book clubs.

Purpose Statement

Given current knowledge on book clubs and areas that remain unexplored in research, the purpose of this study is to investigate one particular book club as a way to build new knowledge that can be used toward generating new theories about the reading experience. Research to date demonstrates creative methodological and theoretical approaches to investigating book clubs and provides much insight about these groups. As detailed in the Literature Review and Methods chapters, researchers have taken archival and historical approaches, qualitative approaches, and statistical approaches to investigating reading communities; they have designed case studies, comparative studies, quasi-experimental studies, and studies that combine different research methods; they have framed studies within a number of theoretical and disciplinary traditions. While finding new clubs to study and designing new ways to study them are imperatives as book-club culture and practice—the “shadow tradition”—continues to grow and change, researchers will be challenged in keeping pace. This study participates in existing trends and challenges and is thus humble yet hopeful, reserved yet dynamic. And although this study is

limited in scope, future investigations based on its current findings have the potential to produce insight into the nature of communal reading that may be significant to different academic fields.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study arose from a review of the literature in several areas: theories on rhetoric, literature, aesthetics, publics, education and social science; existing empirical research on book clubs; and popular discourse on book clubs. The research questions are as follows:

- (1) How does a book club operate publically, socially, and privately within specific contexts?
- (2) How does a club participate in external communities and the world at large and connect this participation to the literature its members read?

Significance of the Study

This study is unique and significant for several reasons. One reason is the combined choice to locate this study in Knoxville, Tennessee and to investigate one club, the Books-N-Wine club, as the subject of a case study. To date no study has been conducted on book clubs in Knoxville and so this study enters unknown territory. The city of Knoxville and surrounding areas comprise an interesting context for any kind of literary goings-on and the Books-N-Wine club reflects significant aspects of situated communal reading practice that call for detailed attention to location and other important factors. In terms of scholarship, this study locates its claims within an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, and thus findings from the study will be relevant to a range of fields and can help to re-conceptualize or qualify well-known theories

about readers' encounters with literature. This study also engages with varied discourses on the experience of reading, including empirical studies of book clubs and popular writing on book clubs. Finally, this study presents findings that should contribute to knowledge on book clubs in the academy and in the "real world" and lays the groundwork for worthwhile ways to continue researching this phenomenon.

Significance of Knoxville and the Books-N-Wine Club

The city of Knoxville in East Tennessee is a significant context for a book club study because of its socio-political climate, which combines a collegiate atmosphere, vestiges of Appalachia and the Old South, the legacy of the 1982 World's Fair, the activities of current social movements, a growing immigrant population, and economic disparities that fall along Knoxville's East-West-North-South dividing lines. Some of these features of Knoxville's socio-political climate inspire the work of Jack Neely, a local history enthusiast and columnist for *The Metro Pulse*, Knoxville's print source for culture and politics. His longer works, *Market Square: A History of the Most Democratic Place on Earth* (2009) and *Knoxville: Green By Nature* (2013), describe areas in Knoxville as future-oriented hubs of intellectual, political, economic activity and urban and environmental development. Through his writings, Neely puts words to an existing sense of community in Knoxville, a city that rallies behind "Keep[ing] Knoxville Scruffy" and turns *Wall Street Journal* reporter Susan Harrigan's negative outlook on this "scruffy little city's" ability to host the '82 World's Fair into a slogan for civic pride.

Knoxville's claims to literary and literacy distinction make this city an interesting context in which book clubs can thrive, given clubs' histories as sites for literacy development. East Tennessee's high-profile literacy initiatives, including the University of Tennessee's Center for

Literacy Studies and the Dolly Parton Foundation's literacy grants and nation-wide Imagination Library program, highlight the value this region places placed on reading and learning for all ages. Knoxville-associated authors James Agee, Cormac McCarthy, and others inspire local readers, including book clubs, to explore depictions of Knoxville in well-known works of fiction. Like many cities, Knoxville is also home to a productive, well-organized, and vibrant Writer's Guild that features the accomplishments of local authors, arranges appearances by non-local best-selling authors, and hosts workshops and other events.

Another aspect of Knoxville's literary identity that informed early stages of this study is the presence of Union Avenue Books, a bookstore adjacent to "democratic" Market Square. Union Avenue Books is distinct in that it serves as gathering place for literati from near and far, and more specifically, is home to at least two functioning book clubs that played a role in the final decision to feature the Books-N-Wine club as the subject of this case study. Considering these inner-city intersections and the attractions of a study on one of the clubs meeting at Union Avenue Books, clubs such as Books-N-Wine, meeting in a West Knoxville suburban neighborhood, emphasize the power of groups that operate in peripheral and unexpected contexts. Books-N-Wine, like many clubs, is a community that navigates the boundaries between public and private space and academic and popular cultural values. Clubs such as Books-N-Wine also show the importance of literary discourse produced by the "nonexpert" or "citizen critic," in Eberly's terms (9), discourse that constitutes its own aesthetic in response to the aesthetics present in texts. And finally, these kinds of clubs show the importance of citizen critics' engagement in political discourse that arises sometimes without premeditation or formal participation in social movements.

Books-N-Wine, although one club among many that traverse both Knoxville's inner city areas and its suburbs, is significant because of its relationship to Knoxville and to its reading selections, a relationship that is both obvious and subtle and that needs investigating. For example, Books-N-Wine has invoked Knoxville's literary heritage with its selections of McCarthy's *The Road* and Agee's *A Death in the Family* (1957). More recently, Books-N-Wine read and discussed Denise Kiernan's *The Girls of Atomic City* (2013) because it details the political and scientific history of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a city carved out of wilderness for the express and secret mission of developing the bomb that would end WWII, a city in close proximity to Knoxville. In relation to its region-specific book selections, Books-N-Wine is a significant choice for a case study because of its unique interest in literary genre. This club defines categories such as "fiction," the "classics," or "literature" in ways that suit the opinions of its members. Members of the club select texts for reading based on flexible criteria, and over time the group tends to alternate between popular fiction, literary fiction, and culturally-specific non-fiction.

Books-N-Wine does not represent all book clubs, but as a reading community that is still going strong as it enters its fourth year of operation, it figures as a fortuitous choice for a case study and its practice can inform the design of future research on book clubs. For these and other reasons, including the club's approaches to education exercised through its members' affiliation with a local homeschooling co-operative, the Books-N-Wine club as the subject of this study represents a deliberate methodological choice with important theoretical implications, as discussed in later chapters.

Interdisciplinary Theoretical Framework

This study's interdisciplinary theoretical framework engages with concepts from the fields of literature, rhetoric, aesthetics, education, and social science. Readings in these fields alongside readings of empirical studies prompted flexible understandings of book clubs' contextualized practices and the participation of their members in various *spheres*, the primary concepts undergirding the research questions. To build an understanding of context, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *dialogism* helps to describe the novel form's relationship to the world, while John Dewey's concepts of the "museum experience" and "everyday experience" help to describe consumers' encounters with art. Theories provided by Wayne Booth, Kenneth Burke, and David Novitz supplement understandings of readers' relationships to literary texts. Burke provides ideas on the ways readers "absorb" or identify with the rhetorical position in a literary text, while Novitz considers how readers understand literary texts by becoming absorbed within the emotional content or by responding intellectually to thematic or aesthetic content. Booth provides ideas on authors, texts, and readers as exerting effects on one another or exchanging meaning back and forth, and on literature as serving ethical and rhetorical purposes. Theories provided by Rosa Eberly, Gary Alan Fine, Jürgen Habermas, and Nancy Fraser contribute to understandings of clubs' participation in multiple external *spheres*, as they examine how groups form in order to negotiate values and behaviors that members deem socially appropriate and practice meaningfully in larger public contexts.

Social science and educational theories provide additional understandings of context and participation in external *spheres* that are indispensable for several reasons: book clubs represent particular situations for intellectual growth; this growth is contingent upon communal reading; these experiences correspond to members' experiences outside of the club environment. Paolo

Freire and E. D. Hirsch supply, respectively, *critical pedagogy* and a traditional pedagogy as seemingly opposing viewpoints on teaching towards social justice, and both help to position book clubs' pedagogical potential within a range of different approaches to learning. Freire builds his theory through such texts as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), and *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987) and challenges educators and oppressed classes to begin the process of “conscientization,” or becoming aware of existing social structures and the degrees to which these structures may be oppressive to some communities. In challenging educators and learners to scaffold new knowledge upon their own valuable discourse and experiences, Freire argues that to accept the discourse of the dominant classes, who are traditionally assumed to have a formal education and economic and political power, would be to accept the “false generosity” of the “banking” model of teaching. He suggests that oppressed classes' will experience more political and intellectual empowerment by choosing to favor their own knowledge and to engage in reflection and action, rather than by accepting “instruction” offered by others. Specific methods in critical pedagogy include collaborative dialogue and action among members of a group toward reaching the goals of liberating communities and changing social reality.

Comparatively less radical, Hirsch's 2009 treatise, *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools*, indicts recent educational trends toward Montessori-style, exploratory curriculum and posits that the development of a traditional “common core” curriculum, “enriched by the human traditions of pedagogical practice that the child-centered movement introduced,” is the most effective way to teach towards social justice (Hirsch 188). Freire's and Hirsch's approaches are equally important for investigating clubs as pedagogical settings in which members teach themselves, learn from each other, and may be instructive to non-

members—either rejecting or underscoring the discourses particular to dominant forces (such as the academy or the commercial print industry) in order to teach and learn in the most effective ways.

Rosa Eberly's *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (2000) draws upon Jürgen Habermas's theories of the "public sphere" to build her own theory about the influence of "citizen critics" on literary culture. Eberly's interdisciplinary study of twentieth-century readers' public responses to controversial novels published at the time describes "citizen critics" as engaging in literary public discourse that both influences and reflects the "condition of our democracy" (xi). Gary Alan Fine's *Tiny Publics: A Theory of Group Action and Culture* (2012) also draws upon Habermas's work in studies of the formation and function of various small groups, ranging from youth sports teams to political campaign workers, to build a case for their function as "tiny publics." The role of these groups at the very least is to comprise larger publics and societies. In some cases they exist as sites where members work actively and intentionally toward participation in these larger public contexts.

This study's theoretical framework follows an interdisciplinary tradition that is already at work in existing scholarship on book clubs. Existing studies not only intersect with a range of fields, but also in many cases demonstrate the advantages of combining theories to form more comprehensive knowledge about book clubs' many roles in the world and the complexity of the meanings they register. Several studies use politicized schools of thought, such as postcolonial theory and feminist theory, to discuss the ethics of clubs' cross-cultural and intra-cultural reading practices. Several others studies use theories in literature, education, and library science as ways to imagine or study well-defined communities of readers. Researchers in medicine, psychology,

and criminal theory as unexpected fields for book club studies have investigated the therapeutic value of book clubs.

Combining Discourses on the Communal Reading Experience

This study draws upon different approaches to publishing material about encounters between readers and literature—from theoretical and empirical research, to published popular writing, to news articles, to gathering statements from clubs such as those made by members of Books-N-Wine as a currently operating club—to frame questions about reading communities. These intersections enable this study to treat different ways of producing knowledge about clubs and literature as equally valid and to examine discourses and terminologies with careful scrutiny—necessary approaches to producing fuller, more unique, and unexpected understandings of club culture and practice. Following the examples set forth by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin’s glossary *Critical Terms for Literary Study* for “continu[ing] to theorize [our] own practice” of book-club research within a larger field of cultural studies, this study regards even the term “discourse” as subject of reevaluation (x). “Discourse” must be reevaluated because it involves the privilege, power, and knowledge of those operating within a given community who create a specialized language that enables the community to function. Paul Bové’s entry on “discourse” within this glossary suggests that the concept refers not only to the language endemic to a particular “genre” of literature, such as poetry or prose, but also to a recognizable set of terms and their associated assumptions used within a discipline to denote meanings (50). Even within the small field of book-club research, relevant discourses span from those of the academy and its uses of specialized terminologies to discuss culture to the discourse that circulates outside of the academy; both sides of this

spectrum, from the esoteric, to the technical, to the everyday, mean that those entrenched in a discourse have gained entry into a community of other users who share and negotiate meanings. Examining these meanings must be a continual endeavor.

Providing invaluable occasions to consider different sources of knowledge and to use discourses and terminology with heightened awareness, popular publications reveal the grassroots nature of writing by clubs, about clubs, for clubs to suggest that ideas produced by scholars or “outsiders” to the practice alone cannot suffice. Guidebooks and anecdotal memoirs, such as Evelyn Slezak’s *The Book Group Book* (2000) and Monique Greenwood, Lynda Johnson, and Tracy Mitchell-Brown’s *The Go On Girl! Book Club Guide for Reading Groups* (1999) feature clubs’ own ideas about best practices for running a club and the importance of clubs’ articulating for themselves the nature of their social and intellectual achievements. In addition to revealing the grassroots nature of writing by clubs for clubs, popular guidebooks and anecdotal memoirs provide information about the logistical details of meeting-to-meeting club conduct that distinguish one club from another and that relate directly to a club’s process of self-identification. These logistical details include, but are not limited to, clubs’ practices in recruiting members, serving food, and selecting reading material, as well as whether or not the group elects a member to serve as leader or facilitator. Ideas provided by Books-N-Wine’s members supplemented scholarly and popular definitions of book-club practice and highlight the “lived” discourses and enactment of shared meaning-making between texts and readers. For this study I considered Books-N-Wine members’ reading practices as authoritative ways to produce meaning about literary texts, members’ lives, their surrounding communities, and the world at large.

Expanding this study’s research basis beyond a strict focus on academic scholarship has had important theoretical and methodological implications for investigating Books-N-Wine as a

contextualized practice whose members connect their club participation to their roles in external communities. Intrepid combinations of otherwise unrelated theories provide more extensive and precise vocabularies for describing book clubs. Detailed data on Books-N-Wine members' lived experiences lend authority to describing relationships between readers and texts. Drawing upon different kinds of knowledge furthers this study's potential relevance to non-academic institutions such as the commercial print industry, in which clubs become stakeholders of cultural and commercial capital and negotiators of meaning through purchasing texts and producing dialogue.

Significant Applications

Altogether, interdisciplinary research on book clubs demonstrates the potential for researchers and club practitioners to conceive of numerous ways that book club knowledge can be produced and used by the academy, by the print industry, and in non-literary contexts. Creating new intersections of academic fields, discourses, and theories for research on book clubs is a timely endeavor. Currently, university-level research and teaching reflect increasing interdisciplinary alliances, and many universities promote an ethos and practice of community engagement. In relation, Elizabeth Long's invaluable scholarship in *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* points out that previously overlooked social groups such as book clubs and other activities typically associated with women are receiving increasing recognition from scholars for their contributions to cultural production and commercial value. And in the midst of intense political times, new forms of grassroots social activism and literacy initiatives are gaining momentum and may correlate to book clubs that are socially and

politically educated, even in the event that these groups and their members do not formally participate in social activism.

Drawing upon knowledge from the academy, the community, the print industry, and from popular publications on reading experiences, as noted in the section above on “Combining Discourses on the Communal Reading Experience,” this study explores sometimes tacitly understood concepts such as “activism” in order to consider the goals and accomplishments of clubs such as Books-N-Wine. “Activism” might be generally understood to refer to the actions of engaged citizens invested some sort of social change on large and small scales. Engagement can range from raising awareness, advocacy, and community-building to visible demonstrations in public spaces, to organized social movements based on political issues such as civil rights or environmentalism. It would be worthwhile to consider the possibility that some citizens, while not publically engaging themselves in socio-political issues, apply their civic interests to their domestic lives, educating their families in ways to live and grow. These investments are no less important, given their influence on the family unit as a powerful societal institution, and thus “activism” must be investigated as it might occur in the less conspicuous sphere of the everyday.

Given the range of possible sites in which social change can be seen to occur—from public policy at the national level to the services that charitable organizations might offer to members of a small community—and given the varied issues and circumstances that might motivate citizens to engage themselves as activists, this study theorizes its use of “activism” by consulting the work of self-described scholar-activists. Definitions provided by scholar-activists may foreground consultations, in a future study, of definitions provided by non-academic engaged citizenry and even citizens who do not identify themselves as “activists.” Rebecca Jones’s “Finding Hope for Academic Prose” and Amy Pason’s “Reclaiming Activism for

Students,” appearing in Kahn and Lee’s edited collection *Activism and Rhetoric: Theories and Contexts for Political Engagement* (2011), are particularly useful to this study in that the authors question their status as activists during a time when their institutional obligations such as graduate coursework and classroom instruction or other scholarly endeavors influence the nature and frequency of civic participation. Becoming less involved in such actions as rallies and becoming more inclined to publish articles or present conference papers that are received by small academic audiences, Jones questions whether academic writing can constitute action or lead to action outside of the academy. Pason observes that the public may conclude that students are “apathetic” if they are not participating in “protests.” She argues that narrow definitions of “activism” that include only concrete movements and demonstrations will mean that “most activists will not gain recognition for their efforts” (192-193). If “activism” can include students’ or citizens’ efforts in community service and education, as Pason suggests, and if the “Ivory Tower” can be, as Jones suggests, a “space for gathering—a commons where citizens meet to rethink and revise” before “making public decisions, acting on public policy, or writing our life’s work” (198), then how might a spectrum of engagement on the part of more citizens, scholars, and teachers contributing to changes in social reality? What other “commons” exist on a smaller scale, including book clubs and other groups, that accomplish the reflective and discursive goals of activism?² To further qualify the range of engagement that may be categorized as “activism” and to consider important but overlooked spheres in which it may occur, I consult Michel de Certeau’s theory on *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). Certeau’s theory helps to render the behaviors that are “ordinary” and “common” to a given citizen, group—or, for this study, a

² Carolyn Dever’s *Skeptical Feminism: Activist Theory, Activist Practice* (2004) and Katy M. Swalwell’s *Educating Activist Allies: Social Justice Pedagogy with the Suburban and Urban Elite* (2013) suggest that the act itself of theorizing terms to describe “activism” or other high-stakes practices is important because it challenges previously-held assumptions toward producing new knowledge.

community of readers—the subjects of close analysis with regard to the power of these practices to shape a culture.

In addition to “activism” and the “everyday,” this study explores other concepts such as “research,” “transformation,” “public,” and “authenticity,” in relation to Books-N-Wine’s (and in a future study, other clubs’) cultural and aesthetic accomplishments and even politicized actions within a community. Flexible understandings of these terms can also be used to explore members’ sense of social obligation to one another, their (un)intentional and (un)conscious formulation of a socio-political ethos, and their contribution to the socio-political attitudes of other people in their lives, such as family members, friends, co-workers, and even strangers encountered in public. This study lays the foundations for formulating updated and adventurous understandings of book clubs and their intersections with domestic, professional, educational spheres, and illustrates the importance of the “everyday” as a locus for these activities.

Parameters of the Study

Delimitations

Efforts to ensure that data collected for this study would produce useful and valid findings began with a six-week period of social networking within Knoxville’s book-club culture in order to locate and become acquainted with a small sampling of the different kinds of clubs that operate in this city. Networking enabled an intentional rather than haphazard selection of a club to figure as the subject of the case study, based on several criteria for finding a “progressive” club as one particular type.³

³ The process of selecting Books-N-Wine from other clubs in Knoxville will be described in more detail in Chapter III, Methods and Procedures.

Once Books-N-Wine was selected, another effort to arrive at useful and valid findings included attending six club meetings, rather than one meeting in isolation, and attending meetings consecutively, rather than sporadically. Repeated and consecutive attendance revealed the ways in which the club's operation changes and remains consistent over time and the ways in which each meeting has a noticeable impact on subsequent meetings. Taking observation notes and audio recording the meeting discussions contributed to detailed descriptions of this club's operation and more conscious identification of important themes.

Another effort to make useful and valid discoveries included supplementing data from observations with data from interviews of all willing participants, in order to gather information on club members' perceptions and experiences and their specific ways of describing them. Two rounds of interviews enabled the gathering of detailed baseline information and following up on important themes. These two rounds also noted any changes in participants' experiences or new insights that came about over time as a result of their continued participation in Books-N-Wine and as a result of their reflections on the conversations that took place during initial interviews.

In order to consider additional data on Books-N-Wine that cannot be gathered through observations and interviews, this study included analysis of text-based sources of data: the club's reading selections, the club's website, and one member's blog post about her reading of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in light of contemporary race relations. Through these venues, club members exercised their discursive and ideological relationships to literary texts and to their intended or imagined audiences who read their online, publically-accessible material.

Finally, Atlas.ti, qualitative data analysis software, systematized data processing and analysis, by accounting for a range of important themes, consistencies and inconsistencies in the

club's operation from April to September 2013, consistencies and inconsistencies in members' statements, and correlations across data sets.

Limitations

Several factors of this study limited the generalizability of the findings. One factor concerns the six-week period of social networking with only ten clubs. Given the diverse population and size of Knoxville, it is probable that many clubs operate in this city. However, some clubs are virtually invisible if they do not advertise themselves online, post announcements in local news sources, or circulate information on their goings-on extensively by word of mouth. The fact that most clubs meet monthly rather than with more frequency limits the opportunities to visit meetings within a short time frame. The most effective networking, carried out over a longer period of time, would acquaint a researcher with a more representative sample of the variety of clubs in Knoxville, or even clubs in nearby cities or other locations, from which general comparisons can be made.

In relation to the limited familiarity with local clubs as a result of a short period of social networking, another limitation to this study is its small population of participants. On the one hand, there are advantages to the case study approach. Investigating one club comprised of eight participants, five of which were "core" participants, brought forth in-depth knowledge of the club's function. Findings from case studies can produce new theoretical knowledge that is useful in continued research and can highlight the ways in which the subject of the study operates uniquely in comparison to other similar populations. However, because a case study describes such a small and isolated population, findings from this study alone cannot be generalized toward making valid inferences about other book clubs and social groups.

The short duration of the study, with official data collection lasting from April 2013 to September 2013, limits the degree to which the transformation (or consistency in practice) of the club and its members can be observed over time. While the six months of collecting data on Books-N-Wine afforded repeated and consecutive opportunities to observe the club in action and to interview members individually, the club's two-year history prior to data collection and its continued operation after data collection constitute important periods of this club's practice that would provide more thorough answers to this study's research questions. To address this limitation, several interview questions were designed to solicit participants' descriptions of their past involvement in the club and their ideas about the club's plans for the future.

Another limitation concerned the preferences and daily schedules of Books-N-Wine's members as factors that affected their availability for interviews and the length of time during interviews for engaging in thorough conversations about members' experiences and perceptions. Six members agreed to participate in initial interviews at various times and locations that members deemed convenient, while five members agreed to participate in follow-up interviews. Interview protocols for the two rounds of interviews were flexible in that some questions were excised during the interview process in order to keep the length of interviews within a reasonable time frame for members and in order to focus on questions that would yield data on the study's most salient themes.

A related limitation involves the fact that two less-frequently attending members (who may have dropped out of the club altogether) were not available for interviewing, and thus this study does not include their perceptions of and attitudes about Books-N-Wine that are perhaps less enthusiastic than those of "core members." These (former) members' unavailability reflects Books-N-Wine's members' statements on unenthusiastic members defecting from the group. In

addition, Books-N-Wine's evolving constituency correlates to a consistently underexplored area in current research on clubs, because researchers tend to focus on functioning book clubs and their members who are more easily located. Elizabeth Long, an oft-cited scholar on book clubs' historical and contemporary value, notes a dissenting spirit among some book-club participants who "leav[e] the circle" for a number of reasons, including boredom with a club's reading materials or a sense of social alienation (137). Similarly, Heather Murray cites in her scholarship on Ontario clubs a "book-club backlash" that counters the enthusiasm and pervasive participation by diverse readers (5). Even with these researchers' interests in the experiences of dissatisfied members and clubs that disband completely, knowledge about book clubs—which has been constructed mainly from the operations of existing clubs—can be expanded to reflect more experiences of disgruntled, dissenting, or defecting club members. Locating a population of book-club "defectors" who are willing to participate in a study would provide alternative perspectives on clubs' influences on reading culture.

Finally, in relation to the small population size of this case study, the methodological design posed another limitation to the type of data collection that is possible. Certainly, observations and interviews and analysis of text-based data provided rich insight into this club. However, distributing surveys and questionnaires during a networking phase to connect with other clubs in Knoxville or those other cities would enable comparisons between data sets toward making generalizable conclusions.

Organization of the Study

Following the Introduction chapter, this dissertation contains a review of the literature from which the research questions (on clubs as situated, contextualized practices representing

particular ways of participation in the world) and methodology were developed. Then, it includes a chapter on the methods used to collect and analyze data. A Findings chapter describes data that answer the research questions concerning how Books-N-Wine operates in response to contextual factors and the degree to which members use the club space as an exchange site for values and beliefs exercised in other spheres. The Conclusion chapter discusses the implications of these findings and suggests worthwhile avenues for continued research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

They began as “salons” and “literary societies,” and now we know them as “reading groups” or “book clubs.” Individual book clubs and the culture they comprise signify popular, social, and intellectual practice, and as socio-cultural phenomena, they can be defined in several ways and attract members that reflect some historical consistency alongside demographic diversity. Book clubs are ubiquitous in the United States and abroad. Yet, they escaped scholarly attention prior to the 1980s and can seem difficult to locate except to readers who search tenaciously for potential clubs to join. Thus they function at a tenuous yet fascinating intersection between public and private contexts and negotiate the cultural values of the academy and those of “everyday” readers—the latter a nebulous and at best an imagined population that Rosa Eberly investigates in *Citizen Critics*.

Despite the private nature of book clubs, even those that establish a public presence by maintaining a website, and despite the fact that book clubs have only recently become the subject of academic scholarship, a fascinating variety of discourse related to fiction, readers, and book clubs informs what is known about this phenomenon. This discourse includes theory, empirical studies, published popular sources, news sources, and statements articulated by members of existing book clubs. Book clubs themselves produce rich and authoritative knowledge on their own practice, given that club members fuel their operations at the same time that they analyze what they do. Book clubs’ knowledge and practice contributes, more than researchers might expect, to literary and critical theory, print culture, to the lives of participants, and to their communities.

This chapter details scholarship from the past three decades to explore the definitions and history of book clubs and the ways in which they have been studied. This chapter begins with a large section devoted to the difficult task of defining book-club practice and culture, difficult because of book clubs' complexity and the sheer variety of authoritative sources of definitions. Definitions will then be followed by a section historicizing the evolution of book clubs since the nineteenth century toward their current status. After exploring book clubs' history, this chapter will then detail clubs' features and functions and the current methods and theoretical approaches that researchers have used to study book clubs. This chapter will conclude with a review of the interdisciplinary theoretical framework that contributed to this study's design and that may inform this project's future.

Defining "Book Clubs"

Generally speaking, current book clubs can be said to be and do a variety of things. Whether they resemble their historical analogues of salons and literary societies or call themselves "reading groups" or "book clubs," these groups all describe individual readers' formations of small communities based on interests in literature, social interaction, and learning. However, these terms can connote hierarchies of literary and cultural authority from one environment to the next. "Book club" might refer to social and recreational environments, while "reading group" might refer to academic environments. Heather Murray's *Come, bright Improvement!* distinguishes between these terms in historically- and geographically-specific ways. She claims that "literary societies" and "book clubs" were terms that were both in use in nineteenth-century Ontario but denoted slightly different practices; "book clubs" meant "a group of people who clubbed together to acquire costly books and periodicals or to circulate their

private libraries,” while “literary societies” functioned as groups discussing common reading material (7).

With all these possible uses of these terms, and despite the occasionally interchangeable uses of “book club,” “reading group,” or “book group,” this study makes use of “book club,” because it connotes a wide range of meaning, including clubs’ potential to serve social, recreational, pedagogical, academic, and even activist purposes. This term also has wider popular usage in contemporary book-club practice and culture, as many groups that advertise themselves publically or that are the subject of scholarship identify themselves as “book clubs” rather than as “reading groups.” The term “book club” also implies a wider range of members identifying with those purposes, and a wider range of acceptable club behavior. Indeed, popular and scholarly knowledge on book clubs suggests that this practice and culture provide its members with occasions to engage in several important actions. Members of a club can negotiate identity and cultural meaning. Furthermore, members can participate in emancipatory and democratic communal practices to dismantle or reinforce cultural hierarchies of value, overtly political or not. In addition, members can enjoy access to literary forms and discourse that traditionally belong to the academy, alongside the sanction to form both emotional and intellectual responses to literature. To provide a concrete example of these actions and negotiations, clubs often choose to discuss both popular fiction and literary fiction with equal fervor. Another example would be clubs’ preference for works of literature they deem accessible over works of highly esoteric literature, because of the conversational value that accessible texts bring to the social environment of club space.⁴

⁴ This chapter will continue to explore clubs’ roles in dismantling as well as reinforcing of hierarchies between middlebrow culture and highbrow culture, popular fiction and literary fiction, and accessible reading material and esoteric material. Jim Collins’s *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*

The possibilities and varieties among clubs considered, “Joe,”⁵ a member of Books-N-Wine, the focal club for this dissertation’s case study, provided a clear, succinct, and generally applicable definition of book clubs that partly inspires the title for this study. Joe says that book clubs are “... a group of people who have decided, ‘we’re going to read *this*, we’re going to have *this* in common, and we’re going to get together and... talk about it.’” His use of an indefinite “*this*” indicates that common, yet flexible, choices, identities, and experiences among members are three necessary components of this practice.⁶ Joe’s definition of clubs as serving members’ common goals and definitions from popular and empirical discourse all suggest that book clubs and the culture at large are knowable and comprehensible to those with either casual or enthusiastic interest in them. At the same time, the variety in definitions corresponds to a range of different kinds of social reading and dialogue practices—from high-brow, elite, and exclusive, to middle-brow and inclusive. And even though book clubs have a long-standing history, it is appropriate to say that over time these practices are transformable, in flux, and adaptable to individual clubs’ needs.

Definitions from Popular Discourse

Popular definitions of book clubs can be found most notably in “how to” guides, in most cases delightfully written *by* clubs *for* clubs that are in the midst of starting or refining their

(2010) shows that book clubs are not the only factor in this negotiation of cultural hierarchy. Collins argues that readers and scholars must take into account such factors as chain book stores, chain coffee shops, and film adaptations of novels, as well as academic training and material access to literature, which affect readers’ procurement of electronic or print copies. It should also be noted that although Collins includes a chapter on large-scale book clubs such as Oprah’s Book Club, he is primarily concerned with individual readers’ experiences and the impetus to validate readers’ contributions to literary discourse, especially when readers find themselves in public contexts specifically designed to create a reader-ly culture.

⁵ Chapter III lists all participants in this study, using pseudonyms.

⁶ This study considers “Joe’s” definition of “book clubs” to be authoritative since it is formulated in the midst of book-club participation. Chapter IV explores other members’ definitions of this practice.

practice. Examples include Ellen Slezak's edited collection of anecdotes *The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group* (2000), Monique Greenwood, Lynda Johnson, and Tracy Mitchell's *The Go On Girl! Book Club Guide for Reading Groups* (1999), and Rachel W. Jacobsohn's *The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know, From Choosing Members to Leading Discussions* (1994). These guides provide general descriptions that can educate a layperson with casual interest in this social practice, as well as specific descriptions that explain individual clubs' particularities. From these guides' general and specific definitions emerge striking consistencies: clubs often like to be transparent in describing themselves and stake claims over articulating their own definitions; they often cultivate a sense of integrity and authenticity in their practice and inoculate themselves against perceived hegemonies and cultural hierarchies of value that exist external to club practice and culture. And although some clubs model their practice off of "mega clubs" such as Oprah's Book Club (OBC), many clubs dictate and execute their specific versions of book club practice by choosing reading material and conducting discussions independently, thus serving the expressed needs of participating members. Altogether, these consistencies among clubs and the popular sources that describe them confirm that book clubs are rich and authoritative sources of knowledge and suggest that book clubs, as social, pedagogical, and sometimes political practices, can operate on a grassroots basis.

Whether clubs follow the lead of Oprah's Book Club or other models or function independently, these "how to" guides encourage clubs to define themselves and operate in the manners that seem most fit, despite cultural assumptions about how clubs "ought" to run. Seamlessly intertwined in these bold commitments to clubs' self-definition and individualized operation is a spirit of tongue-in-check, self-deprecating humor. This humor comes across in

participants' confessions that their involvement in a book club becomes a non-negotiable imperative and that other life commitments such as family or social events will become less prioritized during the scheduled time for a club meeting. Greenwood, Johnson, and Mitchell's *The Go On Girl! Book Club Guide for Reading Groups* provides a definition of book clubs as a "long-standing tradition of coming together around a sustained and sustaining interest in literature," a definition that could apply to book-club culture at large (3). Yet, in describing clubs comprised of "diverse, dynamic Black women" engaging in culturally-specific club practice, this definition includes additional details. A book club, particularly the Go On Girl! Book Club, is "sacred time, sister-bonding time," and is best understood by the humorous and explicit imperative: "[d]on't even bother to call or drop by in the afternoon" during designated meeting times (3). This club provides additional cultural and literary qualifiers to define itself, explaining that the club and its affiliated chapters comprised of African-American women function uniquely through a particular awareness of the historically and "commonly accepted" roles of oral transmission, print literacy, and collective reading experiences in African-American culture (3).

Margaret Atwood's Foreword to Slezak's popular guide *The Book Group Book* similarly combines the humor associated with members' intense enthusiasm about their club involvement with descriptions of what clubs do. Atwood says a club is comprised of "the people who will kill you if you have an author in your clutches and don't have the book group to tea"—emphasizing that reading experiences are best when shared communally. Atwood supplements this comical definition with a composite definition, indicating that a book club is "the graduate seminar, the encounter group, and the good old-fashioned village-pump gossip session, all rolled into one" (xi). Blending ironic and jocular tones with images of academic and social settings, this definition demonstrates that a book club is not merely a casual and enjoyable recreation, but is a

practice requiring dedication from members and that serves their various social, emotional, and intellectual needs.

Definitions from Scholarly Sources

In contrast to popular definitions of book clubs that take on ironic or jocular tones, but equally as useful, Jacobsohn's *The Reading Group Handbook* provides thorough and straightforward definitions of book clubs. This guide uses the terms "reading groups," "book groups," and "book clubs" interchangeably rather than distinguishing among them as other scholars and practitioners prefer, but its purposes are nonetheless to assist club leaders in discerning from a range of possibilities the practices that will best suit their goals. Jacobsohn explains that

... [B]ook clubs [are] organized around a love of reading and lively literary discussion, ... evolv[ing] in various directions: some toward the interpersonal and social, some toward the scholarly, and still others toward the exploration of a particular subject or author. Some groups gather ostensibly to discuss the book, but the group structure actually provides participants with a means to promote new, or strengthen old friendships, ... apply[ing] the text to their personal lives. ... [T]he book group provides adult conversation and social prestige (usually within a community). On the other hand, groups that read "quality" fiction and serious literature (more "difficult" books) tend to perpetuate an elitist attitude that strengthens their purpose of literary criticism. (5)

These and other components of Jacobsohn's definition are based on her own two decades of leading club discussions professionally, participating socially, and collecting data from written

letters, completed questionnaires, and phone conversations with various groups in the United States and abroad. Given the many options available to participants and facilitators for operating a club, Jacobsohn's definition combined from research and experience emphasizes that clubs should be defined first and foremost by their members, their identities, and their goals.

The descriptions, both comical and serious, in these guides present book clubs as democratic and collaborative communities, even considering the occasional bossy facilitator or overbearing club member. In addition, these publications' ethos of sharing their successes with others, especially in the case of Slezak's invitation to clubs to write to her about their experiences, indicates that the collaborations that enable book clubs to operate not only occur within clubs but exists among clubs and those who write about them.

Janice Radway's academic investigation of the national Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC) program in *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-The-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1997) reveals the subscription club experience as one that can produce mixed emotions for the participant. Unlike *The Book Group Book*, *The Go On Girl!* guide, and *The Reading Group Handbook*, Radway's work does not tell its readers "how to" conduct clubs. Rather, Radway provides academic analysis through a personal narrative about her discoveries about and experiences with BOMC, a "mega club" program of editors selecting and mailing books to subscribers nationwide. And although Radway's scholarship is geared to an academic audience including those working in the fields in cultural studies, rhetoric, and literature, this publication is accessible to a non-academic audience by virtue of its personal narrative format and honest and forthcoming tone. The relevance of *A Feeling for Books* to multiple audiences and the experience-based evidence for Radway's analysis lend authority to a definition of the BOMC in particular and cumulative definitions of book clubs in general. Radway recounts her

original inspiration for joining the BOMC and her initial, conflicted attitudes toward it as a way to define the program. Initially, the Club was something she had “learned to disparage,” after her years as a literary-trained graduate student, and she was inclined to assess the Club as “a middle-brow operation offering only the come-on of free bestsellers to people who wanted only to be told what to read in order to look appropriately cultured.” She and others admitted to participating in it only “with staged irony” (1-2). These attitudes of disparagement, irony, and even embarrassment were accompanied, though, with a “secret but suppressed desire to read in a less cerebral, less aesthetically focused way than the one [she] was taught in graduate school” (5). Thus, the business of dismantling or reinforcing hierarchies of value can occur in clubs as a communal effort, or it can translate from a “mega club’s” function to individual readers’ internal practices.

Radway’s conflicted attitudes about the BOMC—that members should feel embarrassed about it in academic circles or conversely that academics should value popular modes of reading that the BOMC represents and propagates—provides startling insight into the cultural and commercial stakes in print culture. Radway qualifies her definition of the BOMC in these regards by describing its role in generating cultural capital as a means of generating commercial capital, or “traffick[ing] in the business of distinction” (35). In addition, she defines the Club by describing its internal culture and structure, rendering questionable the BOMC’s status as a true book club in service of or defined by its members. The BOMC markets itself as a “club,” by issuing members a new book each month. This monthly issuance regularly engages readers’ literary sensibilities and implies that readers’ participation in BOMC will be ongoing, monetarily and intellectually, beyond an isolated encounter with fiction. The fact that members consequently make purchases means they are customers or subscribers. However, BOMC does not directly or

explicitly exist as a parent club modeling for members how to begin their own clubs for discussing literature, though small group clubs may have indeed formed in response to the BOMC's influence. Radway observes, rather, that the BOMC's in-house editors considered *themselves* to be the "readers," and "assumed—or at least hoped—that their own reading of a manuscript could stand in for or represent the likely behavior of their subscribers." Indeed, Radway points out that editors enjoyed communal, albeit boardroom-style, "opportunities for experience and response," and "long, ritualized conversations about books," meaning that editors constitute the *real* club, with no connection to the practices of members. In addition, the profits from purchases by members, who are more accurately called "customers" or "subscribers," essentially financed, and thus functioned in service of, editors' club experiences. Radway more aptly and wryly summarizes this dynamic: "editors *read*" and "subscribers *bought*" (41). A question might be raised here about what would result from a communicative, rather than purely commercial, dynamic in which subscribers read and provide feedback to which editors respond directly.

Radway's definitions of the BOMC as part of a cumulative definition of book-club culture and practice at large highlight the ethical issues that pertain to the publishing industry's direct influence on sales and commodification of literary taste. Radway also parallels BOMC's in-house editorial structure to the structure of other contexts producing literary taste, such as the graduate seminar, in which academics *read* and transfer knowledge while their students *buy* and receive knowledge. These questions suggest that even popular book club practice, when associated with a large commercial enterprise, can reinforce the academy's occasional hierarchies between meaning makers and meaning receivers, despite many book clubs'

democratic or collaborative social structures as presented by the *The Book Group Book*, *The Go On Girl!* guide, and *The Reading Group Handbook*.

Oprah's Book Club, dubbed OBC as part of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* (and now *OWN*, as an acronym for the *Oprah Winfrey Network*), figures as another "mega club" and bastion of commercial and cultural production that reflects some tensions between clubs' democratic and collaborative operations and clubs' tendencies to reinforce hierarchies between meaning makers and meaning receivers. The collaborative-hierarchical tension in OBC results partly from Winfrey's self-fashioning as a cultural authority and the variety of book selections featured on the show. The fact that the OBC is dramatized on television influences avid viewers and readers. OBC's definition converges with its operation. Several scholarly examinations of OBC define this club as an agent of influence and transformation and one that has achieved phenomenon status, as suggested by the titles of notable publications. *How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* and *Reading with Oprah: the Book Club that Changed America* suggest national-scale transformation, while the titles *The Oprah Affect* and *The Oprah Phenomenon* abstractly suggest the show's immeasurable influence. These titles commonly conflate Oprah herself, her self-titled show, and associated Book Club to produce a pervasive sense of its ethos and its marking of an important moment in the development of book clubs. On the show, the club's ethos of individual and community transformation is sometimes explicit and verbally articulated and other times more implicit and subtly communicated through the show's scripting and the reading selections it features.

These tensions and pervasive influence mean that the OBC's definitions must be factored into this project's construction of a composite definition of book clubs, even though not all readers and clubs model themselves on OBC. In addition to its collaborative-hierarchical tension

and influence on other clubs, OBC is defined by its diversity and literacy initiatives. OBC features books that range from “popular” to “literary,” it takes seriously a variety of authors including minorities and women, it welcomes dialogue that ranges from “middlebrow” to “highbrow,” and it makes literature generally accessible. Yet, at the same time, OBC seems to suggest that “middlebrow” reading habits and standards of living need elevating, and thereby exerts a certain degree of authority and superiority over readers. OBC also communicates to its audience that anyone can improve his or her life and presents Oprah’s expertise and assistance as the appropriate sources for such improvement. Considering these literacy initiatives, hierarchies of value, and Oprah’s role as teacher-helper, OBC and potentially other clubs can be defined as transformative practices with a variety of ethical and political implications. They can also be defined as entities that navigate the fine line between imposing standards onto reading communities and valuing the tendencies that club readers (and the lives that TV viewers) already possess—entities that navigate the line between “tastemakers” and “facilitators.”⁷

The Oprah Affect: Critical Essays on Oprah’s Book Club (2008), a collection edited by notable OBC scholars Cecilia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker, draws from publishers, readers,

⁷ Much like OBC, well-known television personality, Glenn Beck, whose presence in media extends beyond the Fox News network, has recently begun endorsing “political thriller” novels and other reading material as part of his repertoire of influence on the thoughts and behaviors of his viewers. In 2009, Motoko Rich of *The New York Times* termed Beck “the New Oprah,” and points out that even though Beck is known as an “outspoken media darling of populist conservatism,” he endorses the work of authors whose ideas do not align with his own. Similarly, in 2013, host of *The Daily Show* and cultural satirist Jon Stewart received media attention for his book endorsements in a *Bloomberg Business Week* article by Keenan Mayo. Stewart tends to promote books on political topics, usually non-fiction, but has recently promoted works in other genres including memoir narratives. In figuring as “new Oprahs,” Beck and Stewart participate in a tradition of literary sensationalism that is beholden to big-name media personalities who conflate their politics-as-entertainment ethos with print material. They provide further evidence that TV-endorsed reading material is an effective mode of influence. Demonstrating transatlantic trends in TV book clubs, British audiences enjoyed a book club segment in the *Richard & Judy* show between 2004 and 2008 and then the following year on a less popular program. According to Jenni Ramone and Helen Cousins’s edited collection, *The Richard & Judy Book Club Reader: Popular Texts and the Practices of Reading* (2011), the book club, hosted by Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan, launched face-to-face clubs and online reading communities, influenced print culture, and flooded libraries with patrons demanding to read the hosts’ recommendations. As with the OBC, the *Richard & Judy Show* attempted to navigate high-brow/low-brow cultural tensions and its hosts fashioned an ethos of connecting with an imagined audience of “general readers,” but media and readers were often critical of the host-endorsed book selections and the commentary of the show (5).

and libraries to provide a composite and slogan-worthy definition of the OBC as “the most important influence on literacy in the past fifty years.” Farr and Harker add that “literary scholars tend to identify the Book Club as a media phenomenon rather than a literary one, or as an unprecedented merger of literature and commercialism.” The authors suggest, however, that “the cultural and commercial production are only part of what’s going on with this club,” as it has now “officially crossed over” to receive academic attention. According to Farr and Harker, OBC is enlightening not only because it crosses the boundaries between popular and academic attention, but also because it expands the possibilities of what can be said about literature—whether discourse is popular or academic, emotion-based or intellectual, or a combination of all of these. OBC also expands the possibilities of who can be considered qualified to comment on literature. In other words, OBC renders literary criticism accessible to varied populations of readers and re-invigorates the “debate about the definition and purpose of literature in American culture” (1).

Despite this impetus to invite participation from a range of readers, it seems that OBC has at times expected its readers to possess literacy of a certain degree or type. Such literacy, according to Mark Hall’s chapter in *The Oprah Affect*, “negotiates this ‘elite-versus-popular polarity’” (94). But even in negotiating the cultural value of different ways of reading, OBC implies that the show’s staged dialogues about works of literature privilege specific reading practices. Hall points out that while the OBC “democratizes reading” by “bring[ing] discussions about serious literature down from the ivory tower and into the living rooms of regular people” (100-101), the show attempts to redirect and instruct readers (whom OBC scholars or even OBC itself identify as “middlebrow”) toward “better” ways to read literature. These “better” ways combine academic discourse with, as Michael Perry puts it in his chapter in *The Oprah Affect*,

reading as “engagement with community values and recognition of individual concerns” (120-121). Perry examines the March 6, 1998 episode, devoted to Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, in which OBC managed to create a hybrid club/classroom atmosphere and implied that readers were “helpless” without Winfrey’s intervention (123).

Whether or not *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and by extension OBC, touts the direct opinions and agendas of Oprah herself, Oprah’s persona on the show and in public discourse seems to be one that expands social activist agendas to include the idea of personal and community transformation, at the level of “self help.” These agendas are marketed best as makeovers and prize giveaways, but also and most interestingly through the book selections. OBC’s fiction selections such as Billie Letts’s *Where the Heart Is* or Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* serve to fuel motivational rhetoric aimed at her viewers so that they—in Winfrey’s own words—might “change the world” by reading the books that Winfrey selects, or in the case of *The Bluest Eye*, “this book” (quoted in Farr and Harker, 111). Literature, for OBC and possibly other clubs, can thus be a means to achieve non-literary goals such as self-improvement. Likewise, the space of the book club, as shown by the “how-to” guides and the research by Radway and OBC scholars, can be a means to achieve non-club goals such as articulation of personal identity for use in contexts external to the club space.

OBC’s hybrid or conflicting interests—of access, enlightenment, “self help,” and literacy “intervention”—do not represent the values of every book club, but they do contribute to cumulative understandings of book clubs as cultivating distinct and recognizable atmospheres and creating rules for specific reading and social behaviors. Certainly, some clubs cultivate a narrow sense of what constitutes appropriate dialogue about literature, while other clubs may cultivate a more flexible sense of appropriate dialogue. It seems consistent at both ends of this

spectrum that members of a given club must adhere to the type of dialogue that is communally agreed-upon. Yet, even though clubs may create possibilities for different types of dialogue and safe spaces for members to explore the possibilities, book clubs' social accessibility varies from club to club, with some book clubs preferring to be socially exclusive rather than inclusive, by maintaining strict "by invitation only" membership rules, based on demographic markers such as socio-economic status or gender. In fact *The Book Group Book* is chock full of anecdotes by clubs defined by their demonstrably exclusive membership, such as clubs comprised of middle-class women or clubs comprised of men who identify themselves by a non-heteronormative sexual orientation. Exclusivity, then, can also and paradoxically correspond to the political side of book clubs' potentials, meaning that members of a club might identify with narrow or specific socio-political agendas in the club space. In the words of Farr and Harker, clubs historically and currently reflect a "shadow tradition of literature," signifying the power of non-academic or marginal communities—power that may go unseen or unacknowledged by dominant communities (4-5). This "shadow tradition" also connects book club culture's literary interests to activist impulses and signifies clubs potential to transform the lives of individuals and perhaps even the opinions and values of communities.

While several book-length publications of types mentioned above define book-club practice explicitly, there are also empirical studies that work from a tacit understanding of book clubs as social and collective reading. These studies do not include explicit or lengthy definitions of book-club culture and practice, but rather spend their energy describing the contexts and ways in which clubs teach members and provide them with transformative experiences of one kind or another. Such experiences might encourage members to reflect on their own lives and enable them to negotiate individual and collective identity through club participation and to transgress

geographical and social boundaries. Even these varied perspectives on clubs can lead to similar conclusions. For example Kate Clifford Larson's "Saturday Evening Girls: A Progressive Era Library Club and the Intellectual Life of Working Class and Immigrant Girls in Turn-of-the-Century Boston" (2001) explores archival records of early twentieth-century clubs in Boston that provided literacy-building opportunities for cultural and language minorities at the same time that clubs engaged with issues pertaining to the women's suffrage movement. From an occupational science standpoint, Linsey Howie's "Ritualising in Book Clubs: Implications for Evolving Occupational Identities" (2003) studies book clubs as occasionally operating through visible organizations or institutions such as the Centre for Adult Education,⁸ and that they can provide members with opportunities to ritualize social practice. Clubs ritualize through "customs and procedures," and the results include "unity," "orderly conduct of society," and conflict resolution, and these rituals have resonance in other areas of members' lives (131). Combining library science and social science perspectives, Elbieta Barbara Zybert's "Prison Libraries in Poland: Partners in Rehabilitation, Culture, and Education" (2011) explores the "Bartnicka 10" book club's therapeutic and re-socialization value for inmates at the Siedlce prison, most notably by "involv[ing] groups and organizations outside prison" and sometimes involving former inmates who pursue literary interests upon their release (422). These three studies and others explored in this literature review show that clubs can be defined by members' transferring of their club experiences to other contexts.

Third and finally, published research defines clubs by their constituencies who use club spaces for the purposes of literary engagement and inter-subjective identity formation. Historical

⁸ Howie indicates that clubs operating in private homes are difficult to research in Victoria, Australia, as a result of the fact that club culture and practice are not as commercially linked as they are in the United States. Despite this commercial difference between clubs in the United States and those in Australia, the difficulty of investigating privately-operating clubs certainly describes a researcher's experience globally.

and current evidence suggests that literary societies and book clubs that operate in community or domestic spaces have been populated mostly by women, while the salons and academic reading groups have been male dominated. Gender-inclusive exceptions certainly exist, but generally speaking, book clubs have been and continue to be a gendered practice, as explored by Cecilia Farr and Jaime Harker, Elizabeth Long, Sarah Twomey, and Marilyn Poole, and other researchers. Gender, of course, relates to race, class, age, and occupation as conspicuous identity markers and as subject matter for dialogue alongside the actual reading material. These identity markers can be a basis for clubs' reinforcing or dismantling dominant discourse, assumptions, and traditions.

From academic and popular sources of knowledge, book clubs can thus be defined in several ways—as a practice that becomes a priority in participants' lives, as a practice that necessitates clearly defined “how-tos,” as a practice that enables the cultivation of multiple literacies and cultural capital, and as a practice that transforms individuals' lives and communities. These different sources of knowledge suggest that clubs can subscribe to a general definition of “book club” that is appropriate for social use in casual conversation—whether among a club's members or between a club and prospective members. These sources also suggest that club culture is adaptable to and contingent upon the needs of specific communities. In addition, book clubs must be defined by the unique history of communal reading practice and by what clubs actually do—how they operate internally and in connection to other areas of members' lives. Thus, clubs signify general and particular meanings, and their definitions, histories, and functions provide overlapping, indeed inextricable, ways of understanding them.

Historicizing Book Clubs

From what beginnings did book clubs—as researchers and participants know them today—evolve? Histories of book clubs provide some answers by exploring how this practice began in the nineteenth-century and evolved throughout the twentieth century. These answers help to shape definitions of contemporary clubs, including the Books-N-Wine club as the subject of this study, whose in-scene-and-on-location definitions of what they do fit into a centuries-long tradition and at the same time show that clubs can generate their own traditions. This section begins with a brief overview of clubs’ consistencies and evolutions over three centuries and continues with a more detailed view of the major periods of the development of reading communities.

Indispensable to histories and theories on reading communities, Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1991) suggests that eighteenth-century salons and literary societies arose as the novel was being developed as a literary genre. Salons and societies also figured prominently in the development of the modern middle class, the project of Enlightenment, the expansion of reading audiences, and the literary and political public spheres. According to Habermas, the public sphere is comprised of “private” citizens (usually aristocrats, intellectuals, and other well-to-do readers) who convene in generally accessible places such as coffee houses, as areas of commodity exchange and social labor, and produce discourse that is both self-consciously literary and political and free from the control of the state. The eighteenth-century culture of salons and literary societies and contemporary book club culture can fall under the rubric of the public sphere, even considering clubs that meet in private homes. Although book clubs have provided and continue to provide leisure-time enjoyment, marking them “bourgeois” pursuits, they can

potentially produce discourse that reflects members' broad-ranging investments in current socio-political reality. Studies by Elizabeth Long, Elizabeth McHenry, and Heather Murray provide more specific descriptions of nineteenth-century "literary societies" and "women's clubs" as politically-motivated reading communities. Similarly, Kate Clifford Larson and Marilyn Martin chart clubs' early twentieth-century accomplishments within what Larson identifies as "Progressive Era" literacy initiatives. Investigating another side to book clubs' twentieth-century investments in political reality, E. H. H. Green points out political groups within England's conservative party that created large-scale book clubs to combat perceived leftist influence, as will be explored below.

Investigations of late twentieth-century and contemporary clubs find that club practice has remained consistent over time while also producing new trends. From the nineteenth century to current practice, history shows that clubs do have their roots in the literary public sphere, meaning that literary communities often intersect with the concerns of public life. At the same time, some clubs seek to maintain a private and exclusive practice focused strictly on social recreation. Clubs can also be thought to operate within a "shadow tradition of literature," aptly phrased by Farr and Harker, meaning that while book clubs address the concerns of public life, they oftentimes operate just under the radar or just outside of mainstream academic and cultural production, such as that which is associated with institutions of higher education (4). Across history, some clubs have often embraced their "shadow" status, using different descriptors, of course, while others have sought centrality (4). And of course, the print, television, and Internet industries have been known to market texts and TV programs aggressively to book clubs, thus identifying them as a conspicuous demographic that can increase these industries' revenue.

Histories of book clubs' nineteenth-century origins in literary societies and women's clubs, as explored by Long, McHenry, and Murray, reveal that reading communities were and continue to be gendered practices. Despite centuries' worth of invaluable knowledge on clubs, the past three decades of research reveal that clubs are the subjects of gendered scholarship, having been dismissed from serious academic attention, along with other activities typically run by women, until the 1980s. The delay in scholarly interest, as Elizabeth Long suggests in *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, results from male dominated academies' propagation of "traditional academic hierarchy of values," such that women's clubs as "small culture groups" were not considered a "serious topic for investigation" (x). Within the current flurry of interest, Long's work itself provides a "rejoinder to that dismissal," as her research into book clubs' history and their contemporary analogues stems from an argument that these clubs are worthy of scholarly attention, because they show researchers "how people create meaning" within the frames of their "culture[s]" (x, xvi). Through archival research into historical clubs and field research (observations, interviews, surveys, and questionnaires) into contemporary clubs in Houston, Texas, Long argues that book clubs are important because of the way that their structures potentially create "ideal" situations for participants to form social and political opinions. Long provides a theoretical basis for examining clubs' potential as both past and contemporary contributors to middle-class values, in terms of the socio-economic status of participants, and to values that can be defined as grassroots, in terms of the self-fashioning and self-defining that takes place among participants. Long cites Habermas's "public sphere" theory in which an "ideal speech situation" allows "a free and open exchange of ideas, accompanied by a strong ethos that encourages expression of and respect for other people's opinions" (Long 108). Long's history also suggests that small reading groups helped propel modernity in Europe from

the eighteenth century onward; because reading groups were neither accomplishing social change on a large and public scale nor strictly relegated to the “private life” of family relations, small groups of readers had the power to influence “cultural politics of class, religion, and gender” (31-32). In the nineteenth century, across the Atlantic Ocean, post-Civil War reading groups in the United States, comprised of middle-class white women, helped participating women form identities and set the tone for turning literary movements into social reform movements. Literature and reading communities thus connected literature to movements related to literacy, women’s suffrage, Progressive Reformation, and other political engagements. Questioning, though, whether the public sphere theory of the “ideal speech situation” as “usher[ing] in innovative political ideas or policies” can describe contemporary club practice, Long says that many clubs “have no such political mission.” Without explicit goals of political engagement at the level of policy change, clubs “are not necessarily expected to shift their opinions because of rational arguments; rather they are expected to entertain ... excursions into the personal.” During these “excursions,” clubs value and “entertain the possible validity of other ‘takes’ on either literature or life” (108).

McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002) details the results of the author’s archival research at various museums and universities whose records are gapped and incomplete and her field research of current clubs. McHenry’s scholarship shows that literary societies comprised of this historically oppressed group are not well-researched, because scholars traditionally deem the published slave narrative “as the founding paradigm of black literary production in the nineteenth century” (6). Certainly, these societies are worthy of scholarly attention because of their remarkable achievements in literacy, literature, and public oratory. In addition, the achievements of these groups parallel

those associated with political movements such as abolition, civil rights, women's suffrage, and aesthetic movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, showing the connection between literary and political discourse occurring outside of official power structures. Their importance also lies in their reflection of recurrent and inextricable issues of gender, class, and race. McHenry comments on more recent advancements in the print industry that show that while African-American literary societies' and authors' works are often excluded from mainstream attention, publishers' profitable campaigns to promote works by minority authors under the banner of "diversity" reflect the need for continued cultural debate.

Murray's archival research in *Come, bright Improvement!: The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* shows that book clubs have a history outside of contexts such as Europe or the United States, whose literary histories figure more prominently in the established canon of the academy. Ontario's literary societies began around 1820. Some of the more longstanding men's clubs, including the Twenty Club of Lindsay, the Macaulay Club, and The Saturday Club, and women's clubs, including the Tuesday Reading Club and the Dundas Travel Club, began in the 1800s and 1890s and have lasted throughout the centuries with little interruption in operation. Murray points out that across history and in current practice, clubs' literary agendas may combine with other professional, cultural, religious, or social agendas, including serving as sites for activists to support women's suffragist movements and for learners to grow through formal educational curriculum (6, 82). Ontario clubs have also served as sites for refugees, learning, literacy and cultural exploration. At least one notable instance, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) that began in Upstate New York, demonstrates connections between the U. S. and Canadian reading community culture in the

1870s and 1880s, and, as the longest-standing such community in America, demonstrates the staying power of committed, literary-minded initiatives.

According to Murray's research into records at various universities, libraries, and museums in Canada and the United States, Ontario's book club culture development over the nineteenth century is "interestingly analogous to the book club phenomenon of the 1980s, 1990s, and early twenty-first century." Murray suggests that literary societies early in the nineteenth century constituted "more than a club for readers" in the contemporary sense of "book club," with "more" indicating that literary pursuits could be combined with other activities such as musical performance. At the end of the nineteenth century, as at the end of the twentieth century, clubs narrowed their meetings' objectives to discussions of common reading selections. In addition, both periods saw a shift in clubs' large- and small-scale operations,⁹ including reports that personal and communal transformation was an outcome of participation in the clubs alongside exposure to certain works of literature. Similarities also include the possibility that serving refreshments and members' inclination toward gossip during meetings can distract clubs from their literary interests (6-7). Some differences between historical and contemporary clubs include nineteenth-century clubs' broad uses of the terms "literary" and "culture," broader than uses by today's clubs, to refer to their interests and practices. For instance, "literary" included creative non-fiction and even exercises in elocution or debate, while "culture" included anything relating to "the means and the ends of processes of development and improvement in which individuals and groups engage" (10-11).

⁹ Other sections of this literature review list clubs' primary operations as encompassing the impact that book clubs have on external communities and on their members. Current knowledge about book clubs also suggests that individual book clubs are distinguishable by secondary features that encompass small-scale logistics of maintaining a book club. These features (explored later in this chapter) are more numerous and differ from club to club, and include practices of recruiting members, selecting books, serving refreshments, choices to elect a leader or facilitator, and choices of when and where to meet.

Altogether, Long's, McHenry's, and Murray's histories help to contextualize contemporary book-club culture and provide additional fuel to scholarly interest in the degree to which the "shadow tradition of literature" simultaneously disrupts and reinforces dominant traditions of reading culture, print culture, and literacy. These traditions continue to be politicized, even in seemingly innocuous reading communities, because they represent hierarchies of policy, power, privilege, access, socio-economic status, culture, gender, class, and race. Just as clubs themselves can disrupt and reinforce hierarchies of cultural value, even though they were for so long thought to be negligible, current research into past and present reading communities disrupts traditional divides between the academy and community, and thus resembles in its disruption the very subject matter of its inquiry.

These claims about the nature of book clubs and research on them hold true for findings on early twentieth-century clubs, as studied by Kate Clifford Larson and Marilyn Martin, who show that reading communities' literary and activist interests did not cease at the end of the nineteenth century and that these interests included literacy, women's suffrage, and other issues related to the "public good" (Martin 74). Larson's "The Saturday Evening Girls" details clubs that formed as sites for gatherings of working class Jewish and Italian immigrant girls who dwelt in various culturally- and language-based enclaves in Boston. The clubs afforded these young women the chance to increase their language and literary knowledge and social skills. In so doing, these clubs represented upward mobility, as book selections usually included the "classics" such as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, to encourage the girls to achieve the status of their white and more socio-economically advantaged counterparts. Indicating some historical continuity in clubs' social and political accomplishments alongside McHenry's history of African-American literary societies, Larson points out that reading communities can serve and

have served the interests of ethnic and language minorities and/or working class groups. Furthermore, Larson's historical explorations suggest that the act itself of exposing working class girls to certain works of literature and intellectual pursuits is a political one, whether the goal is for readers to assimilate into a dominant culture or to distinguish themselves within a tradition all their own. It is interesting to note too that these clubs worked toward women's suffrage, and that many members of the Saturday Evening Girls clubs who came of age during their participation later became dedicated activists, suggesting that the involvement with the club directly influences action in external contexts.

Martin's "From Altruism to Activism" details Arkansas reading communities¹⁰ whose procuring of books and spaces for 28 libraries between 1880-1935 were part of a national literacy-building sensation. These efforts by clubs such as the "Morrilton Pathfinder Club" demonstrate the connection of the materiality of literacy work to twentieth-century feminist ideology and broader social concerns about public access to reading opportunities, lobbying efforts toward women's suffrage, and other "changes within a culture" (65). Through archival research into records of club minutes held in Arkansas libraries' special collections, Martin explores these clubs' interests in literary and personal self-improvement through the reading of literary works and books on topics related to domestic and civic life, and through discussions about the "public good" (74). Martin also points out that some of these clubs seemed invested in changing the content and tones of local newspapers to make them "fit for family reading," while women in other clubs used their membership to reflect middle-class social standing and values, even "indoctrinating" lower socio-economic classes with what they saw as "proper" reading material (75). This range of social action among Arkansas's literary clubs presents a history of

¹⁰ Martin notes in her study that "historians refer to the clubs variously as literary, cultural, or study clubs," but opts for the use of "literary club" (64).

book-club practice as one that does not blaze a singularly “Progressive” path through history. Rather, book clubs’ histories reflect several parallel agendas that comprise the legacy foregrounding contemporary clubs.

Along these lines, E. H. H. Green’s “Battle of the Books: Book Clubs and Conservatism in the 1930s” details a conservative movement among clubs in England during this period to counter what they saw as a Leftist ethos in the literary world. In government, the milieu of the twentieth century was distinctly conservative in the partisan sense of the term, Green reports, and contributed to the spirit of English culture, from J. S. Mill’s criticisms of the “non-ideological” nature of political conservatism,¹¹ to an ethos of middle-class citizens’ “self-realization” in relation to a “healthy society” at large, and to more concrete organizational initiatives such as those of literary indoctrination (47, 261). Green points out that conservatives in the 30s felt ill at ease with growing numbers of groups identifying with Leftist ideals, including “Labour party” activists, writers, intellectuals, and even the “Left Book Club” (LBC), which published books written expressly for the LBC’s purposes.¹² In direct response to the perceived threats these groups posed to England’s welfare, separate conservative groups formed two large-scale conservative book clubs—the Right Book Club and the National Book Association, which resembled the late twentieth-century’s Book-of-the-Month Club and Oprah’s Book Club in the States by virtue of their marketing of books to thousands of subscribers.¹³ The RBC and the

¹¹ This argument suggests that the “non-ideology” refers to this party’s apparently less abundant production of abstract political theory, but Green points out that production among conservative politicians and officials of speeches, debates, and deliberations on policy demonstrates this party’s actions toward and investment in “ideas” (2, 14).

¹² John Lewis’s *The Left Book Club: A Historical Record* (1970) lists such texts as G. G. M. M’Gonigle and J. Kirby’s *Poverty and Public Health* and Leonard Bames’s *Empire or Democracy?* as included in this organization’s goal of “enlightenment” of a nation through texts and study groups (13).

¹³ As with BOMC and OBC, the RBC and NBA may have produced small communities of readers meeting to discuss the endorsed texts, but Green historicizes these organizations’ internal motivations rather than by charting their subscribers’ responses.

NBA served to undercut each other's efforts through their disunity, but nonetheless both propagandized English nationalism through endorsements of academic, educational, and literary texts. Developed in 1936 by W & G Foyle booksellers, the RBC reprinted already-published works by authors such as Francis Yeats-Brown, stamping and sealing these works as RBC editions (141).¹⁴ The National Book Association (NBA), jump-started in 1937 by Education Department head Arthur Bryant and endorsed by Stanley Baldwin, British Prime Minister at the time, lost some steam and support due to RBC's emergence. Green observes that both the RBC and NBA nonetheless "shared personnel" as well as "common themes," goals, and assumptions leading up to the outbreak of WWII. These commonalities were reflected in endorsements of literature that espoused such values as "certitude and simplicity," in contrast to the "change" and intellectualism that RBC and NBA associated with the Left. Green notes that RBC's literature also espoused such "myths" as a "stable, hierarchical social order untroubled by class conflict" (150-3). Although the Right maintained its majority influence in government, the RBC and NBA lost the "battle of the books" in terms of membership involvement and united support.

These consistencies, divergences, and evolutions among reading communities, as seen historically and in different geographical locations, help to inform what is known about contemporary book clubs. In many cases, clubs retain from history their self-authenticating, self-empowering impulses and manifest these impulses in a number of ways, not the least of which includes their choices of and comments on reading material. While individual readers might privately enjoy esoteric or literary fiction that some many describe as accessible to narrow audiences, clubs collectively insist on choosing reading material that is accessible to all members so that a fruitful discussion is possible. Researchers have found that many clubs want reading

¹⁴ Yeats-Brown, in addition to writing memoirs of his military experiences and newspaper editorials, was active in other political organizations such as the fascist-leaning "January Club."

material to be challenging enough to raise questions during discussions and at the same time want to experience empathy for characters.

At the same time, some researchers suggest that historical evidence of clubs' interests in social activism—whether they identify with “progressive,” “liberal,” or “conservative” ideals—have not remained consistent in contemporary practice. Or, if clubs do retain interests in social activism their interests seem less overt than they were in nineteenth- and twentieth-century clubs. Social activism as part of book-club practice at large has either diminished dramatically, evolved into different forms, or has become subsumed by dialogue strictly about reading material. Contemporary clubs that connect social reading to a sense of social responsibility seem to make that connection at the sites of literacy, advocacy, or gearing club discussions toward more open-minded discussions, rather than at the site of explicit involvement in a movement or community activity. One illustrative example in Knoxville and surrounding cities, the ETTAC Next Chapter Book Club as part of a larger national non-profit network, focuses its literary and social interests on advocacy. Operated by the East Tennessee Technology Access Center, this club publically describes its mission as providing resources and opportunities for individuals with different disabilities to engage with others in community settings through reading books.

In addition to the ETTAC Next Chapter club and other clubs that publically declare their interests in social advocacy and promoting literacy, it is likely that Knoxville and other cities are home to clubs that privately converse about topics of a social, cultural, or political nature, or clubs whose individual members involve themselves separately in social movements. In any of these cases, the challenge of serious networking among clubs in general, and with ones that are socially- or politically-motivated in particular, means that researchers need sustained access to clubs that welcome visits from outsiders. As noted in the “Defining ‘Book Clubs’” section, many

clubs have incorporated various social media tools into their functionality, enabling in many cases larger participating communities and remote and asynchronous participation. Social media can also provide clubs with more public and visible opportunities to express a political ideology or a strictly recreational identity. Examples of clubs in other cities that publicize their politics highlight interesting possibilities for investigating correlations between a book club's ideology and the geographical location in which it meets. For instance, the "Politically Inspired Book Club" in Mountain View, California explicitly identifies its political interests by name as listed on Meetup.com and on the website for Books, Inc. where it holds meetings. This club's Meetup.com profile describes an ethos of collaborative learning and lists several "principles" of participation, including "seek[ing] to understand rather than persuade." Its Meetup.com profile also states that this club "collectively" reads a mix of fiction and non-fiction such as Aldous Huxley's classic *Brave New World* and a more recent title *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto* by Tavis Smiley and Cornel West who occupy high-profile positions in current political and intellectual culture ("Politically Inspired Book Club"). While the "Politically Inspired Book Club" example seems to have created a city- or region-based nexus for socio-political dialogue, a 2011 blog entry by the U. S. Department of State details the reading-based connections that can be made across great geographical distances. Charles Ray's post cites The "Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle"¹⁵ as the oldest continuous book club in the United States. According to Ray, this club teamed up with diplomats in Harare, Zimbabwe to create inter-cultural and inter-generational opportunities to engage Americans and Zimbabweans, including established leaders and young emerging leaders, in productive sharing

¹⁵ Heather Murray's *Come, bright Improvement!* (cited in other sections) provides a history of this reading community endeavor, or "artistic and idealistic enterprises" in Upstate New York that is still going strong today as a "cultural summer camp" for adults to learn and enjoy visits by such dignitaries as the President of the United States and prominent artists (76).

of “ideas and information.” This club carefully selects books on topics in U. S. history, such as the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Hellbound on His Trail*, by Hampton Sides), rather than on topics related to Zimbabwe, as an indirect method of encouraging dialogue and “shed[ding] light on a number of social, cultural, and political problems that have plagued [Zimbabwe] for decades” (Ray).

Even though these examples provide evidence of a socio-political basis in current club culture and even though other less visible book clubs may operate similarly, many contemporary clubs, on the surface of what is visible to outsiders, appear to operate mainly for social, recreational, aesthetic, and intellectual purposes—an image that is partly propelled by media and technology. In these regards, the “mega-club” phenomenon defines much of twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century book club culture, most notably with the Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC) and Oprah’s Book Club (OBC), as explored in the section on “Defining ‘Book clubs.’” These mega clubs operate on a national level and utilize innovations in media and technology, and thereby wield a certain degree of cultural authority and influence on print culture. Oprah’s entrance into television and film in the 1980s and 1990s—including her roles in Steven Spielberg’s film adaptation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1985) and Jonathan Demme’s film adaptation of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1998) and her vibrant personality as host of the Oprah Winfrey Show (1985-2011)—enabled the national popularity and influence of OBC on readers, clubs, and the publishing industry. With the OBC’s revival in 2012 as “Oprah’s Book Club 2.0” came new practices for this mega club. Along with its usual cultural content and celebrity profiles, *Oprah.com* includes several links on topics of “self-help,” a webpage providing an overview of the original OBC, and links for subscribing to the revamped, Twitter-enabled OBC component. These new features connect OBC to individual readers and reading

communities that subscribe to her recommendations and book club practice, and render the “how-tos” of this practice instantly “tweet-able.”

Similarly, the online club Goodreads and customer reviews on heavily trafficked sites for online book sales such as Amazon.com seek to increase the number of participant-consumers, and thus propel large volumes of online literary discourse that ranges from a strict focus on reading selection to broader interests in socio-political topics, and that reflects the increasing commercial and cultural influence of the print industry. One online Goodreads community, “The Liberal Politics & Current Events Book Club,” seeks avid readers who identify as “leftist, liberal, socialist, or progressive.” While this club does not espouse commercial value, it does express a desire to “grow” as a defined reading public comprised of readers and authors. In addition it uses the advantages of online promotion to garner a larger and particular kind of participation in “courteous” and “passionate debate,” and maintains a lively discussion forum (“The Liberal Politics & Current Events Book Club”).

Whether or not a small contemporary club associates or registers itself with OBC 2.0 or Goodreads, it is increasingly the case that a contemporary club’s practice connects to social media in some way, enabling different forms of communication with its current and prospective members and with communities external to it. Plenty of face-to-face clubs choose not to use websites at all as part of their practice, while other clubs operate exclusively on the Internet. Some clubs extend their face-to-face operations by maintaining a lively website. Clubs strictly operating online or combining online and face-to-face practice add a new dimension to clubs’ recruitment methods—expanding the sense of community and oftentimes increasing the number of active participants and creating national and global networks, based on members’ recreational interests rather than on geographical proximity. The Internet also influences the number and

identities of participating members, the relationships that form among them, the types of dialogue that are possible, and the types of books that are chosen. Online reading communities, depending on the configuration of a club's profile and chat-forum, can provide either a false sense of anonymity, which might promote less inhibited verbal exchanges, or a sense of public exposure, which might censor otherwise candid exchanges.

Given the online component that defines a fair amount of the contemporary practices of reading communities, it seems that club participation, the reading selections themselves, and the online content all combine toward enabling participants to cultivate critical voices, formulate identities, and to practice certain social skills that are not possible in clubs that operate strictly in face-to-face formats. One study's example, Cassandra Scharber's "Online Book Clubs: Bridges Between Old and New Literacy Practices" (2009), shows that online book clubs serve as one way to attract adolescent readers to communal practices of literary discourse. Although many successful face-to-face clubs exist for adolescent readers and although many adults participate in online clubs, Scharber points out that online clubs provide adolescents with unique opportunities to engage with texts through discussions facilitated by librarians in connection to designing their own online profiles as ways to establish literary and social identities and to cultivate their intellectual and critical voices.

Another particularity of contemporary book club culture that is related to advancements in media and technology is the impetus to "revive" reading practices, as though the activities of reading and discussion were dwindling and needed formal programs to prevent their ultimate extinction. In connection to the OBC and BOMC as entities that decide what good reading is and looks like, Virginia Hermes, Mary Anne Hile, and Johnetta L. Frisbie's "Reviving Literary Discussion: Book Club to Go Kits" (2008) suggests that current book-club culture includes a

spectrum of top-down and grassroots community-building efforts. Libraries want to create new communities of readers and to support existing reading communities, while some book clubs start and run themselves without any influence from libraries, schools, or other well-established entities. Hermes, Hile, and Frisbie describe the efforts of the Johnson County Library in Mission, Kansas to “engage a large community of active and passionate readers” for the purposes of researching, developing, and implementing the “To Go” kits. These kits were made accessible online in an age when readers are assumed to be too busy to select and respond to literature independently and were thus intended to inspire Johnson County’s “homogenous” community to discuss culturally diverse and relevant literature (31-32). The reported success of this program suggests that program coordinators’ assumptions about many readers’ busy lives and important obligations were correct, and that the kits, with their reading lists and discussion questions, made the otherwise difficult tasks of starting and running book clubs easier for participants. Indeed, offering clubs some immediate participatory capabilities without a lot of behind-the-scenes planning addresses the hurried rhythms of our current culture; some readers might want the status of participating in a “tradition” of sorts, but without putting forth the effort that goes into its production.¹⁶

Local examples of face-to-face clubs using an online component to promote their practice show the multi-dimensional nature and importance of creating a public image. A club’s website

¹⁶ In contrast to “To Go” kits, and as the Findings chapter will explore, the Books-N-Wine club vets and chooses its own reading material based on members’ own self-articulated criteria for good discussions. Members have stated that they deliberately avoid books that appear on big-name or pre-fabricated lists such as those on OBC. In addition, book club scholarship does report a current trend in encouraging readers, especially young ones participating in school-based book clubs, to be included in the process of selecting reading material. Another “how to” guide, Harvey Daniels’s *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2002), suggests that “voice and choice” as indicated by the title are of paramount importance in empowering and inspiring readers, as evidenced by the success of the Chicago schools-based program on which Daniels’s guide is based. More specifically, Daniels describes the club structure as “literature circle groups formed around several people’s desire to read the same book or article—not by reading level, ability grouping, teacher assignment, or curriculum mandate” (19).

not only establishes a name and identity, but also facilitates recruitment, promotes events, and propagates the club's ethos for public audiences. A club's ethos can be based on such features as the identities of members that a club has and wants to attract, the types of books that a club selects, and the type of dialogue that a club values. For instance, a university-based club may want to list its book selections alongside links to the university's other academic events and newsworthy accomplishments that bring it prestige. Toward this goal, the University of Tennessee's Common Ground book club, meeting on occasion in the "Culture Corner" of UT's main library, announces its book selections and upcoming meetings through the UT Library homepage. Common Ground promotes itself as an interdisciplinary undertaking, appealing to prospective participants from different departments on campus and inviting participants from the university's faculty, staff, administration, and students alike, while readers outside of the UT community are less likely to know about this club. In contrast, UT's International House sponsors a "Literary Colloquy" each semester that deliberately invites members from the UT and Knoxville communities to share conversations about culturally-significant works of fiction and creative non-fiction. In both cases and perhaps as a function of the online promotion that fuels these clubs, dialogue tends to combine intellectual and emotional responses that demonstrate participants' facility in self-expression, their awareness of what is considered appropriate discourse, and their interest in making connections across broad categories of knowledge.

That contemporary clubs maintain websites is no surprise. However, it might be the case that websites accomplish more than simply facilitating the administrative features of clubs' practices such as announcements, recruitment, public discussion forums, and other components. Functioning websites may be a primary and public register of a club's history and its members' identities, on both an individual basis and a communal basis. A website can attract new

members, enable current members to stay up-to-date with book selections and meeting schedules, and encourage members to express ideas and negotiate group decisions in discussion forums that are visible sometimes to a public audience.

Functions and Features of Book Clubs

The previous sections defining and historicizing book clubs include some information on the functions that are ubiquitous in book-club practice and culture and that demonstrate clubs' outward focus or their large-scale impact on the world. These served as starting points for investigating the Books-N-Wine club in Knoxville and include: contexts in which clubs function and clubs' potentials to provide members with transformative, educational, and even liberating experiences, in response to literary works, other readers, and other communities. Paragraphs below explore each of these functions in more detail.

Contexts

Clubs' operations in response to different contexts involve more than the expected registers of time and place and challenge a researcher to redefine it continually, as occurs through this study's review of the literature and ongoing analysis during the case study on Books-N-Wine.¹⁷ Existing studies indicate that book clubs themselves are producers of contextual data, such as their internal social structures, at the same time that they are influenced by pre-existing contextual data, such as the city or region in which they operate. Context's flexible meanings foreground clubs' other functions of serving as sites of teaching and learning,

¹⁷ See remaining chapters for details on themes that emerged from data in relation to situated club operation.

empowerment, and transformation. Because much attention has been devoted to context at all phases of this study, this section begins by exploring this component of book clubs' operations.

For this study context is categorized in three ways. Two categories emerged from the literature review and denote how context can be understood according to its external markers and its internal characteristics. External context includes the time and place of a club's reception of literature and clubs' degrees of public visibility or accessibility, such as the use of the "virtual" space of a website or the selection of reading material in response to current events. Internal context can be described as behavioral or inwardly-focused details, and includes the group dynamics and structure (collaborative or hierarchical), members' combinations of intellectual and emotional responses to literature (formed individually and expressed communally), the intersubjectivity of contemporary readers' identities (identifying by occupation, personality type, or other demographic data), their non-literary dialogue and actions, and their internal systems of record-keeping such as rosters or archives (or lack thereof). Internal context can refer to more concrete, small-scale examples, as described in "how-to" guides on book clubs and by members of the Books-N-Wine club. These include, but are not limited to, clubs' choices of reading material, clubs' choices to serve refreshments, clubs' methods of recruiting and retaining members, clubs' leadership within the club, and clubs' meeting itineraries.

A third category of context includes the combination of activities that clubs themselves perceive and articulate voluntarily and the activities that a researcher may choose to discuss with a club's members. This latter category emerged as a set of themes from data collection and analysis, and insights gathered from these steps will be discussed in subsequent chapters. This category might include club members' residence within and relationship to a city or region, their interests in and knowledge of literature's historical significance, members' willingness to

connect their participation in a club to other environments and activities, and their responses to the presence of an outsider—in this case, my presence as researcher. This third category is a methodological, ethical, and theoretical challenge, given that clubs and the researcher work closely together to produce accurate data on clubs' operations. Book clubs by definition are inherently discursive and so a researcher's interview conversations with members of a club means that the researcher unavoidably participates in and may even influence the way a club describes its practice. This third category also means that these very conversations between clubs and a researcher serve to contextualize a club's continued operations if the insight, reflections, and self-awareness that are produced from these conversations influence members' behaviors, dialogue, and social structures within the club space.

External Contexts: Time, Place, and Visibility

Empirical studies of clubs suggest that tangible spaces and places—recognizable at international, national, regional, city-wide, and community levels—affect participants' dialogue within the club setting. Research questions driving this project include how clubs respond to place and how clubs transfer what happens in the club to the atmosphere of the geographical contexts in which they situate themselves. On national and international scales, Jenny Hartley's research on British clubs shows that an overarching difference between British and American clubs is that “the latter places far greater emphasis on the therapeutic dimensions of reading” (quoted in Collins, 99). Although it is impossible to note this trend of “bibliotherapy” in every club, Hartley's claim suggests that American book clubs lend even more purpose to the act of

reading than it already possesses.¹⁸ Murray's *Come, bright Improvement!* points out that Ontario is historically and geographically important for understanding book clubs, while Marilyn Poole's "The Women's Chapter: Women's Reading Groups in Victoria" (2003) and Linsey Howie's "Ritualising in Book Clubs" (2003) present Australia as a worthwhile context for book-club research, despite the fact that much more scholarship on American and British contexts has been published. While there may be large-scale differences from one national context to the next, such as the "bibliotherapy" trend, book clubs and club scholars in each of the aforementioned national contexts work to prove wrong some assumptions by non-clubbers and researchers in fields traditionally valued by the academy that clubs are little more than "chat and chew" sessions, as observed by researcher Rosemary Sorensen (quoted in Poole, 263).

Studies by Long, Larson, and other researchers investigating city-wide contexts for the operation of reading communities show that a city's unique ambience may influence the ways in which individual readers respond to and discuss literature socially. Long finds that middle-class women's book clubs conducted in suburban neighborhoods in Houston, Texas dialogue about literature in ways that reflect the power of geographies that are peripheral to an urban center and ideologies that are peripheral to an academic center. These clubs—registering geography, ideology, class, and gender—assert cultural authority against dominant traditions. Larson's study of the "Saturday Evening Girls" shows that Boston neighborhoods comprised of language- and cultural-minorities were home to clubs that provided social support and literacy training. While city-wide contexts, or particular geographies within a city, can influence the function of a

¹⁸ Timothy Aubry's *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does For Middle-Class Americans* (2011) is not a study of book clubs, even though it does acknowledge OBC's contributions to middle-class reading practices, but focuses rather on solitary readers' experiences with the therapeutic value associated with certain works of literature. Most relevant to this study and consistent with claims made by other researchers is Aubry's consideration that bibliotherapy blurs the "boundary between middlebrow and avant-garde" and between popular practice and academic practice (9).

reading community, these studies do not offer definitive statements as to whether clubs in turn affect their cities in ways that pertain to that city only. It may be the case that clubs initiate action external to themselves, action that could happen regardless of location. However, more research is needed on whether and what kinds of clubs can have an impact on their cities in ways that reflect clubs' conscious and intentional desires toward civic engagement.

Existing studies highlight smaller-scale examples of tangible spaces and places that range from book stores and libraries, where books can be purchased or borrowed, to coffee shops or community centers, and to the homes of book clubs' members. These sites represent clubs' impulses to find, create, set aside, and claim spaces for the purposes of conducting their meetings. In the latter cases, such impulses show relationships to space that seem particularly empowering; meeting in members' homes allows clubs to dictate codes of conduct that reflect clubs' specific needs, as well as enables them to fulfill other desires, such as social interaction. Small-scale contexts for book clubs' operations that register larger meanings also include clubs' navigations of environments or spheres that we assume to be disparate or even at odds with one another in terms of ideology and purpose. For example, some clubs can conspicuously navigate the tensions and collaborations between community environments and formal education environments, and thus show that context and pedagogical potential are inextricable from one another. Clubs might also navigate the tensions or collaborations between public and private space and between tangible and virtual space. Considered altogether, these three sites of tension or collaboration suggest that book clubs can provide their participants with experiences of social and intellectual freedom, in that members can engage in discussions about literature and life in ways that both defy and reinforce prevalent cultural influences. In addition, clubs' multiple purposes can provide opportunities for members to authenticate club practice, transgress

boundaries of ideology, propriety, and purpose, so that members might take full advantage of the personal and communal growth that can occur when opposites collide.¹⁹

In some cases, book clubs operate entirely separately from academic institutions. Many of the Houston, Texas clubs that inform much of Elizabeth Long's work, for instance, do so, and thus legitimate non-academic learning processes and ways of creating cultural knowledge. On the other hand, studies by Mary Kooy, "Riding the Coattails of Harry Potter: Readings, Relational Learning, and Revelations in Book Clubs," and Michael W. Smith, "Conversations about Literature outside Classrooms: How Adults Talk about Books in Their Book Clubs," argue that clubs' participant-centered structures can serve as models for teachers who are designing formal classroom discussions of literature and can provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to professionalize themselves before entering real classroom teaching situations.²⁰ For both of these researchers, book clubs and formal classroom environments, as sites for particular understandings of literature, are mutually reinforcing in terms of the intellectual and social value they offer. They might also represent important relationships of power and influence. It is important to consider whether the relationship between the two environments is chronological, such that club environments prepare teachers for their subsequent performances of

¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that context can also indicate more abstract understandings of space or place, beyond the navigation of these boundaries. For instance, a club's perceptions of socio-economic status as indicator of its "place" in society may act as a corollary to the identity formation of a club and its members. As it currently stands, this project does not explore this notion of "place," but a future version of this project might resume with narrowed attention to participants' understandings of "place" as both a social and geographical marker.

²⁰ Kooy's *Telling Stories in Book Clubs: Women Teachers and Professional Development* (2006) is a larger interdisciplinary scholarly undertaking following the appearance of "Riding the Coattails of Harry Potter" on the subject of book clubs as sites for teachers' professionalization. For this study, Kooy recruits two groups of novice and veteran teachers, rather than finding existing groups, and gathers information on these teachers through interviews, observations, collecting teachers' journals, and paying close attention to the stories these teachers tell among themselves. Kooy finds that storytelling among teachers in book clubs is as important a professionalization tool as selected literature, because this practice helps participants articulate their epistemologies for life and the workplace. As with this case study on Books-N-Wine, Kooy finds that the participants in her study are inquisitive, committed to their own learning process, and invested in the research in which they participate. Such investment on the part of participants, while inspiring and rewarding, poses challenges for a researcher in terms of the variables that must be considered in terms of their effects on the outcomes of a study.

expertise within classrooms. Another consideration is whether the relationship between the two environments is socially or professionally hierarchical. Are clubs primarily sites in which popular knowledge is formed while classrooms serve as sites in which elite, academic knowledge is formed? Yet another consideration is whether one environment requires more contrivances to establish itself while the other can arise through more “natural” or “authentic” means. For instance, a recreational book club might arise in spaces that require fewer formal arrangements than would be required by a professionalizing club that meets in a classroom space, which is often beholden to the policies of educational institutions. The opposite might be true if it becomes simpler for teachers to use the classroom spaces to which they regularly have access than to make elaborate arrangements to meet in someone’s private home. As later sections of this literature review and other chapters of the project at large explore, these questions resonate with theories about encounters with art (or literature) in particular environments. One such theory, John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934), suggests that the degree of authenticity or artificiality of the environments in which art (literature) functions will determine the type of work that it elicits from (or shares with) the consumer (reader).

Book clubs’ occasional intersections with classroom space or formal educational agendas constitute one possible way in which clubs might become hybrid spaces; while book clubs are typically cited as places where participants seek the experiences of socializing, recreation, and intellectual stimulation, educators might use a book-club-type atmosphere to combine social and intellectual experiences with agendas of leadership and professionalization, seeking the support of colleagues to prepare for influencing students. Mary Kooy’s scholarship offers insight into the frequent hybrid purposes of book clubs and the ways in which book clubs can serve as bridges between community reading environments and formal educational reading environments—

environments that many readers might assume are distinct from one another. Exploring book clubs' versatility as personally and professionally valuable endeavors for the readers who participate flexibly in them, Kooy's "Riding the Coattails of Harry Potter" argues that book clubs are "lived experiences" with literature (141).

These studies' investigations of clubs' potentials to combine recreational social structures with the professionalization goals of formal learning environments do not indicate the only ways in which book clubs exercise their pedagogical potentials. Some clubs, including the Books-N-Wine club, operate entirely separately from formal educational institutions, even though the clubs' members may be formally educated, as is the case with several of the clubs that figure into Long's study in Houston. Long sites one such club as comprised of members from a range of professional backgrounds, including engineering, accounting, and education, who read mystery books and organized their meetings as "classes" (*Book Clubs* 77). Another Houston club comprised of university-educated but non-academy-affiliated women created a learning environment in which members read women's literature as fodder for reflecting on gender, their lives and careers, and their futures (79). An area for future investigation might be to inquire about the degree to which a club's members regard the skills and insights gained through participation in a club as qualifying them to be examples of certain values and behaviors in other communities in which they participate. With this range of pedagogical possibility—clubs as professional development for teachers, and clubs as places to learn and to become qualified "social" teachers in other communities—it is important to examine the ways in which clubs articulate and identify their own curricula that they deem appropriate for learning and teaching.

The potentials for book clubs to hybridize the purposes they assign to the spaces they occupy extend beyond educational value to include the connections between the physical spaces

where clubs gather to conduct their face-to-face meetings and their choices of whether or not to use the virtual space of the Internet to supplement their operations. Book clubs that make use of both physical and virtual spaces seem to be exploring identity in ways that might not be possible in clubs that operate strictly in a face-to-face format, given the ubiquity of social media as a public extension of the in-person identities of individuals, businesses, and communities. As a large-scale example, OBC's television and online presence enables its member-subscribers to navigate public and private status either by starting an OBC-affiliated club or by reading OBC's book recommendations in solitude. GoodReads can function similarly when readers create online communities by logging into to report their solitary reading experiences and to read others' reports. It may also be the case that face-to-face book clubs affiliate with this website, using online forums as bases for club reading selections. Online clubs can be one space in which adolescents engage in a particular kind of identity formation. As noted earlier, Scharber's study suggests that adolescents participating in online clubs, through the use of chat forums and the management of online profiles, enjoy these opportunities to form literary and social identities and to develop their intellectual and critical voices. Although the online clubs featured in Scharber's study are monitored by librarians, they allow these adolescents some experience with public discourse and the choice of how and when they participate. More specifically, these youths can create their own discussion threads, related to a chosen text or to other interests, and can choose when they participate in a particular discussion—in "real time," synchronous chats, or in asynchronous threaded discussions.

Knoxville clubs, much like those in other cities, define themselves according to their relationships to space, navigating the tensions between public and private, tangible and virtual space, in ways that reflect self-promotion and self-censorship. In so doing, clubs not only

transgress these spatial boundaries but also use these boundaries as platforms for identity formation. As explored in later chapters, the Books-N-Wine club stakes its own claims both to tangible and online space, however small, and connects this space to its name and practice. As Joe explained, one component of club practice that enables its function is to “hav[e] a name that conveys the identity” of the club. It might also be observed that a name functions well when it is catchy for use in social conversation and if it corresponds to an up-and-running website—all of which contribute to creating a specific context for a specific kind of club operation. Indeed, Books-N-Wine’s name, in conversation and on the internet, does convey its identity as a group that values socializing among friends and intellectual stimulation, and in terms of context, this name conveys the “adult-only” atmosphere that members have cultivated, in which alcoholic beverages are served and to which members come unaccompanied by their children.

Knoxville’s clubs stake claims to public and well-traversed territory such as libraries and book stores from which books can be borrowed and bought, and to private spaces such as members’ homes where readers encounter works of literature and their peers ostensibly a little further removed from environments that fuel the print industry’s commercial influence on readers. These factors of physical space alongside a club’s presence on the internet and degree of visibility to outsiders add dimension to its public-private status. Clubs often create websites for announcing their presence, recruiting new members, sharing news and updates on recent meetings with current members, and providing chat forums and books to encourage continued discussions about book selections. These websites, as individual clubs’ own public representations of a practice that generally navigates intersections of public and private spaces, are rich sources of definitions for book clubs. In Knoxville, several clubs have made themselves very easy for prospective members to find through electronic searches. Typing “book clubs in

Knoxville, TN” into the Google search bar yielded such clubs as “All Over the Page,” “Common Ground,” “Book-Aholics,” “The Bookies,” and “Books-N-Wine,” their names alone revealing several consistent language-oriented patterns. These clubs prefer names that combine catchy humor, puns, and moderate proportions of self-deprecation that highlight the enthusiastic and committed participation that is common among participants, confirming some of the observations made by Joe of the Books-N-Wine club and by popular publications like *The Book Group Book* and the *Go On Girl! Guide*. The names of these Knoxville clubs imply varying degrees of social inclusivity in terms of membership that may or may not correspond to actual practices of exclusivity in terms of member recruiting. For example, the Common Ground club’s name suggests that different kinds of people are welcome to participate and create bonds with one another. On the other hand, the names for the “Book-Aholics” and the “Bookies” clubs were likely inspired by names for support groups for individuals who struggle with substance addiction. Thus, even though these clubs might be socially inclusive in their actual practice, their names might suggest that regularly participating members tend to bring with them certain attitudes about reading—either that it is an experience that should be shared among wide varieties of personalities, or that members must exhibit intense enthusiasm about reading. An additional consistency among the names for these (and possibly other) clubs is their references to books themselves as necessary components of a book club’s operation.

Place, whether physical or virtual, as affecting a club’s function is inextricable from registers of time. Notably, time becomes significant when certain works of fiction are read and discussed within a global climate of political conflict, as Catherine Burwell explores in “Reading *Lolita* in Times of War: Women’s Book Clubs and the Politics of Reception” (2007). Using transnational feminist thought and reception theory, Burwell argues that women’s clubs are sites

for a particular understanding of literary works and accumulation of cultural capital. In addition, she points out the ethical questions raised by cross-cultural reading practices, and adds to these questions her consideration of contextual factors such as time and place of authorship in relation to time and place of reception. For example, Burwell points out the possibility that hegemonic literary fascination may be fueled by events such as the “War on Terror” and its rhetoric, and by the publishing industry itself. Burwell examines reviews of Nafisi’s text published in 2003, publishers’ promotions, and Nafisi’s own book discussion guide that appeared in 2008. Burwell also examines the ways in which North American women’s book clubs read texts written about middle-eastern topics and locales, and reports that readers cultivate empathic responses to the characters, imagine a global sisterhood, and tend to emphasize differences between cultures in their responses to the text. Evidence of these kinds of responses suggests that readers, like texts and authors, must be historicized, in terms of how and what they read, and contextualized according to specific times of reception and larger realities of “Eurocentrism and imperialism” (294).²¹

Another notable way in which time becomes significant to clubs’ operations is a particular season of the year, as explored in Kelly Chandler’s “The Beach Book Club: Literacy in the ‘Lazy Days of Summer’” (1997). Chandler describes her experience as a teacher leading a book club comprised of high school students, an age group that is not typically associated with

²¹ Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) is itself a captivating exploration of contextualized reading. This text dramatizes the experience of a group of women whose reading practices condense and defy the larger politics of location, religion, gender, education, and literature at work in an Islamic culture. Less politically charged, there does exist a small body of fiction dramatizing not only the relationships and dynamics of book-club culture, as in Karen Joy Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004), but also the occasional and uncanny resemblance between fiction and real life, as in Catherine Hunter’s *The Dead of Midnight: A Mystery* (2001). Such fiction, when chosen by book clubs and discussed as ways to examine their own practice, provides clubs with concrete outlets for exploring their own meta-social operations. In the case of Nafisi’s text, written about a book club and marketed towards book clubs, the stakes of club’s meta-social reading practices as the basis for an international ethics are much higher.

wanting to engage in educational activities during the summer months. Chandler discovers that her own pedagogy and practice transformed through this summer-time interaction with students and influenced her school-year approaches to instruction, including providing more student-centered discussions. The students enjoyed literary activities and intelligent conversation sans grades and other assessment-based pressure as well as social interaction opportunities with classmates with whom they might otherwise not spend time when school is not in session. Chandler's reports about the quality of discussions made by summer book-clubbers who aren't pressured to perform are echoed in a statement by "Shelley" of Books-N-Wine, who enjoys the club experience because it affords her the "ability to be intellectual again without an agenda." With these examples in mind, future investigations of book clubs might consider whether the freedoms related to time and place encourage members of a club to engage in reflection and discussions that are more exploratory and rewarding to members than are discussions associated with quantifying grades.

Internal Contexts: Club Members' Behavior

As surmised from a review the literature, internal or behavioral aspects of context, including identity formation, responses to literature, non-literary dialogue and actions, and internal systems of record-keeping are inextricable from external registers time and place. What remains open for further study is the question of whether these behavioral aspects exist in a causal relationship (i.e., identity formation foregrounds a particular kind of dialogue, or vice versa), or whether they function cyclically and in an integrated fashion. The inter-subjective nature of identity formation in clubs means that the personalities present at a club meeting will influence the social dynamics, dialogues, and other accomplishments of the meeting and of the

club over time. Reciprocally, club members may use the club experience as a way to form identity for use in the club and for use outside of club. Popular publications maintain and empirical studies report that book clubs have historically garnered the participation of diverse demographics but that clubs' processes of inter-subjective identity formation operate according to distinct gender, class, ethnic, age-related, and socio-political codes. Twomey, Long, Larson, and Melvette Melvin Davis suggest that club members approach participating in a club with identities already formulated but emerge from participating in a club with specifically or differently articulated identities. In her dissertation, "Daughters Reading and Responding to African American Young Adult Literature: The Umoja Book Club" (2009), Davis describes adolescent girls who gained the confidence to articulate their opinions about their own experiences—particularly their family roles and relationships—as a result of participating in communal conversations about literature. Similarly, Linsey Howie's sociological study of the ways in which Australian book clubs' ritualize their conduct during meetings suggests that book clubs can help members create stable yet "liminal" experiences through which individuals and social groups might experience forms of transformation and/or affirmation. Ritualizing facilitates an "occupational identity," dictating participation in "everyday" experiences (Howie 136). As explored in sections above, the studies by Kooy and Smith show that teachers intentionally hone professional identities through the club experience, while social identity formation might be an unperceived or secondary outcome. Inter-subjective identity formation, then, is learned and acquired. Most importantly, identity for book-club participants becomes something they claim, own, and control.

In *The Book Group Book*'s forty short essays written by various book clubs, self-described book clubs range from the "Gerber-Hart Gay Men's Fiction Discussion Group," to

“Four Women Reading,” to “Literature For All of Us.” As their names suggest, these clubs enable members to declare an identity based on sexuality, gender, and reading preferences. In the case of the “Literature For All of Us” club, the name suggests a general system of inclusion and appeal. Yet, the anecdote itself describes a book club set up for teen mothers, providing its members with social opportunities to discuss a variety of popular and literary fiction in which characters conspicuously negotiate their identities, including works by Sandra Cisneros and Maya Angelou. Club participants respond by formulating identities and empowering themselves through activities such as writing poems under the heading “I Am a Free Woman,” and articulating desires to pass on literacy to their infants and toddlers (Slezak 175).

Readers’ combinations of intellectual and emotional responses to literature, formed individually and expressed communally, is a contextual function surmised from research on book clubs, such as Farr and Harker’s attention to the OBC, as well as from aesthetic theory. David Novitz’s ideas in *Knowledge, Fiction, and Imagination*, suggests a binary for describing readers’ range of responses to fiction. Novitz offers “absorption” to connote “belief” in fiction and getting “caught up in” it and “appreciation” to connote responses that are emotionally distant and intellectually engaged. Using a problematic adjective to describe readers’ facility with fiction, Novitz suggests that “sophisticated” readers alternate between absorption in and appreciation of fiction, while less “sophisticated” readers mainly experience emotional responses. This adjective is problematic because it implies that emotions and intellect are mutually exclusive responses to experience, rather than mutually reinforcing ones, and also because it implies that one type of response has more value to the academic fields of literature and aesthetics than the other. Novitz cautions readers against emotionally-distant responses to fiction such that they are not moved by it at all, and suggests that reader who do alternate between (or combine) absorption and

appreciation, emotions and intellect, can use this facility and “fanciful imagination” to promote “criticism and protest,” “loyalties,” and even “group action” (233). Book-club researchers might usefully begin new studies specifically of clubs’ responses to fiction as either absorption or appreciation, according to the members’ perceptions of their participation.

Several studies demonstrate that clubs’ external registers of time and place combined with the internal registers of members’ behavior such as clubs’ systems of record-keeping can provide valuable insight into book clubs but will also pose significant methodological challenges to researchers. Preceding sections explored the ways in which book clubs navigate two seemingly disparate spaces, conflate them, or make them relevant to one another, such as classrooms and community spaces, or public and private spaces. Although clubs can exercise versatility and control over identity through their use of these spaces, they can also exercise a great deal of control over visibility and accessibility. Thus, it is difficult for researchers and practitioners to conceive of the true magnitude of book-club culture and to trace the contours of its history with accuracy. Elizabeth Long reports in *Book Clubs* her original estimation that Houston would be home to “approximately a dozen reading groups,” based on the *Houston Chronicle* editor’s estimates in the late 1980s (xi). Yet sustained and thorough networking through flyers, emails, letters, and phone calls on the part of Long and her research team revealed that Houston was home to approximately 200 clubs, potentially more. This contrast between the estimated number of clubs and the number of clubs that were eventually found demonstrates the sometimes hidden, inaccessible nature of book clubs, even in a culture driven by social media and hand-held communication devices that render even sundry details of people’s lives public domain. Methodologically and theoretically significant, a researcher’s diligent efforts to find clubs that vary in their visibility and effective networking skills, as

forerunners to the “official” segment of a book club study, may very well yield a surprising volume of rich data on book clubs as elusive yet ubiquitous entities that raise questions about the nature of public and private spaces in the twenty-first century.

Along these lines of clubs’ public and private status, Christine Pawley’s “Seeking ‘Significance’: Actual Readers, Specific Reading Communities” (2002) draws attention to the ways in which place and time influenced the formation of face-to-face groups in Wisconsin during the years following World War II. More specifically, Pawley draws attention to the tension between the public and private, visible and invisible nature of these reading communities at work. Pawley’s archival research shows that for some clubs data is accessible to members of the public who are stalwart enough to sift through files. However, the fact that many working class and minority clubs did not leave records behind means that important data about these clubs will be forever lost—or to use a theme guiding this study, *private*.

Demonstrating local truth to Long’s and Pawley’s findings on the external and internal registers of context, Knoxville’s book-club culture has proven difficult to research because of the inconsistencies in visibility and access from one club to the next. Some clubs simply do not make themselves visible through online searches or social media tools that many communities use in the twenty-first century. Other clubs, visible online or otherwise, may recruit members selectively or by word of mouth rather than indiscriminately. One interesting Knoxville example, the “Friday Book Club” was featured in the *Knoxville News Sentinel* in 2011 when current members met to celebrate 100 years of operation. With more than a century of history and several decades of maintaining old records, the Friday Book Club figures as a potential follow-up to this current study of Knoxville clubs. Allison Rupp’s feature article on this eighteen-member club reveals aspects of the club’s practice that would entice any researcher beyond its

history and records. Unlike most clubs, the Friday Book Club structures its reading schedule on a rotating basis, designating only two members as responsible for reading and reporting on each month's selection. Also, club members' expressed awareness of how technology has altered book-club culture over time would pose a golden opportunity to investigate this club's accomplishments in consistency and traditions. Additionally enticing, current members whose personal involvement spans several decades recount how the club, once called the "Neighborhood Book Club," originally served as a substitute for public political engagement during a time when women were excluded from such activity. Decades later, this initial motivation toward community action still contextualizes the club's ethos, as the Friday Book Club organizes at least one philanthropic project per year. As possible limitations to a researcher's sustained presence in the club, however, the Friday Book Club maintains a practice of social exclusivity in terms of member recruitment. Rupp reports that this club's recruitment is a formal and selective process, beginning with an invitation from an insider member, screening of several recommendation letters, and acceptance by committees.

Long, Pawley, and other researchers, as well as Knoxville examples suggest that the researcher who can discover the existence of a longstanding and virtually inaccessible club, such as the "Friday Book Club" as visible perhaps only through news exposure or a stroke of luck and good skills in social networking, will have made an important historical discovery given that records on these clubs are incomplete and access can be difficult. Likewise, the researcher who earns the trust and favor of a club that is selective about its members will perhaps have access to a unique set of data on the operations of a self-protecting community. On the other hand, the researcher who discovers a club that appears to be accessible to the public and that is willing to host the researcher as a non-participating outsider will gain valuable insight into the degree to

which a club's public identity matches its private practice and the degree to which a club's claims to "open" access translates to its actual membership.

Transformative and Pedagogical Potentials

Clubs' operations as sites for transformative, pedagogical, and liberating experiences are influenced by various factors of context and are of interest to scholars in many fields, including literature, rhetoric, education, cultural studies, social science, psychology, and criminal justice. Empirical studies show that participation in book clubs and the contextual facets of this participation enable individual readers to experience transformed attitudes, literacies, and cultural knowledge. Likewise, club members themselves, in small communities and social groups, can also experience transformed attitudes, literacies and knowledge, and transformed relationships with other members. On a larger scale, researchers such as those interested in Oprah's Book Club or the Book-of-the-Month Club can observe through qualitative research the transformation of the print and culture industries as a result of these mega-clubs' influence. Although it is difficult to study concrete influence in the reverse order—that the participants of a small book club or individual readers effect changes within the print and culture industries—researchers might speculate about clubs members' self-empowerment and the impact of their book-buying power on the ways in which texts are marketed. Researchers might also pay close attention to readers' and clubs' engagement in public-popular discourse through Amazon reviews and blogs—all as possibly having a transformative effect on the aesthetics of fiction itself. The literature review and data collection phases of this study prioritized investigations of whether clubs can provide members with different types of transformative experiences, while later phases brought forth interests in clubs' pedagogical and liberating potentials. The notions of

transformation, teaching, and learning, experienced by clubs' members as positive or negative experiences, can be informed by John Dewey's theories in *Art as Experience*, in which the author distinguishes between the "work" of art and a "product" of art. Dewey suggests that whereas the "product" is a created object that is available for consuming or experiencing, the "work" (ordinarily the term that is used to refer to the product) is the term that refers to the experience that artists and consumers share during the process of meaning-making. This "work" is contingent upon context. Theory and empirical studies suggest that power behind this work is divided among several components—individual readers, the selected reading material (as vehicles of dialogue, reflection, and possibly action), and reading communities. Transformation can be one goal of a club's pedagogy, in that learning through the club experience leads to new attitudes and social dynamics, new interpretations of the selected reading material, and correlations between the club experiences and external environments such as one's profession.²²

Two studies on book clubs, encounters with works of literature, and transformation focus on readers in vulnerable populations who experience a range of mental health issues or who have been incarcerated. Hodge, Robinson, and Davis's "Reading Between the Lines: The Experiences of Taking Part in a Community Reading Project" (2007) reports that participants in the "Get into Reading" program in Merseyside, England included adult males whose mental health is compromised by such experiences as substance abuse, full-time responsibilities as care-givers or single parents, experiences of social isolation during old age, and residence in homeless shelters. The program's goals were to promote literacy, encourage library use, and improve mental well-being among participations by providing them with meaningful reading experiences. Participants

²² Preceding sections explore clubs' navigation of academic and community environments. Specific examples include teachers' forming clubs in order to professionalize for the classroom and individual readers' forming clubs and using these experiences to teach themselves or others in external contexts.

reported that they formed “strong and supportive relationships” with each other, learned new ways to narrate their own life stories, and cultivated interests in literature that they did not have before participating in the program (102-3). Findings from this study suggest that literary discussions can serve a “coalescing social purpose” and provide “individual therapeutic benefits” when they are offered without following a specific agenda or pre-established series of discussion questions (100). These researchers add that book-club participation may produce emotional results that are similar to the results of talk therapy with a licensed counselor (104).

Focusing on another vulnerable population, Elbieta Barbara Zybert’s “Prison Libraries in Poland” claims that prison clubs are particularly transformative for inmates. Transformation, Zybert suggests, results from the range of cultural and literacy activities that often entail interactions with members of the society to which inmates are being “prepare[d]” to return (423). Inmates’ past experiences, limited mobility, and their emotional and psychological distress created unique contexts for community literary engagement where facilitators must take extra care regarding the well-being of participants. It is thus important to examine examples of intentional (rather than just casual or recreational) uses of literature in communities comprised of vulnerable populations, populations for whom transformation and reintegration into society is the desired result.

Both of these studies illustrate that book clubs and works of literature can serve a purpose within different therapy programs intended to improve the lives of those who are suffering. However, this therapeutic possibility might elicit from researchers and therapy directors practical questions about the degrees of literature’s power to improve lives, socially, emotionally, and intellectually. For instance, is literature the most effective tool for self-help, emotionally or behaviorally, on an individual or communal basis? Researchers and therapists might ask ethical

questions about whether works of literature can and should be used a tool to empower readers in vulnerable populations. For instance, what are the ethics behind a program director's uses of literature to enhance vulnerable populations' social experiences, or even riskier, to intervene in the behaviors of vulnerable populations and thus "correct" undesired behavior? What are the significances of the aesthetics and subject-matter of certain works of literature used for these purposes? Providing vulnerable populations with access to an extensive library for their own personal continuing education is one thing, but organizing structured programs is quite another, in that a program that is managed poorly or without some degree of input of participants may do more harm than good. To begin answering these practical and questions about reading programs as therapy, researchers and participants would need to investigate the specific texts chosen for programs, whether or not participants themselves are given the opportunities to lobby for texts, and the themes and topics of meetings in relation to the dialogue that participants produce.

More general questions about clubs as sites for members to experience many forms of transformation echo from book clubs' nineteenth- and twentieth-century origins, as explored by Elizabeth McHenry, Marilyn Martin, and Kate Clifford Larson. These researchers address such questions by exploring clubs' operations as pedagogical communities in two main ways: members can acquire new knowledge as a result of participation in the club, and the club can provide people outside of the club with new knowledge. Larson reports that the club itself as a social atmosphere can prompt interest in political issues such as women's suffrage, but she does not address how the influence of specific texts and their specific content may be responsible for specific politicized initiatives. For example, the "Saturday Evening Girls" consisted mostly of young women from Italian and Jewish immigrant communities who were presented with literary "classics" such as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Records of particular topics discussed

in dialogue may or may not exist, and Larson reports only the girls' exposure to Shakespeare and other such classics, as the club's way to help the girls assimilate into dominant culture. But given these girls' specific ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds, reports of whether or not these girls discussed the play's somewhat racialized characterization of Shylock may provide insight into immigrant communities' formations of cultural literacy in response to textual literacy. The girls may have responded in dialogue to Shylock's characterization, but this article does not include any reports or statements about a search for archival records of such commentary. A follow-up study into any existing records could investigate the girls' actual responses and the connections between the girls' textual and cultural literacy and by extension their awareness of their own positions in turn-of-the-century Boston.²³

Sarah Twomey's "Reading 'woman': Book Club Pedagogies and the Literary Imagination" (2007) similarly explores the relationship between clubs' pedagogical potentials and contextual significance. In considering contemporary women's groups as spaces for learning and empowerment outside of dominant traditions, Twomey reveals that women's groups develop a very specific literacy within the "public sphere," but in a space demarcated as their own. Thus, the education they seek and receive in the club space is specific to the texts they read and social climates they perceive. In contrast, Long shows that some of the Houston clubs challenged literary hierarchies and cultural and gender expectations by asserting their own reading practices and modes of interpretation outside of established discourses or traditional family roles, as exemplified by the clubs holding "classes" on non-canonical genres or using literature written by women to discuss issues of gender in their lives and futures. Long reports that members of other

²³ See previous sections on Catherine Burwell's research on book clubs' cross-cultural reading practices during politically-intense times. Also see footnote on Nafisi's text as a narrative memoir of women engaged in culturally-specific dialogue about literary works they read in high-stakes political contexts.

clubs used their meetings to discuss the difficulties of managing their intellectual, professional, and domestic lives, as sometimes conflicting and other times reinforcing agendas, especially in cases when homemakers seek book clubs to “save” them from what they may feel is a “drab existence” (93). Twomey cites Long, Radway, and other studies appearing in this review of the literature, but more explicitly than others explores the pedagogical potentials of women’s reading groups by defining a “reading group pedagogy” (399). Funneling Freire’s critical pedagogy through new literacy pedagogy (the New London Group), and considering “woman” as a contested site for reading and literacy, Twomey suggests that book club pedagogy consists of readers’ dialogic relationship to text, agency, and artful constructions of responses within social situations, while negotiating identity and gender and discussing body-related topics alongside the act of reading. Twomey argues that “... reading is a negotiated relational process between reader and text, enacted through social practices within a particular historical moment” (398). Twomey’s argument is particularly informative alongside Bakhtin’s exploration of the novel’s representation of historical moments, though Twomey explores this thought only in relation to how other studies have looked at specific books.

From defining book clubs, historicizing them, identifying their common features and functions, to exploring their powerful potentials as sites for teaching and learning, transformation, and even action, it is apparent from the literature review that book clubs constitute a consequential part of contemporary culture on a global scale. Because of clubs’ complexities and their influences on readers, print culture, literary discourse, and possibly even other communities, researchers must consider theoretical frameworks and methodological choices carefully.

Designing a Book Club Study

Empirical studies have been designed in a variety of ways to investigate book-club practice and culture, and these designs influence the current design for this study, though methods and procedures will be explored in more depth in the next chapter. Empirical investigations into book clubs follow several method and design trends: statistical methods, historical and archival research, and qualitative methods through participant-observations and interviews. In addition, book-club studies are positioned within a variety of theoretical frameworks that quite often reflect interdisciplinary interests. While each study offers invaluable insight into individual book clubs, city-based contexts in which clubs operate, or national and global contexts, it seems that no single study and no single method can adequately inform how clubs and book club practice and culture at large operate. Understanding book clubs requires experimentation with different methods and mixed methods approaches and continued inquiry over time.

Statistical approaches serve as the exception to the rule for book-club studies, but despite their scarcity, they have value in challenging researchers to reconsider the validity and reliability of more often-used and celebrated qualitative methods for studying clubs. Historical and archival methods show that the passage of time and other factors such as changing social climates and technological advances are important for understanding clubs' past and present. For example, clubs' systems of record-keeping will change over time and will affect how researchers acquire knowledge about clubs. Qualitative studies represent the methods most often used for studying clubs, and even though findings may not be consistent with statistical methods, the variety that qualitative methods offer suggests that clubs are knowable and approachable, even while their complexities and evolutions over time continue to elude researchers.

Several studies in the following sections model possibilities that would be useful for any researcher designing a study based on interdisciplinary theoretical approaches and combined methodologies.

Statistical Approaches

Because most studies of book clubs use field methods associated with qualitative research, Susan U. Huber's statistical approach to analyzing readers' responses is distinct and thus important to consider. Qualitative studies explored in the literature review have praised book clubs' potentials to transform readers' attitudes and experiences, from encouraging readers' identity formation (Scharber) and increasing their cultural authority (Elizabeth Long), to evoking empathy and possibly prompting action (Kimberly Chabot Davis). In contrast, Huber's dissertation, "A Study of the Perception of Book Club Members Reading Multicultural Literature: A Quantitative Analysis," administers short surveys to approximately ninety readers who participate in eleven book clubs. This approach yielded data that indicate that literature may not have the power that it is assumed to have to effect immediate change in the world. Statistics from this study's survey responses suggest that transformations in attitudes toward multiculturalism can result from sustained, cross-cultural reading. However, Huber's findings offer no statistical evidence that reading experiences transform participants' engagement in particular actions.

Given the limitations of Huber's study (small participant pool, short time frame, single method), it may be that surveys of a small pool of participants can neither reflect the long-term potentials of book clubs to transform attitudes and actions, nor capture (as qualitative methods can) the discursive nuance and complexity of such transformations. On the other hand, Huber's

findings from surveys might also be validated if they are combined with qualitative approaches to studying this population, in the event that both methods yield findings that suggest that transformation is not an automatic response to readers' participation in book clubs or exposure to cross-cultural texts. These discrepancies between statistical and narrative evidence of transformed attitudes, alongside questionable changes in action, provide an important place to begin further investigations. Using combined methods for new studies, researchers can interrogate the relationship between attitude and action and can find new tools for measuring whether reading literature and participating in a book club leads to transformed attitudes or actions.

Historical and Archival Approaches

Several historical studies demonstrate research methods that will be significant to future versions of this project. These studies include Larson's history of "The Saturday Evening Girls," Martin's "From Altruism to Activism: The Contributions of Literary Clubs to Arkansas Public Libraries, 1885-1935," and Long's *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* as a combined history of nineteenth-century clubs and accounts of contemporary clubs in Houston, as well as McHenry's *Forgotten Readers*, and Murray's *Come, bright Improvement!* As reported in the "Historicizing Book Clubs" section of this chapter, these scholars' research indicates several consistencies in club culture, over time and from city to city, such as club members' accumulation of cultural knowledge and interest in social issues. More specifically, the history and contemporary reality of book clubs suggest that these groups consistently desire to decide for themselves the criteria that constitute good reading material. Book-club history and contemporary reality diverge in the areas of civic engagement and social activism, such as

participation in concrete movements that influence cultural behaviors or even policy; while clubs do continue to be an outlet for members to express political attitudes and values, it is a challenge to find clubs that intentionally and publically connect literary discussion and social activism. These consistencies and divergences not only correspond to the complexity of book club culture and practice but also suggest that researchers need to continue identifying the essential components of this culture and practice, the factors that enable clubs' long-term sustainability, and the ways in which clubs can satisfy (or even create) the desires of their participants.

A question remains within historical and archival knowledge as to whether clubs have an immediate and recognizable impact on the communities in which they function. Methodological questions remain, also, given that clubs' internal systems of record-keeping tend to taper off over the decades, making learning about clubs difficult without direct access to their meetings and members. In a society that is fast-paced and driven by the Internet and other electronic media, evidence of and information about clubs' internal operations are more the business of tenacious journalists and researchers. Most current archival data must be found through clubs' websites. Depending on the length of time a club has operated and the set-up of its online profile, a website will provide more information about ongoing activities—chosen books and discussion board forums—than it will about membership rosters and past accomplishments. In other words, archives on clubs from prior decades or centuries report what clubs say they *did*, such as the composing of meeting minutes or maintaining member rosters. Current online “archives” of reading lists or clubs' upcoming events, even if seen after the fact, tend to announce what clubs plan to do. Of course, years from now, if these sites are still accessible through online searches, they will appear as past events, but unlike libraries' and museums' records, which have a longer shelf-life, current clubs' online archives may disappear if and when a club ceases to maintain

them or decides to disband altogether. Researchers might keep in mind the differences from past to present, in terms of the existence and shelf-life of records, as they compile information and construct histories about current clubs, by asking how existing archives (whether reporting what the club has done or what the club will do) influence their ongoing functionality.

Long's combination of historical research with field methods of participant-observations and interviews of contemporary Houston clubs offer researchers insight into the ways in which book clubs remain consistent or evolve over time. In addition, Long's approach offers nuanced narrative and discursive insight into the ways in which literature, readers, and clubs act as agents of transformation. Although she narrows her scope to the study of Houston clubs comprised of white women, she makes comparisons from club to club in order to comment on a city-wide context for clubs' operations and finds that book-club practice at large evidences a democratization of cultural productivity and distinction. In other words, in response to all the influences on the ways in which book clubs operate, from media and technological advances and academic traditions, to domestic-professional divisions of labor and the power of the commercial print industry, individual clubs' decisions about their own standards place clubs on equal footing, in terms of importance and influence, with one another and possibly even with other cultural phenomena (220-221). Making use of historical information on contemporary clubs' predecessors, Long pieces together a history from such sources as library records across the country and short entries on reading communities appearing in publications about other topics. In so doing, she is able to note consistencies and divergences between historical and contemporary clubs, making the general comment that clubs' political engagement and impact has changed over the centuries to become more focused on deliberative conversations internal to the clubs' spaces. Likewise, as I've noted in the section on "Historicizing Book Clubs," Heather Murray

accesses archival data through records in libraries, museums, and universities in Canada and the United States to illuminate Ontario clubs' continuities and evolutions over the centuries and between Canada, the United States, and Europe as national contexts in which reading communities have operated. Also searching records in libraries, museums, and universities, Elizabeth McHenry's study demonstrates that the difficulty of finding records about African-American literary societies does not diminish the importance of finding out about these societies, given this community's legacy of literacy-building, its literary accomplishments in reclaiming and revising history, as well as continued issues of equality and representation in American race relations. Through archival methods, McHenry discovers that African-American literary societies influenced such movements as the Harlem Renaissance and the formation of the "black public sphere" (297). She concludes that contemporary African-American book clubs operating out of an important legacy have an equally important task ahead of them of producing cultural discourse in the midst of the publishing industry, an industry that can powerfully promote talented authors and market their writing for consumption by "different groups of readers" (315).

Christine Pawley's "Seeking 'Significance': Actual Readers, Specific Reading Communities" demonstrates a researcher's challenges in investigating clubs as both public and private practices and demonstrates the attractions of archival research into book clubs' histories. Pawley fashions her persona as a researcher as one who attempts to locate historical evidence of cohesive reading communities, or even "imagine" them by making connections among otherwise disconnected or incomplete records. Following Pawley's example, a researcher might use library loan records for an individual patron to "imagine" the patron's reader-ly identity within another reading or non-reading community for which there is a record of some affiliation. No matter the state of existing records, Pawley argues that all researchers "imagine," because "no methodology

is truly neutral” and because information on these “populations” is spotty at best (148). She points out that ethnic and religious minority groups as well as working class groups in Osage are difficult to trace because they left behind few records of their activities, while the “elite women’s Shakespeare Club” did leave records, most likely because of an institutional affiliation (151). Pawley’s research into the histories of nineteenth-century readers in Osage, Iowa and mid-twentieth-century readers at the Door-Kewaunee Regional Library in rural Wisconsin informs this study on the Books-N-Wine club because of her theoretical questions about “how” readers read, the spaces and times in which they “situate” themselves for this reading, and how researchers locate data that is difficult to find (114). Pawley’s questions about methodology are particularly important for exercising caution when drawing conclusions about readers and reading groups for whom little data exists. Historical records that exist in fragments or data sets on current clubs that are limited in scope can produce only speculative, or “imaginative,” answers to research questions about reading communities. Several methods that Pawley considers include her scouring of both institutional and social sources of data, such as newspapers, yearbooks, magazines, which are often archived at libraries, universities, churches, and schools. Some of this data can be quantified—such as a library’s records of patrons’ borrowing—and it is possible, as summarized above, to extract some trace of communal reading data based on who reads which books and when, in comparison to these readers’ recorded membership in other communities. Pawley also considers the use of combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to studying contemporary face-to-face clubs, so that findings might “allow the reconstruction of face-to-face reading communities of the past” (151).

Another interesting aspect to the methods that Pawley employs is particularly relevant to planning a future on clubs in Knoxville or other cities, because some local clubs may be difficult

to locate or may leave fragmented records behind. In the midst of her immersion in records on readers in Iowa and Wisconsin, Pawley take several steps backward in the chain of making connections between individual readers and non-reading communities and constructing “imagined” reading communities. Rather than beginning her search with clubs’ records, which many researchers may consider the ideal, go-to source for reading community data, Pawley examines the membership of non-reading communities, such as choirs or school groups, and how these membership records might lead to records relating to reading practices, such as the formation of social relationships in which literary conversations occur or the formation of cohesive reading communities. Pawley concludes that to “imagine” these possibilities may be the best that some investigations can offer when there is very little material proof of their realization. Such a study, however, models a potentially useful approach to investigating more comprehensive records of reading communities that might show more indisputable connections among readers and other groups. It may be plausible, or provable, in instances in which extensive records can be found, that pre-existing communities that form for non-literary purposes instigate the formation of communities for which reading is a primary attraction. This study of the Books-N-Wine club approaches book-club research at the site of the club itself rather than through records of non-literary communities. However, this study does have something in common with Pawley’s reverse methodological approach; the Books-N-Wine club evolved into a self-sustaining community but is a community that has its roots in members’ pre-existing affiliation with a local home-schooling co-operative.

Qualitative Studies

Qualitative approaches to investigating book clubs are the standard in current research, because field methods such as observations and interviews enable the collection of detailed narrative data on the nuances and development in readers' experiences. In contrast, statistical studies, which cannot capture such nuance and development, are few and far between. Historical and archival approaches constitute important work, given the social, intellectual, aesthetic, and political accomplishments of reading communities over the past several centuries. Archival research into fragmented or nonexistent book-club records poses a number of challenges to producing coherent reports on historical and current reading communities. These three main methodological categories will yield different data and researchers can thus tell a number of different stories about book clubs. These stories may say that clubs transform and teach readers while other stories may suggest that clubs do neither of these things. Combining statistical or historical/archival approaches with field methods book clubs can enable a researcher to tell even more layered stories about book clubs. For instance, researchers might choose to collect data on existing book clubs and combine them with data collected from individual readers recruited to comprise a focus group. Researchers might also combine observations and interviews with gathering responses from surveys and questionnaires that can be distributed widely. Researchers can create more dimension by collecting data from a range of print sources, including academic and popular publications on clubs, book reviews, book stores' sales records, blogs, and social media.

Keith Oatley's "The Meeting of Minds: Dialogue, Sympathy, and Identification, in Reading Fiction" (1999) is not an investigation of book clubs but is rather a study of the responses of individual readers recruited for his study. Oatley and his team of researchers set out

to observe “meetings between reader and the text” using data gathered from individual readers’ experiences over a period of seven years to draw conclusions about how “particular kinds of minds connect with particular kinds of short stories” (448, 439). Generally speaking Oatley’s approaches to data collection, by recruiting participants and gathering narrative data, demonstrate that creative project designs can yield unique insight into reader-text relationships. Data was collected through “emotion diaries”—for which participants read short stories and marked passages eliciting emotional responses, autobiographical responses, and other trains of thought, and then detailed the emotions and memories associated with these passages. Findings suggest that narrative form is quite consequential; passages narrated in first-person and stream-of-consciousness forms encouraged readers to experience identification and empathy for characters, while third-person narrative passages simulated experiences of spectating (445-446). More specifically, the methods used in this study allowed researchers to discover that “the kind of meeting that one habitually has in adult life, derived from early attachment patterns,” described as “avoidant, secure, and preoccupied with relationships,” is often “recreated in one’s meetings in literature” (451). Legitimizing knowledge wrought from readers’ responses to literary forms, these researchers concluded that emotion diaries might be studied alongside the conversations shared by members of existing book clubs (452). Collecting emotion diaries and marked passages from members of an existing book club in addition to collecting diaries and passages from readers who share no connection to one another and who encounter literature in solitude would provide invaluable comparisons between individual and communal responses to reading material.

As noted in the section on “Defining ‘Book Clubs,’” Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* presents the results of the author’s rigorous investigation through a transparent first-hand

account of her experiences with the Book-of-the-Month Club. More specifically, Radway's account strives toward the objectivity that is a priority for any researcher at the same time that it explores the emotional subjectivity and storytelling allure of journalism. Initially striking in Radway's narrative is the methodological challenge that researchers often face of gaining access to the intended site for research. Radway's access to the BOMC, as an important part of the story, began when administrators reluctantly provided access to Radway, whom they initially assumed would write an exposé. But through her negotiations with BOMC executives and editors who eventually granted her access to the BOMC's operation, Radway observes closely its practices of selecting and marketing works of literature for consumption by BOMC subscribers. Across the whole of Radway's narrative, the issues that become striking are the large-scale commercial and cultural influence of the BOMC and the researcher's self-exploration of her conflicted attitudes about the BOMC. Radway's discoveries about the BOMC's internal editorial and administrative structure—particularly the fact that BOMC's "club" component is more for editors and less for subscribers—contextualizes what her readers can discover about the BOMC's external commercial and literary influence. In addition, Radway's self-conscious and transparent narrative of experiencing the BOMC—from gaining access to interacting with the club's staff—reveals the importance of a field researcher's skills in networking. Networking affects the collection, analyses and conclusions that are possible, while varying degrees of professional and personal self-disclosure in writing can influence the choices made by other researchers, who become reader-subscribers to the art and craft of a publication such as Radway's.

Studies by Kimberly Chabot Davis, Melvette Melvin Davis, and Catherine Burwell are notable in their considerations of book clubs' socio-political relevance and power. These studies

suggest that narrative data that is collected through field methods and analysis of relevant texts, such as a club's selected readings or published book reviews, can work toward capturing the nuances of reading experiences as perceived by individual readers and reading communities. Although often limiting the range and scope of a study, qualitative methods can enable a researcher to gather detailed accounts in participants' own language and modes of expressions, their emotions, and their experiences and perceptions over time. Studies by Kimberly Chabot Davis and Melvette Melvin Davis provide evidence of readers' transformation and identity formation and consider the ethics of readers' emotions in relation to cross-cultural and intra-cultural reading practices. Kimberly Chabot Davis seeks to "complicate 'white' modes of reading" and explores a spectrum of empathetic responses and transformations experienced by readers who identify as white and who read texts representing other cultural and ethnic perspectives. Through her observations of more than twenty clubs in the Boston area—some comprised entirely of readers identifying as white, some comprised of African-American readers, and some comprised of both men and women or of readers from diverse ethnic backgrounds—Kimberly Chabot Davis found that readers became invested in "enlarging and enriching their perspectives on socio-political issues" and "consider[ing] new kinds of activism" such as involvement in "inter-racial coalitions" (177-178). This study stratifies its findings by noting that some readers respond to cross-cultural reading with "self-congratulatory posture[s]," "self-reflection," and "radical interrogation of white privilege" (177-178). Melvette Melvin Davis uses the results of her observations of and interviews with readers in the Umoja Book Club to argue that intra-cultural reading practices have a positive ethical value. She notes that African-American adolescent girls' exposure to contemporary fiction by "Black-educationist-activist authors stimulated response practices that paralleled the educationist-activist sentiments of the

writers” and prompted the girls to reflect and express thoughts on relationships with families, boys, and other girls (158). As noted above, Susan Huber’s statistical analysis of readers’ survey and questionnaire responses about experiencing transformed attitudes through reading reminds researchers to question their assumptions that transformed attitudes are a natural and expected response to experiencing culturally-specific texts. Her statistical data, gathered through surveys and questionnaires, excludes some of the emotional and social complexity of these experiences, to suggest that statistical findings must be supplemented by data gathered from observations and interviews with readers in order to produce a more comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural readings.

Burwell’s study demonstrates that a range of theories and methods are necessary in debates about an acceptable ethics of cross-cultural reading. Burwell, as noted in the previous section on time as a factor in context’s significance, uses transnational feminist thought and reception theory to examine the consumption of Azar Nafisi’s memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by North American women’s book clubs. In so doing, Burwell demonstrates one useful combination of theoretical perspectives to inform cross-cultural reading practices as part of what she terms “the politics of reading” (282). Burwell’s gathering of text-based data, such as the extensive marketing of Nafisi’s memoir, published discussion guides directed toward book clubs, published reviews, interviews, and editorials, demonstrates the range of textual analysis that not only informs but is indispensable to book-club research. She concludes that commercial production of literary texts is a large contributor to the imperialist gaze that Western readers might adopt when encountering such texts as Nafisi’s memoir. Burwell’s work suggests that researchers need to consider the public proliferation of such material as fueling the private accumulation of cultural capital that occurs in small gatherings of reading communities.

Linsey's Howie's study on book clubs in Australia shows that combining theories on community rituals and liminality and combining grounded theory and in-depth approaches to data collection can provide insight about the value of clubs as one basis of social order, a means for individuals to construct the self. For example, Howie's selection of female interview participants on the basis of their relationship status (committed, married, or single) demonstrates that this factor can influence readers' club participation and "social construction of the self" (133). Howie found in general that ritualized behavior can help clubs to maintain their desired social order and that it can enable members to oscillate between a club's previous behavior codes and new codes that emerge over time. Furthermore, rituals create occasions for members to question perceived restrictions on their behaviors and respond by creating new experiences of freedom. In the midst of these rituals and liminality, individual readers expressed different self-concepts. Howie recommends that the theoretical and methodological combinations defining her study can provide a template for conducting research on groups other than book clubs, particularly inquiries into "everyday occupation" and the rituals used in cohesive communities and organizations (137).

A Review of Theory on Encounters between Readers and Literature

Heather Murray concludes *Come, bright Improvement!: The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* with a chapter suggesting that literary societies, reading groups, or book clubs, whichever terms a researcher might use to refer to this practice, can be a "source" for theoretical investigations. Other studies have demonstrated unique combinations of theoretical perspectives to examine the cultural significance in book clubs. Likewise, data gathered from the Books-N-Wine club's meetings and interviews with members call for continued interdisciplinary

theoretical investigations into context, transformation, and identification—concepts culled from the work of several theorists including Bakhtin, Habermas, Burke, and Dewey that informed this study’s initial design and the phases of data collection and analysis and that will likely inform a future study. A researcher’s familiarity with theoretical claims about readers’ encounters with literary texts not only frames knowledge on book clubs and the methods used to gather data, but also promotes dialogue between researchers and clubs, beyond the processes of collecting data for a study.²⁴

Theories on literature and aesthetics—from Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel” and *The Dialogic Imagination* and John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*—contributed to a multifaceted definition of context throughout this study. Context provided new understandings of the significance of a book club’s relationship to other communities and to the world at large and its responses to a number of other factors of time, place, and social behavior. Bakhtin’s concept of *dialogism* describes novels as representing complexities of time, place, reception, and literary form. These claims can illuminate findings from such studies as Catherine Burwell’s examination of Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a text that is most often read in locations geographically distant from its subject matter. Burwell’s interest in this text’s marketing and in readers’ encounters with this text in the midst of political conflict happening around the same time of the reading is certainly a sophisticated approach to book-club research. However, Burwell’s analysis might be enhanced by attention to Nafisi’s integration of her own first-person narrative, the stories of the young women she taught in Tehran, with the themes and forms in *Lolita* and other works of fiction. Thus, combinations of geographical distant and timely readings

²⁴ As explored in the remaining chapters, most of the Books-N-Wine members who participated in this study were quite interested in discussing the study’s emerging findings. Participants were interested in the origins of book clubs as a research topic, this study’s methods, and its progress during the months when data was collected.

thus signal a potentially rewarding connection between Bakhtin and theories in postcolonial, feminist, and reception studies as ways to examine how privilege affects reading experiences. For *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and other literary examples, Bakhtin's observations about novelistic forms representing particular historical moments of the recent or distant past, but expressed in forms of authors' present for the consumption of readers in an indeterminate future, need to be examined as they occur in reading communities. Furthermore, other aspects of Bakhtin's *dialogism* can be studied in reading communities, such as his interest in the transformation of the novel form itself as it corresponds to a world in flux, or to a reading community in flux.

Theories from rhetoric and aesthetics—gathered from Wayne Booth, Kenneth Burke, and David Novitz—contribute to multi-faceted understandings of *transformation* and *identification* as important aspects of reader-text relationships and as possible outcomes of readers' participation in book clubs. These theorists provide somewhat linear models to describe literature's influence on readers who might absorb a novel's message or be absorbed by its plot, or who might express identification with a novel's characters. As explored in sections above, current research suggests that book clubs and their members do experience these responses to literature's (and the print industry's) influence, but findings from these studies also suggest that researchers need to investigate the possibilities of models that reverse the linear literature-to-reader model described by these theorists. Readers, with their book buying power as consumers and cultural power as "citizen critics" in the literary public sphere, may influence literary genres even at the level of form, in the event that publishers and authors exhibit awareness of readers' practices. It may be true that literary influence is fluid rather than one-directional. Questions of readers' (or genres') transformation and identification cannot be restricted to reader-text

relationships but should rather be expanded to include readers' relationships to other social groups and the world at large.

Social science and publics theories including Gary Alan Fine's ideas on small group function and Rosa Eberly's ideas on public literary discourse contributed to early stages of this study. Drawing upon Habermas's theory of the *public sphere*, Fine describes "tiny publics" as individuals forming small communities based on affinity for one another and who define social order for use in larger contexts. Fine posits that observing these groups' structures enables better understandings of actions that a small group's members might carry out on larger social or public bases. In consideration of multiple approaches to education, Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy, Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and E. D. Hirsch's comparatively more traditional educational arguments offer useful vocabularies for exploring how book clubs as reading communities learn, transform, and experience empowerment. Freire's and Mezirow's somewhat non-traditional approaches to education hold that communities transform and empower themselves through collaborative social structures, and through action, experience, and articulating their awareness of existing systems of power and knowledge. E. D. Hirsch's 2009 treatise, *The Making of America: Democracy and Our Schools* (2009), which provides comparatively more traditional claims about learning and teaching, and argues that combining an established, common curriculum with child-centered classroom methods constitutes the educational way towards social justice. Although the philosophies behind these models seem to oppose one another in their approaches to curriculum development and classroom methods, some commonalities between them may indeed exist, and thus they contributed to a more receptive and broader interest in the educational value of a book club.

Combined with the findings from empirical studies, these diverse theories generate for this study interest in clubs as sites for transformation, identification, teaching, learning, and action. The Conclusion chapter will revisit these theories and suggest new avenues for theoretical considerations of book clubs in light of this study's findings.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study is to investigate a small part of Knoxville, Tennessee's book club culture to provide some answers to questions that remain unanswered in current research on book clubs. Despite the diverse ways researchers have designed their studies and the range of valuable insight that these studies provide, it is important to find new clubs to study and new ways to study them, as book-club culture and practice—the “shadow tradition of literature”—continues to grow and change (Farr and Harker 4). As detailed in the Literature Review chapter, researchers have taken archival and historical approaches, qualitative approaches, and statistical approaches to investigating book clubs; they have designed case studies, comparative studies, and studies that combine methods; and they have framed these studies in a number of theoretical and disciplinary traditions.

To date, research says that book clubs are contextualized, situated operations, providing members with educational and transformative experiences and distributing transformative power among members and works of literature. To provide some answers to questions that remain unanswered in current research on book clubs, this study primarily explores the complex and intertwined contextual factors that affect clubs' operations. Another primary focus for this study concerns the existence of many categories of book clubs, such as categories that represent the demographics of clubs' constituencies (gender, age, socio-economic status, occupation and other factors), categories that represent members' interests in specific literary genres, or categories that state particular goals. This study explores the Books-N-Wine club, which locates its practice in a suburban neighborhood in Knoxville, as one particular type of book club whose constituency, unique interests in literary genre, relationships to other communities, and other factors resist a

single, encompassing descriptor. A third focus for this study is to investigate the degree to which a club transfers its functions, attitudes, and values to or from external contexts. Finally, this study sets out to address unresolved questions about the methods that yield the most useful data on book clubs and to suggest new theoretical explorations.

Research Design

To address the research questions, I designed a qualitative case study of a club in Knoxville, Tennessee, collecting data through the field methods of participant-observations of the club's meetings and interviews of its members. Data collection also included reflective annotations of this club's selected texts and familiarity with the online aspects of this club's operation—its website and one member's blog entry in response to the club's reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This study is based on the following research questions:

- (1) How does a book club operate publically, socially, and privately within specific contexts?
- (2) How does a club participate in external communities and the world at large and connect this participation to the literature its members read?

Robert K. Yin's *Case Study Research* (1994) informs my choice to conduct a case study of the Books-N-Wine club as a distinct social group, or "a contemporary phenomenon" operating in a specific "real-life" context (13). Yin argues that the case study is a valuable approach because it enables a researcher to conduct a pilot exploration of a previously unknown group, to use findings to consider new hypotheses about the "how" and the "why" of the studied group, and to use these theories in designing well-informed follow-up studies (20). Yin explains that findings from a case study are not generalized to large populations, but are rather generalized to

theoretical propositions. For this case study, new knowledge about the Books-N-Wine club can contribute to existing knowledge on book clubs as context-specific, situated practices, participating in the “real world” in different ways, with potentials to teach and transform members. This knowledge can also contribute to a follow-up study on Books-N-Wine and other clubs toward expanding theories and making tentative inferences about reading communities, with the eventual goal of producing knowledge generalizable to larger populations.

An important characteristic of the case study approach that informs this project is that in conducting a case study a researcher gains more in-depth knowledge about a single group beyond surface-level information that might be gathered on larger or multiple populations. Field methods such as participant-observations and interviews allow sustainable professional relationships between a researcher and participants based on trust and respect, two standards of conduct that help to elicit more forthcoming responses from participants. Depending on a case study’s design, these field methods provide access to a group’s operations over a span of time, so that transformations and consistencies in members’ behavior and the group dynamic can be observed. James Spradley’s *Participant Observation* (1980) informs the choice to observe Books-N-Wine’s meetings over a period of six months, in order to produce a detailed description of this club as a community that is distinct, that behaves in particular ways, and that produces its own knowledge and artifacts, and as a community whose operation and constituency show signs of transformation and consistency over time. Spradley’s concept of “start[ing] with a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance” prompted my use of several crucial research techniques during observations of meetings (4). These techniques include recording detailed notes for producing comprehensive reports, entering each meeting with no other predetermined agenda than to describe the activities and events that occurred, remaining an unobtrusive “spectator,”

and delaying the reading of each of the selected texts until after the club meeting for which it was chosen (59).

In order to gather additional detail on this club through study participants' perceptions of their experiences, I consulted Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin's *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (2012) and Steinar Kvale's *Doing Interviews* (2007) to design two rounds of interviews with willing participants. The protocol for the initial round of interviews was partly based on information gathered from the literature review, including the notions that book clubs become priorities in members' lives and can serve as sites for teaching and learning and other important experiences. In order to address specific actions and behaviors exhibited by Books-N-Wine's members, several questions in this protocol were based on observations that I made during the club's April meeting regarding the group's responses to the selected reading and the interactions between all attendees. This protocol was also designed to solicit participants' perceptions of Books-N-Wine's history as context for its current operation (including social dynamics, book selections, and dialogue), members' individual narratives of their own histories in the club, and their definitions of "book club" as a social practice. Finally, the protocol for the initial interview was designed to solicit participants' perceptions of context as a multi-faceted factor in club function and the relation of the club to other areas of their lives. For the initial round of interviews, I followed a "semi-structured agenda," as termed by Rubin and Rubin and Kvale, using prepared questions to establish at the outset of the conversation the topics to be discussed, and then as the interview progressed allowing participants' responses to shape the conversation. The dialogue that resulted from this structure was more focused than everyday conversation but more flexible than a closed questionnaire. The follow-up interview protocol was also semi-structured but reflected narrowed interest in themes that emerged from data

collected during May through September meetings and initial interviews. The goal for this protocol was to gather participants' perceptions of context, literary genre, the club's relation to other areas of members' lives, members' roles within the club, meeting structure, and my presence as researcher. Follow-up interviews allowed additional flexibility, reciprocity, and mutual self-disclosure during the course of these conversations, so that "interviewer" and "interviewee" became equal contributors to and co-constructors of meaning.

Methods and Procedures

Initial Research

Prior to this study's "official" phases of data collection, I networked within Knoxville's book-club culture in order to begin compiling baseline knowledge of this city's range of different types of clubs and to find a club that fit several criteria for the case study, including distinctiveness and willingness to participate. Along with searching local clubs' websites and contacting the facilitators of ten clubs through email or by phone, I visited the meetings of six different clubs and talked with their members. Notes about these experiences contributed to a working sense of Knoxville's book-club culture as a basis for selecting a single club for a case study. These notes also provided a basis for describing particular categories that can be used in a future study that investigates the validity of assumptions about these categories and clubs' operations within them.

This study's original focus on a "progressive" category for clubs developed in response to historical and current findings that reading communities often disrupt and reinforce social and

cultural boundaries through their literary activities.²⁵ As this study evolved, so did the use of “progressive” as a descriptive category for book clubs. “Progressive” is a contested and problematic descriptor, in that it can imply a range of meaning. Careless use of this term to describe social groups might have negative results. Concretely, it can refer to historical periods such as the “Progressive Era” of the early twentieth century, as termed in archival research on early twentieth-century literacy-oriented clubs (Larson). It can be used by a variety of different social groups to describe their attitudes about social reality and their efforts to effect change. It might also connote a general sense of newness unrelated to organized social action. With all of these possibilities and potential problems, “progressive” (and other contestable terms identified in the introduction chapter, including “activism” and “transformation”) must take on more appropriate definitions—supplemented with such descriptors as “enlightened” and “socially-conscious” and others offered by book clubs themselves—for the purposes of more conscious and intentional engagement with reading communities.

Although any type of book club would be a valuable site for a case study, several predetermined, yet flexible criteria guided the process of networking with clubs in Knoxville and making a final selection of a single club for this study. I sought to locate a club in which members express either a moderate-to-liberal political ethos or a cosmopolitan worldview, describe involvement in other communities and activities, and explore reading material—popular or literary—that addresses a range of social issues. This search was not without certain

²⁵ For instance, clubs often operate through collaborative social structures, connect their interests in reading selections to some agenda of personal and communal empowerment, and connect members’ identities to the texts they choose to read. As examined in the literature review, small reading communities and mega-club subscription programs can promote—explicitly or implicitly—the full spectrum of the socio-political goals and messages that a club may express. Certainly, there are clubs that actively exclude socio-political dialogue or actions (Farr and Harker, Martin, Burwell, Radway, Green, Long). It is important to continue historical investigations of reading communities’ social interests and to continue investigating these interests as they exist in clubs from one city or region to the next.

underlying assumptions, which, left unidentified, could hinder the quality of the research process. Sharan B. Merriam, a scholar in the field of Adult Education, cautions, in her guidance for “Assessing and Evaluating Qualitative Research” that “[i]t is impossible to imagine a person leading a life without making judgments or without making discriminations,” which is true for “our roles as inquirers, educators, [and] evaluators.”²⁶ With this caution in mind, I attempted to locate a club fitting the listed criteria by observing clubs’ self-identification, rather than by initiating explicit conversations with clubs about their politics, community involvement, or interests in reading material. When contacting clubs and attending meetings, I simply stated my general purpose of “studying Knoxville-based book clubs,” and gathered information about them through members’ dialogue and actions toward forming a basis for selecting a club for the case study.²⁷

Although working knowledge of several of Knoxville’s clubs gathered through social networking is limited at this point, it is possible to suggest that book clubs in this city vary in terms of meeting location, reading selections, constituency, stated goals, and other factors. Several clubs meet on UT’s campus as an undeniably academic locale, including the “Common Ground” club sponsored by the Library and a “Literary Colloquy” sponsored by UT’s International House. These clubs discuss literary fiction and works of non-fiction that often carry cultural, social, aesthetic, and political significance. These gatherings are infrequent (once or twice during the academic calendar) compared to clubs that are more cohesive and well-defined communities meeting every month, and reflect revolving or temporary participation by members

²⁶ Merriam quotes from Smith and Deemer, whose work considers researchers’ roles, in “The Problem of Criteria in the Age of Relativism” (2000) and “The Practices and Politics of Interpretation” (2000).

²⁷ Any study that investigates categories and types of clubs should consider clubs’ own self-identification and descriptors. In this study “progressive” or similar qualifiers never entered into conversations with members. Further field research into this and other qualifiers to describe book clubs and community groups is necessary.

of the UT and Knoxville communities. Other clubs meet at local franchises, including Barnes & Noble and Panera Bread locations in West Knoxville's commercial, retail district, to discuss a range of popular fiction. A number of book clubs meet in private homes in centrally-located neighborhoods or in Knoxville's suburbs and subdivisions. It can be safely assumed that many local clubs operate invisibly and exist in numbers that would be impossible to estimate with accuracy.²⁸ At least two book clubs meet in a locally-owned book store located in Market Square, an area of town that Jack Neely, a local history enthusiast, author, and editor and columnist for the *Metro Pulse*, has described as "urban" and "democratic."²⁹ A number of other clubs meet in local places of worship, schools, or community centers, including the "Next Chapter Book Club" operated by an advocacy organization, the East Tennessee Technology Access Center (ETTAC).

To visit book clubs operating in public places, as indicated by easy-to-find websites that seemed to invite general rather than exclusive participation, I arrived at the indicated meeting time and introduced myself as a researcher with the general purpose of studying book clubs in Knoxville. Prior to visiting clubs that operate in private homes, I emailed or called clubs' contact

²⁸ Elizabeth Long makes a similar observation through her research in Houston, Texas. Although her extensive networking shed light on the existence of 121 clubs in this area, Long speculated that many more clubs exist.

²⁹ Neely's pop-historical publication, *Market Square: A History of the Most Democratic Place on Earth* (2009), points out that over its history, Market Square has been and is politically, culturally, and economically a "magnet for country people," while often being "the most urban spot in East Tennessee" (1). Neely points out that it also has a unique literary history, including descriptions of the place in novels by James Agee and Cormac McCarthy. Currently, it is home to locally-owned businesses and corporately-owned franchises, and businesses range from restaurants, to retail, to professional, enabling customers to shop and recreate in this central location. Several loft apartment spaces and historical monuments lend some longevity to the area, and make it a place not only for enjoyment, but also for learning and living. Perhaps its most fascinating feature, as Neely explores, is that "so many disparate people and events could be so intimately associated with one small patch of the planet" (vii). Market Square is also a space that is used for municipally-sanctioned arts festivals, performances, film screenings, and farmer's markets (serving aesthetic and cultural interests), and provides an impromptu "stage" for street performers, activists, and even flash mobs. There is a sense that some frequenters to this area are self-consciously engaged in the political *public sphere*. In all cases, Market Square manufactures its own local culture and charm. Finally, I note that Union Avenue Books is a primary site for faculty and graduate students from the University of Tennessee's English Department to deliver readings of poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. Other local and regional authors have delivered readings at this location as well.

persons in order to request their permission to visit, to state my purpose, and to gather preliminary information about the clubs. One club politely indicated that members were uncomfortable with the idea of a researcher as outsider visiting the club in which conversations might be of a personal nature, while Books-N-Wine's host was enthusiastically welcoming and intrigued by the idea of scholarly research into the club that meets in her home. I discovered later that Books-N-Wine's host confirmed with other members that they would feel comfortable with my visits.

After several weeks' worth of visits and conversations with clubs' facilitators and members, I narrowed my selection to two clubs as close contenders for making the final cut for this project's case study: (1) the "Book-aholics" club, which meets once a month during a lunch hour in the Union Avenue Books store adjacent to Knoxville's Market Square, and (2) the "Books-N-Wine" club, which meets once a month for several hours in the evening in the co-founder and facilitator's home situated in a suburban neighborhood between West Knoxville and Oak Ridge, Tennessee. These two clubs were close contenders for the final selection because they both choose to discuss politically- and culturally-significant works of literature and they are both comprised of members who express interest in socio-political issues and who engage in their communities (however they might define this term) to varying degrees. Their location in two different environments made the selection even more difficult. On the one hand, an interesting study can be conducted on the correlations between the Book-aholics club's interests in certain reading material and social issues and its operation within a part of town that is known for its cultural attractions. Market Square has a unique literary legacy, such as figuring as the landscape for Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* and providing performance space for summertime productions of "Shakespeare on the Square." Market Square has also undergone a distinctive

cultural and commercial resurgence in the past decade to become a versatile venue for festivals, merchants, artists, professionals, politicians, recreating citizens, and even social activists to engage with the *public sphere*. Even with these obvious attractions, choosing the Book-aholics club seemed to be the predictable choice and may have produced limiting findings on context as a factor in book club function.

While similar to the Book-aholics clubs in its interest in reading material and social issues, Books-N-Wine's operation in a suburban neighborhood suggested that choosing this club would enable an intriguing investigation of context. In contrast to Market Square as a known site for cultural and political activity and public exposure, suburbs are residential sites, and while many suburbanites may express or behave according to a moderate-to-liberal political leaning, these remote neighborhoods do not garner the same degree of public participation as does a place like Market Square. Choosing Books-N-Wine—a club engaging in the literary and political *public spheres* in an environment that does not typically invite the public's participation—seemed to offer new and unpredictable discoveries about context.

In addition to this club's willingness to participate in a case study and its operation within an interesting context, several discoveries made during visits to the February and March 2013 meetings influenced the choice of this club for the case study.³⁰ These discoveries also prompted slight modifications to the original criteria for selection, in light of the potential hindrance of making political or other weighty assumptions about a social group based on a limited acquaintanceship with its members. First, I modified my original interest in a club's "moderate-to-liberal political leanings" in order to pursue interest in Books-N-Wine's cosmopolitan worldview and participation in exploratory, deliberative dialogue. Second, I expanded my

³⁰ Although defining features of the Books-N-Wine will be explored in greater detail in the next chapters, I list several features in this chapter for the purposes of providing a rationale for choosing this club for the case study.

interest in club members' participation in social activism to include Books-N-Wine members' diverse community involvement. And third, I expanded my interest in clubs that read literature on explicit socio-political topics to consider Books-N-Wine's wide ranging interest in literary forms, genres, topics, and authors. More specifically, I discovered at these early meetings that neither the club as a whole nor its individual members explicitly identifies partisan views, voting practices, or support for particular politicians. Instead, and equally as (if not more) intriguing than explicit political identification, members implied political interests through what they later described as "open-minded" conversation about social topics such as government action, policy-making, and cultural ethics—all in response to reading selections. At these early meetings, members followed an unstated "rule" of welcoming expressions representing a range of opinions, yet funneling them through common values of social justice, advocacy, critical awareness, tolerance for opposing viewpoints and lifestyle choices, and respect for underrepresented cultures and developing countries.

In terms of reading selections, this club expressed its interest in diverse works of fiction and non-fiction. While members expressed that they generally preferred material that they consider to be relevant to their own lives and the "real world" or that could be termed a "classic" over "popular" material, their reading practices combine recreational escapism, emotional and intellectual engagement, and cultural sensitivity. In particular, members' dialogue about *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* during the February meeting exhibited awareness that cross-cultural empathy can be problematic if it reinforces a patronizing and colonizing attitude. Even with this awareness, Books-N-Wine's members express empathy in response to the circumstances of characters and populations represented in the reading selections.

Other factors discovered during my visits to the club's February and March meetings that influenced the selection of the Books-N-Wine club included the identities of its constituency, members' involvement in other communities, and the relationships among members that make this group cohesive and intimate. The club is comprised of both men and women, and most of these members are affiliated with a local homeschooling co-operative, an affiliation that jumpstarted the group's formation and subsequently influenced this group's dynamics and identification.³¹ This club's attitudes about book clubs in general were also clear from the beginning of my interaction with Books-N-Wine and I wanted to investigate these further. Like many clubs described in popular "how-to" guides (*The Book Group Book* and the *Go On Girl! Guide*), this one sets its own standards, goals, and aesthetics for its operation. Several members expressed early on their disregard for and outright rejection of any perceived cultural authority, such as that of Oprah's Book Club, on what a book club "should" do or read. An additional aspect of the Books-N-Wine club that was immediately noticeable and that suggested fruitful investigations included Books-N-Wine's navigation of public and private space—a navigation that defines the operation of many clubs, as explored by the review of the literature. Although

³¹ Books-N-Wine is comprised of adults who fit somewhat narrow socio-economic and demographic criteria. These criteria have manifested themselves organically over the club's more than three years of operation, based on the identities of the initially revolving roster of members. Now that the roster has stabilized to include five "core members," this club represents an established middle- to upper-class demographic. Members are college-educated, occupy diverse professions, identify as heterosexual, and are either involved in or divorced from marital relationships. Most of these members home-school their children and they all reside in suburban neighborhoods. Members identify as white, with the exception of one who identifies with her Jewish ancestry and exposure to Jewish culture throughout childhood. More specific markers of members' identities are flexible and transforming, as they participate in a range of recreational activities, from dancing to watching football to travelling, and as they engage in dialogue in an exploratory manner. Other chapters of this dissertation will explore in more depth club members' involvement with the homeschooling co-operative as part of their alternative educational attitudes and approaches. This homeschooling approach includes their approaches to curriculum development, teacher-leamer relationships, their formation of a collaborative community, and creation of safe and productive learning environments. A related concern that will be explored in the next chapters is that while Books-N-Wine members affiliate with the co-op on an educational basis, members have expressed during meetings their perceived social differences from other home-schooling parents in the co-op.

members conduct meetings in the private home of “Sarah,”³² who co-founded and co-facilitates this club, Books-N-Wine maintains a website as a public sign-post for its identity, as a tool for recruiting members, and as a space to archive its past reading history and announce to active members each month’s book selection and other upcoming events.

At the time of making a final selection for the case study, Books-N-Wine’s members agreed to allow me to attend six consecutive monthly meetings (April to September 2013) to observe and collect data. As host and co-facilitator, Sarah provided a signed letter of permission allowing participant-observations of meetings to be conducted with audio-recordings of the club’s dialogue. She was aware of the informed consent process, the measures to maintain participants’ privacy, and the general objectives for the study including the type of data that would be collected. With IRB approval and signed consent forms, official data collection began on April 29, 2013. Interview participants were recruited from willing members who were in attendance at meetings.

Conducting a Case Study

As summarized in the section on “Research Design,” the methods for research included participant-observations of six consecutive meetings from April to September and two rounds of interviews with willing members. I chose to observe meetings and interview individual participants, rather than distribute surveys or questionnaires, in order to seek knowledge about the inner-workings of this particular book club, including the nature and content of dialogue, the structure of its meetings, the social dynamics of its members, and the relationship between the club and other areas of members’ lives—all in relation to the club’s selected reading material. In

³² See the section below on the “Site, Population, and Sources of Data” for a description of each participant and a note on this study’s use of pseudonyms.

addition to observations of six meetings, six initial interviews were conducted between May 8, 2013 and July 25, 2013, and five follow-up interviews during the month of October.

Site, Population, and Sources of Data

Participant-observations were conducted at Sarah's private home in a West Knoxville subdivision, where she hosts Books-N-Wine's meetings each month, usually on a Monday evening, beginning at 7 p.m. and lasting until the last person leaves, usually approaching 11 p.m. The Books-N-Wine club is a pre-existing social group, rather than one recruited expressly for this study, and has operated since March 2011. Members' agreement with the meeting time and location and other factors provide both a sense of routine and a team-oriented attitude among members.

At most meetings, at least four or five members attend ("core members" as they have been termed by Sarah and Joe, who co-founded and facilitate this club), while some meetings have included additional but less frequently attending members, bringing the number in attendance to six or seven. Club members know each other through a Knoxville homeschooling co-operative, as well as through faith-based and social relationships. Core members and participants in this study are listed and described as follows:³³

"Sarah," the club's host, founder, and facilitator, moved to Knoxville several years ago from Houston, Texas, where was a member of a book club. Shortly after moving, she started Books-N-Wine, after visiting several other Knoxville clubs and being dissatisfied with those experiences. In addition to homeschooling her three children (the eldest recently enrolled in public school to attend high school), she works from home as an editor.

³³ The names referring to Books-N-Wine's members have been selected as pseudonyms in the interest of participants' privacy.

“Joe,” the club’s website administrator, was acquainted with Sarah through the homeschooling co-operative in which his four children receive their education. His eldest child is in college. Joe helped Sarah found the club and now serves as a discussion facilitator and collaborates with Sarah to select each month’s reading selection. He works as a researcher at Oak Ridge National Labs.

“Linda,” Sarah’s next-door neighbor and friend, is a homemaker and mother to five children. Although she has in the past homeschooled her children, her three younger children are currently enrolled in public school, while her two eldest are a college student and college graduate. She has a bachelor’s degree in English and enjoys maintaining a blog.

“Mitch,” another homeschooling parent, is a father to a teenage son and has a background in sociology. In addition to his homeschooling acquaintanceship with other members of Books-N-Wine, he shares an acquaintanceship with Linda through a place of worship.

“Shelley,” another parent in the homeschooling co-operative, joined the club in response to a personal invitation from Sarah with whom she was acquainted at the time. She has a microbiology background, is involved with local dance communities, and currently educates her two small children at home.

“Helen,” “Evelyn,” and “Nina,” also parents in the co-op, attended meetings less frequently. From April to September, Helen attended twice, while Evelyn and Nina each attended only once, perhaps, as Sarah speculated, because of either scheduling conflicts or discomfort participating in the group. Sarah shared that on occasion there have been visits by other homeschooling co-op acquaintances who saw Sarah’s announcement on the co-op’s listserv, and visits by other readers in Knoxville who did not have a prior acquaintanceship or affiliation with Sarah and who, like me, came across the club’s website during an online search.

As of September 2013 the constituency had stabilized to five core members—Sarah, Joe, Mitch, Shelley, and Linda—though it is likely that Books-N-Wine will experience ongoing comings and goings by readers who come across the website or who share a homeschooling acquaintanceship.

To arrange interviews with participants, I contacted them through email, having requested their addresses at club meetings for these purposes and informed consent form signatures. Initial interviews took place at various places in the Knoxville area, depending on participants' preferences. These choices provided important context to each individual interview and to the building of knowledge about this group as a whole. Locations represent a range in public and private locations, commercial and community locations, and West Knoxville and city proper locations. The initial interview with Joe was conducted at Golden Roast, a campus-area coffee shop whose customers are likely a mixture of UT affiliates and local professionals, all quietly sipping coffee and engrossed in work. The studious atmosphere made it easy to capture good-quality audio recordings and may have had some influence on the mood of the conversation, in that Joe and I did not feel rushed or distracted.³⁴ In contrast, initial interviews with Mitch and Linda were conducted at a loud and busy West Knoxville Panera Bread, at these participants' request. As a soup and sandwich franchise, this location attracts families and residents of that area, and while it would have been a reasonable location for a social conversation, the background noise and fast-paced counter service were distracting and made it difficult to capture good-quality audio recordings for an interview. Sarah chose to meet at a West Knoxville Mexican restaurant for the initial interview, and similarly to Panera, this location's

³⁴ In addition to this location's proximity to the UT campus and quiet atmosphere, Golden Roast stands as an interesting and relevant site for a study on book clubs given that many clubs meet in coffee shops. As explored in other chapters, Habermas's public sphere theory cites coffee shops as one nexus for the emergence of the literary and political *public spheres*.

festive and social atmosphere was distracting and made it difficult to capture quality audio recordings.

While these four members selected coffee and dining establishments for interviews, two other members requested to meet at non-commercial locations. Evelyn requested that the interview take place at the downtown branch of Knoxville's public library system. This quiet location with more "public" access than the commercial locations produced a distraction-free discussion and a good quality audio recording, and its books-oriented, print-rich environment seemed even more conducive to book-club research than the UT-area coffee shop. Shelley requested that we meet in her home, so that she could care for her small children without having to take them to a public interview site or hire a sitter. This environment, with children engaging some of her attention and with a loud television on in the background, rendered the business of conducting an interview and capturing audio recordings difficult, but served as a reminder that for members of the Books-N-Wine club, the acts of teaching, learning, childrearing, reading, and engaging in dialogue about reading often converge in domestic space.

The five follow-up interviews took place in various locations in Knoxville. Several locations were repeats from initial interviews. Shelley found it most convenient to meet in her home for the second interview. Joe requested again that we meet at Golden Roast near the UT campus, a coffee shop for which he expressed a casual affinity as a former UT doctoral student. Linda requested to meet again at the West Knoxville Panera Bread out of convenience. To interview Mitch and Sarah, these participants and I relocated from our initial meeting spots to meet at the West Knoxville Barnes & Noble. To meet with Sarah, I had requested that we choose a quieter place than the Mexican restaurant, and she suggested meeting at Barnes & Noble as a quiet place where she had already planned to make some homeschooling-related book purchases.

Mitch offered to meet in the same place on the same day, so that I might enjoy the convenience of back-to-back interviews in a single location. While Barnes & Noble's quiet atmosphere enabled better recordings and a more relaxed conversation, there were no electrical outlets in the coffee area and these participants and I resorted to finding chairs and an outlet in the store's back corner.

For considerations of methodology, site, and population for this study, it is important to note the different orchestrations behind meeting observations and interviews as the two main types of "events" that provided data. Meetings are naturally-occurring events organized by the club that I observed, while interviews I contrived expressively to hold conversations with participants for the purpose of data collection. Interview contrivances establish a formality to the conversations, despite any congeniality between researcher and interviewee and despite the existing ambience of an interview location. Thus, the contrived events and their resultant formality influenced the content and course of the conversations, particularly during the initial round before my relationships with participants had become more sociable. According to Rubin and Rubin's description of a naturalist-constructionist paradigm in *Qualitative Interviewing*, researchers operating within this paradigm "monitor the impact they have" instead of "deny[ing] that they influence what they are studying" (17). For this study, I thus include my impact on meetings and interviews as part of the data on this group's combinations of identities, behaviors, personalities, academic and professional backgrounds, and associations with external communities. As researcher and knowledge-seeker, I represent the academy, and while I attempted to remain unobtrusive at meetings, limiting my conversational contributions only to polite greetings before meetings began, my presence inserted to some degree the academy's values into the club's otherwise socially-intimate, non-academic space.

“Official” data on the Books-N-Wine club came from both social and text-based sources. Social sources of data include participant-observations of six meetings at Sarah’s home, as naturally occurring events, and eleven interviews at various locations around Knoxville, as contrived events. Text-based sources include the Books-N-Wine club’s reading selections, and online content including the club’s website and one member’s personal blog entry on *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Data Collection

Data collection on the Books-N-Wine club came from social and text-based sources, as described above. Participant-observations of six consecutive meetings from April 29, 2013 to September 30, 2013, six initial interviews, and five follow-up interviews with members comprised seventeen separate events, each its own set of “raw data.” Meetings of the Books-N-Wine club as a naturally-occurring social group were audio-recorded to capture members’ dialogue verbatim, while observation notes included details on shifts in conversational tone, topic, and social dynamics and reflections on my perceptions of how these details correspond to the values and attitudes of members and their opinions about texts. The notes produced a thick description of this club. Each transcript records meeting dialogue in full and verbatim. I included, at the top of each transcript and in a column parallel to transcribed dialogue, reflective commentary on the nature and specific content of dialogue, the chronological structure of the conversation within individual meetings and over the trajectory of the six meetings I attended, the specific nuances of the club’s discourse or “speech genre,”³⁵ and the varying degrees to

³⁵ The Conclusion chapter will explore the possibility of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “speech genre, defined as a “stable” type of utterance developed in “particular sphere[s] of community,” as an appropriate term for Books-N-Wine’s discourse (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* 60). See also Paul Bové’s entry on “discourse” in

which each member voiced his or her thoughts and became prominent contributors to the meeting. At the request of study participants, however, personal details about members' lives were excluded from transcripts.³⁶ While Rubin and Rubin term a researcher's insertions of commentary into transcripts (or their creation of a separate file) "memos" (191), Spradley encourages researchers to maintain a "fieldwork journal" to record the "experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that arise during fieldwork," as important insight into the biases and assumptions that affect a researcher's analyses and claims (71-72). My choices to include "memos" and "journal"-like commentary within transcript files enabled simultaneous viewing of raw data and analytical material.

Interviews with all members, as contrived rather than naturally-occurring events between researcher and participants, were conducted in initial and follow-up phases, each taking approximately thirty or forty-five minutes. All interviews brought forth more in-depth descriptions of participants' perceptions and experiences, with respect to the club as a social group and the reading selections that this group encounters. The initial interview protocol (See Appendix) was based partly on information gathered from the literature review and on themes that emerged inductively from the April 2013 club meeting. This protocol was semi-structured and followed the technique that Rubin and Rubin call "responsive interviewing," whereby the

Lentricchia and McLaughlin's *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. "Discourse" can refer to differences in works of literature or in schools of literary theory, but can also refer to different communicative tendencies particular to a well-defined community or academic discipline (50). In the case of a book club, which engages with literary texts and is inherently communicative, it might be observed that members engage in dialogue that possesses a distinctive aesthetic.

³⁶ Transcripts indicated when and for how long members engaged in personal conversations, and summarized the content, while excluding the details of these conversations. Example: "[At this time members discuss their children's homework]." This transcribing choice enabled me to keep personal details of members' lives private, as members themselves requested, while maintaining a record of the structure of the conversation. As subsequent chapters explore, meeting structure—particularly the content of "pre-meeting" and "post-meeting" segments of these gatherings, produced rich and important data for this study. "Structure" emerged as a theme from inductive coding and influenced later stages of data collection and analysis.

researcher works to ensure the quality and detail of data that is collected, as well as the comfort and privacy of participants. To ensure quality and privacy, a researcher is respectful and adopts a friendly and supportive persona. In addition, the researcher conducts interviews with flexibility to allow a “give-and-take” relationship to form between the researcher and participant. With these techniques, self-disclosure is mutual rather than one-sided, and interviewees are given time at the end of the conversation to ask the researcher questions and to offer comments that extend or supplement responses to the official line of questions. Through this approach, interviewees help to steer the course of the conversation, based on what the researcher and interviewee both feel are important aspects of the phenomenon in question (Rubin and Rubin 36-37). Respect, flexibility, self-disclosure, and reciprocity as social and methodological commitments from the outset of the study meant that interviews—while formal and purposeful—became less like stilted conversations between researcher and interviewee and more like give-and-take conversations between friends. As a result, initial interviews yielded much detail, and reflected a relationship based on trust and mutual commitments to authentic and accurate data.

Themes that emerged from initial interviews and ongoing club meetings were used to shape the protocol for the follow-up interview (See Appendix). The follow-up protocol probed for more detail, informed participants at the outset of interviews of the structure and thematic basis for questions. For each primary question, I prepared in advance several “probe” questions or alternative phrasings in order to encourage more detailed responses (Rubin and Rubin 139). As with initial interviews, follow-up interviews became give-and-take conversations, based on a trusting relationship and participants’ increasing reflection on their participation in the club. The follow-up round of interviews provided more in-depth data on the general topics of this study’s research questions (clubs as situated, contextualized practices representing ways of participation

in the world) and more specific insight into topics such as meeting structure, the importance of literary genre, and my impact as an outsider-researcher on club function. It was the case during both rounds that several prepared questions were not explored, as interviews began to exceed the scheduled thirty-minute allotments and as interviewees' responses to one question addressed the topics of several other questions. Even with this flexibility, I was careful to maintain a consistent agenda from one interview to the next in terms of covering the main topics intended for both rounds of interviews.³⁷

At the beginning of each interview, I shared several minutes of social dialogue with the participant in order to establish friendly interactions. Once the formal interview process began, I used the prepared protocols to conduct and audio-record a semi-structured conversation, while typing notes. I later transcribed recordings and notes in full, in order to capture participants' detailed responses, anecdotes, narratives, evidence of participants' individual choices in verbal style or "speech genre," as well as evidence of a common "speech genre" that seems to have developed throughout members' participation in the club. In addition, I noted instances when my choices as interviewer seemed significant, such as my use of certain words or descriptions as triggers, specific probe questions used to solicit more detail, instances of self-disclosure, and answers to participants' questions. As I transcribed interviews and important segments of meeting dialogue, I inserted clearly labeled notes to myself containing insights, suggestions for

³⁷ When participants asked questions at the beginnings of several meetings and at the end of several interviews, we discussed a few general points related to the ongoing discoveries of the study, including the importance of the club as a social outlet and the nature of book clubs in general. In the interests of good social conduct, I responded to their questions politely. But in the interests of methodological mindfulness, I avoided extensive self-disclosure that might interfere with the clubs' dialogue and actions. These impromptu pre-meeting and post-interview conversations not only extended the conversations that took place during interviews, but also established an ethos of intellectual reciprocity between me as researcher and the study participants as "experts" on the book-club experience, and thus were mutually educational. Later chapters will explore the significance of becoming a conversationalist with, rather than strictly interviewer of, members of a book club featured in research.

identifying themes and codes, and other reflective commentary—“memos” and “journaling”—so that analysis became an ongoing and recorded process from the beginning of the study.

To gather data on text-based sources, I made the deliberate decision, as stated in the “Design” section, to delay my reading of each month’s selection until after observing the meeting for which the text was designated. Delayed readings allowed me to enter meetings with a dialogue-centered agenda rather than a literary-centered one. This decision has important methodological and theoretical underpinnings, based on information surmised from the review of empirical and theoretical scholarship that suggests that book clubs, or individual readers, and works of literature are all mutually transformative and influential upon one another. I used this technique with several goals in mind: (1) Members’ dialogue about a text during meetings would serve as a guide for my own readings and interpretations of these texts, (2) Members’ dialogue about a text would serve as a guide for constructing follow-up interview questions about their reading experiences, (3) My after-the-fact readings along with transcripts of members’ dialogue would allow me to combine participants’ literary interpretations with my own analysis, and (4) Reflective annotations for each after-the-fact reading would aid in the process of exploring data as I began integrating files and identifying themes. The motivations behind these reading techniques corresponded to the motivations for interview techniques; both allowed “give-and-take” between participants and researcher and shared construction of meaning. During analysis phases, club members’ dialogue and meeting details became ways to understand literary texts, while my after-the-fact readings of texts became a way to understand the club’s dialogue, so that individual members, the club as a cohesive community, the selected texts, and I as researcher contributed to building knowledge on the Books-N-Wine club.

More specifically, data from interviews and observations were used to produce an individual reflective annotation for each of the texts that Books-N-Wine selected for meetings. As subsequent chapters will explore, the texts that the club selected for the April through September 2013 meetings all represent culturally- or historically-significant topics and themes and highlight this club's concentrated interest in exploring literary forms and genres. Selections included J. Maarten Troost's *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* (April meeting), Denise Kiernan's *The Girls of Atomic City* (May and June meetings), Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (July meeting) Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder* (August meeting), and William Kamkwamba's *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (September meeting). February's selection was Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and although February lies outside of the "official" time frame for this study, observations and interviews have shown that this text influenced participants' subsequent experiences in Books-N-Wine, as evidenced by members' frequent references to it during meeting dialogue and interviews. Thus, I included a reflective annotation for this text for use in analysis. In addition, I annotated Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, the selection for the October meeting, in response to members' discussions of this text during follow-up interviews and in response to Joe and Sarah's lobbying during the September meeting to choose this text as reading material.

Online sources of data included Books-N-Wine's website, the main purposes of which are to archive book selections and to provide a public sign-post of this club's operation, and Linda's personal blog, in which she wrote a response to her reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These online (and therefore public) writings extend the club's literary dialogue that occurs at book-club meetings and become accessible to an external audience, whether comprised of acquaintances or strangers.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in three main rounds of constant comparison: an initial round of inductive coding, a mid-way point round of organizing data using manual strategies and Atlas.ti software, and a third round of coding using themes surmised from the literature review. During these phases, the themes that emerged and contributed to this study's findings provide some answers to this study's research questions and provide additional data for use in a future study.

In order to process data in an efficient and organized manner, I transcribed notes and recordings shortly after each meeting and interview. To overcome the challenge of unavoidable lag-time between recordings and transcriptions and to preserve memories of each event, I organized several paragraphs of reflection and ongoing analysis before each transcript. Reflective annotations of the club's selected readings were produced alongside transcripts of meeting dialogue and interviews so that all literary responses from participants and researcher contributed to knowledge produced about Books-N-Wine.

Early phases of data collection, transcription, coding, and analysis were manual and solitary processes, in that I did not hire transcription services, and I did not use data analysis software until later in the process. To account for the range and chronology of topics that characterize this group's interests and dynamics, I included a chronological list of topics explored during each meeting. These manual processes enabled not only greater attention to salient themes but also a better structural sense of each meeting's rhythms and tones and a better sense of a consistent routine from meeting to meeting. Conversations that were of a sensitive and private nature were not transcribed and instead were summarized in the chronology of topics.

The April meeting and all six initial interviews were transcribed in full. When reviewing these first sets of raw transcribed data, I attempted to disregard themes previously identified from

the literature review, and inductively coded data to arrive at themes rooted in data itself. In so doing, I borrowed from the grounded theory model as described by Rubin and Rubin, to “see things in [the] data [I] never imagined were there,” to gain insights that were “fresh and rich,” and to allow “definitions” of codes to “keep evolving throughout the analysis” (204). During this process, I highlighted data in relation to *context*, *transference*, *transformation*, *structure*, and *roles*. Although paying attention to each meeting’s range of discussion topics creates a more comprehensive sense of the Books-N-Wine club as a cohesive community, Rubin and Rubin caution against the “enormous amount of coding” that is endemic to grounded theory analysis, an approach that “does not distinguish between themes and terms that are more central and those that are more peripheral to the research topic” (204). Thus, as I transcribed May through September meetings and including reflective “memos” and “journaling,” I began to pay greater attention to these themes and their more specific subthemes in my ongoing analysis. All raw data sets—six meetings, six initial interviews, and five follow-up interviews—were maintained in chronological order according to the dates when the events occurred to draw attention to consistencies and inconsistencies in this club’s operation as observed over time, among members, and between meetings and interviews. The process of transcribing each data set involved simultaneous reviews of existing files. These reviews facilitated the discovery of recurring and newly emerging themes and enabled me to link together passages from separate transcripts highlighted as pertinent to common themes to reveal the relationships among themes.

Initially, the rigors of manual and solitary transcription enabled more intimate knowledge of recorded data, particularly each member’s distinct personality and manner of speaking and the common discourse or “speech genre” that seems to have developed over the course of members’ participation in this book club. In addition, the challenges of manual transcription highlighted

ways to stratify *context*, *transference*, *transformation*, *structure*, and *roles* into subthemes. Even though these are listed distinctly, themes and subthemes are all interrelated. “Context” includes external facets such as West Knoxville and other places and times for the conducting of meetings and interviews, internal facets such as personalities present during meetings, members’ prior reading experiences, professional and educational experiences, preparation for each meeting, the “pre-meeting” as context for “meeting proper.” “Transference” includes members’ pre-existing and co-existing participation in other social groups and communities, and the club’s ethos or self-image in relation to other communities and readers. “Structure” includes the dialogue’s tone, content, and purpose over course of a meeting, from “pre-meeting,” “meeting proper” and “post-meeting” segments, and measured as timed segments of text discussion, discussion of related content, and discussions of a purely social or personal nature unrelated to text. Structure also includes leadership within the club, such as “host,” “facilitator,” “web administrator,” and “participants.” “Transformation” denotes changes in knowledge, attitudes, interest in genre, discourse (common terminology, expressions, grammatical structures, and humor). “Roles” denotes individual members’ identities and “jobs” within the club and contributions to the culture of the Books-N-Wine club, and also refers to the group’s sense of its “role” within a larger context.

Despite the tedium of manual data processing, additional advantages included control over organization, claims to my own terminology, and a sense that my system of data processing was personalized. Manual data processing also prompted me to intuit and identify the primary types of patterns that indicated the prevalence of a theme, by answering the question, “How do I know when a theme is emerging in data?” Identifying the four pattern types listed below

modifies Spradley's methods of creating a comprehensive list of themes and "inventory" of examples from data that fall under each theme (157-158):

- *Frequency*, denoting when a potential theme is repeated within a certain unit of measurement, such as a single club meeting, a single interview, or a set of meetings or interviews, or a single participant's transcribed dialogue.
- *Consistency*, related to frequency, but denoting when a potential theme is repeated across units of measurement that occur over time, such as the six monthly meetings, and among units of measurement that are roughly simultaneous, such as the six initial interviews.
- *Quantity*, denoting either the amount of actual spoken dialogue devoted to a potential theme (measured by transcribed word count), or the amount of time in dialogue devoted to a potential theme (measured by recorded minutes and seconds).
- *Consensus or Saturation among participants*, denoting the degree to which more than one participant produced a potential theme.

Identifying these pattern types manually helped to narrow down further the themes that would contribute to the eventual integrating of coded data into a narrative report of the findings. The sense of these pattern types also facilitated the conversion of typed data files to Atlas.ti, qualitative data analysis software, for the purposes of noting group consensus, disagreements among members, as well as behavioral transformation—information that can supplement members' own statements.

At the mid-way point of this study, I converted files to Atlas.ti to systematize data processing, constant comparison, and analysis. This conversion helped me to account for the

range and stratification of important themes and to expedite the tasks of linking together passages from separate files. Labeling passages through Atlas.ti brought forth additional considerations for analysis, including meaning produced through *dialogue* (anything conversational, verbal, or discursive) and meaning produced through *actions* (anything behavioral or non-verbal, such as social dynamics, electronic searches, selecting books, and serving refreshments). Atlas.ti also helped to label differences in participants' explicit articulated knowledge, and tacit or unstated knowledge, knowledge produced through the interview experience, and unconscious behavior. All of these differences, contradictions, and discrepancies provide occasions, as Rubin and Rubin advise, to "recognize more subtle concepts and themes" that are difficult to account for when noting only consistencies in data (196), and can be used to generate tentative claims about this club's accomplishment of its stated goals and formulation of new ones as evidenced by participants' shifting interests, values, and influences on one another.

Following the inductive coding phases, the subsequent phase of analysis added themes gathered from the literature review, including clubs' *identity formation*, readers' *empathic* responses to literary texts and dialogue with other members of a club, and clubs' frequent formation of a *non-academic stance* as simultaneous to their reinforcement of traditional cultural values and assumptions. These themes were combined with *context*, *transference*, *transformation*, *structure of leadership and dialogue*, and *members' roles/jobs within club* which emerged through inductive coding of this study's data. Combining themes from data and those from the literature review places the findings from this study within a larger tradition of book-club research and provides grounds for noting how this case study identifies Books-N-Wine's unique and exceptional qualities and those that reflect commonality with other clubs.

Below, I provide an excerpt from one of the raw data sets to demonstrate how I interpreted salient and recurrent patterns in Books-N-Wine's actions and dialogue and highlighted them as themes. The transcript of the September 2013 meeting details the conversations shared by Joe, Sarah, and Shelley (Mitch and Linda could not attend). In addition to discussing topics related to their lives and their interests in current events and remote cultures, Joe, Sarah, and Shelley discussed the selected text, William Kamkwamba's *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, which dramatizes the experiences of an African youth who designs a windmill for his family in the midst of a crippling famine. The September meeting transcript provides a notable example of the club's common discourse, or "speech genre," that seems to have formed throughout the club's operation, as will be discussed in the next chapters. Throughout the official phase of data collection, Joe was the member who most often quoted from and paraphrased passages of reading material during meetings and interviews. The following excerpt from this meeting's transcript demonstrates Joe and Sarah's performed responses to *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* and their collaborative construction of meaning about this text as they combine their sense of the bitter ironic humor that the narrator uses to characterize the hardships of the famine and the ineffectual responses of the Malawian government:

Joe: 'Our president's a funny guy.' I liked that part.

Sarah: '...funny guy.' Oh not so much.

Joe: [laughing] I know. 'Our president is a funny guy.' You know? And ...

Sarah: And he was afraid of being shot. There's nothing...

Joe: It is ... understatement of... ha! [scrolls through text] 'Our president, like I said, our president is a funny guy.'

Sarah: I know, and then it was just so neat after, after the famine ended, people were like ‘Hey!’ And it was all ... all ...

Joe: Yeah, ‘You’re still alive.’

Sarah: All ‘You’re still ...? That’s great!’ And ‘How are you doing?’ ‘I’m great. How are you?’ And it was just so resilient, the culture, it was an amazing testament to human nature surviving.

Joe: Yeah

As I highlighted additional passages that revealed members’ uniquely personal yet performable relationship to literary texts, the “memos” and “journaling” that were inserted into transcripts as part of ongoing data analysis and that were linked in Atlas.ti across data sets not only produced a more comprehensive sense of themes’ significance in Books-N-Wine’s operation but also highlighted the significance of my role as researcher in this study. The following note was inserted into the September meeting transcript and thus remarks on several months’ worth of insight into Joe’s behavioral consistencies as one of the co-founding members of the club, a dominant voice during meetings, and as an astute and sensitive reader. In addition, this note and others like it in other transcripts inspired some discussion with participants during follow-up interviews about the nature of club members’ discourse:

During a number of meetings, Joe includes additional dramatic and extemporaneous responses to texts to demonstrate in a social setting his sense of character development, crucial plot points, and the larger systemic implications of the text. For this meeting, Joe’s direct quote—“Our president is a funny guy”—demonstrates this member’s sense of what he identifies as “understatements” in text. He repeats this quote several times to emphasize that the understatement is

meant to convey the economic and political reality of this community in Africa and to convey the author-narrator's managing of several emotional stances: memories of the suffering experienced by Kamkwamba and his family and the irony that often comes with more distant reflection on hardship.

An inserted note in the follow-up interview with Sarah reflects on the degree to which I myself began to participate in this "common discourse" during the interviews, on a somewhat unconscious basis, until the transcription process brought it to my attention. In asking Sarah about the degree to which members of the club protect this activity as a priority in their lives, I seem to have constructed a paraphrase to express my imagination of club members' attitudes:

Julie: So, it almost seems like the book club, as an event, has to be protected in some way, like, 'for us to do it in this way and to the degree that we like, we need to be ... we need to set it up to where that's possible,' almost. It's like a protective—'this is so important and enjoyable that we don't want interference, or we don't want the enjoyment to be diminished in some way.'

Sarah: Well, that's how *I* feel. I would hope that other people feel the same, and maybe not. Um, you know, when I think about the core members, I just think about me and Joe, Linda, Mitch, and Shannon.

...

I mean, I think you get into a routine and you find something that you like and of course you don't want it to end.

While transcribing this section containing my paraphrase of how I imagine participants describing the club, I inserted a note that suggested I was "ventriloquizing" for this participant, to remind myself that I was perhaps too heavily influencing Sarah's response to my inquiry

about the club as a priority or a space that needs to be protected and maintained. I reflected later that with this kind of “ventriloquizing” during the interview experience, I blurred my role as researcher with that of “informant” and revealed my growing admiration for this club’s successful operation over three years.

Themes such as “common discourse,” “researcher role,” and others that emerged from three phases of coding span participants’ experiential expertise and the ideas that I surmised from published scholarship. These themes produce findings toward answering this study’s research questions on clubs as situated, contextualized operations—publically, socially, and privately—and their ways of participating in the world—on local or global scales—in relation to the texts they read. As explored in the remaining chapters, findings can be used for several purposes: (1) to supplement existing knowledge on book clubs, (2) create new opportunities to explore theories in literature, rhetoric, aesthetics, social science, and education, and (3) to recommend methods and designs for a future project.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Data collected according to the methods and procedures listed in the previous chapter produce several important findings on Books-N-Wine regarding this club's situated, contextualized operation and its unique participation in the world on local and global scales. These findings provide answers to the following research questions that guided this study:

- (1) How does a book club operate publically, socially, and privately within specific contexts?
- (2) How does a club participate in external communities or the world at large and connect this participation to the literature its members read?

To explore the findings, this chapter is organized into four sections. The first section provides three discoveries from research that help to foreground additional findings: (1) the history of this club and its members who have created a well-defined and cohesive community, (2) Books-N-Wine's general definitions of "book club," members' perceptions of this club's specific defining qualities, and their sense of the club's development over time, and (3) the unique trajectory of the club's reading selections that figured into this study's "official" time frame. This chapter then proceeds to report findings on the ways in which Books-N-Wine operates within existing contexts and even creates contextual factors within its internal practice—culminating in a distinct *aesthetic of group interaction*. A third section explores findings on this club's relationships that have been cultivated within the group and between the group and entities external to it—relations that enable the club to formulate, on a continual basis, a complex worldview. The social relationships among individual club members, the club's relationships to literary texts, and the club's relationship to the homeschooling co-operative and

interest in communities near and far can all be seen as this club's discursive means of participating in the world at large. A fourth section describes how this club's external relationships, or participation in the world, invokes within the club space several vital *spheres*—the domestic sphere, the professional sphere, the educational sphere, and the sphere of daily living—where members of Books-N-Wine support and affirm one another in negotiating actions and behaviors appropriate for these spheres, thus rendering themselves “everyday activists.”

As defined in the Introduction chapter, “activism” can include the inconspicuous actions of citizens (or the intellectual activity of scholars) that involve consistent efforts to effect social change. Social change might be measured or recognized most obviously on broad systemic levels, but scholar-activists Rebecca Jones and Amy Pason posit that it is important not to ignore the efforts of citizens, educators, or students who engage in civic affairs through their coursework, community service, or debates about political topics. For this study, I consider the “activist” potentials that exist even in small communities that do not set out to participate in formal social activism but rather who apply civic-minded energy to their immediate surroundings, such as families and social groups, where they spend the majority of their time. While Books-N-Wine's members do not participate in formal, concrete social movements, this study considers the merits of a flexible understanding of “activism,” and qualifies a concept of “everyday activism,” to describe Books-N-Wine's day-to-day approaches to educating their children, their deliberative dialogue within the club space, and unforeseen interactions with other citizens in public who may represent for these readers a perceived social difference.

The Books-N-Wine Club as a Situated, Contextualized Operation

The History of the Books-N-Wine Club

The Books-N-Wine club has been operating in Knoxville since March 2011, when Sarah, the club's co-founder/facilitator began hosting adults monthly in her home, after moving to Knoxville from Houston, Texas where she enjoyed participating in a local book club (and coincidentally where Elizabeth Long conducted a gender-specific investigation of middle-class suburban clubs). Sarah recruited the original members for his group through the listserv for a local homeschooling co-operative with which she and her children affiliate, and the first meeting embarked on a discussion of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Over the past three years, membership has evolved, but has now stabilized to five "core members"—Sarah, Joe, Shelley, Linda, and Mitch. As listed in the Methods chapter, members of Books-N-Wine who were in attendance in April, May, June, and July 2013 and who participated in this study included eight members: Sarah and her co-founder/facilitator Joe, as well as Mitch, Linda, and Shelley, and less frequent attendees, Nina, Helen, and Evelyn. August and September meetings were attended only by core members.

The club's history shows that several aspects of its practice have remained consistent: serving alcoholic beverages and other refreshments, maintaining an adult-only atmosphere where members can discuss a range of topics without filtering for children present, choosing works of literature that will produce meaningful discussions, and protecting a space that is safe for expressing attitudes about politics, religion, and culture. Alongside these constants, several aspects reflect the club's growth and development over nearly three years of operation: members' interests in exploring literary genres and categories, their accumulation of cultural knowledge, their manner of engaging in dialogue, and members' values and behaviors. While the

unofficial roster of members has undergone changes over the last three years—with some members attending infrequently or dropping out altogether—several core members can be counted on to attend regularly. The club's current core membership is evidence of a gradual development of a group identity and a settling into supportive yet deliberative interactions, whereby the club explores interests in literature, culture, and global issues and whereby members receive affirmation as they discuss their values and behaviors for use in other areas of their lives.

Altogether, these consistencies and changes work toward a significant accomplishment—the Books-N-Wine club's formulation of a cohesive community, as seen in September 2013 at the end of the six months of official data collection. Since March 2011 when the club launched its operation, the processes of exploring works of literature and building meaningful social relationships based on common interests, values, and backgrounds have allowed members of Books-N-Wine to create a well-defined, distinct, and autonomous micro-community. Members share a common commitment to providing their children with meaningful educational opportunities and a nurturing home environment. Members also commonly place value on obtaining college, and in some cases, graduate degrees, and exhibit a critical consciousness of the impact of curriculum development at all stages of a learner's development. All but one member of the core constituency identifies with a faith-based affiliation, and although issues of religion do not comprise the majority of meeting discussions, there is a tacit understanding that tolerance and respect for a variety of religious perspectives constitute one standard for acceptable club behavior.

As stated, Books-N-Wine's members are recruited mainly from the local homeschooling co-operative, and while members' common involvement in this co-op comprises part of this club's educational and communal ethos, Books-N-Wine does not officially register itself with the

co-op. In fact, based on Books-N-Wine members' perceived social, political, and religious differences from some individuals in the co-op, Books-N-Wine over time has defined itself as separate and distinct from the co-op. The club's monthly meetings, in addition to allowing members to explore literature and other topics, provide a socially-comfortable space set aside implicitly for the purpose of exploring the club's distinct status in relation to the community that supplies most of its members. As will be discussed in more detail in later sections of this chapter, some members of Books-N-Wine's have noted differences in their reading preferences from those of other parents in the co-op. Some members have also discussed, during several club meetings that I attended within the official time frame for this study, their dislike for some of the ways in which the co-op is organized, including some parents' use of the co-op's shared instructional space for sharing political or religious opinions that do not represent the opinions of all affiliated families.

As a corollary to Books-N-Wine's distinguishing itself from the co-op that supplies most of its members, findings show that the club has over time unconsciously acquired a mode of political operation through its book selections, changes in membership, and core members' tacit agreement to engage in a particular kind of discourse. This mode of operation is marked by members' willingness to learn from each other's minor differences in life perspectives, to negotiate cultural and political meaning in a collaborative and egalitarian manner, and to avoid expressing inflexible moral judgments about what is "right" or "wrong." Although the Books-N-Wine club does not formally engage in social activism with the goals of concretely affecting public policy and although the club meets in Sarah's private home rather than in conspicuous public space, the club's participation in this discourse and members' descriptions of the ways in which they participate in other areas of their lives do indicate the club's particular engagement

with several tenets of the *public sphere*. For example, members discuss matters related to policy and other topics of public concern, as well as qualify their socio-political and pedagogical choice to educate their children through alternative, home-based approaches rather than through mainstream institutions that are beholden to state legislation and the development of a standard, core curriculum. Social engagement and practices such as these examples—discussed in a supportive environment—translate to members’ actions and behavior for their private, domestic, or day-to-day lives.³⁸

The individual histories of the core members of Books-N-Wine correspond to this club’s social and literary history and demonstrate how and why Books-N-Wine has become a distinct community, characterized by (un)conscious engagement with the *public sphere* on a discursive basis and its members’ actions and behaviors as “everyday activists” in the non-club areas of their lives. Sarah, as host, co-founder, and co-facilitator, recounted that her original desire was to join an existing club in Knoxville, but after visiting several clubs that met mostly in public places and discussed texts in which she had little interest, Sarah decided to start her own club and posted an announcement on the homeschooling co-op’s listserv, which she and her family had joined upon moving, to recruit prospective members. Thus, Sarah’s involvement with the homeschooling co-op and her efforts to form a book club very nearly coincided. After several weeks, several prospective club members met for the club’s launch meeting in March 2011. Having seen the listserv announcement, Joe had expressed interest in participating weeks prior to

³⁸ Under Habermas’s theory the literary and political *public sphere* allows participants to discuss topics of public concern in an environment where discussion can be separate from state-based and commercial values. Literary discourse provides participants a foray into topics of public interest, as evidenced by the discussions during Books-N-Wine’s meetings. Also relevant to these findings on Books-N-Wine’s status as a cohesive community whose practice is situated, contextualized, and in correspondence with other “spheres,” Nancy Fraser’s “Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere: Toward a Postmodern Conception” reconsiders public and private spheres as distinct categories and suggests more provocative terms, “alternative publics” and “subaltern counterpublics,” to describe communities’ conceptualizations of self and context. These are sites not only for engagement with issues of public concern but also for taking issue with dominant discourses, from feminist or other “counter” standpoints (291).

the club's beginning; he entered the group at the second meeting and eventually took on an unofficial but recognizable role of co-leadership with Sarah. In this role, Joe not only helps Sarah facilitate meeting discussions but also partners with her in a rigorous process of selecting each month's reading material. He also runs the club's website that archives each month's book selection, defines the club, and that provides a seldom-used space for threaded online discussions. Joe also brings enthusiasm and focus to club discussions, often ushering the group out of "pre-meeting" business of greeting one another and touching base and into "meeting proper" concerns of book-related conversation. Joe is also known as the member who has most extensively prepared discussion notes and gathered supplementary material to bring to meetings, such as maps or news articles, and most often is the member who steers conversation back to the book when it tends to get off track.

Because of Joe's consistent efforts in maintaining the club's website, the history of Books-N-Wine can also be charted according to the archive of book selections. This particular aspect of the club's operation reflects the consistent efforts of Joe and Sarah to maintain a self-conscious literary and cultural ethos for the club and to account for members' interests in a range of genres and topics as extensions of their professional and academic backgrounds and recreational purposes. Members report having experienced meaningful literary training in high school and college, and that they have always been avid readers as professional adults and enjoy the experience of reading with others in a community. More specifically, members have suggested that now that they have completed their formal university educations, one perquisite of the club is that it offers the "ability to be intellectual again without an agenda," an opportunity she says that the "daily grind" removes. Also, this practice of reading reflects their exercise of a certain set of cultural values in their quest for reading high-brow fiction, "classic" literature, the

occasional work of “sensational” fiction, and narrative-style non-fiction, while consciously avoiding “Oprah picks,” or texts that fall under popular genres such as mystery or romance fiction. Although members report that exploring genres, authors, and topics has been their rule for reading selections over the course of their history, they expressed an interest during the time frame for this study in reading books that explore “real world” topics.

Just as the online archive offers a compelling history of Books-N-Wine’s evolving interests in literary genre, Books-N-Wine’s core constituents have recounted personal histories as members of this club, usually using the archive of reading selections as ways to measure their participation in relation to their literary and professional identity. Sarah and Joe, of course, are the longest standing members, as co-founders and co-facilitators. Sarah reports that she briefly considered a plan to rotate from house to house for meetings, but that she eventually decided to host meetings consistently, because she enjoys welcoming people into her home for “as long as they want to stay” and because she felt that hosting consistently would lend stability to this club’s practice. Just as Sarah reports a prior experience in a book club prompting her interest in starting and hosting one, Joe reports that observing his California-dwelling cousin’s enthusiasm and commitment to a club made him interested in joining Books-N-Wine when he saw Sarah’s announcement. Joe said that at first he didn’t understand his cousin’s commitment to a club, but then began to understand the appeal of a group of people sharing a common interest and engaging in an activity that is set apart from other life or social commitments, or as he phrases it, “different from that other stuff.” Although he could not attend the very first book club meeting, he attended the following month and then began to take on the responsibilities of webmaster, book selector, and discussion co-facilitator. These became Joe’s unofficial roles, but ones about which everyone seems to agree.

Linda is the only member of the core constituency who does not currently affiliate with the homeschooling co-op, though she has homeschooled her children in previous years. Linda is Sarah's next-door neighbor and fellow reading enthusiast. Linda reports that she began attending Books-N-Wine shortly after moving to Sarah's neighborhood. Sarah had introduced herself and invited her to join the group, and friendship between these neighbors thus arose. Fortuitously, although Linda is not affiliated with the homeschooling co-op, she does have a previous acquaintanceship with Mitch through a place of worship and reported that she was pleased to discover that prior social connections existed within an unfamiliar situation. A native of Knoxville, she moved to Sarah's neighborhood after her previous home burned down, destroying her extensive personal library, which she said was the most heartbreaking and "surreal" part of the experience. She remembers that Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* was the text that was selected for her first attendance, which she said had an ironic significance because of this novel's book-burning plot:

One of the biggest horrible things about our house burning down was that all my books burned up, and I had boxes and boxes of books, and I've got pictures of burned books, and I've got some that are covered in soot, but most of them were in the garage. I mean I had a huge, if you can imagine, a huge book collection. And that was like the most traumatic, horrible thing of all. And so then to go to this book club not long after that where the reading selection was all about burning books—that was just kind of a surreal, strange beginning to the whole thing.

Despite this association between significant loss and a longstanding enjoyment of reading, Linda's joining of Books-N-Wine provides an optimistic activity for reclaiming a relationship

with books and entering a social environment where there is, as she says, “intellectual stimulation.” She noted that her continued participation in the club coincided with a developing friendship with Sarah and was characterized by her increasing enjoyment of club-related experiences. She stated during interviews that she only occasionally lobbies for selected reading, but does enjoy contributing to the social and literary dialogue during meetings and raising questions about texts, plots, communities, and histories they depict.

Mitch describes his entrance into the club as the result of Sarah’s invitation and persuasion. Although he does not remember which book had been selected for his first meeting, Sarah’s persuasion was successful and long-lasting, as he has consistently attended for nearly two years. He reports that he had some previous involvement in clubs that read faith-based texts, and while that experience was both “intense” and useful for him, he does enjoy the relaxed atmosphere, refreshments, and the ongoing camaraderie that occurs in Books-N-Wine.

Shelley, as the core member most recently enveloped into the fold of this club, began participating in January 2013, when the club was scheduled to read Felix J. Palma’s *The Map of the Sky*. Shelley had been acquainted with Sarah through the co-op and expressed that while the invitation to the first visit came too late for her to read the selected text, she looked forward to the fact that other homeschooling parents were already participating. Even though she is the newest member, she expressed that she felt immediately connected to others in the core group based on everyone’s perceived mutual interests in exploring diverse viewpoints and the commonly shared challenge of homeschooling their children. Like other members, she also has prior experience with a book club, but reported that she prefers Books-N-Wine’s particular attractions of social and intellectual engagement. Based on her prior and current club experiences, Shelley speculates that other clubs have specific tasks and literary genres in mind,

but enjoys Books-N-Wine's "lack of mission" and the combinations of personalities enabled by members being "differently intelligent," often bringing their professional and academic backgrounds into conversations about a range of texts and topics.

Defining "Book Clubs," a Practice In Flux

In relation to the collective history of the Books-N-Wine club and the individual histories of its members that contribute to a sense of this group as a cohesive community, Books-N-Wine's members shared during interviews their general understandings of "book clubs" as a type of social activity as well as described their sense of this club's unique defining qualities. These definitions are important to consider, in the spirit of emboldening clubs to self-define—a spirit promulgated by the popular "how-to" guides that were explored in the Literature Review—because they are formulated at the same time that Books-N-Wine's members entrench themselves in this social practice and in the ongoing process of individual identification. Joe defines book clubs as "... a group of people who have decided, 'we're going to read *this*, we're going to have *this* in common, and we're going to get together and... talk about it.'" His use of an indefinite "*this*" indicates that common, yet flexible, choices, identities, and experiences among members are three necessary components of this practice and suggests that book clubs and the culture at large are knowable and comprehensible to those with either casual or enthusiastic interest in them. Mitch echoes this sense of common practice and defines book clubs as "two or more people who decide to read the same book and meet to talk about it." Mitch adds that sustained practice is a defining element of a club, that "*anyone* can go do a first meeting," but for the activities of common readings and discussions to constitute a book club, the readers "would have to do this more than once."

Additional definitions of clubs from Books-N-Wine's core members focused on the components they deemed necessary for these groups to operate, including an agreed-upon place to meet; participants who love to read, who are willing to show up, and who want to discuss their thoughts with others; books that engage the interests of all members. Members added that the serving of refreshments tends to facilitate discussions and the forming of relationships, while Joe added that an operational website and "a name that conveys the identity of the group" create an "official" status that a club's members can reference when conversing with non-clubbers. In listing these core components for any club, these members drew from their experiences in Books-N-Wine and used these as segues to define this particular club. Sarah defined the very club that she founded by contrasting her experiences as host to experiences with other clubs. After enjoying her Houston club but being dissatisfied with experience visiting a Knoxville club that met at a local Panera Bread location, she said that Books-N-Wine is "definitely more intimate," attributing the intimacy to the relationships among members enabled by the private space of her home: "We're friends. We've known each other. We have something vested in the club and we want it to continue." In contrast to the Books-N-Wine experience that she provides for and receives from the other members, Sarah described the Panera meeting in terms of the number of participants and her opinion of the quality of the discussion:

You know, with the people at Panera, there must have been twenty people there. You couldn't even all sit in the same area. Some people brought their kids and their kids were making noise, and I was like, 'Well, this is ridiculous.' And somebody was leading a list of questions from a back of a book, and you know, it just, it seemed more ... pedestrian, I guess. Just not, not something that would interest me. I modeled this one after my Houston club. And I think it's pretty

similar. People in that group were all pretty good friends. I think that there are a lot of parallels.

Just as Mitch defined Books-N-Wine in contrast to a previous book-club experience, Shelley contrasts Books-N-Wine to a previous experience in a club comprised of women who at the time met to discuss, over a period of six months, Eckhart Tolle's *The New Earth*, an Oprah book, and who infused their "religious" identity into club practice. Making additional observations, Shelley noted that Books-N-Wine's inclusion of both men and women contrasts with the previous group's female constituency and speculated that Books-N-Wine "is probably a more educated group overall." She also noted that while Books-N-Wine's members "are fairly defined by some of their religious beliefs," this identity marker "is not as pervasive in the conversations."

Combining these slightly different descriptions of book clubs in general and the Books-N-Wine club in particular, members of Books-N-Wine agree that this club is defined by its constituency of people who enjoy each other's company and who learn from each other's slightly different perspectives and opinions, as a result of what Shelley describes as members being "differently intelligent." At the same time, members confirm Joe's claims and enjoy enough common ground with one another in terms of education level and moderate-to-cosmopolitan worldviews such that conversations involve enough generalized political agreement to ensure a congenial atmosphere. As with published "how-to" guides, the statements made by Joe and other members thus suggest that book clubs do share common features, but that each club needs to discover and adhere to its own best practices as they evolve or remain consistent over time.

As suggested in the Introduction and Literature Review chapters, it is possible that book clubs as social units and their individual members experience transformation in a variety of ways, whether positive or negative. Transformation may involve the shifting ethos or identity of

a club as a collective unit, readers' acquiring new knowledge about literature, their enjoyment of new social relationships, and the formulation of new opinions about social issues.

Transformation may additionally or alternatively involve readers' experiences of discomfort while participating in a book club, prompting them to seek other social groups or forms of social recreation. Books-N-Wine's members neither describe their experiences with this club using the term "transformation," nor feel that the club or their sense of how to define it has evolved in any drastic way beyond the gradual stabilization of its constituency during 2013. Several of the participants were initially reticent to note specific or significant changes over the course of their involvement in the club, as they would have been able to measure it up to the point at which I was conducting initial interviews, beyond coming away with new knowledge or stronger acquaintanceships with others in the group. Yet, upon reflection during the interview process and over the course of this study, some members shared that participation in this club provides a sense of how the club experience and the reading material might have some impact on their lives—namely their own perspectives and how these might shape what they "pass on," as Sarah suggests, to others through conversations, behaviors, and relationships. Linda located a sense of personal transformation within the structure of a club. She first qualified her regard for Books-N-Wine as not only a site for intellectual stimulation in general, but also an environment where she exercises "feeling intelligent" as a "core part of [her] identity." Exercising this "feeling" is an endeavor that she says is difficult now that she is "not in school anymore." Thus Linda's description seems to suggest that the club is a space for maintaining and crafting a salient aspect of her identity. Secondly, she shared that she is open to the idea that her desires for participation in a book club may change, that for now she does not "want the trouble of thinking the books out," but that "maybe at some point" she will consider lobbying for reading selections. Shelley,

based on her experiences with this club, opined that a club's effects are intellectual and social. She added that "the biggest thing" a club does is provide members with "a better understanding of the world, better perspectives, and opening minds." As with Linda, Shelley finds that her interests in "different world views" and "discussing what is current" along with "historical contexts" are difficult to pursue "once we finish school," because "the daily grind takes away this ability." Echoing Linda's interest in continuing education, Shelley adds that "to be intellectual without an agenda is nice." Joe described his experiences in the club as oftentimes involving "wrestling" with his own attitudes, an intense verb to describe his personal transformations as a result of reading Books-N-Wine's selections and discussing them with open-minded individuals, whom he says are not "unified around any particular dogma or set of beliefs." Heather Murray's historical study, *Come, bright Improvement!* echoes this definition, suggesting that contemporary "book clubs may be classified as a form of adult education or continuing learning," but that the "opportunity for socializing is key to their popularity, particularly for those that meet in private settings and are composed of friends or invited members" (4).

Shelley also notes that several other important defining features of Books-N-Wine have come about as a result of members' consistent input into the ambience of the space of club meetings. The experiences of intellectual and social ease are facilitated by members' social connections existing outside of and prior to the club experience, and by the relaxed etiquette, yet clear expectations, for club participation. Politically speaking, this group follows an unspoken rule that differences of opinion on and exploration of social issues are encouraged, but members typically do not express opinions and sentiments that fall too far outside of the group's perceived norms. Literarily speaking, this group agrees that no one is pressured to complete the reading of

the chosen text or to prepare discussion notes before attending meetings; social engagement takes precedence over literary engagement.

With these factors combined, Books-N-Wine (and perhaps other clubs) defines itself by patterns of introducing and absorbing new, slightly different ideas into its discussion and slightly different behaviors into the environment. These patterns all come from members' interests in temporary negotiations of differences within a certain range of a perceived "norm," followed by the formulation of a collective ethos and collective set of behaviors that either fall within or slightly exceed a previously established norm. An example of this group's discursive social norms provides somewhat comical evidence of Books-N-Wine members' experiments in establishing and testing acceptable boundaries of behavior with one another, as well as illustrates the levity and sense of rapport that has developed over time in these readers' social and intellectual relationships. While discussions often become humorous or bawdy throughout the evening as members relax into the ambience of a given meeting, they steer clear of entering discussions of a personally salacious nature. During the August meeting as members opened the discussion by referring back to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (abbreviated *HeLa* in members' conversations) and the medical industry's profitable use of the title character's cervical cancer cells, Sarah joked, as a meta-social and direct way to reference established boundaries and perhaps even extend or cross them, about raising the level of bawdiness of the topics that might be explored within the space of the meeting: "Can we have a sex discussion one night? But we'll have to hurry because my kids will be home." Sarah's joke served to connect the reproductive content central to the plots of both *HeLa* and the August selection *State of Wonder* to the very structure of the meetings; without skipping a beat, Linda used Sarah's joke to announce directly the "official" topic of conversation for a club meeting—"oh, the segue into the

topic of this book”—an abrupt and explicit sort of announcement that is not customary with this club. During most meetings, members tend to begin discussing reading material more gradually after an extended period of greetings and social banter, and so this jocular and self-referencing segue marked perhaps a new trend in the conducting of club meetings.³⁹

The September meeting, in addition to including a rich discussion of *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* and other topics, provides several examples of Books-N-Wine’s religious or political norms and evidences two members’ sense of the most productive manner for asking one another about differences of opinion and testing the boundaries of acceptable discussion fodder. Sarah and Shelley arrived at a discussion of the subject of gay marriage and the surrounding laws, rights, cultural mores, and debates about sexual orientation—a subject that might create tension in any social environment. As stated by members and as I observed between April and September, one discursive boundary that most of the core members generally observe is avoiding expressions of staunch religious or political claims. Yet the September meeting seems to mark one point at which Books-N-Wine tested these previous boundaries in order to venture into new social territory. While still adhering to the general rule of avoiding staunch claims, Sarah and Shelley seemed comfortable and curious enough during the September meeting to explore the subject of gay marriage—and each other’s preferences, tolerances, and sense of ethical behavior—a comfort that may not have existed during the club’s inaugural meetings three years prior. The following excerpt from this transcript focuses on these members’ very pointed interest in specifying their division of opinions about sexual orientation from opinions about social treatment of other citizens:

³⁹ See later sections of this chapter and the Conclusion chapter for more details on the significance of meeting structure.

Shelley: There're a whole lot of women who choose to, you know, I don't know, *do* things that I don't approve of—

Sarah: Exactly.

Shelley: —and I don't stone them in the street.

Sarah: Right. Yeah, you can't ... it's your *actions toward* the people that are not acceptable.

Shelley: Right and it's your ... yeah, your personal actions.

Sarah: And you have to have some sort of a moral compass that leads you to believe one way or the other.

Shelley: Right.

In the midst of this discussion, these two members work toward acceptable degree of differences, expressing affirmations such as “right” and “I understand” and also asking and answering questions directly. In so doing they establish a new norm or boundary that has less to do with the topics of sexual orientation, the state, and religion and more to do with productive ways to engage in deliberative dialogue:

Shelley: My question is, did your God give you the power to say ‘That’s wrong. It’s aberrant and you’re going to hell’ to make that judgment call yourself, ... or, is there a, you know, a ‘Live and let live and minister to people the best you can and be an example yourself?’ Like, which of those—because those seem to be the two schools of thought—either, ‘it’s wrong and God says it’s wrong, so you’re damned and I get to do whatever the hell I want to because you’re *damned*,’ or ...

Sarah: Well, it depends on if you’re looking at the God of the Old Testament or the God of the New Testament....

Shelley: There're a whole lot of Christians that are saying, "You're going straight to Hell."

Sarah: I understand that.

Shelley: It's not that black and white for most people.

Sarah: I know, but I see more shades of gray than most people.

Shelley: Yeah. You're right. Exactly.

At a later moment during the September meeting and in the midst of discussing several political- and culturally-related topics, such as fans' opinions about performance artists' lyrics versus artists' politics and the reality of free speech rights and censorship, Sarah and Shelley discussed the politics of spending as a customer at big-name corporations, such as Home Depot and Wal-Mart, and the effectiveness of boycotting places like Home Depot and Wal-Mart. Sarah argued that "*You* don't make a difference"—meaning that a single individual consumer has no power to bring down a powerful retail corporation—and added, "You make more of a difference in the lives around you." Shelley offered another perspective on the idea of economic protest and suggested that "sometimes you *can* speak with your money." While these two members do not express an opinion on whether they desire to boycott one of these corporation, they use two slightly different approaches to reflect on the most effective means of boycotting. In so doing, these members invoke one of the major themes of this study—"everyday activism"—as a means of social change that may appropriately describe this club's ethos and that is worthy of further investigation.

Literary Contexts: A Trajectory of Reading Selections

The Books-N-Wine club's history as a community, the history of its members' involvement in this group, and members' definitions of "book club" all contribute to this club's sense of its identity in comparison to other clubs, and more specifically its status as a club that is committed to flexible conversations and open expressions of socio-political opinions and life perspectives. Books-N-Wine comprises a community of reading enthusiasts who have all received a traditional college education or higher and who have become friends and compatriots as self-described intellectuals and lovers of fun. In combination with these details, this section addresses the findings on this club's responses to reading selections between February and October 2013, a brief but important period for this club's formulation of a special relationship to literary genre. This relationship is as exploratory as it is intentional and provides some basis for investigating Books-N-Wine as a group of "everyday activists" who to some degree regard works of literature as tools to build knowledge and to negotiate with peers new values and behaviors for use in their professional, domestic, and everyday lives.

The club's trajectory of reading selections from February to October 2013 reveals these months as a period of concentrated investment in exploring genre and generating cultural authority. During this time, members read and discussed works of non-fiction on a near consecutive monthly basis after having previously engaged with mostly works of fiction. The selections included Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (February), C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* (March), J. Maarten Troost's *The Sex Lives of Cannibals: Adrift in the Equatorial Pacific* (April), Denise Kiernan's *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II* (May and June), Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (July), Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder* (August), William

Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer's co-written *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (September). The October selection, Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, as noted, marked the club's intentional selection of a fictional work. Among these texts, several categories can be identified: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*, *The Girls of Atomic City*, and *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* comprise a category of narrative non-fiction on the subject of historically- or culturally-notable events and personages; *The Screwtape Letters* combines several literary traditions, as an epistolary allegory combining a fictional plot with heavily philosophical and theological themes, while *State of Wonder* can be more narrowly categorized by its fictional plot and linear narrative form; *Guns, Germs and Steel* stands as an outlier in this trajectory of narratives that present some form of literary aesthetic, in that the author presents a scholarly monograph based on anthropological research on the subject of the history of the world's populations. Even with these categorical differences, these texts altogether represent Books-N-Wine's interest, during these months of the study and potentially during other periods of the club's operation, in texts that inspire an emotional response in readers, instigate in-depth dialogue during meetings, represent the experiences of historical or "real world" topics as a result of a researcher's ethnographic (or anthropological) findings, and present a literary form that challenges readers to acquire new literacy skills yet is accessible enough to provide enjoyable recreation. And with the exception of *The Screwtape Letters*, these texts consistently display an element of ethnographic research or autobiography on the part of these texts' authors or main characters.⁴⁰

Several details related to this club's overall agenda for selecting books provide important background information for understanding the trajectory of texts chosen during the time frame

⁴⁰ See Chapter V for more detailed commentary of these texts in relation to Books -N-Wine's constituency of "everyday activists."

for this study. Joe and Sarah, who figure as this club's team of founders and facilitators, also serve in the capacity of "selection committee" for reading material. While these members said that they occasionally take into account the wishes and suggestions of other members, Joe and Sarah demonstrate in practice (and verbally expressed to me during an interview) that they spend a great deal of time and energy selecting books each month for the club to read. The online archive represents Books-N-Wine's primary system of record-keeping (organized by Joe as self-appointed webmaster) and traces the club's three-year reading history. For some entries, the archive includes commentary by this club's members. Joe and Sarah's original goal was to select "the classics" that would enable members to revisit texts they read in high school or college, such as J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, toward producing new responses to these texts. Their goal for selections evolved over time, expanding an interest in "the classics" to include a range of genres, forms, topics, authors, time periods, and themes. Shelley suggests that this expansion stems from the club's priorities of "camaraderie," "shaping of the world from different points of view," and an "open-minded seeking of other ideas."

As stated in the Methods chapter, I read each text after the meeting for which it was selected in order focus more on members' statements and behaviors rather than on my own literary responses to the readings. In delaying my readings temporarily, I treated participants' literary responses as a way to direct my own responses to these texts. The responses of Books-N-Wine's members, I discovered, comprised an aesthetic in and of themselves and actually highlighted more starkly this genre-specific trajectory and its correspondence to the club's

unique participation in the world.⁴¹ Although April through September (and including February, even though it was outside of this study's time frame) was a period focused more on non-fiction than fictional texts in this club's practices, several general observations can be made regarding this club's responses to fiction and non-fiction texts. Members expressed more enthusiasm or strong reactions to non-fiction selections than did they in response to fiction and tended to make more connections, as could be observed in their dialogue, between reading selections and their own lives.

With regard to these connections, a tentative claim might be made with Books-N-Wine that the more detailed and strong reactions to non-fiction texts provide members with a stronger basis for and indicator of the social and intellectual relationships that develop in this group. The conversations explored above between Sarah and Shelley during the September meeting regarding political opinions spiraled out of conversations related to *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* and previous club selections including *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, and show how these members can explore differences of opinions and literary responses and build a friendship with amicable and intellectual motivations. An earlier example occurred during the April meeting. The members present were Sarah, Joe, Mike, Linda, Helen and Nina and the discussions of Troost's *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*, the author's non-fiction account of his experiences living on a small South Pacific Island, and other topics such as members' experiences of homeschooling their children and weekend activities very quickly revealed this group's proclivity to inside jokes, banter, laughter and general social amusement. With regard to the text in question, members discussed their appreciation of aspects of its narrative form, including the

⁴¹ The Conclusion chapter will provide additional analysis of this reading selection trajectory in consideration of Books-N-Wine's own aesthetic of group interaction and literary response, which combines its relationship to genre, its shared discourse or "speech genre" in the Bakhtinian sense and the consistent structure of meeting dialogue.

author's ironic humor and his style of "moving on" quickly in the plot, as members put it, from long sections of philosophical rants about government and culture. During the April meeting, even at the beginning of my social and investigative relationships with these readers, I noticed that social banter, literary interest, and connections between the text and members' lives all seemed to exist in a symbiotic relationship; comfort and understanding among the friends in this group facilitated in-depth conversations of personal experiences and even small differences of opinion as they related to the texts at hand. Nina's single visit to Books-N-Wine during this study provides an intriguing example of the social dynamics that are revealed in members' responses to the readings. Nina was a dominant voice in the April discussion and seemed comfortable enough she share her experiences of traveling in connection to the descriptions of travel in *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*:

What struck me was, I took the work as a whole, thinking about when you travel to a foreign country, anywhere you go, there are just these idiosyncrasies that you deal with. ... I would have a hard time living in that kind of place. I went to Peru one time on a mission trip, and then I went to Russia one time, and both times when I went I was so glad to get back to the U.S. There is no way I could ever be a foreign missionary.

Because Nina was neither available for interviews nor in attendance at subsequent meetings, it was not possible, for this study, to investigate further Nina's seeming comfort with and relationships among others in the group in connection to her literary experiences and worldview. However, I discovered later during an interview with Linda that she was "rubbed the wrong way" by some of Nina's comments, perhaps showing that these members might have been socially and literarily at odds with one another, but lacked a close social bond that would have

enabled more interest in exploring each other's differences, the kind of exploration that is likely to occur when Sarah and Shelley discuss social issues and literary texts.

The July meeting provided an important occasion for observing connections between members' lives, attitudes, and choices to read non-fiction texts. During this meeting, members engaged in a very in-depth and rousing discussion of Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, including their impression's of the author's use of "ego-driven" academic prose to detail his anthropological claims. Along with this group's usual jokes, banter, and sharing of the details of their lives, Books-N-Wine members explored the premise behind this reading selection, namely that "history's victors" who are today's developed populations were able to advance in technology, politics, and religion because of greater access to vital resources for survival and not because of any biological differences in intelligence or other abilities. This text, by virtue of its academic focus and anthropological subject matter, seemed not only to incite detailed dialogue but also to identify disagreements among members that may result in somewhat tense social dynamics. For example, Evelyn's summary of additional reading that she had done in connection to *Guns, Germs, and Steel* suggested that she did not accept this book's evolutionary premise and that she wanted, perhaps, to involve members in discussions that would argue against evolutionary explanations of the world's populations:

I think that evolutionary thought has also come into that whole anthropological arena, that at one point we were really limited in intelligence and went through into greater intelligence. I think there's a lot of evidence that that's not true but that's the way that it's portrayed. But anyway, I was hoping to open a can of worms there.

While no heated discussions ensued, Shelley and Joe responded to Evelyn's suggestion with their acceptance of a basic evolutionary model that undergirds Diamond's premise and drew upon their differences in scientific and religious backgrounds to express their interest in additional investigations of Diamond's anthropological claims. While Shelley said that "the evolutionary part didn't bother [her], being a scientist, and not a particularly religious person," Joe said he "understand[s] both perspectives, being both religious and a scientist." Thus, as Joe and Shelley over time have entertained a pleasant friendship within the club and enjoy more consistent interactions with one another through Books-N-Wine, they respond to one another in ways that create common ground in the midst of their different perspectives. In contrast, Evelyn's inconsistent attendance and differences of opinion during the July meeting regarding the selected text, along with other references to Biblical scripture as a means of disputing Diamond's claims, marked her as a religious and political outlier to the group. Shelley observed during an interview that she was not surprised that Evelyn did not return to the club, summarizing her impression of the polarizing dynamics between Evelyn and others in the group produced by Evelyn's "back-up information in her arsenal" as a means of "converting everybody" or "swaying a group" that "would never have taken her word for it." The others, Shelley recalls, "just nodded and looked away," as though to communicate a collective unspoken response to Evelyn's claims, such as "Okay well, I'll do some research into that and get back to you."

The August meeting produced a less intense discussion after July's rousing discussion of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, but members' readings of Patchett's *State of Wonder* did instigate a fairly detailed conversation of its themes and literary form, given its continuation of topics that previously interested members of this club, such as bio-medical ethics and the behaviors of communities around the world. *State of Wonder*'s focus on a scientist's development of a fertility

drug while researching the women in an Amazon tribe who bore children well past a normal stage of menopause elicited comments about the physical and emotional impact of extended fertility as well as claims, such as Sarah's, that outsiders "can't change what is natural" for an indigenous community. Yet, no one was enthusiastic or enflamed by this text enough to engage in serious debates beyond points such as these. Rather, August seemed to be a meeting for relaxing and simply enjoying social relationships and light, yet detailed conversations about the book. This shift in tone from July's meeting might have resulted as a combination of everyone's mood during the evening and a general lack of strong response to this particular reading selection. When Linda asked if anyone enjoyed the novel that she had recommended for August, members politely responded that they "liked it," but observed that the "pregnancy plot" was "bizarre," and wondered whether the novel was "oversimplifying" or reducing the ethics and pragmatics of childrearing to pharmaceutical profit. And while Sarah suggested that the open-ended conclusion "set the author up to write a sequel," she felt dissatisfied with the characterization of the protagonist, who for her, did not elicit an empathetic response. Shelley added that the protagonist's characterization seemed inconsistently rendered across the whole of the narrative and therefore was not "believable." Adding some analysis of form to the discussion, Joe connected *State of Wonder*'s plot to that of his recent reading of *Heart of Darkness* in terms of these novels' protagonists' extended experiences in remote communities, while Mitch and Shelley made comments on what they felt were faulty transitions in plot that diminished the intriguing subject matter. Mitch specified that the author's "skills as a writer were unable to keep up with her ideas."

During the months when I was collecting data, deeper reflections on this club allowed me to discover that the February selection, Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, had a

significant bearing on the subsequent selections of the texts for April through September, and by extension a significant bearing on the conversations that these texts produced as one mode of solidifying friendships and negotiating values and behaviors. Even though the February meeting predated the “official” part of this study, club members frequently commented on Skloot’s text during subsequent meetings and interviews as a way to understand other reading selections. Thus, members’ continued descriptions during meetings and interviews and their choices in reading material based on their experiences with *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* warranted a reflective annotation of this text for the purposes of examining this text’s plot, form, and thematic significance in light of participants’ experiences with it.

Skloot’s non-fiction narrative charts the author’s process of researching the history of the vaccine coded “HeLa” abbreviating the name of the patient from whom doctors collected cancerous cervical cells, an African-American woman named Henrietta Lacks. Books-N-Wine members were intrigued by the bio-cultural ethics represented in this book; despite the remarkable “life” of these cells and their use in developing countless treatments and scientific advances, the ethical problem is that these cells were used without the consent of the patient or her family. Despite the profit and professional success experienced by the doctors and researchers who used HeLa cells in their work, the Lacks family remained in poverty for decades and never knew the full story of Henrietta’s experience until Skloot began her research. The aftermath of this medical policy had an enormous impact on the Lacks family, particularly Henrietta’s daughter Deborah who was an infant when her mother died. The most striking part of this narrative concerns Skloot’s discovery of the impact not only on the Lacks family but also on herself through the bond she builds with Deborah of friendship, discovery, disappointment, and reclamation.

Members expressed their high regard for this book because of its influence on their individual and club reading experiences, its role in raising their standards for “good” reading, and its accomplishments in shaping their socio-political attitudes. Shelley describes this book’s genre according to the response it produces; it’s “a kind of ‘Aha! moment’ kind of book.” Members expressed during follow-up interviews that *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, or “*HeLa*” as they began to refer to it with more affection and familiarity, inspired the club’s April through September pursuit of culturally- and historically-significant non-fiction works. Shelley remarked that *HeLa* consecutively followed the club’s January 2013 reading of *The Map of the Sky*, which she observed from others’ comments to be “a very long and a somewhat convoluted story,” and a book about time travel that was “difficult to talk about because it was ... all left up to the reader’s imagination,” and left readers asking, “Okay, what really happened there?” and “Is this part real?” *HeLa* was introduced by Sarah who enjoyed reading it in her Houston book club, and who strove to meet the needs of club members who “wanted something more tangible to discuss.” Members report that this book had an impact that was both emotional and intellectual and all but Mitch—who shared that he did not quite understand other members’ “fascination” with this selection, and stated that his reading of an article, rather than a “whole book,” on the *HeLa* subject was sufficient—cited this text as one that revealed to the club a very important aspect of its literary identity. Shelley added her impression of *HeLa*’s influence on the club and its reading practices:

I think it was kind of unconsciously [that] we were seeking more books like that. ... I think that book particularly did kind of lead us on this quest to find other books of the same caliber—which we haven’t yet [found] by the way.

After Books-N-Wine's exploration of non-fiction texts which bring out in-depth discussions of the topics and connections to members' lives, the October selection perhaps marked a new phase of this club's operation, though the meeting falls outside of the official time frame for this study. The club's October selection, Ray Bradbury's 1962 novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is worth considering, even though the October meeting falls outside the period for official data collection. This text shows the club's resumption of fiction selections and a new exploration of genre and plot in relation to a season of the year. During the latter portion of the September meeting, a significant amount of energy was applied to lobbying for the October selection. Joe and Sarah's criteria for selecting an October book consisted of the following requirements: (1) that the selection be fiction, preferably "classic," rather than "popular," and (2) that the selection be "scary" in some way, in order to add a Halloween festivity to the October meeting. These requirements render time and season as significant contextual markers (as with Kelly Chandler's study of "The Beach Book Club" for high school students). Although Linda typically does not lobby for texts, with the exception of her suggestion of *State of Wonder* for August, this member offered the idea of reading about the "Bell Witch," a Knoxville-specific legend, and thus indicated that her interests in place, history, and season culminate in a sense of appropriate reading material for a social group. Joe and Sarah worked hard in online searches to select a suitable publication on the "Bell Witch," but could find no definitive version of this legend, which is scattered across separate folklorists' treatment of this subject matter. Joe and Sarah eventually chose *Something Wicked This Way Comes* as a way to satisfy the requirements of "classic" fiction and scare-factor and to relieve what they observed as the group's fatigue after a long period of non-fiction, and in some cases scholarly, reading selections. With additional interaction with Books-N-Wine, it would be fruitful to

identity subsequent literary exploration that revealed distinct reading periods, such as several months devoted to a theme or topic, or more diffuse and nebulous interests, as bases for further describing this club's literary sensibilities and the ways in which responses to texts can reveal otherwise unspoken social dynamics.

Contexts: Private Space as Symbolic Exchange for Public Engagement

February through October 2013 (with April through September marking the “official” time frame for observing meetings), as a relatively brief period in the Books-N-Wine club's communal and reading history that is now entering its fourth year, was a demonstrable period for observing this group's position within the mire of several powerful operations. Books-N-Wine situates itself alongside its impressions of the academy, the print industry, concrete community involvement, other book clubs, mainstream education, the homeschooling co-op, and others, and authorizes itself to operate in the way it deems fit. Books-N-Wine's members alternate between underscoring and questioning the literary values of the academy, and to invoke Rosa Eberly's theories, this group is a viable candidate for the status of “citizen critics” who examine and reconstruct their literary sensibilities as well as their worldviews without pressuring themselves to instigate concrete “missions” typically associated with social activism. Findings suggest that Books-N-Wine defines itself in opposition to clubs that focus strictly on reading popular fiction and producing plot-based dialogue and calls for wider investment in social issues and intellectual stimulation during club meetings. In addition, its (un)conscious engagement in the *public sphere*—through discussions of ideas with fellow club members—translates to real behavior and actions—“missions”—for their domestic, professional, and everyday lives.

How specifically does the Books-N-Wine club situate its behaviors and actions within concrete contexts such as East Tennessee or in cultural contexts such as the print industry or educational institutions? How might Books-N-Wine's situated operation be observed in the club's meeting dialogue and expressed by its members? With its history, initially revolving but recently stabilized constituency, and nearly consistent non-fiction selections of reading material during the time frame for this study, findings suggest that the Books-N-Wine club responds to many influences of time, place, culture, and social behavior. One useful place to begin describing this club's situated operation is by observing its navigation of public and private spaces. Books-N-Wine has cultivated a public identity (namely through its website) that corresponds somewhat to the details of its private practice. The "About Us" page of the Books-N-Wine club's website describes this club as one that is accessible to virtually anyone and that locates itself in a particular city, as "[o]pen to any adult in the Knoxville, TN area who loves to read." This page then defines the club according to its general schedule and according to the basic components that comprise meetings—reading material, refreshments, adult company, and conversation:

Each month we meet to discuss a book and share a bottle of wine. The conversation and company are great. Snacks are served, so come a bit hungry. It is a great time to share ideas and thoughts with other adults and to have intelligent conversation.

Joe and Sarah, who co-founded and facilitate this club, individually paraphrased the online description that they generated two years prior to this study by emphasizing that Books-N-Wine is a welcoming environment. At the same time, these co-founders made it clear that this club setting is not "open" to the presence of children, lest they distract from the social and intellectual pursuits of adults who value the precious little time they enjoy with other adults. During an

interview Sarah further explained this insistence anecdotally to validate her responses to prospective members who want to bring children with them:

... this is just not for kids. You know, you want the adults to be able to talk plainly and have an adult conversation and not worry about the child interrupting, or the child running through, or the child saying, ‘Mommy, Daddy, I need this,’ or something, ... and I want to be able to provide kind of a safe discussion. And it’s not that we talk about sexy subjects, but, you know, there is a way of speaking with adults and a way of speaking when the kids are around. And I want people to be able to feel open and free.

Other members expressed their understandings of Books-N-Wine’s operation by citing the club’s consistent meeting in Sarah’s home, rather than rotating among members’ homes or in public places—a choice that they feel enables more candid conversations. They added that meeting in Sarah’s home as opposed to public places and other members’ homes also sets the tone for expected behavior and provides some stability from month-to-month. At Sarah’s home, members have come to expect that they can stay late at Sarah’s house on meeting nights and that conversations about life and the selected reading material will be candid without being at the expense of anyone’s beliefs or values. Despite the “welcome” to “any adult,” Sarah’s home as the meeting space has become increasingly insular as the club’s constituency stabilizes to a group of close-knit core members; these members have developed several specific practices over time that may not be possible in a group that operates in public space or whose constituency is constantly changing.

On the level of discourse, members continually form shared ways of verbal and bodily communication, or a “speech genre.”⁴² On the level of social dynamics and interaction, members have delegated unofficial roles and responsibilities to members and have established operational procedures. And on the level of literary and “real world” interests, this club spends its meeting time discussing literature and other topics in ways that satisfy the desires of its members. In the private space of Sarah’s home, members’ values, such as commitments to family and the building of cosmopolitan worldviews, are affirmed. Also, members’ verbal and social exchanges in the space of Sarah’s home represent, or model, behaviors and actions for use in these members’ lives, particularly the powerful sphere of everyday life where members interact meaningfully with families, friends, co-workers, or even strangers in public. In relation to this club’s operations within private space in which members model these behaviors and actions, Books-N-Wine’s literary sensibilities have global registers—meaning that the more intimate this group becomes the more it might explore texts and themes representing populations in distant regions of the world or characters whose experiences seem vastly dissimilar. Through this patterned behavior and alternating inward and outward focus, the members of the Books-N-Wine club seek and find social kinship with one another at the same time that they use texts to imagine kinship with (or to articulate respectful unfamiliarity with) communities and populations with whom they likely will never interact.⁴³

⁴² See Chapters 1 and 3 for references to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Speech Genres* and Paul Bové’s “Discourse” as ways to conceptualize Books-N-Wine’s particular manner of speaking as a combination of individual members’ verbal and non-verbal communicative expressions and as a product of the social and intellectual relationships that form within this community.

⁴³ See Chapter 2 for a review of scholarship on clubs as site for intra- and cross-cultural reading practices, including Charles Ray’s blog entry on the U. S. Department of State’s site, detailing collaborative readings of significant texts shared between American and Zimbabwean political leaders. See Chapter 2 also for Catherine Burwell’s explorations of publishers’ marketing of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to North American book clubs.

Initially, contextual details were easily observed as concrete and external to the club, such as details related to Knoxville or East Tennessee as the municipal and geographical regions in which the club functions. Additional details of this nature include the historical or current events that shaped meeting dialogue often in connection to the club's reading selections. Books-N-Wine's most notable responses to the distinct region of East Tennessee and to the city of Knoxville and its boroughs center around several factors, as will be explored in this section: (1) the club's readings of books specific to this region, (2) members' personal experiences living in this region, and (3) the club's relationship to or perceptions of other local social groups, including communities such as other book clubs and the homeschooling co-op, members' families and friends, and members' professional and religious affiliations. With these connections between geographical region, social groups, and literary texts, Books-N-Wine may not set out on what Shelley calls a "mission" but the club does demonstrate intentional affirmations of values, such as self-directed education and tolerant views of diverse social groups, for actions in spheres external to the club's private space.

Several of the club's chosen texts, authors, and fictional plotlines have general connections to Knoxville's literary heritage, including Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and James Agee's *A Death in the Family*. While these texts were read well before the time frame for this study, they are relevant in that they reveal the club's early interests in authors who either lived in Knoxville or have depicted its locales, interests that serve as a backdrop to the club's reading of Kiernan's *The Girls of Atomic City* during May and June 2013. This text reflects the club's interests in some aspects of the history of East Tennessee such as the remarkable origins of Oak Ridge, a city in close proximity to Knoxville. Oak Ridge is a city that was carved out of wilderness for the express and secret mission of developing the explosive "Gadget" that would

end WWII, and a city that was and is populated by workers, military personnel, and scientists from all over the United States and abroad. Even more compelling than the secrecy, the global involvement, the science behind the bomb, and the “Gadget’s” death toll, *The Girls of Atomic City* weaves together the stories of Oak Ridge women who experienced and contributed to Oak Ridge in diverse ways.

During the May and June meetings, club members used this text as a launching pad for discussions of the initially tense relationship between Oak Ridge and Knoxville during the war years, characterized by Knoxvillians’ suspicions about a city full of outsiders who traveled to Knoxville with ration cards and vague statements about “what [they were] making over there” (Kiernan). While Sarah, Joe, and Mitch are transplants to this region, Shelley and Linda both grew up in Knoxville and shared their impressions of this region as one that might seem to distrust and dislike outsiders. In particular, Shelley remarked during meetings and interviews that a local culture of distrust may correspond to narrow worldviews that she feels characterize the “Bible Belt” as a whole. Linda has suggested that East Tennessee is a “black hole for weird things.” Joe, who works at Oak Ridge National Labs and who is Sarah’s partner in the “selection committee,” provided much of the impetus behind the selection of *The Girls of Atomic City*. During the May and June meetings, Joe provided fuel and focus for dialogue among all members present by bringing in ORNL maps and sharing his own ORNL experiences. In particular, he used this text as a way to explore his fascination with ORNL’s urban legends such as the “radioactive frogs.” He also shared his experience navigating the convoluted geography of Oak Ridge roads and his knowledge of the security clearances and compartmentalized science that not only defined the “Gadget’s” manufacturing but also to some degree and more currently define the job of any ORNL employee. Other members also used this text as an occasion to

comment upon the significance of its narrative form, using Oak Ridge women's own testimonies and reflections as organizing principles for history. Members' responses to *The Girls of Atomic City* and its focus on the experiences of individuals who worked at Oak Ridge ultimately prompted Books-N-Wine to consider the ethics behind the bomb and to weigh its material costs of manufacture and its human costs of detonation.

My continued interactions with Books-N-Wine brought forth additional findings on members' diverse experiences in and impressions of East Tennessee that contribute to their participation in this club and the resultant behaviors and values that may translate to "everyday activism" for other *spheres*, such as members' attitudes about other cultures and the values that they teach their children or use when interacting with parents at the homeschooling co-op. Important manifestations of these experiences in East Tennessee and ones that are highly relevant to this study include several Books-N-Wine members' attitudes about a few local book clubs, based on interactions with clubs prior to their involvement with this one. These opinions correspond to larger, general statements about book-club culture, opinions that stem partly from knowledge about Oprah's Book Club or depictions of other book clubs in the media. Sarah upon several occasions expressed her desire for Books-N-Wine to operate independently from OBC recommendations, best-seller lists, and pre-determined discussion questions. Her memories of good experiences in a Houston club, but feelings of disappointment with other Knoxville clubs that meet in public places and discuss fiction for which she has a distaste, provided the motivations for starting Books-N-Wine. These experiences fueled her selections (with Joe's input) of reading material for the purposes of provoking both internal reflection and lively group discussion. These impressions of other clubs also contributed to the decision that her home would serve as the site for club meetings. It is a private space for adults to get to know each other

and explore enjoyable reading material together, experiences that she says are not possible in environments that she describes as impersonal and distracting, such as Panera Bread.

Shelley contextualizes her participation in Books-N-Wine by citing her prior experience with reading communities comprised entirely of women. In particular she said she did not identify with these readers' interests in mostly religious texts and topics and appreciates Books-N-Wine's gathering of different perspectives and literary interests in addition to members' common experiences with the challenges of homeschooling children. Mitch contextualizes his participation in Books-N-Wine by sharing ideas about his individual and club-specific reader-ly identity, as it might be perceived in public space or among his social groups. He shared one especially intriguing anecdote during an interview, describing a casual conversation with an acquaintance that brought to his attention the ways in which readers may figure into and be identified by others in society. The act of reading, which seems natural to him and others in the club, may seem strange to others. He began, "A person I know asked if I read, and I was not sure what she meant." Mitch then repeated the acquaintance's inquiry — "She was asking if I read" — characterizing this encounter as one of bewilderment. Mitch then added an anecdote about co-workers' reactions to his reading a book "in a break room" as though it were "torture" and their expressions of disbelief—"You *choose* to read a book?" His participation in Books-N-Wine, which exists because its constituency regards reading as a pleasurable activity, has garnered similar reactions from his teenage son and his son's friends. While many adolescents participate in book clubs, these youths view the idea of a voluntarily-formed reading community as "strange."

Books-N-Wine's members discuss their experiences in other communities—professional, religious, and educational—and compare these experiences to those they enjoy during book-club

meetings where they find affirmation and support within a safe space. Members (with the exception of Linda) discuss their affiliation with the local homeschooling co-op as the primary source of the club's constituency and as an educational community that represents non-mainstream approaches to curriculum development, instructional methods, and learning environments. Within the club space, members share different strategies and techniques for providing their children with effective instruction as well as their perceptions of social differences between themselves and cliques that form within the co-op.

Other findings on the ways in which Books-N-Wine responds to contextual factors that is members produce within the space of the club emerged through repeated observations of its operation. Internally-produced context extends from the logistical functions of Sarah's home as the meeting location, beyond its provision of privacy, and includes such details as the meeting's extension into the evening hours that members reserve for club gatherings and the serving of alcoholic beverages and other refreshments. These logistical choices enable members to feel generally comfortable exploring topics about their important values or aspects of their personal lives, as well as produce a combined spirit of intellectualism and conviviality. In addition, these logistical choices prompt members to continue each month's meeting later and later into the evening, sometimes approaching or exceeding midnight. Members attribute these extended hours to the fact that meetings have become a hard-earned and highly-protected time away from other obligations to spend with people whose company they enjoy. Joe, speaking on his own behalf and that of the club, said that a meeting will run late because no one "wants it to end." Others have suggested that the late-night portion of a meeting, a "post-meeting" to what is otherwise the "meeting proper" focused on the selected text, is the segment when "things get real," in that topics become more personal, provocative, exploratory, and analytical. During this time,

members will also make additional points about a text, or “interspersals,” as Joe terms them, and during most “post-meetings,” Joe and Sarah make a decision about the reading selections for the next meeting. These details suggest that the club’s identity, its make-up, its DNA is discoverable in each meeting’s last segment. Linda suggests that the “post-meeting”—with its extended hours and the “real” topics—is possible now that the previously revolving roster has stabilized to core members who “get” each other. Joe, who often lends drive and focus to each meeting, offers a similar explanation that the “sett[ling] down” of a core constituency has enabled the post-meeting to become a “social time.” Shelley, a more recently inducted member, offers another dimension to the development of the “post-meeting” segment, citing her “curiosity” about others’ experiences as homeschooling parents and her interest in their opinions about other topics, and says that extended conversations are “natural” occurrences.

Additional findings on internally-produced context arrive at operations that exist on an even smaller scale within this club space that Books-N-Wine’s members work so hard to preserve amidst the rigors of the other areas of their lives. Members’ behaviors within the club space—from their inside jokes to their exploration of heavier topics—and the club’s internal operations of identification and affirmation seem minute and easy-to-overlook, but reveal themselves as cumulative over the course of this club’s development over time. Members’ behaviors and operations of identification and affirmation create certain conditions such as comfort, exploration, and conviviality for a given meeting’s function as well as affect subsequent club operation. Factors such as individual members’ non-club-related identities are important in this regard, such as their professional and academic backgrounds, their hobbies and interests, and the fact that all members identify themselves within a suburban middle-class demographic. Factors such as this club’s articulation and achieving of goals are also worked into context as a

cumulative function. Some goals are stated explicitly by members and have existed since the club's formation, such as creating opportunities for adults to discuss books they deem significant. Others have formed over the course of this club's operation, somewhat on a tacit and understood basis, such as members' goal of seeking of a larger worldview through interactions with similarly motivated adults. The latter is a goal that members have become aware of and reflected upon during interviews.

Another internally-produced factor of context that this club has created over time is a "pre-meeting" segment that functions as more than merely the period when members arrive and jovially fill their wine glasses. Whereas things get "real" during the increasingly drawn-out "post-meeting," the "pre-meeting" segment serves to establish each meeting's tone and to foreground text-related conversations and allows individual personalities to register their moods and relationships with one another. Among other details, members share with each other their knowledge about external or non-club-related topics. They also consistently begin meetings by recounting their occasionally difficult processes of procuring a copy of a book and sharing their emotional responses to the reading material.

These small but important details establish the Books-N-Wine club as a contextualized and participatory social activity, in which the group's history shapes its continued operation. These details also correspond to and inform the global-scale sensibilities of Books-N-Wine's constituency as members work together through the "shaping of the world from different points of view" and "open-minded seeking of other ideas," as described by Shelley. As detailed throughout this chapter, Books-N-Wine defines its practice in relation to other readers and non-readers, book clubs, communities, as well as in relation to their families, friends, and co-workers. Books-N-Wine also defines its literary and cultural interests in relation to broad descriptions of

East Tennessee. While Sarah expresses her unfamiliarity with this region and preference for her previous residence in Houston, Shelley uses her experience growing up in Knoxville as a basis to describe with confidence East Tennessee as somewhat narrow-minded. And while Mitch seems to have neutral-to-pleasant associations with this region, Linda feels very positively about the city of Knoxville in which she was raised and has expressed her desire to act as an informal “ambassador” for transplants who do not have positive opinions about this city. Joe’s job at ORNL, which employs researchers from all over the world, places him alongside many foreign nationals on a daily basis. This region attracts international communities and supports social diversity and cosmopolitan sensibilities on the part of many who are native to this area. However, Books-N-Wine as a social unit does not look to the internationalism present in its immediate surroundings in order to learn about global-scale issues. Rather, Books-N-Wine expands its worldview by choosing to read texts about characters and cultures that are very distant from East Tennessee. One significant text selected during this study’s time frame, *The Girls of Atomic City*, does reflect interest in the impact of local history on the current landscape. Other texts selected during the time frame for the study reflect the desire for knowledge about communities that can be defined by different cultural, economic, and ethnic factors, as with *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Selections of other texts on global themes enabled this club’s widest expansion of interests in terms of geography or life circumstances, as shown through members’ choices to read *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* and *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. Books-N-Wine also uses literary texts to expand its scientific and anthropological knowledge, as enabled through members’ readings of *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

With the above examples, Books-N-Wine’s alternating inward and outward focus and members’ conceptualizations of external communities near and far manifest themselves mostly

in their conversations. Within the private and intimate space of the club, members discover themselves, expand their world knowledge, and seek kinship with each other, while imagining kinship with distant others. A more tangible fulcrum around which the Books-N-Wine club manages its private operation and its relationship to what exists externally is members' uses of Internet space or other technology. As with many book clubs, Books-N-Wine's website serves as a public signpost of its identity, the logistics of its operation, and its archive of reading selections. Two correlating uses of technology to bridge the club's public and private operations include Linda's blog post entitled "I Hear America Crying" and the club's July 2012 FaceTime session with Brian Kenneth Swain, the author of *World Hunger*. In the case of the FaceTime "Q&A" session with Swain, Books-N-Wine intentionally draws outside influence into the intimate space of the club, combining members' reflection on *World Hunger* with the author's own analysis to produce collaborative and authoritative interpretations of the text. Linda wrote her blog entry to reflect on diversity in America and current race relations and to connect these reflections to her reading of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the Books-N-Wine club's reading selection for April 2012, one year prior to the official start date for this study. More concretely, Linda's post connects her reading of Lee's novel to two significant non-club experiences: overhearing a local passer-by make an unsavory comment in public on "strange religions" and reading about what was then recent news of the death of Trayvon Martin. In posting a blog entry for these purposes, Linda extends the club and reading experiences beyond the confines of the club space and renders them relevant to her internal processing of important social phenomena. In terms of expressing such consciousness to others, Linda's written blog response explores a set of values in such a way that her stance on acceptable behavior in a diverse society becomes visible to a public audience of friends and family or to a larger imagined

audience. This post also describes more concretely her opinions on behaving in the everyday—including reading the news and overhearing conversations—in relations to one of the selected texts. For Linda, *To Kill a Mockingbird* provided at least one occasion to muse on her emotional and intellectual responses to the unforeseen occurrence of overhearing an unsavory conversation.

Contextualizing Identification and Reflection: Interview Conversations

The Methods chapter lists interview sites as important methodological considerations for this study for two reasons: (1) they are orchestrated situations between researcher and participants, and (2) they were conducted in locations ranging from commercial to community locations, public and private locations, and locations representing different degrees of convenience, preference, and comfort for researcher and participants. These individual locations and the interview as a methodological choice thus contextualize the thirteen separate discussions about the Books-N-Wine club that occurred over a span of several months. While there were several “Oh, Julie is here!” moments during meetings when club members interrupted their discussion in order to acknowledge my presence and direct comments or questions to me, interviews became the primary occasions for exploring themes in more depth. In addition, interviews became the primary occasions for exploring the evolving relationships between researcher and participants, outsider and insiders, and for articulating the best terms for describing our observations about the Books-N-Wine club.

At the beginning of this study, the interviews’ formality reduced these conversations to a transactional gathering of information from club members as experts on their own perceptions and experiences, and participants revealed their concerns about whether they provided “appropriate” answers for the nature of this study. For example, the initial interview with Mitch

was characterized by this participant's short and limited responses and his sense that he was "missing the point entirely" of some of my questions. Over time, however, interviews became more enjoyable, reciprocal explorations like those shared by friends, a development that is attributable to members' social and intellectual interest in this project, and participants and I were able to express ideas in more detail and with greater comfort and deeper reflection. Mitch attributed these relationships' development, and the resulting comfort during follow-up interviews, to my demeanor at meetings as minimally conversational without "interfering" as opposed to "sitting above [them] with a clipboard" in complete silence. Thus, in addition to the fact that interviews produced the raw data for which they were designed, interviews served as sites for the kind of social bond that enables intellectual investments and revealed themselves to be important contexts for the processes of identification and reflection for all parties involved. As a result, Books-N-Wine's members became more conscious of factors of context and the connections between the club and other areas of their lives. As Chapter 5 will explore in more detail, interviews highlighted the influence of my eight-month role as researcher on the findings and conclusions.

Interviews brought forth additional understandings of the major factors of context that affect the club externally and from within—such as East Tennessee's historical and regional influence, the club's website as a public identification signpost and archive, and the club's gathering of individual personalities who shape the club as a cohesive unit. One significant discovery made possible through the process of conducting thirteen interviews is a growing sense that Books-N-Wine has developed its own aesthetic of group interaction. This aesthetic is comprised of several components that are distinguishable yet function inextricably from one another: (1) the social structures that determine the club's leadership and the specific roles and

responsibilities that have been unofficially conferred upon members, (2) the three-part structure organizing each meeting's unofficial itinerary, (3) a common discourse or "speech genre," and (4) the club's unique relationship to literary genre.

The roles and responsibilities that Books-N-Wine's members take on can be observed as distinct for each individual member and at times shared or blended among members. For instance, while Joe and Sarah most often fill the roles of discussion facilitators and book "selection committee," it was Linda who ushered the August meeting's social discussion into more pointed dialogue about *State of Wonder*, as the text that she recommended. Members seem to perceive these unofficial roles—such as which member most often serves as discussion leader or as comic relief for the group—as they interact with one another and these perceptions affect the club's function. During an interview, Shelley observed that "everybody lines up with sort of their 'character'" and that this "character" affects the nature of questions and comments directed from one member to the next as well as dialogue in general. As stated in previous sections, Joe and Sarah figure as Books-N-Wine's co-founders, co-facilitators, and partners on the "selection committee," making most of the book selection decisions but often considering others' suggestions for reading material. For example, Joe suggested *The Girls of Atomic City*, while Linda's suggestion of *State of Wonder* introduced that selection in August 2013. In terms of facilitating discussion, Joe is cited as the member who most often brings book-related focus to each meeting's exploration of a range of topics. Other members have also served in this capacity from time to time during the course of this study.

All members provide a spirit of exploration by connecting reflections on the reading to other topics of interest as well as a spirit of levity through jokes and humor. For example, during the August meeting, during an intriguing discussion about the nature of the literary canon and

current public school curricula, Linda remarked on her dislike of a book that one of her children read in school, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. She summarized this text as "well-written," but expressed that the plot about a "poor" family arranged narratively as a "series of vignettes about these people in this neighborhood and about the horrible things happening to them" might represent a specific cultural or political agenda on the part of educators. Curious about this text but providing humor to a discussion of the literary canon, Mitch jokingly asked if the characters in Cisneros's text were treated badly "because they don't recycle"—to which other members responded with laughter as well as additional impressions about literature that teachers may assign to students. In addition to this example of curiosity and a proclivity toward humor, Mitch lends a particularly quiet but powerful voice to meetings through his wit and keen observations. Although he does not typically instigate conversational threads or steer the course of conversations, his comments often succinctly synthesize the group's most salient discoveries. For example, in a later conversation during the August meeting that continued the notions of curriculum development and reading practices, Mitch provided a gendered observation about adolescent boys' reading preferences, most likely drawing upon observations of the development of his teenage son: "There's a real gap for boys I think because their reading level is not as advanced as their like cool interest level. They want something that's really cool and exciting and violent of course." With this observation of young boys' reading preferences, and in relation to the fact that this conversation is conducted within a group devoted to reading, Mitch succinctly surmises that reading development, literary curricula, and recreation are often subject to a reader's stage in life, gender, and other social factors.

During interviews, when I asked participants about Books-N-Wine's conferral of unofficial and oftentimes shared roles, members consistently offered specific and even comical

titles to describe their own and others' contributions to the dynamics of the group. Specific examples include Joe who has been identified as the member who is "ready" with notes and discussion topics. Linda identified herself as "the neighbor" and "the English major" of the group and identified Mitch as the "comic relief." In contrast, several of the less-frequent attendees were described as contributing to discussions in ways that the core constituency does not prefer. For example, core members perceived these other attendees (and others who may have visited Books-N-Wine before this study began) as expressing closed-minded perspectives or as having irritating personalities. While these particular attendees were not available for interviews and only attended meetings once or twice during this study's time frame, Books-N-Wine's speculations about these members' roles within the club's social dynamics do contribute to this club's image of itself as cohesive and open-minded.

The meetings followed a three-part structure that determines conversational shifts in focus, topic, mood, and tone. During interviews, participants and I discussed the characteristics of what we called the "pre-meeting," the "meeting proper," and the "post-meeting," as well as their perceptions of the development of this structure. The pre-meeting functions not only as a time for arrivals, pourings of wine, and expressions of "Hey, how's it going?" but also enables members to establish the tone of the meeting through expressions of life updates and general reactions to the reading selections. The meeting proper does not begin with an official "Okay, let's begin" call to order. Instead the meeting proper begins when one member, oftentimes Joe and in the case of the August meeting when Linda and Sarah drew attention to *State of Wonder*, raises more pointed questions about the text at hand. This segment usually lasts one or two hours and includes comments about characters, ethics, literary form and genre, author biography, and connections of the text to "real world" issues. When, as Linda suggests, members "have nothing

left to say about the book, or [they] get off track,” the meeting shifts into its extended “post” segment, when, as members have suggested, things get “real” or “crazy.” Core members agreed that everyone’s comfort with and curiosity about each other’s lives and perspectives, not to mention the enjoyment of tasty wine and other refreshments, contribute to the extended hours for each meeting and to the nature of the topics raised as the meeting approaches or exceeds midnight.

A third component of Books-N-Wine’s aesthetic of group interaction is comprised of members’ formation of a common discourse, or as Bakhtin might term it, a “speech genre.” This discourse, observed during meetings as well as during interviews with participants, entails members’ specific ways of speaking to one another for use during club meetings, which are held in a designated space and conducted through understood codes and rules. This discourse functions on the levels of performance, grammar, and terminology, and serves as a means of identification and relationship-building among members. More specifically, Books-N-Wine’s series of “utterances” includes inside jokes, expressions of humor, use of specific terminologies, and other creative expressions that are shared and understood by members (*Speech Genres* 60). In addition, Books-N-Wine’s common discourse draws attention to the fact that book-club culture is inherently discursive and socially concerned with literary genre and a hierarchy of cultural values. Books-N-Wine’s discourse provides members with a means of expressing emotional, intellectual, and ethical responses to texts and topics of discussion. Altogether these details of the common discourse have developed over the course of the club’s history through members’ dialogue and actions and reflect members’ individual identities and the identity of the group at large.

In terms of Books-N-Wine's responses to works of literature, notable examples include members' spoken quotations of passages from the readings or paraphrases of characters' actions, which serve to connect members closely to the texts they read. Joe, Sarah, and Shelley are especially skilled conversational performers of their reading experiences, and use vocal intonation and gestures to dramatize texts' characters, plots, and themes, as well as their own emotional and intellectual responses to them. For example, Joe's quotation from *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* in which the autho-narrator William Kamkwamba repeats "Our president, like I said, our president is a funny guy," which I cited in the Methods chapter, enables Joe to perform his appreciation of the author's "understatement" of the problematic responses of the Malawian government to a debilitating famine. Even more intriguingly, this example and others of the techniques of reading and dramatization enable these members to conflate time, space, and identity. In terms of time and space, these performances conflate the experience of private reading with the experience of reflecting and sharing responses in social settings, so that these experiences become mutually reinforcing rather than strictly distinct and separate processes. In terms of identity, quotations and paraphrases allows members to identify (or dis-identify) with characters, speaking as if they are characters as an attempt to understand characters' choices and circumstances. As with Joe, Sarah paraphrased from *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* during the September meeting to express her attempt to understand the plight of Kamkwamba's sister who left her immediate family to elope with an acquaintance during the famine. Speaking as the character, Sarah speculated about the character's motivations: "Well, this is a win-win. My family is starving, they won't have to feed me. They will get a dowry for me, and I'm with this guy, and he's fine. He's alright." With these examples, identity becomes a fluid experience, not merely restricted to the personalities present in the room, and experiences with texts are not

arranged by the usual constraints of time and space. Books-N-Wine's performed responses to texts provide members with reading experiences that are empowering and challenging as well as entertaining and mirthful.

The idea of a common discourse as part of Books-N-Wine's (or any other club's) aesthetic of group interaction is an important consideration in book-club research. As stated, these types of communities are inherently and self-consciously discursive and expressly literary in nature, in contrast to communities based on activities that do not require extensive conversation in order to function, such as athletic teams. This distinction highlights Books-N-Wine's shared discourse as one that includes members' expressed standards of appropriate discussion of literary texts and socio-political topics—namely that discussions be socially respectful and intellectually exploratory. For instance, Linda references the May and June discussions of *The Girls of Atomic City* to suggest that “there are ways of discussing the political implications [of a text or topic] without just coming right out and saying, ‘here’s what I think, and this is just wrong.’” She added, “I think that we did a good job of not talking about the bomb. I mean, I’m sure that everybody had different opinions about *that*.” Members agree that while the core constituency mostly adheres to this rule, several of the less frequently attending members (or defectors) did not and contributed to a bristly atmosphere. For instance, Linda remarked during an interview that Nina’s comments about the Kiribati culture described in *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* “rubbed [her] the wrong way,” including Nina’s distaste for some of this culture’s practices, while Shelley commented that Evelyn’s unsuccessful attempt to “convert” other members during July perhaps meant that Evelyn would not continue participating in the club. One of Evelyn’s contributions to the July meeting provides a counter example to this member’s dissimilarity to core members and resemble the more productive political, cultural, or

ethical discussions such as those shared by Shelley and Sarah regarding sexual orientation and religion. Evelyn expressed an opinion during the July meeting that public school curricula should be more inclusive of instruction on cultures and religions rather than focusing just on “Muslim Day,” a comment with which other members seemed open to agreeing. Perhaps in response to Books-N-Wine’s general rule that social and political discourse within club space should be egalitarian, Sarah responded to Evelyn’s suspicions of narrowed curricular interests with the suggestion that broader cultural instruction such as “world religions day” might be a better approach to mainstream education.

In connection to this common discourse, the fourth component of Books-N-Wine’s aesthetic of group interaction is comprised of core members’ unique relationship to literary genre. As noted in the section on the trajectory of reading selections, the time frame for this study coincided with the club’s concentrated attention to the genre of historically- or culturally-significant works of non-fiction. Additionally it brought to light the club’s personalized (rather than universal) terms for and definitions of literary categories. Simultaneously to exploring genre, members have developed these terms and vocabularies to suit their individual intellects and to perform in social settings their literary knowledge. These terms include familiarity with broad categories carried over from high school and college readings, formalist descriptions based on current readings, as well as comical or emotionally-driven descriptions for these genres, all of which add dimension to their literary understandings.

While remaining an unobtrusive observer during meetings, I noticed that members defined genre with distinctive terms and definitions in connection to the texts they were selecting within the February to September trajectory. Members seemed to regard broad categories such as “literature” and “fiction” as distinct from one another, rather than overlapping, when they

referenced these categories in club dialogue or used them as a basis for selecting the readings, such that “literature” tended to connote traditionally canonical texts such as Shakespeare or Charles Dickens, while “fiction” included more recent popular publications such as *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Other nebulous yet intriguing categories that entered the way into meeting dialogue, such as “really good literature” and “old stuff,” seem to represent members’ impressions of texts’ artistic value and ongoing presence in literary canons. Prior reading selections were offered as examples of these categories, including *A Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace*. Mitch, who has an academic background in sociology, jokingly confessed to liking “weird stuff,” and offered the example of *A Clockwork Orange*, to express his interest in themes related to psychology, sociology, and language and to register his interests in literary mood and tone.

All these terms combined with members’ wide-ranging explorations of genres, forms, authors, and themes and their attempts to experience more texts like *HeLa* are connected more broadly to book clubs’ influence on the print industry and literary culture and on communities in general. With this connection in mind, I followed up on meeting comments related to genre with interview questions designed to gather detailed reflections on literary and cultural values as contributors to the club’s goals. Putting my literary training to the side during these conversations, I focused my energy on gathering categorical definitions in members’ own words. Members shared descriptions of broad categories, sub-categories, and new coinages for categories that highlight the importance of finding out what literature can and should do according to readers like those in Books-N-Wine who are intimately involved in shaping their own views of literary culture at large.

Sarah, Joe, and Linda elected to define the broad categories of “literature,” “fiction,” “classics,” “non-fiction,” and the adjectives “popular” and “contemporary” in ways that include both fixed and fluid meanings, that run parallel to traditional or academic hierarchies of value, but that are adaptable to the club’s specific needs. For instance, Sarah (who works from home as an editor) and Linda (who has a bachelor’s degree in English) grouped “classics” with “literature” and the category of “fiction” with the adjectives “popular” and “contemporary.” With these groupings, Sarah and Linda further explained that texts can “cross” boundaries and that works of fiction can fall under the category of “literature,” but that “literature” is reserved for texts that have “stood the test of time,” continue to be regarded as relevant or valuable for readers, and demonstrate authors’ artistic skills. Linda in particular offered thoughts on college syllabi, the literary canon, and her suspicions of various “agendas” that maintain or revamp the traditional canon, and suggested that they all have weighty cultural implications. She also considered an alternative approach to constructing a reading list for a college literature class, suggesting that “it would be neat if a professor assigned one favorite book from each student as reading for the whole class.” Although Linda is not currently a homeschooling parent, this critical reflection on the canon and consideration of the merits of participant-based reading lists match some of the values associated with alternative approaches to education and to the interests that this club and others may have in determining their own reading lists and topics of discussion rather than following the recommendations from Oprah’s Book Club or best-seller lists.

Thoughts by Mitch and Shelley further stratified this club’s shaping of genre-based knowledge. Shelley perfunctorily defined what she perceives as traditional literary categories, such as a “classic” work measured by its ability to “stand the test of time,” but seemed more interested in contrasting her enjoyment of sub-categories such as YA literature, fantasy, and

science fiction with her distaste for the July selection, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which she identified as ego-driven even though she was interested in Diamond's anthropological theories on the world's populations. On the subject of broad categories of "literature" and "fiction," Mitch reflected critically on typical inclusions in the canon, using an earlier club selection, *Catcher in the Rye*, to illustrate a point about educators' facility with the hazy yet powerful popular/literary binary. He said that Salinger's novel "seems to have hopped over into the canon," not based on its merits, but based on "teachers wanting it to seem cool." In addition to this observation, Mitch's coinage of "NPR books" to describe some of the non-fiction books that were chosen between February and September 2013 combines this member's aptitude for wit with his observations about trends in reading culture. During the follow-up interview, Mitch defined "NPR books" as being less about the representation of historical events and real personages and more about the "hype" and attention that such books likely receive on National Public Radio. He added to his definition of "NPR books" their seeming status as "manufactured to have people feel good about themselves by being righteously angered at another group." He added that such texts can seem "manipulative." Mitch describes books not only in these aesthetic, ethical, and socio-political terms but also in economic terms, as he considers the motivations by the print industry, which he says "manufactures" books for the "consumption" of readers.

These descriptions of genre, from "NPR books" to the idea of literature's manufacture and consumption, exhibit Mitch's skills in analysis and discernment. Corresponding to his reserved personality during meetings, and in contrast to Joe who is talkative during both meetings and interviews, Mitch's comments in interview conversations serve distinct purpose of dialogic wit and skilled synthesis of disparate ideas. Although it is difficult to gather long and

detailed responses from Mitch, as a man of few words, he contributes valuable information to a study on book clubs, not only because of his succinctness and well-crafted expressions but also because his thoughts often show that intellectual disagreement, specifically in relation to literary opinions, can occur within this group without causing tension, as a result of the supportive and exploratory social conditions that this club has created.

Books-N-Wine's aesthetic of group interaction—combining leadership and other social contributions, a consistent three-part meeting structure, shared discourse, and the club's unique relationship to genre—culminates in additional “roles” that members of this club take on. As has been noted, Books-N-Wine's members often expressed through dialogue their identification with characters in the selected texts as well as their more emotionally distant considerations of how they would act if they were in characters' circumstances. Notable examples occurred in their responses to historical personages depicted in *The Girls of Atomic City*. During the June meeting, members slipped into speaking through the imagined voice of these personages as a way to experience more viscerally the ethical dilemma of contributing to the bomb's manufacture and detonation. Without making a definitive statement about the right and wrong of the bomb's destruction in Japan, Shelley was able to consider the stance of those involved when speaking as the collective voice of title characters of *The Girls of Atomic City*: “We saved all of *our* lives. We saved all of these *ally* lives.” Similarly, Joe imagined and performed the internal voice of President Truman who faced the knowledge of the bomb's material cost—“Two and a half *billion* dollars!?”—not to mention the human cost. Through this discursive tactic, these members take on not only the roles of leadership or discussion facilitator within the club but also imagine what it's like to fill larger societal roles as citizens or national leaders who must consider the

consequences of their decisions, imagined roles that may inform these members' ethical and practical decisions in other areas of their lives.

Club members engaged in more abstract identifications with texts when considering the emotional and intellectual challenges experienced by the researcher-author personas who guided the narratives of several of the non-fiction selections. While members, Shelley in particular, expressed distaste for what seemed to be Jared Diamond's "ego-driven" presentation of his anthropological findings in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, members felt sympathy for Rebecca Skloot as a social researcher whose findings comprised *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Members noted that Skloot's narrative was not only visceral but was also transparent, as she juggled her desire to bring the medical history behind the HeLa cells to light while respecting the hopes and sorrows of the Lacks family. In reading *HeLa* and other non-fiction narratives, members thought about the difficulty of conducting research. In continuing to use electronic devices to investigate topics related to reading selections—such as searches for maps of the Pacific Ocean in order to visualize the location of Kiribati, the South Pacific island depicted in *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*, or searches for biographical information about Denise Kiernan, the author of *The Girls of Atomic City*—members indirectly took on the role of researcher themselves. One salient and consistent example includes Sarah and Joe's collaborative roles as "selection committee," which means that these members also take on roles of "literary researchers" and "curriculum developers," demonstrated in the time that Sarah and Joe devote to selecting texts each month that they anticipate will provoke discussion during meetings and provide meaningful learning experiences. Joe shared that he and Sarah email each other, peruse Amazon lists, book reviews, and other online descriptions of possible titles, as well as consider other members' preferences and observe

over the course of Books-N-Wine's operation the kinds of books that tend to enliven rather than limit book-related discussions during meetings.

As a final note to Books-N-Wine's aesthetic of group interaction and as a foreshadowing of explorations in the next chapter, I point out that members seemed to transfer their observations of texts' inclusions or exclusions of formal Epilogues and Afterwords or their sense of narrative closure to the very structure of meeting dialogue. "Post-meeting" segments became "social Epilogues," so to speak, as members would discuss the aftermath of characters' lives in order to tie up the loose ends of their understandings of texts. At the same time, they used "post-meetings" to tie up the loose ends of their own lives and relationships to one another.

Books-N-Wine Members as "Everyday Activists": Values and Behaviors for Counterspheres

Factors in Books-N-Wine's contextualized operation inform investigations of the ways in which club members actively participate in literary discourse and in the world around them—from their social relationships with each other to their relationships with other communities and their formation of complex worldviews. Findings show, more specifically, that relationships between Books-N-Wine members and other areas of their lives reflect ongoing exchanges of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors that are significant and powerful—as markers of identification and *dis*-identification as well as personal and group transformation. As previous sections explored, this club's publically viewable website, Sarah's private home as meeting location, and even interview situations in which members were called upon to express their perceptions of experiences more fully, all serve as sites where Books-N-Wine's members verbalize and perform these exchanges within conditions that are socially-intimate and value-affirming. Members' actions in the club produce values and behavior for the *public sphere* and

for what Nancy Fraser calls “counterspheres” where members perform domestic and professional duties. All of these actions, values and behaviors funnel into the general yet important sphere of daily living where members perform as “everyday activists.” This cycle is a continuous one.

In connection to findings explored in the previous section on contexts for Books-N-Wine’s operation, this section details the findings on the exchanges of values and behaviors between this club and the other *spheres* in which its members engage. More specifically, this section describes these values and behaviors and their external applications. These descriptions set up the next chapter’s more solid considerations of book clubs as sites for teaching, transformation, and “everyday activism,” involving members’ investments of time and energy making a difference, as Sarah phrased, “in the lives around them.”

Books-N-Wine Members’ Actions as Readers, Parents, and Educators

Several areas of this dissertation describe the local homeschooling co-operative as a significant site of exchange for the Books-N-Wine club, given that all but one member of its core constituency affiliate with the co-op as participating parents. Indeed, the book club’s very existence results from Sarah’s initial outreach and recruitment of interested readers, and following Joe’s stalwart investment in Books-N-Wine, other reader-parent-educators joined the club. Within the safe space of club meetings, these homeschoolers, along with Linda who has both university literary training and former experience homeschooling her children, find common interests and validate each other’s values. At the same time, they seek opportunities to expand their worldviews through others’ perspectives and through their responses to literary texts. Their affiliation with the homeschooling co-op—from their impressions of the co-op’s

social dynamics to their ideas about specific instructional techniques—comprises a large portion of the conversation about education, literature, and socio-political topics.

During this study's time frame, I observed the club's members seeking each other's support in designing effective home-based instruction, swapping tips and sharing woes about different assignments, discussing the challenges of scheduling home instruction alongside classes through the co-op, as well as evaluating the quality of co-op course offerings, such as "Zoom Science" and foreign language classes. Members also shared their educational philosophies and life circumstances that guide their ongoing commitments to the homeschooling approach to education. One major educational commitment on the part of Books-N-Wine's members is developing a curriculum that is child-centered and parent-led, negotiating with children such details as writing assignment topics, field trips, extracurricular activities, and daily schedules. For example, when the club read *The Girls of Atomic City*, Susan reported during the June club meeting that she took her children to the "Secret City Festival" held in Oak Ridge as an effort to provide them with enjoyable educational experiences, such as "a WWII demonstration and USO singers," all connected to her own reading experiences. Club members report that collaborating with their children in these ways has a number of results, from generating children's enthusiasm and strengthening family relationships to producing the usual tensions associated with homework-before-play rules. Curriculum development's basis in the home corresponds to Books-N-Wine's club practice, particularly in this club's selection of reading material and determining its own standards independently from OBC or other external standards for club practice, as described in previous sections. Members use the club space to share teaching strategies for use in home and co-op environments. Two interesting examples connect these readers' voluntary choices to read within a social group to their approaches to educating their

children. While Sarah shared that reading passages aloud from the club's selections to her two elementary-age boys often results in a stronger parent-child bond and her children's interest in the subject matter, Shelley shared that assigning her son writing exercises results in tension. These two members commiserate about these challenges of providing engaging yet instructive learning experiences and agree that being "the most patient person" while instructing one's own children is often an effective means of getting through a lesson.

In seeking each other's support on the level of navigating the co-op's social dynamics, Books-N-Wine's members often share anecdotes with one another about their experiences with other homeschooling parents, some of whom have attended one or two club meetings and subsequently never returned. On the one hand, members of Books-N-Wine value the creativity and direct involvement they exercise in homeschooling their children and take advantage of the intellectual support that the co-op provides. On the other hand, several club members express their sense of dissimilarity with other co-op parents in terms of socio-political and even religious values. While Books-N-Wine members value different opinions, they have expressed dissatisfaction with the occasional use, by some parents, of co-op space to express socio-political opinions or to engage in faith-based activities such as group prayer that do not represent the practices of all families in the co-op. As a counter-statement to these exclusionary conversations and practices that may occur in a place that they feel should be neutral territory, Books-N-Wine members elect not to participate in others' somewhat public expressions of opinions at the co-op's shared space. Instead, Books-N-Wine establishes the club space as "countersphere," not only providing members with social support and intellectual engagement but also designating the privacy of Sarah's home as what they perceive as the appropriate location for expressing socio-political opinions and perceived dissimilarity from others in the co-op. Books-N-Wine members'

actions in this regard invoke three “spheres”—the club space, the co-op space, and the pedagogical space of mainstream education. For one thing, to home-school one’s children already means to choose an alternative to mainstream education; Books-N-Wine’s members make this choice and discuss within the club space the day-to-day particulars of this choice, such as assigning activities to their children. Books-N-Wine’s choice to create an alternative to this alternative raises the socio-political, educational, and emotional stakes for its members for whom the major part of a given day includes the fusion of lesson-planning, instructing, and parenting.

Into the midst of these three spheres, Books-N-Wine inserts a fourth sphere, of literary engagement, which serves as the stated reason why the Books-N-Wine club formed itself in the first place. In the process of invoking these spheres and using the club space as an exchange site for practicing values and behaviors for use outside of the club, Books-N-Wine enlists works of literature to produce discussions not only about literary form but also about members’ interest in “real world” topics and lived experiences. Members certainly do not make explicit declarations that they will read books as occasions to express opinions about the co-op. Most often, conversations about the literary aspects of selected texts—such as character development, plot, and narrative form—lead to discussions of reading practices and topics related to the “real world.” During several of the meetings, these discussions of literary works, reading practices, and the “real world” led to observations about other parents in the co-op. Sarah cited an experience of reading a book by Greg Mortenson during parent volunteer hours at the co-op site that prompted other parents to comment, as they walked by, with responses ranging from “Oh that’s a good book” to a warning that Sarah had “better read up about him.” In relation, Books-N-Wine’s reading of texts about global issues can quite possibly be a factor in other co-op parents’ decisions to remain members in or excise themselves from the club, as noted by Shelley

and Linda, regarding Evelyn's participation in the July 2013 discussions of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which highlighted differences in opinion among members about evolution, populations, and civilizations. Despite these perceived differences, or perhaps because of them, Shelley noted during the September meeting that she followed up on texts about Islam that Evelyn had mentioned, as a way to become more educated about this religion herself. Additional observations can be made regarding these intersections of the four spheres (club, co-op, mainstream education, and literary engagement) in terms of Books-N-Wine's thoughts on other co-op parents who visit the club once or twice and then do not subsequently return. Members have speculated that this club's practice of serving alcoholic beverage is one deterrent from some prospective members. Members have speculated that other deterrents might include the club's exploration of certain conversational topics and reading texts that contain occasionally include explicit language, sexual content, and political themes, which may be too bawdy or dicey for some visitors.

Connecting these explorations of contexts, the aesthetic of group interaction, and exchanges of values and behaviors among several spheres highlight Books-N-Wine's potential to teach and transform its members and have an impact on their families, friends, and communities. It is possible that these potentials are enhanced by the fact this club's goals and identities are flexible according to the needs of its most committed members. For instance, during the time frame for this study, members extended the meeting time later and later into the evening—socializing, resuming book-related discussions, and sharing more intimate details of their lives—based not only on enjoyment of each other's company but also, it seems, on a need for this level of intellectual and emotional engagement as a respite from (but occasion to talk about) their hectic professional and domestic duties. Rather than ending the meetings by a certain time, Sarah

hosts members for “as long as people want to stay.” Examples such as these emphasize the power of this club’s literary and social engagement as it supports the “everyday” worlds of parenting and other professional involvement, as will be explored in the next chapter. There are other concrete ways to explore the exchanges of values and behaviors, with Books-N-Wine or other clubs. These exchanges occur not only within the spheres of social, educational, and literary engagement but also within the sphere of the commercial print industry, where as Mitch points out transactions between readers and texts can be explained in economic terms of manufacture and consumption, and where as popular discourse points out publishing houses can aggressively market books to receptive clubs. With regard to the commercial component of Books-N-Wine or any club, Books-N-Wine members’ experiences in procuring copies of the selected texts evidence attitudes about the value they place on consuming reading material—whether they own books as physical (or electronic) commodities or borrow them in order to accumulate cultural capital—in relation to their participation in the club. It seems that book-sharing among members, particularly between Linda and Sarah as next-door neighbors, or book-borrowing from local libraries is an option when Amazon orders take too long, when a local bookstore does not carry used or affordable copies, or when a member decides that a book purchase may be too expensive. Quite consistently during the six meetings I observed, members spent time during the “pre-meeting” segment reporting on whether and how they procured a copy of the selected text. While Linda occasionally did not have the extra time to read each selected text, she generally made a concerted effort to attend meetings and to ask questions about others’ reading experiences. Joe usually listened to texts through audio format during his commute to and from work or as he is driving to attend a meeting, and on at least one occasion has invited his family to join him in listening. During the April meeting, members commiserated about their

unsuccessful experiences trying to find copies of *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* at the McKay's store in Knoxville, remarking on the disorganization of used merchandise on book shelves and the staff's seeming "dedication to anti-customer service," as Leslie put it. Sarah observed that copies of the same title are often shelved in many different locations and joked that Troost's text, regardless of its actual content or literary category, is just as likely to be shelved in the "S & M" section as it is in "New Releases." Reports such as these suggest that the social and reading experiences offered by the club are prioritized over the possession of a brand new hard copy of each text, and in some cases, attending meetings is more important than having completed the reading. Through these practices, as I observed during the study and as others might observe to a lesser degree by scrolling through the club's online archive, Books-N-Wine (and possibly other clubs) models ways for other readers who may be observing, including members' children, to participate in the commercial and cultural production of literary meaning.

Highlighting what Books-N-Wine might consider the most significant dialogues, behaviors, and "actions" that occur within the space of the club and that correspond to "actions" in other areas of members' lives, Shelley suggested during the follow-up interview that club members "do have a tendency to explain things in the context of children or families." She added that "talking about current events or in literary terms" such as character development, story-telling, and sharing the reading experiences of "feeling and seeing" with books and getting "basic ideas" from them take on "common" forms among members, "because there are similarities in backgrounds, family structures, and the age of our children." Connecting these commonalities to the ways in which Books-N-Wine's members might negotiate difference within supportive relationships, Shelley described her deliberative interactions with Sarah as a

means by which these two members (and others) gain new knowledge that might translate to non-club experiences:

Susan and I have had lots of talks. We're very different in our religious backgrounds and maybe our basic political backgrounds, but there is a lot of common ground in what we want for our children and what we want for our lives. And because of that very common ground we've able to say "Well, why do you think that?" and "How can we explore our common ground and find out where the differences are and kind of pull that apart?" So, I think that's an interesting way to find an audience. Everybody is so eager to learn from one another.

Shelley offered an additional summary of the club's combination of consistent and flexible practices and emphasizes the importance of these practices to its members and relevance to other areas of their lives. She suggested that one agent of cohesion for the group is everyone's "sense of personal, shared tragedy." While she and I agreed that no one in the group is "tragic-minded," we discussed members' faith in this club as a system that provides support to adults who comfortably disclose the challenges and triumphs, hardships and hope that they experience in everyday life. Shelley observes that as she listens to other parents in Books-N-Wine discuss their approaches to homeschooling, she finds that the club may provide her with instruction that she may need as her children develop and require a different kind of parenting:

You don't learn a lot about somebody's personal life over the first one; it takes four or five or six book-club meetings to kind of put together all the details of someone's life. And then you start becoming more curious about how things are going, and too, I think, because all of the others have older children than I do, that

it's kind of that curiosity of what happens in ten years, you know? Where does it go in ten years when you do this now?

It may be that this sense of “shared tragedy,” such as some members’ experiences of divorce or raising children with special needs—provides members with the strongest impetus to seek guidance from one another in what they *do* in their multiple roles as parents, providers, educators, readers, cultural critics, and “everyday activist” in their lives, not only for the immediate present but also for the future.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was designed and conducted to find new answers to questions that remain in book-club research, including knowledge about particular categories of clubs, clubs as situated and contextualized practices that participate in the world in unique ways, and the most effective methods for studying book clubs. The Books-N-Wine club was selected from several other Knoxville clubs to figure into a case study on book-club culture. Findings on Books-N-Wine, collected from observations of six consecutive club meetings, two rounds of interviews with participants, and explorations of the club's online content and its reading selections, provide answers to the following research questions that guided this study:

- (1) How does a book club operate publically, socially, and privately within specific contexts?
- (2) How does a club participate in external communities or the world at large and connect this participation to the literature its members read?

Findings suggest that Books-N-Wine's responses to context contribute to the club's formation of a distinct *aesthetic of group interaction*, comprised of the club's leadership and the roles of its members, the three-part structure of its meetings, a common discourse, and its unique relationship to literary genre. Books-N-Wine's aesthetic of group interaction defines its members' participation in the world at large, managed through their exchanges of values and behaviors for use in various "spheres," domestic and professional, and the sphere of daily living, thus training the members of Books-N-Wine "everyday activists."

This chapter is divided into two main parts to explore the implications of the discoveries made in this study. The first part explores the notion of Books-N-Wine's impact on others; this

club's responses to a number of contextual factors and its members' use of the club space to affirm one another's values and behaviors for use in other spheres provide an important occasion, for the researcher and even the participants, to identify the possible ways in which this club affects other groups and communities. The second part of this chapter explores this study's outlying discoveries and implications that establish a focus for future research on reading communities. Implications include the importance of a researcher's entrance into a community that is inherently discursive and invested in intellectual exploration. These considerations are then more broadly applied to the importance of book-club research as a field for reconsidering terms such as "activism," "authenticity," and "transformation." This chapter expands the analysis of this study further by considering the most useful applications of knowledge on books clubs to multiple theories and disciplines. These implications and applications lay the groundwork for designing an extended future study toward more intentional investigations of book clubs as sites for "everyday activism."

The most abstract outlying discoveries that emerged during the research process are explored in a concluding "Epilogue," or "post-text" section. Including an Epilogue in a dissertation project on book clubs is an aesthetic choice inspired by the Books-N-Wine club's striking aesthetic of group interaction. Books-N-Wine not only chose to read several texts that featured Epilogues but also structured its meetings to include an extended "post-meeting" or "social Epilogue." In addition, this narrative and dialogic structure worked its way into the structure for conducting interviews, such that these conversations between participants and researcher began to exhibit an interactional aesthetic of their own, characterized by the intellectual collaborations and by the fact that some of the most compelling reflections on the part of all parties involved in this study took place through casual exchanges after interviews'

official line of questioning was concluded. This dissertation's "post-text" establishes a focus for future investigations of Epilogues as narrative, aesthetic, dialogic, social, and ideological spheres for "everyday activism."

Implications of the Findings

Identifying Areas of Books-N-Wine's Impact

The Books-N-Wine club is certainly a very small reading community whose constituency had stabilized to five core members by the time that data collection was completed in October 2013. This club has indicated that Books-N-Wine does not "have any kind of huge presence in the community," as Sarah has summarized succinctly, and members shared that their motivations for participating in the club center around socializing, recreating, learning, and reading, rather than around organizing concrete action for the purposes of social change. The merits of their recreational approach to operating a book club considered, it does seem to be the case that members are mindful of and have come to value the impact they have, as parent-teacher-readers, in their immediate surroundings, in the present and future. Just as Shelley, as quoted in the last chapter, regards her experiences in the club as occasions to learn from other members what kind of parent she may aspire to be ten or so years from now, Sarah emphasizes the impact of one's "feelings about what's going on" and the importance of "passing on" information or values to others. Sarah, in particular, cites reading as one impetus for this act:

The things that you read can certainly have an impact on you as an individual, which goes forward depending on how you interact with other people. I definitely think that the more that you read, and the more that you're aware of things, especially in all the non-fiction books, the more your knowledge can be passed on

to other people. And so your awareness is not only good for you, and good for my kids, but for anybody I happen to talk to the book about.

In Michel de Certeau's *The Practices of Everyday Life*, the author considers everyday "ways of operating," including but not limited to the activities of reading and talking (xiv, xx), and suggests that such "commonplace" tactics of "making do" mean that consumers become producers and manipulators of their worlds (29). This project has focused on Books-N-Wine's reading responses and social dialogue as important intellectual accomplishments that have a strong connection to this club's members' "making do" in or having an impact on other areas of their lives. Additional work must be done toward investigating whether the impetus to "make do" in the everyday and reader-ly senses of the term resembles the impetus toward "activism" in an organized social movement sense of the term. Furthermore, it is important to theorize about whether "everyday" and "activist" practices differ in terms of the scale of citizen involvement or identifiable outcomes, and whether "everyday" is an appropriate adjective in some cases to modify notions of "activism." Citizens' (or readers') engagement in the everyday, as with their participation in concrete and organized social movements, can combine a self-conscious, rote, or habitual investment of time and energy, intellect and passions, into the aspects of life that citizens deem valuable. In investigating "everyday activism," it is important to consider the degree of regularity of these investments, whether the "everyday" as a synonym for "ordinary" investments such as reading and rearing children, happens truly *every day* or whether it becomes relegated to less frequent (and thus *extra*-ordinary or exceptional) habits. In the case of Books-N-Wine, the club meets once a month to formulate opinions about literature and life, yet members' investments in their children's lives and interactions with other co-op parents demonstrates daily "making do" in their approaches to education. How do members' commitments fare within

categories of the “everyday,” “activism,” or “everyday activism?” Are they candidates for these inclusion in these categories at all?

Given these considerations of citizens’ (or readers’) time and investment with regard to “everyday activism,” it is important not to discount the impact of readers such as those in Books-N-Wine who read for amusement and for knowledge, in response to contexts near and far, and who read with the understanding that “knowledge,” as Sarah claims, “equals power” that is worth “passing on.” Just as knowledge is a factor enabling the accumulation of power, “passing on” knowledge, or at least the means and skills to acquire it, leaves behind a legacy. Sarah’s and other readers’ sense of social responsibility, the impact they have, and the legacies they leave behind certainly manifest themselves within the space of the Books-N-Wine club. There, members discuss not only the communities represented in the texts they choose to read but also the communities with which they affiliate, including the homeschooling co-op, a site that offers both positive experiences of educational support and negative experiences of social exclusion and in some cases moral judgment. Sarah has shared during club meetings that she discusses with her teenage daughter ways to treat others in ways that are not “nasty,” that are inclusive, and that withhold moral judgment. It may be that Sarah’s motivation to inculcate these social attitudes partly stems from her observations of behaviors in the co-op with which she does not identify.

Sarah’s comments about her social interactions and the legacies she wants to leave with her children and others emphasize that “everyday activism” as might occur in a book club must be theorized by critics such as Michel de Certeau’s and by reading communities themselves who observe or perhaps disregard their own impact on others. During interviews, Mitch and Sarah both expressed that they were somewhat surprised by the fact that a researcher would choose to

study a book club. Sarah in particular said that when I first contacted her, she had not considered the book club to be a “big deal.” To an observing researcher it might be disheartening to discover that the participants may not regard the activity that is being investigated with the same kind of fascination; yet, this kind of honesty on the part of the study participants is fascinating in itself, especially in the case of Books-N-Wine, in which members may attach varying degrees of importance to this recreational activity and may be in the midst of changing the ways in which they participate. On the one hand, Sarah and Mitch both seemed to regard book clubs as ordinary activities, given the ubiquity of these groups as part of reading and print culture, and perhaps not sensational enough to warrant intense scholarly attention. On the other hand, this club’s core members participate consistently and enthusiastically enough to suggest that this activity has become a fixture in their social and intellectual lives. Sarah, of course, helps to select books, commits to hosting the group on a monthly basis, and has articulated specific standards for how she would like Books-N-Wine to operate, while other core members demonstrate by their regular meeting attendance that they create space in their busy schedules to participate. An additional consideration is that this group has become a close-knit community that protects its operation, within the private space of Susan’s home, from excessive outside influence, whether they perceive that influence to include OBC recommendations or the socio-political opinions and reading preferences of less-frequently-attending participants.

Why would these readers protect a reading community that is not a “big deal?” And by whose standards do they measure the importance of the club? Do Sarah’s and Mitch’s initial surprise at a researcher’s interest in Books-N-Wine reveal contradictions in their attitudes toward their own community? Or rather, do these members simply value the club in their own lives at the same time that they understand that it is one small community within larger systems,

networks, and cultures? Conceptualizing what is ordinary, important, or what can be classified as a “big deal,”—based on Books-N-Wine members’ statements about the club’s operations—might begin with Sarah’s interest in “passing on” to others the knowledge and values she gains from the experiences of reading on individual and social bases. And of course, contexts for reading and reading communities’ participation in the world around them, as the subjects for this study’s research question, will affect the ways these questions are answered in future research.

Impact Continued: the Presence of the Researcher

Details from the previous chapter on the Books-N-Wine club as a situated, contextualized, and autonomous practice in which participants exchange values and behaviors for use in other spheres emphasize that my presence as researcher is an important consideration in evaluating the findings. A researcher’s interactions with participants, whether collaborative and friendly or strictly business-like and transactional, set the tone for the type of data that can be collected among people who have created what Joe terms an “environment of friends.” For this study, developing social bonds with participants enabled us to gain greater insight into such factors of Books-N-Wine as its use of a website, selections of reading material, and its relationship to the local homeschooling co-op. By extension, participants and I built new knowledge about this club’s powerful intersections with the realms of education, literature, and the print industry, as well as its relevance to members’ domestic and professional lives and their socio-political identities. Interviews in particular served as important sites in which participants and I articulated more clearly our sense of this club’s *aesthetic of group interaction*, which includes a common discourse among members. Altogether these discoveries, the impact that Books-N-Wine’s members and I had on each other, and the fact that book clubs are inherently

discursive, indicate that book-club researchers need to investigate more closely their presence in the reading communities—whether as silent observers, meeting participants, or interviewers—as a guide to future methodological choices and theoretical claims.

Reports in the previous chapter on this club’s website as a public record of its identity focused on Books-N-Wine’s brief description on the “About” page of its practices and the types of members it desires to attract. Through my interactions with Books-N-Wine, I found that the website signifies additional complexities at work in this club’s public and private practice, on top of the general observation that many clubs are invisible to outsiders if they do not maintain a website. Books-N-Wine’s website serves as the primary gateway into the club, in terms of recruiting and retaining members and establishing its rules and etiquette. During the challenging phase of networking to find the club, Books-N-Wine appeared in an online search, but it required that I contact Sarah, make my research purpose transparent from the outset, and establish trust with members to gain access to the club’s inner workings and privately-determined dynamics. What can be learned is that clubs often work to ensure some degree of control over and a heavy stake in the ways in which they are perceived by outsiders and the ways in which members as “insiders” participate. As detailed in the findings, the Books-N-Wine club’s common discourse enables the exchange of values and behaviors for participation in various spheres. And while these accomplishments developed on a somewhat unconscious basis, it is this very unconscious operation that suggests that exchanging values and behaviors is a natural impulse of the club, rather than one that is implanted by external influences, making it all the more powerful.

But before participating in this naturally-occurring operation and experiencing full fellowship in Books-N-Wine as a reading and social community, a prospective member (or in my case, a researcher) must first interpret the website’s descriptions and then coalesce them with

the privately-negotiated rules. Online, Books-N-Wine defines itself as open to “any adult who loves to read” and thus suggests that the criteria for an “ideal” member are general and based first and foremost on the common interest in literary and social engagement. Despite these general criteria, other details on the website further narrow the pool of potential participants by describing the primary items on a meeting’s informal itinerary as literary discussion and “sharing a bottle of wine” and other refreshments—with which prospective members must be comfortable. Sarah also shared that prospective members contact her before visiting, because her address is not listed publically. Although the website is still operational, Books-N-Wine has more recently enjoyed the intimacy among its core members. Given that it does not widely or assertively advertise itself to outsiders for the purposes of additional recruitment, only occasionally do prospective members contact Books-N-Wine to arrange a visit. On the occasions when prospective members do contact Books-N-Wine, initial emails or phone calls allow a reciprocal initial screening process. A prospective member finds upon gaining access to Books-N-Wine that the intellectualism and conviviality that are promoted on the website are indeed manifested in actual club practice. Anyone *is* welcome and invited to attend and those present at meetings *do* engage in conversations of the intellectual sort. An implied rule but one that is no less strict is the policy of an adult-only atmosphere, as stated in previous chapters. These two practices of serving alcohol and maintaining an adult atmosphere, along with implicit rules, of exploratory and deliberative conversations about socio-political topics, may mean that some prospective members will decline to join while others may drop out altogether. Current members have speculated that attendees who have dropped out have done so because of scheduling or other commitments unrelated to social preferences.

Speculations about the defectors, of course, are shared only with members who do in fact become part of the core constituency. My presence as researcher meant that I was not only privy to these speculations but also aware of the discursive forms through which members expressed these speculations, some in the form of narrative anecdotes, as the means to validate their club's practices and to cement individual and group identity.⁴⁴ For example, Sarah shared with other members that after she described the club to a prospective member who had contacted her, including details such as the service of alcohol, she "never heard from her again." When members verbalized during interviews their speculations about prospective members who decline to join or members who defect from the group, my first responsibilities were to listen to and support their processes of identification and to gather detailed and accurate data, while remaining neutral about these subjective statements. After spending more time with members in the club setting and in interviews, however, I found myself sympathizing with this club's desire to maintain its rules, or "best practices," for operating a successful reading community, including its adult-only atmosphere and its methods of engaging in deliberative dialogue about socio-political issues. On an aesthetic basis, I began to regard speculations about prospective and defecting members and anecdotes about interactions with non-club parents in the co-op—scattered across meetings and interviews—as comprising a collective and ongoing narrative of the club's survival in the midst of external influences of culture and rotating membership that might serve to dissolve less cohesive groups. In this narrative, core members figured as stalwart "protagonists" and skilled autobiographers. I became an especially sympathetic and rapt

⁴⁴ Anecdotes that reference the club itself function as what Gary Alan Fine calls "*identity-salient* narratives about happenings deemed relevant to common interests" (120), and help Books-N-Wine articulate its identity in terms of the ways in which its practices attract and repel prospective members. Another important theory that is relevant to Books-N-Wine's anecdotes as part of this club's methods of identification and contextualizing, Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives* describes the *anecdote* as a rhetorical device that can serve to direct, modify, and correct social behavior, by "constituting" rules and "admonishing" participants against their possible demise. Anecdotes can affect the behavior of individuals as well as institutions.

audience when the club's ongoing survival story began to absorb other narratives—those of characters in the reading selections, those of Books-N-Wine's individual members, and mine. Learning, identity-formation, and storytelling became mutually-reinforcing processes, in that as members learned more about each other and the club's identity as a group and reflected on how others outside the club perceive (and in the case of this study, research) Books-N-Wine, they made time during meetings to generate creative narrative ways to share these discoveries just as they made time to formulate responses to reading selections.

Based on bonds that had formed between members and me while sharing thoughts and ideas during interviews and in response to Sarah's explicit invitation for me to join the club as a *real* member once I completed official data collection, I began participating in meetings after the last "official" observation removed the imperatives of limiting my self-disclosure and allowed me to enjoy full participation in the club. I completed data collection in October 2013, by which time social bonds had developed into intellectual commitments to internalizing discoveries we had made during our interactions. For example, at the same time each member reflected on his or her "role" in the club and on this group's unique exploration of genre, I increasingly appreciated Books-N-Wine's prioritization of "good discussions,"⁴⁵ the experiences of social intimacy, and members' impact on their immediate surroundings as action in the sphere of the everyday. Although the goals that other clubs may have of creating a conspicuous public presence or engaging in community action can provide important insight into book-club culture at large, my evolving role as researcher-turned-member of Books-N-Wine brought to my attention to the

⁴⁵ Members of Books-N-Wine echo claims made by published material and say that "good" reading material for the purposes of discussions should be challenging enough to raise questions during discussions and at the same time evoke empathy for characters. Books-N-Wine adds to these criteria their desires to imagine characters' lives beyond the confines of plot, to connect the readings to their own lives and their knowledge about the world at large. More specifically, Books-N-Wine members spend time during meetings discussing the aesthetic qualities of a work of literature, such as narrative voice and structure.

importance of this club's connections of their reading experiences to the details of their day-to-day lives.

As a corollary to these emotional and social connections, Books-N-Wine's members and I began to share the role of researcher, prompting genuine interest in each other's lives, increasing our mutual self-disclosure, and collaborating more cohesively in the business of producing knowledge for this study. Sharing the researcher role in our conversations and interactions encouraged our greater attention to the non-fiction texts we read as occasions not only to learn about "real world" subject matter but also the nature of writing about research, including J. Maarten Troost's account of recounted experiences living in Kiribati in the South Pacific and Rebecca Skloot's discoveries about Henrietta Lacks and members of the Lacks family. At the same time that members weighed ideologies of the texts, either rejecting or incorporating them into their belief systems, members also weighed the emotional and intellectual costs of a researcher's entrance into a field, as presented in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*, and to some degree *The Girls of Atomic City*. Everyone's interest in what it means to research or investigate phenomena became not only a social and intellectual commitment on the part of everyone involved but also a methodological commitment that has important bearings on how book-club research can and should be conducted. In terms of sharing the role of researcher in this study, I was the "official" researcher, following a protocol guided by the scholarship of seasoned qualitative researchers. Members served in a more informal capacity by conducting electronic "investigations" into reading material and by inquiring occasionally about my thoughts on literature, bolstering an already-existing impetus to investigate the world, each other, their own interiors, and the researcher who had entered their turf. Within this dynamic, members and I engaged in serious as well as jocular

discussions about the nature of research on book clubs, as well as our thoughts on literary genres and the “agendas,” as Leslie terms them, behind adhering to or revamping the traditional literary canon.⁴⁶ Members occasionally asked me whether any aspect of the club, such as its period of almost consecutive non-fiction selections or its occasionally bawdy discussions during meetings, would affect the results of the study. We giggled about this meta-investigative banter and I assured them that the bawdy discussions and non-fiction selections would not diminish the quality of the study and expressed that my goals were to observe and interview members about their club’s operation rather than to be a stakeholder in the club’s ways of conducting meetings or selecting texts. Subsequent discussions of literary genre, during meetings and interviews, resulted from these comments. Members shared with me during interviews that through these conversations about the status of the case study at hand and through our interview discussions of their experiences in the club, they became more self-reflective of the nature and significance of their participation in the club. During the follow-up interviews with Shelley, this member suggested that her participation in the study prompted her to ask questions such as—“What *are* each getting out of the book club?” ... “What *are* we putting in?” ... “*How* do we interact?” and “*Do* we bring it back to the book?” She added that she became “a little more conscious of contributions, whether [she is] contributing anything or just eating the brownies and drinking the wine.” She connected this self-awareness to her interest in the research itself, suggesting that my presence at meetings did not “affect what [she] was going to say,” but that she found herself “wondering what aspects of the discussion” I was focused on, knowing that I “was looking at it

⁴⁶ See the Finding chapter for more details on interviews as important sites for the co-discovery of this club’s aesthetic of group interaction. During meetings when I observed unobtrusively, members joked about whether their occasional bawdy or scatological discussions would make it into this study’s final report. Some of the more serious statements occurred during the May meeting’s post-discussions of the club’s recent alternations between fiction and non-fiction. For May, Books-N-Wine had chosen to read the first half of Denise Kieman’s *The Girls of Atomic City*, and as they agreed to finish this selection for the June meeting, members noted the original title of my study, “Doing the Work of Fiction,” and asked whether their non-fiction selections would “skew my results.”

from a completely different perspective.” During the follow-up interview with Linda, this member and I pondered about whether deeper reflection on participation could alter members’ behavior in the club or whether that their interactions with others in relation to the club would change, but we did not list any examples of changes.

In terms of what these experiences mean for the future, it is important to consider my dual vantage points into the Books-N-Wine club, having conducted a formal study and having been recruited as a *real* member after several months of collecting data as a researcher. These vantage points produce conflicted emotions about and agendas for future research. On the one hand membership in Books-N-Wine enables me to witness the aftermath of sharing the role of researcher with the very subjects of my study, as we all become more self-reflecting and self-aware. On the other hand, my familiarity with published research on reading communities and my access to this study’s large data files mean that Books-N-Wine’s core constituency and I still differ in terms of the scholarly and experiential knowledge that we contribute to this close-knit community. Despite our periods of shared investigation, several questions remain: can we be equals? What is the proper conduct of a researcher-turned-friend? How should I balance (or compartmentalize) my enjoyment of social recreation and impulses to perform the roles of activist and researcher? Will my continued presence mar the “pure” space that these readers have established? Can I help to preserve the club’s own version of the “shadow tradition,” as one that thrives in the margins of mainstream culture, under the radar of traditional academic attention, and outside of the rubric of concrete social movements? Books-N-Wine seems to defy a number of expectations about what a club “should” do, even its own expectations.

Even at this point, the notion that clubs can operate as groups of “everyday activists” is compelling enough, for my participation in Books-N-Wine as a member and my pursuit of future

research opportunities. There are many terms to define, new theories to explore, and new methods with which to experiment in order to begin this new phase.

Book-Club Research as a Crisis of Terminology

Broader extensions of these discoveries about the impact of my relationship with and membership in the Books-N-Wine club include the necessity—for researchers and practitioners—of arriving at updated and appropriate terms to describe what book clubs are and why they are important cultural phenomena. Because book clubs, like many thriving communities, are complex operations, the terms that are typically used to describe their histories and current accomplishments cannot be applied casually. For one thing, the concept of “research” is subject to reconstruction. As explored above, this study enabled the sharing of otherwise clear-cut roles between researcher and participants. These shared roles produced a wider sense of what was actually being researched. Subject matter for this study included, most obviously, the participants, their actions and statements, and the club’s reading material and online content. Subject matter gradually began to include me as a partner, especially during interviews, in the conversations about literature and reading communities and as an object of participants’ curiosity. “Research” includes, of course, formal and structured methods such as the ones guiding this study. But within the club space “research” can also include informal searches for information related to reading selections using electronic devices, as well as the club’s conversational investigations of the researcher, all as simultaneous to the researcher’s formal processes. All resulting analyses equally inform what can be said about book clubs and suggest that making claims about book clubs must be a collaborative process, enabling a researcher to participate in clubs’ pre-existing negotiations of meaning and cultural values. This study on

Books-N-Wine is a distinctive case in this regard. This club combines members' own academic training with their opinions about popular cultural and the practices of book clubs. Introducing the research component into this community adds another layer to these values, because I represent the academy and my own interests in different kinds of communities and cultures.

Both the term "research" and the act of conducting research as an experience that was shared by all parties highlight additional concepts that contribute to what I intuited at several phases of this study as a crisis of terminology, including the uses of "authenticity," "action," and "activism" to describe the operations of book clubs and other types of communities. By "crisis" I mean that the terms researchers use to describe book clubs, as one type of social community, must be considered in light of the multiple sources of cultural influence on clubs' practices and in light of the fact that clubs produce many different types of meaning that likely influence others external to themselves. However, examining one's use of terms in order to expose the assumptions they carry and their power in scholarly dialogue is not unique to book-club research and should apply to any field of inquiry. Exploring a larger theoretical imperative of terminological awareness, Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin's Preface to the second edition of *Critical Terms for Literary Study* asserts that "[c]ultural studies must continue to theorize its own practice" and provides occasions to reflect critically on taken-for-granted terms such as "writing," "culture," "canon," and "discourse" (x).⁴⁷ For this study, the terms "authenticity," "action," and "activism" in particular need qualified definitions when used to describe a club's socio-political leanings, whether these are explicit or implicit aspects of its operation, to accommodate the ethical, cultural, and aesthetic complexities of their literary

⁴⁷ In previous chapters, I cited entries in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* in order to specify this study's use of "discourse" to describe Books-N-Wine as a community that cultivates a unique and evolving relationship to literary genre and that creates a particular manner of speaking during club meetings as part of its *aesthetic of group interaction*.

responses. Authenticity, and its ostensible antonym artificiality, as general concepts in discussions about art and culture are not new concerns and involve important consequences in terms of how communities and individuals identify themselves and are identified by others. For any cultural researcher or self-conscious member of a culture, the notions of authenticity and artificiality, in relation to context or other factors influencing the operations of the culture, create murky and dangerous territory. Academics and practitioners of a culture may be conscious, like Frederick Jameson, of the symptoms of a postmodern moment in history in which art and life forms may err on the side of “imitating ... peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic styles” but without “parody’s ulterior motives” of irony and satire, and label such “blank” forms and expressions *pastiche* (*Postmodernism* 17). In commercial realms, performance artists might be scolded for such crimes as “selling out” to producers or appropriating others’ innovations. Considering the issues of race, class, and gender at work in literary or political discourse, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s oft-cited “Can the Subaltern Speak?” posits that “essentializing” and excluding the voices and experiences of others in such discourse or “insisting” on the inclusion of these voices have consequences in cultural interactions (2207).⁴⁸ Such observations in some case may valid, particular when art and culture intersect with the concerns of underrepresented, oppressed, or disenfranchised groups. But because using terms such as “pastiche,” “authenticity,” or “essentializing” imply value judgments and raise questions about who is even qualified to make the judgments, more debate about what constitutes authenticity and artificiality is needed to determine how these terms should be used, by whom they should be used, and about whom they should be used.

⁴⁸ Spivak summarizes one harmful narrative produced in dominant or elite cultures, such as “White men are saving brown women from brown men,” as a narrative that relegates members of “subaltern” culture to roles that they may not desire or choose to fill (2204).

With regard to book clubs, these tasks are especially difficult given that there are many standards on what clubs “should” do beyond gathering to discuss experiences with literary texts, and given the activist (and in some cases, philanthropic) legacies that reading communities have left behind over the course of several centuries. To observe “authenticity” in current book-club practice, it is useful to return to published research and popular writing on book clubs that claim that these groups are often autonomous practices—forming themselves, choosing texts, and guiding discussions entirely independently from larger reading programs such as OBC. Popular guides such as Slezak’s *The Book Group Book* and Greenwood, Johnson, and Mitchell-Brown’s *The Go On Girl! Book Club Guide for Reading Groups* provide another layer to clubs’ self-direction because they display the narrative and analytical forms that thriving clubs use to celebrate their own accomplishments. Clubs featured in these publications pride themselves on their text selections as well as their self-identification through storytelling.

In contrast to the clubs who are admirably vocal about their practices, other book clubs such as Books-N-Wine do not spend this kind of energy verbalizing explicit commitments to their “authenticity.” Instead, the focus is usually on the selected reading and members present at meetings. These practices—the use of domestic space, self-guided operation, prioritization of the needs of its constituency over some abstract sense of “authenticity,” and the club’s establishment of its own standards regardless of perceived external standards or clubs’ historical legacies—provide occasions for reconsidering the meaning and reality of “authenticity.” In addition to these social practices, a club’s literary practices may also provide an occasion for the authenticity debate. Generally speaking, Books-N-Wine’s explorations of literary genre, through their conscious selections of non-fiction reading material and their discussions of traditional literary canons, mean that members figure as stakeholders in the commercial print industry. Leslie’s blog

post regarding her reactions to *To Kill a Mockingbird* within the context of current race relations suggests that this member and possibly members of other clubs can figure as legislators of literary and social culture. Books-N-Wine's stake-holding status is especially important, given the club's simultaneous regard for categories such as "the classics," its interest in contemporary genres, and some members' declared disdain for OBC recommendations and published discussion guides. Also to be considered is the club's occasional cross-cultural engagement with texts and discussions of topics that tend to produce debate, such as LGBTQ rights, the validity of evolutionary theory, and the effectiveness of some methods of economic protest such as boycotting large retail franchises. Books-N-Wine's readings and dialogue about these topics draw attention to how "real" readers—not just the readers theorized about in the academy or marketed to by publishers—formulate opinions about current events, topics of debate, and works of literature. As book-club researchers Kimberly Chabot Davis and Catherine Burwell explore, emotional and empathetic responses to texts about oppressed populations still need to be investigated, and not simply denigrated, in consideration of the motivations behind and contexts surrounding reading experiences. While there are no simple answers to these questions about authenticity, there is a great deal of merit in a club's courage to approach these literary and cultural challenges through dialogue. Examples of Books-N-Wine's debates about intense topics and their allowance of differences of opinion—as observed in Sarah and Shelley's discussions of sexual orientation and religion, in members' varied responses to their readings of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, and in members' statements about their interests in deliberative dialogue—suggest that members engage in these practices based on their own desires to do so rather than on some sense of moral obligation.

“Authenticity” as might be seen in the Books-N-Wine’s negotiation of literary, cultural, and socio-cultural values corresponds to the previous chapter’s findings on this club’s *aesthetic of group interaction* and its participation in a number of different *spheres*, and introduces additional terms for exploration. “Flexibility” as a social and intellectual standard of practice, alongside Gary Alan Fine’s theory of the “tiny public” comprised of what Rosa Eberly calls “citizen critics,” help to describe the way that this club has managed to stabilize its current core constituency. Fine suggests that social groups form based on emotional affinity and common interests, which certainly describes Books-N-Wine, whose members express similar aesthetic, political, educational, and religious values. Members add to these specific values a general standard of conduct: allowing flexibility in their construction of individual belief systems which they manage through expressing differences of opinion (in connection to their explorations and varied definitions of genre) within the levity of a relaxed social environment. In closely examining these terms, it is important to note that this club’s flexibility, levity, and differences of opinion are not synonymous with a “middle-of-the-road” or exclusively moderate socio-political ideology, though some members may very well identify with these leanings. Indeed, this club can become ironically inflexible with regard to upholding its standard of flexible discourse, particularly when an occasional visitor (usually another homeschooling parent) introduces opinions into a discussion that the club feels are excessively staunch or comparatively narrow-minded, as exemplified by Shelley’s observations that other members would likely not be “swayed” by Evelyn’s “back-up information” about evolution. The club does maintain what it sees as a reasonable norm, from which only small deviations are acceptable.

As a “tiny public,” Books-N-Wine members’ use of its club space to exchange with one another values and behavior for use in other spheres provides the occasion to reconsider the

terms “action” or “activism” as they might be associated with some categories of book clubs or other discursive communities. As stated in previous chapters, neither this club nor its members participate in formal social activism. Books-N-Wine does not uphold a “mission” beyond intellectual deliberation. Books-N-Wine does possess power, but of a different sort than is typically attributed to activism. Participation in concrete in social movements can effect change in social reality, as demonstrated by the accomplishments of nineteenth-century literary societies that doubled as women’s suffrage and literacy organizations. And current participation in social movements can affect the values and behaviors that guide activists’ daily lives. The reverse can happen too, meaning that people’s daily experiences can inspire or influence their participation in social movements. Similarly Books-N-Wine members’ participation in the club and the values and behavior that guide their everyday experience are cyclical rather than chronological processes. Members’ influences within their homes, on the structures of the homeschooling approach to education, within their respective professional environments, their status as stakeholders in the print industry through their choices to purchase or borrow reading selections, and in turn their influences on the structure of the club perhaps resemble activism on a large, public scale. Thus, “activism” as a concept should also include what happens unexpectedly, in private settings, and on a subtle and extended basis.

Several concepts surmised from the literature review provide additional occasions to reconsider terminology that is important to use in book-club research and potentially in research within other areas of culture, aesthetics, or social science. These include a club’s potential to function as a “pedagogical community,” such that members teach others and themselves. These also include a club’s potential to function as a “liberating” or “emancipatory” activity, removing perceived or actual social strictures so that participants can pursue intellectual thought, social

engagement, and a sense of security among peers, without undue pressure or influence from outsiders' expectations. For this club and others like it, "pedagogy" and "emancipation" are exciting terms for any educators or individuals who seek new opportunities to make a difference in their worlds. Given Books-N-Wine's alternative approaches to education and members' use of club space to investigate social phenomena in the informal role of "researchers," the concept "pedagogy" should extend beyond formal philosophies on how and why we teach in certain ways. For further investigating Books-N-Wine or other clubs, "pedagogy" might include interviewing participants about their internal motivations that drive core members to learn from each other's small differences and the ways in which they might exclude the attempted instruction of perceived outliers. Also, given Books-N-Wine's interest in literary genre, exploratory dialogue, and creating a safe space to do these things outside of the shared space of the homeschooling co-op, "emancipation" can be substituted with "liberation" to include not only these terms' social and political overtones but also the ways in which a club's members new spaces, curricula, vocabularies, and relationships to suit their own needs. To what degree to such impulses on the part of book clubs, as sites for recreational intellectual stimulation, resemble impulses within established professional or academic communities to revamp vocabularies and curricula or highlight resistance to change within professions and academics? What could scholars and citizens learn from any resemblances?

Altogether, these terms will require additional theorizing, especially as they might lead to another term, "conspiracy," as a more provocative synonym for a club's particular kind of "interaction," "collaboration," and even "reciprocity"—terms that might be appropriate in investigations of a multifarious "shadow tradition of literature" (Farr and Harker 4). "Interaction" and "collaboration" are fine terms to suggest a cheerful working together, or "give-

and-take,” as members of this club have termed their relationships. And while “reciprocity” is useful in that it implies that two or more individuals intentionally help one another or exchange knowledge, a use of “conspiracy” might suggest that internal collaboration and other actions are somewhat secret and safe from outsiders, and that gaining entry into a safe space requires acceptance by “insiders” or perhaps even a rite of passage. As will be explored in the final sections of this chapter, “conspiracy” may not be appropriate in the noun form to categorize Books-N-Wine (or any club) as a cohesive unit, given “conspiracy’s” loaded meanings. Rather, “conspiratorial” may be an appropriate adjective to describe the guiding force behind a club’s self-protection and intentional separation from a larger structure with which it does not fully identify. In this case, Books-N-Wine separates itself ideologically from the homeschooling co-operative at the same that its members continue to affiliate with its operation. Additional research into book-club-specific pedagogies, activism, and conspiratorial motivations can help to describe the means by which clubs become groups of better informed readers and citizens amidst powerful influences in many areas of their lives.

Interdisciplinary Considerations for Book-Club Research

This section extends discoveries about the importance of identifying a club’s impact and paying close attention to club’s own descriptions of their impact, such as Sarah’s interest in “passing on” knowledge to others. This section also extends discoveries about the nature of book-club research and the crisis of terminology that this kind of research can produce and address by considering the theories, methods, and ethics that should direct future book-club research. The literature review reveals that book-club research has already produced innovative theoretical connections and mixed-methods approaches, and calls for continued debates on the

ethics of reading and research. Researchers may even go so far as to say that these trends in book-club research represent broader imperatives in academic culture, given that universities often promote interdisciplinary alliances among their faculties and students as well as form initiatives for civic and community engagement. These trends and imperatives mean that scholars who identify themselves professionally in the borderlands of disciplines and fields need to articulate with more courage and clarity reasons why these connections are necessary, given the freedoms and challenges that are associated with a flexible professional identity.

Nancy Fraser's social theory helps to consider the political stakes involved in identification with or at the intersections between academic fields. She suggests in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (1989) that being a "radical" in the academy involves a "struggle to *be* a politically committed, critical intellectual within the academy" and creates crises of identity and action. She suggests that these crises also beget a crisis of terminology such as how to stratify understandings of "politics" (2-7). As I have explored, such stratification at the level of terminology is especially important when academics have great influence on knowledge and culture and when in some cases they divide their loyalties among proletariat and bourgeois ideologies. Fraser's claims about these crises continue to apply today in many fields, including book-club research, and can be seen in the work of book-club researcher-practitioners such as Janice Radway, Elizabeth Long, Azar Nafisi, and Mary Kooy.⁴⁹ In their work, these scholars combine academic disciplines and research methods and reveal their socio-political leanings and professional identities. Perhaps more importantly, they are transparent in their descriptions of the emotional conflict that results from the kind of

⁴⁹ I note here that combining Fraser's theories with the work of Radway, Long, Nafisi, Kooy and other book-club researchers would provide new avenues for continuing feminist inquiries into reading communities as representing various kinds of publics and as representing gendered space, social practice, and scholarship.

research in which they are engaged. Disciplinary *and* emotional flexibility inform these researchers' discoveries and their continued entry into book-club culture as an emerging field of study and source of social theory.

With these challenges and examples, “radical academics” and/or interdisciplinary scholars must continue identifying complex fields such as book-club culture and must engage in bolder interdisciplinary approaches to book clubs (and other cultures) in order to produce comprehensive understandings. At the same time that these imperatives of interdisciplinary, mixed methods approaches might generate excitement for a book-club researcher, and at the same time that clear rationales for these approaches might strengthen the credibility of such scholarship, researchers must make informed interdisciplinary connections. Researchers must also navigate different environments in which research takes place, categorized by academic institutions, the community, and the commercial print industry. Another challenge, and perhaps even a risk, that a researcher must accept, is that book-club research is not only an investigation of a “shadow tradition of literature” but is also a contribution to a “shadow tradition of scholarship.” Additional risks involve the outcomes, expected and unexpected, of a completed study on and within these “shadow traditions.” What will be the impact of a published article or book-length monograph on clubs? What will be the effects of an ongoing relationship with study participants or the choice to make connections with a book club’s defecting members? How might the course of a professional career be determined by a researcher’s choice to conduct book-club research?

Exploring New Theoretical, Empirical, and Popular Investigations of Book Clubs

Every stage of this study as it currently stands has been informed by a broad range of discourse, from interdisciplinary theories, to empirical studies utilizing combined methods, to popular guidebooks and memoirs that capture the logistical and emotional significance of the book-club experience. My initial choices to consult these categories of published material and treat them as equally important to this study corresponds to the insight I gained during later stages of this study into what it means to be a researcher facing the afore-described crises of identity and terminology. The perceptions of members, as authoritative sources of knowledge about their own experiences, suggest that a new study should continue consulting these sources in combination. The need for combined consultation of sources is especially apparent when book-club researchers and practitioners begin to fuse their roles; research can prompt participation and participation can prompt research.

“How To” guides written by other club practitioner-scholars, including those by Harvey Daniels and Rachel Jacobsohn, demonstrate that real experiences with clubs alongside rigorous formal scholarship or experiences as educators in formal settings are important accomplishments. The “How To” guides such as *The Book Group Book* and *The Go On Girl! Guide* that include anecdotal explorations by club facilitators and participants show that the act of storytelling—composing oral or written narratives about book-club experiences or sharing stories about one’s own life to fellow members of a club—contributes to an important body of knowledge about book-club culture and supports the start-up efforts of new clubs. In this way clubs become not only authorities, but also *author*-ities, of published material about their own practice. Comprising a larger narrative undertaking than “how-to” guide anecdotes, Janice Radway’s *A Feeling For Books* combines tenacious scholarship, a personable tone, and self-disclosure to explore several

important aspects of her experiences: the conflicting emotions and methodological issues that are involved in a researcher's processes of gaining entry into the environment in question and the cultural, commercial, and professional stakes involved in this research. Thus, Radway's tenacity and skill as a storyteller are indispensable to the "shadow traditions" of book-club practice and research. Alongside the work of other researchers, *A Feeling for Books* provides a useful model for this project's published future and inspire renewed commitments to investigating the crises of identity and terminology that are endemic to this field of study.

For continued investigations of clubs as situated, contextualized practices, theories by Bakhtin and Dewey remain relevant. Bakhtin's *dialogism* emphasizes the temporal significance of novel-length fiction, as it conflates the time of a work's reception by readers, the time of its creation by the author, the historical periods dramatized through its plot, the future interactions between the text and readers, and the social conditions that foreground these readings. Books-N-Wine's members' common discourse in connection to the club's readings includes these temporal conflations as evidenced by the ways in which they quote and paraphrase characters' thoughts and actions, as though readers and characters can temporarily be one and the same or as though solitary reflection and social performance can be intimately connected reading experiences. And as with Nafisi's exploration of the temporal and geo-political implications of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Books-N-Wine's readings of *The Girls of Atomic City*—decades after WWII but only miles away from the city that was built to manufacture the bomb—provide compelling occasions to examine the club's interest in the ways in which Kiernan's contemporary narrative forms render historical and political subject matter.

As a supplement to temporal understandings of context in relation to literature, John Dewey's *Art as Experience* provides a spatial understanding of context. Dewey's theory re-terms

the “work” of art to mean the action or response of the consumer as separate from the “product” of art as the aesthetic object that is consumed (3). The nature of the consumer’s work is contingent on the environment in which it occurs. Experiences with art might occur in constructed “museum” environments, which connote artificiality, because the product is a curation set aside from naturally-occurring situations and because the product is managed by stakeholders of the industry who ostensibly influence the aesthetic values of those who do not work for the industry. An alternative environment for consuming art could be the “everyday” experience, which connotes naturally-occurring situations (13). The museum/everyday binary describes, of course, how consumers encounter visual art such as paintings, sculptures, and installations which take up physical space. Literary analogues to this binary are easily identified as “curated” academic spaces (such as a graduate seminar) versus the ostensible “everyday” spaces outside of the academy, including community or domestic environments (such as book clubs). In all cases, participants are stakeholders *and* consumers performing the “work” and have a hand in the production of commercial and cultural capital.

These binaries are unstable, given that an environment may combine elements of curation and the everyday, or “making do” in Michel de Certeau’s sense of the term. Thus, it is important to identify additional binaries that exist within clubs as environments for “work.” Books-N-Wine as one example contains both the everyday behavior of members and the club space that members have successfully “curated” expressly for engaging in the “work” of literature. Other examples of clubs, and even Books-N-Wine members’ choices to conduct interviews in varied locations, show additional “curations” of space within pre-existing contexts that can be classified according to the public, private, commercial, or community spaces they occupy. They should be

considered alongside clubs' specific selections of reading material (popular, literary, or even scholarly) and their responses to cultural authorities such as OBC and the academy.

For this study, theories from David Novitz, Wayne Booth, and Kenneth Burke on relationships between literary texts and readers inspired my interest in whether this relationship is hierarchical and chronological, such that literary texts are primary producers of meaning and readers are meaning receivers at the moment of the encounter. Another interest for this study in response to these theorists concerns the degree to which texts (or the print industry at large) and readers mutually create meaning, reflect one another, and influence one another. With this possibility, texts and readers (and cohesive reading communities) become collaborative forces. Considering these possibilities, a future study on book clubs can investigate not only the transformations among individual readers, literary genres, communities, and the world, but also the “conspiratorial” relationship between texts and readers and among readers in a group, working to change the status of literature by questioning or reinforcing traditional hierarchies of cultural value, or in more ambitious possibilities, working to change social reality.

The cultural influence (collaboration or conspiring) that book club exercise alongside literary texts, book clubs, both historically and currently, can serve to reinforce traditional hierarchies of cultural value as set forth by the academy and those with expertise within its disciplines or by the stakeholders of the print industry. On the other hand, book clubs can ignore these traditional hierarchies or even dismantle them and create new ones—in either case becoming stakeholders through their purchasing power and *lived* experience with literature. Most interesting, though, is when clubs alternate between these traditional and transformative practices, as Books-N-Wine's members demonstrate through their deliberative dialogue about socio-political topics and explorations of literary categories and genres, toward reaching new

understandings about the world and each other. This club that values flexible opinion formation sometimes reinforces traditional literary canons as much as it challenges them. For example, Linda expresses suspicions of trends and agendas that are explicitly set up to revamp a canon of “dead white guys,” at the same time that she expresses enthusiasm about reading books about underrepresented and disenfranchised cultures. And while Sarah and Joe expressed that they originally set out to select “classics,” the club has more recently explored the value of works of contemporary non-fiction toward producing lively discussions. Furthermore, Books-N-Wine’s members do not want to denigrate works of popular fiction—which Mitch defines as a book that produces “hype” or “sensation” in the media, but will imply a sense of differences in quality in value by placing “classics” above romance novels or OBC recommendations.⁵⁰ Members qualify their genre-based interest further by reserving the club space for lively informal discussions about reading material they take seriously. At the same time, several members confess their interests in reading popular fiction “on the side” for the purposes of escape, but stipulate that these kinds of texts are not to be read for the club. The reason for this general rule is because the experience of detailed discussions about a text is prioritized over the enjoyment of solitary reading experiences. It is the case, though, that members enjoy both reading for solitary amusement and reading as a precursor to discussions with other club members. And while book clubs can be a place to learn about new authors and texts, no one in Books-N-Wine is chastised for not finishing the reading prior to a meeting and there is no pressure to contribute to discussion in a prescribed way, though members do value the exploration of differences of opinion. According to the findings, Books-N-Wine also personalizes their definitions of genres, including distinguishing “fiction” from “literature” and making terms analogous to “popular”

⁵⁰ Sarah remarked on several occasions her dislike for OBC recommendations, while Leslie suggested during an interview that OBC may occasionally explore or recommend a text that for her may have some literary merit.

and “classics,” and coining new genres, such as Mitch’s “NPR books” to describe culturally-sensitive non-fiction and Linda’s “dead white guys” to describe works in the traditional canon.

Shedding more light on encounters between readers and texts and inviting reconsiderations of published theory, Books-N-Wine members agree that the readings that have the most impact have been those on “real world” topics, that are culturally- and politically-significant, and that have evoked an empathetic response from readers. Members’ responses to literary texts—from popular fiction to literary fiction to non-fiction—are an exercise of their influence on one another. These responses in combination with Sarah’s desire to “pass on” knowledge to others may connect to the larger possibility that clubs can produce influential discourse about books just as much as or at the same time that they might be influenced by the discourse of the print industry or the academy. These possibilities carry with them significant cultural and socio-political value. In Books-N-Wine’s case this club’s suspicion of agendas to revamp the canon at the same time that members test the waters of non-traditional texts points to the intellectual power of navigating two seemingly disparate agendas.

Burke’s *A Rhetoric of Motives* offers *identification* as a concept explaining a reader’s taking in of a rhetorical stance of a fictional text so that text and readers as two separate entities (in theory) become “consubstantially” one, following a rhetorical impulse toward uniting with some things and separation from other things. In the case of consubstantial identification with a text or with another member, a book-club participant might internalize a literary work to such a degree that his or her expressions about a text are really expressions (in part) of who he or she is and not just what he or she feels or believes, such as through Joe’s repeated quotations of *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*’s narrator that “our president is a funny guy” to express his intellectual appreciation of and emotional empathy for the narrator’s plight. Through such

literary (and self) expressions, or even “wrestling” as Joe terms his internal reactions to readings, the reader-rhetor changes incrementally. Burke explains that literature’s “autonomy” might be associated with conservative interests in apoliticism while progressives might be concerned with the social implications of art. Books-N-Wine alternates between aesthetic and socio-political responses to literature, as members consistently express interest in such features of a text as narrative style at the same time that they choose texts to which they assign “real world” value. These alternations can be parallel to readers’ identification with texts, readers’ identification with other readers, or a club member’s identification with another club member. What might result is that dialogue, ideologies, and aesthetic responses to texts begin to resemble one another. New identifications with others and with texts provide Books-N-Wine’s members with continued opportunities for transform or solidify ideological identities. In addition to Shelley’s statements about valuing opposing viewpoints as described in the previous chapter, transformation might also be observed in other examples, including Joe’s descriptions during an interview of “wrestling” with the subject matter of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. And while Joe’s “wrestlings” may be primarily an internal response, Sarah’s frequent discursive choice during meetings to express her simultaneous consideration of opposing viewpoints—“...at the same time...”—make the experience of transformation perceivable to others who may also share it.

Novitz’s *Knowledge, Fiction, and Imagination*, in which the author explores the possibility that readers “can and do learn from fiction” (19), presents several problems in terms of the ways in which readers’ different responses to texts might be evaluated. He offers several binaries to describe readers’ responses to fiction—either they “believe” and get “caught up in” it, or they “disbelieve” and “discount it” (83, 87). The binaries are problematic in the sense that

they hierarchize readers and reading practices by assigning them intellectual, aesthetic, moral, and ethical degrees of quality. In other words, such a hierarchy would value some ways of reading over others. Despite the problems associated with accepting a reading hierarchy at face value or with assigning strict categories to reading practices, the binaries that Novitz explores might be more usefully converted into a spectrum, which would then highlight readers' varying degrees of emotional, intellectual, and ethical responses to texts as well as readers' oscillations between and combinations of these types of responses. Although Novitz says that there are no clear criteria for deciding when readers are "properly understanding a literary work" (75), he seems to value combinations of intellectual understanding of and emotional identification with literature. In addition, he assigns "sophistication" to a reader who is "informed" and who "moves in and out of imaginative absorption with relative ease" and suggests that the alternative is a reader who "finds this more difficult, and becomes 'caught up in' the fiction, and has to be reminded from time to time that it is just fiction" (85).

Books-N-Wine members Linda and Mitch provided excellent live examples of the possibilities for comparing various types of responses to literary works. Neither reader is better or more sophisticated than the other, but Linda and Mitch demonstrate that readers often come in contact with one another—in Books-N-Wine's case, once every month—and can value each other's different practices. While both Linda and Mitch are similar in that verbalize their responses to reading material, they contrast one another in their emotional responses to texts, as I discovered during interviews. Linda says she is often "taken over" and "taken up by" what she reads, while Mitch says he is often "skeptical." I noticed, too, that Mitch regards literature in economic terms, and places value on books as items to "market" and "consume" in certain ways. And at the same time that these members' own self-assessments accurately describe their

participation in club meetings, Linda and Mitch (and others) on several occasions during meeting dialogue and interview conversations have demonstrated the flexible “moving in and out” skill that Novitz associates with “sophistication.” Although I hesitate to assign problematic hierarchies of value to these readers’ practices, I observe that the members of Books-N-Wine are discerning in the ways in which they respond to literary texts but also can be moved emotionally by them, as evidenced by examples such as Joe’s quotation from *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* and other texts and Sarah’s consideration of characters’ motives. Along with cultivating and articulating varied literary responses and expressing emotional sensitivity, members of Books-N-Wine allow literature to be influential in their lives.

In connection to the binaries between absorption and appreciation, emotional and intellectual responses, and being able to move back and forth between these ostensibly contrasting ways of reading, Novitz suggests that literary form is to be considered in terms of the degree to which literature and the world reflect and absorb each other. Literary form and its relationship to the world at large are important for book clubs who are mindful of, interested in, or loyal to particular genres, or for clubs in which members like to explore a range of different genres. Books-N-Wine’s members have shared that they do not restrict their readings to one genre or another. In fact, as other chapters have explored, this club was so inspired by Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* that the club’s non-fiction phase very nearly coincided with my official data collection. The timing with regard to the club’s non-fiction phase and this study’s data collection phase was a fortuitous occurrence in that I was able to observe a concentrated period of Books-N-Wine’s cultural power. This club’s spirit of exploration and interest in learning about genre and discussing it in unique ways reflect not only Books-N-Wine’s pedagogical and emancipatory potentials, but also members’ aesthetic aptitude and

ideological courage to decide for themselves what constitutes “real world” value in literature, and thus is worthwhile to them, such as their interests in texts that depict historical events or the experiences of actual personages. For the purposes of Books-N-Wine’s collective (rather than individuals’) reading practices, this club does not seem to want to participate exclusively in the experience of “belief in” and getting “caught up” by books that are purely fictional. A major turning point, as listed in the previous chapter, occurred in January 2013 with the selection of a work of fiction, *The Map of the Sky*. The group’s dissatisfaction with the discussions based on the implausibility of the plot provided one motivating factor for selecting *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* in February. While members admit that reading fiction and getting “caught up” in it are enjoyable experiences, they suggest that there are more lessons to learn from getting “caught up in” story that is based on a historical event or current topics. They also suggest that non-fiction works usually prompt and fuel more extensive discussions about the emotional and moral complexities of events, such as Oak Ridge’s development during WWII, than do fictional works. Books-N-Wine’s opinions in these regards do not represent the opinions of all clubs, of course, but it would be useful to investigate other clubs’ “belief in” literary works, in terms of genre, and their opinions about prioritizing the experience of group discussions about “real world” topics over enjoyable solitary reading experiences.

Given these investigative possibilities, Books-N-Wine’s fiction/non-fiction binary complicates, but cannot be ignored in, the application of Novitz’s theory to other readers’ and clubs’ experiences, particularly regarding the notion that “sophisticated” reading (even though this adjective poses a number of problems for a researcher) requires flexibility in the nature of response. Books-N-Wine’s flexibility in genre-based loyalties and in forming socio-political values and opinions has enabled members to achieve their goals of intellectual growth on an

individual and group basis. Connecting Novitz's, Booth's, and Burke's theories means that flexible reading practices enable different kinds of social and literary identification and suggests that identification is a multi-directional experience; readers not only become absorbed *in* what they read but conversely can absorb the morals or lessons contained within reading material.

The notions of contextualized and situated social practice, identity and identification, and participation in the world help to define a club as a distinct social group, tiny public, or "social conspiracy," as I term in other sections, that sets up for itself certain conditions for long-term operation. Because of the social component endemic to a book club's practice, several theorists working in the areas of social science and education are indispensable to this study. Gary Alan Fine and Rosa Eberly examine the different ways in which citizens engage in public discourse and action. Both should be looked at again alongside Habermas and Nancy Fraser, particularly toward better articulating a theory on literary discussions within public and private spheres (such as debates in salons, coffeehouses, or homes) that allow formations of particular kinds of publics, or what Habermas calls "audience-oriented subjectivities," where readers become rhetorical agents in discussing topics of public concern. As Habermas points out and as many citizens, whether politically active or otherwise, may know from personal experience, public space has theoretical significance as providing citizens with egalitarian, accessible, participatory, democratic, and rhetorical opportunities for expression. Yet, the reality is that public spaces can be spaces for commodification and privatization, as well as exclusion, disenfranchisement, and silencing of certain populations. In response to these realities and possibilities, the actions of "tiny publics" and "citizen critics," whether comprising book clubs or other types of groups, may achieve powerful mediation between or conflation of public and other spheres, through dialogue and in some cases action.

To reiterate the definitions of these theories: Fine's *Tiny Publics: A Theory of Group Action and Culture* (2012) is an examination of small groups that form, correspond to, and constitute larger publics and societies. Indeed, Fine suggests that "public" in the large sense really corresponds to a network of smaller structures. As a useful corollary, Eberly's *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (2000) comes out of an interdisciplinary frame of references and uses publics theory to examine how literature and literary discourse might affect readers. Eberly prefaces her study by considering that "the condition of our public discussions about literary and cultural texts ha[s] something to tell us about the condition of our democracy" (xi). Eberly defines "citizen critics" as readers who claim no professional literary "credentials" beyond their "concern" about certain texts, but who respond to texts rhetorically and in publically accessible ways about their moral and aesthetic opinions on texts' function in society. To build her theory, she studies four cases of twentieth-century public discourse on novels appearing during that period to examine how literature has affected and continues to affect readers and reflects the "condition of our democracy" (xi).⁵¹ Eberly's work will be highly relevant to a future study on book clubs, perhaps one that studies a club's dialogue about particular works of literature with other readers' discourse on the same work in publically-viewable online forums.

With the specifics of these theories on "tiny publics" and "citizen critics" in mind, it is worth reiterating the claims made from this project's outset that book clubs as gatherings of individual readers who have cultural and economic stakes in the print industry are especially invaluable and timely communities for scholarly investigation, given their ubiquity and power. A new book-club study that draws upon Fine and Eberly might rephrase the current study's

⁵¹ The novels receiving attention from "citizen critics" featured in Eberly's work include James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, and Andrea Dworkin's *Mercury*.

research question on the ways in which clubs participate with other communities to match the terminology that these two theorists cultivate:

- *How do book clubs operate as “citizen critics,” “tiny publics,” and “everyday activists” in hybrid contexts, such as intersections between public and private spaces or academic and community environments?*
- *How might clubs’ literary and political discourse directly inform their participation in other, non-club spheres?*

A study would continue gathering and examining data on Books-N-Wine and other clubs specifically with regard to the impact of clubs’ privately-expressed discourse within and about the “public” to answer these questions. Even at this stage, findings from the Books-N-Wine case study provide entry points for these theories, given that Books-N-Wine’s members are well-read critics of literature and culture. Even though they do not claim status as public or literary professionals, they do authorize themselves, sometimes in online public forums as with Linda’s blog entry, to comment on texts’ possible effects on society. It is likely the case, as has been discussed during club meetings and interviews, that members’ literary discussions with their families and friends serve as important sites for enlightenment and influence.

Most useful for considerations of various and hybrid contexts in which literary discourse takes place, Eberly’s last chapter usefully applies this theory to what it means for classroom space as “proto-public space” or as practice space for the later performance in “real” publics. Eberly’s suggestion that classrooms and publics relate to one another hierarchically (one is assumed to be of more consequence) and chronologically (one exists as training space for the other) may very well describe the action of Books-N-Wine or other clubs. Hierarchy and chronology, from the classroom as a training site to the public as the site for action (or the

reverse), are especially important to consider, in terms of this study's findings on Books-N-Wine's unique combination of academic and popular cultural values and its navigation of private practice and online public identity. Eberly's work should be read alongside such empirical studies as those by Mary Kooy and Michael W. Smith, who examine pre-service and veteran teachers' use of the club experience to practice and professionalize for classroom performance, as detailed in Chapter II's Literature Review. This study does not currently draw from Augusto Boal's radical aesthetic in *Theater of the Oppressed*, but Boal's theories on the uses of theater or performance spaces as sites where oppressed classes can rehearse their roles and actions in "real" contexts would be an additionally useful pairing alongside *Citizen Critics* and Kooy's and Smith's findings on classroom-club connections. Although Books-N-Wine's members did not explicitly state that they regard the club as a training opportunity, Shelley in particular did suggest that conversations about political opinions in other social and public contexts do result from the club discussions that are conducted in a safe and relatively private environment.

In response to Eberly's claims and those made by book-club researchers and to extend this study's explorations in redefining "pedagogy" as a term to describe book clubs' operations, it is necessary to examine theories in education that describe learning as transformative, perhaps in aesthetic, rhetorical, and political ways. Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy and E. D. Hirsch's more traditional approach to education, as seemingly contrasting views on the most effective way to teach toward social justice,⁵² are equally relevant to findings from Books-N-Wine. They

⁵² As explored in the Introduction and Literature Review chapters, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) calls educators and learners identifying with oppressed classes to reject the discourse and expertise of the dominant classes, who are traditionally thought of as those with a formal education, capital, and some political power. This rejection thus allows learners and educators to emphasize the discourse of the oppressed classes and to scaffold new expertise upon experiential knowledge that the oppressed already possess. Specific methods would include collaborative dialogue and action, toward empowering communities and changing social reality. Hirsch's 2009 treatise, *The Making of America: Democracy and Our Schools* (2009), is comparatively more conservative and

are relevant for several reasons, one being that clubs in general can be pedagogically significant spaces, whether they reinforce traditions or create alternatives to them. Another reason to enlist the theories of Freire and Hirsch is that Books-N-Wine more specifically constitutes a unique community of reading-enthusiasts who came together through their affiliation with a local homeschooling co-operative, as an alternative to mainstream approaches to education.

As noted in the Findings chapter, Books-N-Wine members' attitudes toward and practices in educating their children (and themselves) invokes three spheres—the co-op as an alternative approach to teaching and learning, mainstream education, and the club space—all intersecting with the sphere of literary engagement. Members' book selections and commentary about them invoke theories from both Freire and Hirsch, as Books-N-Wine navigates between canonical and non-canonical aesthetic values and between politically conservative and cosmopolitan social views. Regarding the club's explicit representation of approaches to education, members are skilled at creating their own curriculum for their children, combining mainstream methods and content with alternative ones as developed through the homeschooling co-op. One notable example of education-related dialogue occurred during the July meeting in relation to topics that elicit debates, such as *Guns, Germs, and Steel*'s anthropological exploration of civilizations' development of religious and political institutions, as discussed during the July meeting. Shelley set the tone for this discussion with her summary of Diamond's points in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*—that “the state organizes conquest and religion justifies it.” More concrete contemporary consideration of this summary was offered by Evelyn, who shared her observation of current public school curriculum's inclusion of activities on Islam culture to the exclusion of other religions. Everyone present agreed with Sarah's vocal suggestion that

traditional in its theories on learning and teaching, and touts the combination of a standard curriculum with child-centered classroom methods as the educational way towards social justice.

equal rather than selective inclusion of world religions in public school curriculum is appropriate.

Although members did not come to an agreement on the validity of claims made in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, they all exercise a principle upheld by both Freire and Hirsch of questioning whether existing curricula have a positive impact on learners' skill sets as well as their social and intellectual values. Members also add to their questions clear and concrete alternatives to what exists, a practice that fits within a pedagogy of "powerful literacy," described by educator Patrick Finn, in *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children* (1999). "Powerful literacy," according to Finn, means going beyond "informational literacy" of merely comprehending education-related content to being able to evaluate the texts and systems pertaining to different contexts (124). On the surface, these pedagogies—critical, powerful, and traditional—may seem to conflict with one another, but upon further reflection they can complement and reinforce one another and provide educators, including the Books-N-Wine club, with a wealth of curricula and methods from which to choose in support of their self-determined standard of club participation as one of intentional flexibility in understandings.

Recommendations for Future Research

An important part of extending this case study is to review the work of researchers who have conducted pilot case studies (whether they recruit their populations or study already-existing populations) as a basis for long-term research into book clubs. The mixed methods approaches in Keith Oatley's seven-year study and Elizabeth Long's ten-year study suggest ways to identify multiple sources of data—including historical and current records, literary texts, diaries, and the dialogue and actions of populations who will figure in such research. Mary

Kooy's "Riding the Coattails of Harry Potter" and *Telling Stories in Book Clubs* model the process of expanding a pilot study on book clubs into a more extensive and long-term undertaking. These and other researchers demonstrate the dedication and creativity required to produce high-quality research on the relationships between readers and literary texts.

Generally speaking, qualitative research is a field that currently reflects decades' worth of effort on the part of researchers to legitimate in the eyes of the academy the rigor of this approach to investigating social phenomena. In *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (1998), Michael Crotty notes that the field of qualitative research is undergirded by multiple philosophical, epistemological, and ontological questions, and presents researchers with a number of methods, designs and approaches—not to mention the large volumes of data that even narrowly-defined studies can produce. In the midst of all this magnitude, Sharan B. Merriam reminds researchers to be savvy about their own individual values and assumptions, lest they diminish the objectivity and quality of the data that are collected and analyzed. With these issues in mind, any social researcher must regard the routine business of evaluating methods and design as inextricable from the actual processes of conducting a formal study.

Regarding case study research, this dissertation's Methods chapter cites the work of Yin, Spradley, Rubin and Rubin, and Kvale in order to rationalize the choice to conduct case study research and to gather data through the methods of participant-observations and interviews. These scholars argue that the case study design is a valid approach to field research, particularly when the phenomenon that is selected for investigation possesses several important qualities. A case study is warranted when the phenomenon is critical, unique, or revelatory in comparison with others similar to it. It is warranted when context is important to understanding the

phenomenon. And third, a case study is warranted when the researcher does not seek to generalize conclusions to other populations (as might be done in research that uses quantitative approaches) but rather uses conclusions to produce new theories and propose new hypotheses to be tested in subsequent studies. These qualities—the uniqueness and context-specific behavior of the phenomenon and the researcher’s efforts to generate new theory rather than to draw conclusions on other populations—describe the case study on Books-N-Wine. Findings suggest that Books-N-Wine’s operation comprises one example in current book-club culture of reading communities’ transformative and pedagogical potentials. But because an isolated example cannot capture all aspects of the operations of this culture, there is more to be learned about book clubs, in terms of how they adapt centuries-long traditions of literacy and socio-political consciousness and produce new traditions of genre consciousness. Further research is thus a logical and promising course of action.

Merriam’s rubric for evaluating qualitative research prompts considerations of the insights, variety, and contradictions in the field of book-club research as proof that no single study can capture all facets of this practice and culture at large. For example, comparing findings from qualitative and statistical studies of book clubs provides conflicting answers to the question of whether literature can transform readers’ attitudes. Qualitatively, there is evidence that literature can transform readers’ attitudes—by evoking emotional, empathetic, or “enlightened” responses to the characters and circumstances depicted in literary works—while there is little statistical evidence to suggest that transformation results from reading or participating in a book club. In consideration of contradictions such as these, of my own study’s findings, and of the interdisciplinary possibilities that I have outlined in previous sections, I recommend the following approaches to redesigning this study: expanding the project’s scope from a case study

to a comparison study of two or more clubs, extending its time frame to a period of several years, diversifying the data collection methods, and refining the theoretical framework. More specifically, data collection methods of participant-observations and interviews should be supplemented by distributing surveys and questionnaires for the purposes of networking and by locating historical and archival records of book clubs. To refine the theoretical framework, combining concepts from diverse disciplines will need to be a simultaneously systematic and provocative process.

Combined, these approaches to redesigning this project will provide more substantial and consequential findings on book clubs, especially regarding the functions that are common to all clubs, those that are specific to individual clubs, and the relationship between clubs and other areas of members' lives. New research questions, further modifying the suggestions above, may help to account for narrowed interests in hybrid contexts, or to use Nancy Fraser's term "counterspheres," and the nature of public-oriented literary discourse:

- *How do book clubs operate as groups of "citizen critics," "tiny publics," and "everyday activists" in hybrid contexts and how might their literary and socio-political discourse have an impact on other discernible spheres?*
- *How do individual clubs become "social conspiracies" operating for themselves, and how do clubs conspire with other clubs, either on a conscious or unconscious basis? What results from these conspiratorial functions?*

From Case Study to Comparative Research: Finding a Culture within a Culture

Despite this study's current limitations, my choice to conduct a case study of the Books-N-Wine club enabled me to gather in-depth knowledge of the club in the forms of thick

descriptions of my exposure to the club's fascinating discourse, members' narratives of their perceptions, and the club's ongoing story—all of which are significant and unique. These findings can be used for the purposes of expanding the scope of data sets to include other categories and types of clubs. Findings can also help to expand the concrete, abstract, and subtle facets of context, as the primary function of book clubs that I have found the most intriguing (and elusive) for this study. Generally speaking, expanding the case study of the Books-N-Wine club to a multiple case design of two or more clubs will enable greater triangulation between data sets toward making accurate conclusions. More specifically, comparisons among clubs will provide additional insight into how clubs form in direct response to geographical context—such as a club that forms for the purposes of immersion in local literary culture or a club that forms for the purposes of making a concrete impact on its surrounding community. Resuming relationships with the Book-aholics club (centrally-located Market Square) and the Books-N-Wine club (suburban West Knoxville) could lay the groundwork for an interesting study comparing clubs whose literary preferences are similar but that meet in very different types of environments. More extensive searches within Knoxville may reveal other clubs operating in different contexts and with different interests in literary and socio-political topics. These approaches will yield important and unexpected results, as did the Books-N-Wine study which suggested that clubs may be training sites for “everyday activists.”

Logical first steps would be to resume networking within Knoxville's book-club culture, reconnecting with previously visited clubs and establishing contact with others. These methods will also help to establish useful criteria for selecting particular kinds of clubs to participate in in-depth research. For instance, at the beginning of the current study, several criteria for selecting a club along with my initial interest in Knoxville's patchwork of different environments,

atmospheres, and contexts led to the painstaking selection of the Books-N-Wine club in West Knoxville over the Book-aholics club in Market Square, a centrally-located “urbansphere.” Either choice would have been favorable, but as this study has explored, the choice of Books-N-Wine provides one example of clubs meeting in private spaces that invoke powerful *spheres* for literary, socio-political, or educational engagement, including the sphere of the “everyday.” Formulating understandings of context that are more complex than those that originally informed this study and networking in Knoxville on a more intentional basis may reveal hybrid contexts for clubs’ operations as “social conspiracies”—hybrid contexts such as intersections between public and private places, the academy and the community, and urban and suburban locales. In addition to networking with clubs in Knoxville, some mobility and use of social media would enable networking in East Tennessee and wider circles. Clubs’ responses to emails, surveys, and questionnaires that provide information on their history, reading selections, identities of members, and willingness to participate in research would help to make selective and worthwhile visits to clubs, even ones requiring travel to another city, for the purposes of designing comparative studies of clubs as “social conspiracies” in hybrid contexts. Such extensive networking would enhance the quality of the protocols for interviews and observations.

Existing empirical studies’ designs (historical/archival, statistical, qualitative, mixed methods, case studies and comparison studies) need to be considered in the design of a new study just as they were in the initial design of this study. Studies by Elizabeth Long, Melvette Melvin Davis, Kimberly Chabot Davis, Keith Oatley, and Jane Barstow represent the range of choices in scope and duration for studies, in terms of the number and sources of study

participants and the length of time a researcher is involved in collecting data.⁵³ Depending on a study's research questions, its objectives, circumstances, and the availability of tools such as audio recorders and archival records or funding for the procuring of other materials, a researcher often chooses between gathering broad swaths of data and investigating richer, deeper understandings of smaller data sets. On the one hand, quantity and variety of data sets ostensibly enable better comparisons between sets, broader triangulation of findings, and the discovery of nuance within the phenomena under consideration. In contrast, a case study of a club, though limited in breadth, enables the cultivation of relationships with participants and collaborative building of knowledge toward making more insightful conclusions about the changes that clubs and members experience over time. Perhaps achieving richness, depth, breadth, and variety is possible, given ample time and the right resources and a well-thought-out research design calling for sustained observations of select clubs and periodic electronic correspondences with larger numbers of participants.

The rationales for choosing to conduct a case study on one book club included not only interest in deep and intimate knowledge of a community of readers (rather than comparatively broad and surface-level information gathered from studying multiple clubs), but also plans to situate findings on one club within knowledge of Knoxville's city-wide culture. Situating a single club within a larger culture may lead to conclusions about the degree to which the club operates uniquely, and could produce new theories for designing a future study on multiple clubs

⁵³ In this list of researchers, Long and Oatley have conducted studies over the longest periods of time and involving the largest numbers of participants—respectively, ten years with nearly 200 clubs, and seven years with 59 individual readers. In the mid-range of scope and duration, Jane Barstow studied six clubs over two years, while Kimberly Chabot Davis studied 21 clubs for less than one year. Two dissertation studies by Melvette Melvin Davis and Susan Huber were conducted for very short time periods, one year in Davis's case and less than one year in Huber's case. Davis's study involved only a few participants, observing and interviewing members of one club in a case study, while Huber surveyed members of eleven different clubs.

within a city. Findings from the networking phase of this study highlighted some variety among clubs operating within Knoxville's culture. In comparison, data collected on Books-N-Wine suggest that Books-N-Wine does possess some unique qualities (though more research is needed to make this claim), including its attention to literary genre and its connections to other communities such as the homeschooling co-op. Interestingly, Books-N-Wine does not articulate its "place" within Knoxville's book-club culture, or even within the city of Knoxville in general, in any kind of deliberate, enthusiastic, or self-conscious way. But while Books-N-Wine does not regard Knoxville as important to its function, members do articulate how they contrast with other clubs in Knoxville with whom they may have had interaction. Additional data is needed to substantiate conclusions made about single book clubs operating uniquely from others and conclusions that Knoxville's city-wide culture is distinct from or similar to other cities.

Setting up an Extended Study

Despite the expected limitations of a short-term case study, findings from this study can be used to investigate whether other clubs operate as groups of "everyday activists" or as "social conspiracies." Because these operations result from the building of relationships among a group's members and the development of a certain ethos over time (such as "passing on" knowledge or becoming self-protecting), these operations should be investigated over a longer period of time than the current span of less than one year. Several years of sustained access to more than one book club will provide better insight into the changes experienced by clubs as groups and by individual members of a club. Depending on the degree of access that a researcher is granted into the inner-workings of club meetings, interview protocols designed with "everyday activism" and "social conspiracy" in mind might include questions about clubs' self-protecting

practices and participants' experiences of daily living. While Books-N-Wine was gracious enough to allow a researcher to collect data for six months, I may encounter resistance from other clubs in future research—resistance that would limit the collection of detailed data as an “insider,” but that would provide an important “outsider’s” perspective on clubs’ practices of self-protection. The more resistant, self-protecting clubs might be candidates for surveys and questionnaires, while clubs like Books-N-Wine would be candidates for figuring more prominently in long-term scholarly research.

Diversifying Methods for Data Collection

Combined qualitative, statistical, and archival approaches to an extended study will help ensure accuracy, reliability, validity, and generalizability of its findings, and will help to inspire research that is sustainable and that produces findings that matter in the real world. Such a study may intersect with other kinds of research in rhetoric, literature, critical theory, culture studies, education and literacy, social science, and social movements, and may also be relevant to those who have a stake in the print industry. Statistical investigations of many different clubs through surveys or questionnaires can help to gather data on large populations quickly toward making general comparisons among clubs and noting trends and patterns in larger book-club populations. Continued networking with clubs in the Knoxville or another area, perhaps through flier distribution, emails, phone calls, visits to clubs, and in-person exploratory networking, may highlight not only the clubs that are easy to find but also those that are hidden from public view and/or internet searches. This approach would make the process of finding clubs meeting certain criteria more efficient. Questionnaires might seek to find out demographic information on club participants such as gender, age, and occupation, and information on their experiences with and

preferences for certain types of reading material (ex. “Out of the following options, in which literary genre does your club seem to be the most interested?”). Distributed to many different clubs and administered at several different points throughout a study, surveys and questionnaires could provide information on larger populations and could be compiled very quickly as a basis for choosing clubs to be the subjects of a more in-depth focus.

Qualitative methods of participant-observations and interviewing can be supplemented with archival research into any existing records that detail Knoxville’s (or another city’s) book-club history. Just as setting up an extended long-term study would provide access into a current club’s changes over time, explorations of old records will allow deeper investigations in how current clubs fare in comparison to their predecessors. For instance, have there been and are there clubs in Knoxville, from decades and centuries prior onward, that operate toward achieving the goals of literacy, transformation, teaching, and learning, and providing occasions for its members to exchange values and behaviors for participating in other spheres? What kinds of constituencies have they historically attracted? What kinds of reading material have they selected?

Refining the Theoretical Framework

Using concepts from multiple disciplines to theorize the current study on Books-N-Wine confirms that book-club research is one field that benefits from courageous combinations of scholarly perspectives. Continued observations of readers’ concrete “lived” experience with literature should draw from the disciplines already identified—rhetoric, literature, aesthetics, social science, and education—and should add to these fields new explorations of social movements and conspiracy formation. These additions will contribute to the building of a theory

on book clubs as places for “everyday activism” and more provocatively sites where “social conspiracies” form. Theories from Booth’s *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Dissent* (1974) and *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988) help to conceptualize literature as containing expressions of dissent and figuring as agents of social change, in the event that one of the after-effects of the reading experience is a substantive change in the “company we keep” in our everyday lives. Fellow members of a book club and individual literary texts can all serve as the “company we keep,” so that texts and readers become partners in social endeavors.

Burke’s *Counter-Statement* (1931), *Permanence and Change* (1954), *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), and *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966) bring forth a vocabulary for discussing book clubs’ psychological and communicative underpinnings, all as possible supplements to the terms “everyday activism” and “social conspiracy.” In these regards, the concepts of *scapegoating*, *anecdotes*, and *terministic screens* may describe a club’s ways of absorbing ideologies and identities that its members deem favorable means of maintaining or shaping club identity, while excising those that are perceived as threats to an established club identity. *Scapegoating*, Burke explains, is a behavioral practice that has its roots in religious or communal rituals in which the community symbolically projects onto a sacrificial human, animal, or object its unwanted characteristics in order to purge itself. *Anecdotes* and *terministic screens* describe behavior that is more discursive in nature, and involve a community’s circulation of terminology and narratives, among themselves and with outsiders, as ways to determine and re-determine identity.

Future applications of findings to Burke’s *scapegoating*, *anecdotes*, *terministic screens*, *identification* might best begin by reexamining Books-N-Wine’s shared discourse, as explored in the Findings chapter. Notable examples include the performance skills that Joe, Sarah, and

Shelley have cultivated within the club space for the specific audience of other club members. In “performing,” these members use vocal intonation and bodily gestures to quote from and paraphrase reading selections. These techniques dramatize not only the books’ characters and plots, but also these members’ emotional and intellectual responses to them. Even more intriguingly, these techniques create a performance aesthetic characterized by conflating the time of the initial reading of texts and the time when readers share with others their responses and their process of (dis)identification with characters, speaking as though they were the characters, as though readers’ and characters’ minds could operate together. Such conflation means that identity in the setting of this book club is a fluid and capacious concept, not merely restricted to the personalities present in the room. Conflations of the time of reading and performance and the identities of readers and characters create very particular experiences with literary texts. Just as identity is fluid and capacious, experiences with literary texts—solitary reading, internal interpretation, and performance in social settings—are neither distinct nor separate processes, but rather unrestricted by the usual divisions of time and space. In other words, Books-N-Wine’s performed responses to literary texts are emancipatory and powerful, as much as they are entertaining and mirthful.

Books-N-Wine’s common discourse as an occasion to reexamine Burke’s theories also includes Sarah’s skills in expressing empathetic responses and performing her consideration of opposing viewpoints “at the same time.” Similarly, Joe consistently performs aloud in the club space his engagement with an interior and occasionally self-admonishing dialogue that is carried on between two sides of his brain on an issue—“But wait!” Often, Joe performed this mental tension for me, while I assumed the role of his rapt audience, as I alternated between silence during meetings and conversational control during interviews. Books-N-Wine’s shared and

performed discourse also includes the ironic and witty phrasing used by Linda and Mitch to express aesthetic and political understandings of the texts and to draw a laugh from their listeners. In connection to these examples, Joe's method of using long phrases and thoughts to function grammatically as substitutes for more concise adjectives shows the potential for book clubs to become sites for members to cultivate a particular mastery of and playful engagement with grammar to suit the social and intellectual exigencies of social discussions of literary texts.

As promising as the above proposals for theoretical applications are, additional theories may legitimate interests in book clubs' as groups of "everyday activists" or "social conspirators." Such explorations might begin with a literature review of scholarship on the phenomenon of conspiracy formation and the logic and rhetoric fueling people who form theories about conspiracies' operations. By nature, real conspiracies operating in secrecy and shadows would resist attention from outsiders, including sympathetic or disinterested researchers. However, a theoretical framework for book-club studies that includes conspiracy as a potentially relevant concept and concrete reality in the current (and future) social landscape would continue to invigorate the power of the literary public sphere, as Eberly aspires to do in *Citizen Critics*. With this proposal, this study returns to its original hunch that literature and readers can and do transform the world. And after engaging with a real book club and participating in the current energy of field research on these groups—a growing academic movement, so to speak—this study celebrates what Farr and Harker identify as "the shadow tradition of literature" at work in book-club culture and scholarship on it. Thus, the original hunch becomes an impetus for more intentional investigations of interactions between readers, literary texts, and communities.

Several recent publications show the range of research that exists on the concept and concrete reality of *conspiracy* and provide forays into designing a new theoretical framework for

a study on book clubs as “social conspiracies.” *Political Conspiracies in America: A Reader* by Donald T. Chritchlow, John Korasick, and Matthew C. Sherman (2008) provides historical information on conspiracies and their impact, as well as terminology and definitions that may inform a future study on book clubs. Steven R. Goldzwig’s “Conspiracy Rhetoric at the Dawn of the New Millennium: A Response” (2002) provides ways to describe how this rhetoric pervades current thought and conversations in the “everyday,” a nebulous but powerful sphere that Elizabeth Long’s research associates with contemporary clubs’ middle-class values, that John Dewey’s aesthetic theory associates with “authentic” experiences with art, and that Michel de Certeau’s social theory associates with the ways in which citizens “made do” in their worlds. James R Martel’s *Textual Conspiracies: Walter Benjamin, Idolatry, and Political Theory* (2011) asserts that texts, from the philosophical to the literary, are important sites for authors and readers to explore revolutionary thought and action. Given book clubs as sites where readers become rhetorical agents speaking about the subject matter of texts and socio-political issues, these three explorations and others may help to show that conspiracies and thoughts about them are inherent aspects of the ways in which complex societies operate and conceive of themselves, and that book clubs can demonstrate important crystallizations of these inherent aspects.⁵⁴

Book Clubs as “Everyday Activism”: An Epilogue on Becoming an Activist

The idea of clubs as sites for “everyday activism” or “social conspiracy” results from the unexpected shift in the relationships between me as researcher and the members of Books-N-

⁵⁴ Additionally helpful readings include David Coady’s edited collection *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debates* (2006) as a basis for determining the most appropriate terminologies for the purposes of conducting concrete investigations, and Michael Barkun’s *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2013) as a basis for describing a mindset of “millennialism” as affecting current social thought.

Wine as participants in this study. This idea results also from this club's commitments to a safe space for intellectual exploration. The relationship shift began in the form of reciprocated social and intellectual interest in one another, and after several months of mutual respect and self-disclosure, evolved into everyone's mutual commitments to the integrity of both the club space and the study. Our interactions dissolved the distinctions between our roles as researchers, informants, participants, and friends, and we all became "The People Who Do 'This' In Common." Reciprocity as a social practice and methodological commitment very interestingly began to emerge as a salient theme in the data, and as a result took on a life of its own, beyond my careful exchanging and disclosing of knowledge with members and being socially gracious during meetings and interviews.

Certainly, many a researcher has experienced congenial and collaborate interactions with study participants, especially considering that the discursive nature of book clubs requires a researcher to engage in conversation with its members, conversation being the very means by which a book club operates. However, this particular study seems unique in this regard based on Books-N-Wine's members' commitments and accomplishments as readers. As explored in the previous chapter, Books-N-Wine's members spent several months choosing to read literary texts whose authors write from a researcher standpoint; these choices facilitated an awareness of the emotional and ethical challenges of conducting research and inspired a culture of investigation among all parties involved. Another accomplishment of this club is its cumulative building of new literary understandings and socio-political stances as fodder for subsequent reading selections and meeting discussions, as evidenced by the club's responses to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* that resulted in extended interests in reading more works of non-fiction. Altogether, these commitments and accomplishments suggest that finding more adventurous

terms than “reciprocity” is in order. “Conspiracy” initially seemed too strong a term for describing a club that prioritizes its social and intellectual interests over its political ones. Upon further consideration and after locating a body of theory on this concept, “conspiracy” seems to be an appropriate metaphor for investigating the stories that clubs tell about their experiences and the social and intellectual bonds that link members to one another, inspire them to protect the *spheres* they occupy, and embolden them to venture into other *spheres*.

“Everyday activism” and its more provocative counterpart “social conspiracy” suggest an enticing sequel to the current study in the form of future investigations of (and participation in) book clubs. In this spirit, and in homage to Books-N-Wine’s “post-meetings” as social-dialogic Epilogues, I have designed an “Epilogue” to conclude this dissertation to serve as a narrative, aesthetic, and ideological sphere for considering clubs’ conspiratorial potentials. Given the crises of terminology and identity that are endemic to book-club research, this “Epilogue” begins with considerations of “conspiracy’s” political connotations. It then revisits the notion of members’ identification with chosen texts as one aesthetic form of “conspiracy” that serves to shape new values and behaviors. Aesthetic forms of conspiracy with texts manifested themselves in the club’s “post-meetings” as dialogic Epilogues. These segments constitute, perhaps, an unconscious social imitation of the reading selections’ narrative structures. Another and arguably more compelling aesthetic form of conspiracy includes members’ “researcher” status as one principle for participation in the club, as explored above, perhaps inspired by ethnographic and non-fiction aspects of the reading selections.

Conceptualizing “Conspiracy”

“Conspiracy” is indeed a politically loaded term, as explored by the researchers listed in the previous section. In popular discourse the term might imply anything from B-quality cinema to the public’s reactions in October and November of 2013 to the Federal Government’s shutdown and the disappointing functionality of the ObamaCare website. The term might also imply a group’s practices of secrecy, insularity, production of dangerous information, and engagement in action for the purposes of challenging social circumstances that the group deems undesirable. This term also suggests that a conspiracy and its conspirators never fully escape the suspicions and attentions of theorists in search of it. On the other hand, this term connotes theorists’ paranoia and hyper-vigilance with regard to conspiratorial action that may not exist, and suggests that theories in most cases should be dismissed and ignored. Despite this range of connotations for “conspiracy”—all with the potential to set a very specific tone in further research into book clubs or other discursive social groups—and despite the potential consequences of flippant use of “conspiracy” as a theme in such research, “conspiracy” used in very specific and deliberate ways may help to conceptualize Books-N-Wine’s (and potentially other clubs’) social structures. Borrowing from “conspiracy” the notions of secrecy, missions, and self-protection, and relinquishing the notions of suspicion, paranoia, and hyper-vigilance, in order to theorize a study, mean that a researcher must also protect a club’s engagement in “(non)-missions,” whether strictly recreational or political. In the case of Books-N-Wine, a club can be a group of close-knit confidants committed to the (non)-mission to explore each other’s socio-political and religious differences in a safe and supportive environment and to learn from the experiences of dialogue and encounters with meaningful reading material. To discover some kind of conspiratorial action, a researcher’s interest should also be accompanied by a willingness

to reciprocate a club's generosity and to participate in the club according to the requests of its members. Interest, reciprocity, and participation must not involve an expectation that the researcher will be invited for long-term acceptance into the fold of the club; after all, research requires the investigator to cultivate some degree of emotional distance and invisibility and a book club that is featured in research may want to remain exclusive once the research phase reaches its conclusion.

Conspiring with Literary Texts

To begin connecting these ideas to Books-N-Wine, I cite an example from a more relaxed discussion with Linda following the formal interview when this member and I considered the possibility that the club "conspired" to navigate public and private space in careful ways in order to protect the space from unwanted external interference and activity. Among many details, we observed that newcomers will know whether or not they fit in with an already-established code of behavior. Linda and I also discussed members' increasingly intentional explorations of literary genre, and as Shelley pointed out on several occasions, we noted that Books-N-Wine does value expanding its worldview. In "conspiring" with texts by identifying with authors and characters and molding new understandings of genre, members spent several months selecting books that provided readers with an indirect "researcher" experience, though they did not use these terms to describe their selection process. Reading research-orientated narratives on the one hand can invigorate an investigative spirit and on the other hand can bring forth difficult emotions of empathy. In particular, Skloot's account in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* in which the author is deeply affected by her interactions with the title character's daughter highlights ethical dilemmas and questions about how to present the story of others' sufferings.

Other aesthetic forms of “conspiracy” include reading selections’ narrative structures mapping to the three-part structure of the Books-N-Wine club’s meeting dialogue. As explored in the previous chapter, the three-part structure to most meetings includes a “pre-meeting,” “meeting proper,” and “post-meeting.” These three segments consistently provided important information on the nature of this club’s literary interests and social dynamics, the accomplishments of each meeting, and the club’s goals for the near and remote future. Even though the three segments often would overlap rather than remain distinct, the extended hours of the “post-meeting” segment produced especially rich data, in terms of the connections and negotiations in which members engaged. These segments most especially indicated members’ attention to literary Epilogues and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with texts’ methods of resolving plot. When narratives did not resolve plot neatly, as in Ann Patchett’s *State of Wonder*, members used the August 2013 “post-meeting” as a dialogic Epilogue to speculate on the aftermath of this text’s plot and on other topics related to tying up the loose or tidy areas in their own lives such as the challenges of homeschooling their children. Through discussing these terminal matters, the club created for themselves the narrative closure that texts had denied them. Also, the post-meeting served as an aesthetic terminus for meetings at the same that that it reserved fodder for subsequent discussions. Textually and dialogically, the Epilogue is a site where valuable work can be done among a group of “everyday activists” or “social conspirators,” a site where aesthetics meet praxis and ideology.

It is important to return to the trajectory of texts as inspiration for Books-N-Wine’s interest in textual and dialogic Epilogues. The texts read from February to September (excluding the March selection of C. S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*) range from irony to pathos in their narrative tones, yet consistently dramatize significant historical events or moral questions

regarding the impact of social and political circumstances on individual characters or whole populations. In addition, these texts (excluding *State of Wonder*, which remained open-ended in its conclusion) not only include explicit and formal Epilogues and Afterwords, but also seem to function in their entirety as Epilogues to the histories they dramatize. For instance, Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is almost an Epilogue unto itself, in that Skloot focuses as much on the relationship she formed with Lacks's daughter Deborah as she does on the story of the title character's sufferings decades before and the remarkable nature of the HeLa cells. While researching the medical history and interviewing members of the Lacks family, she realized that the aftermath of Henrietta's death was painful for the Lacks family, a fact that inspired Skloot's "co-conspiracy" with Deborah Lacks to right the wrongs of the medical industry. Even with this dual focus on Henrietta Lacks and her cells and the relationship with Deborah, Skloot's text provides a formal "Where Are They Now" section and Afterword to detail the status of the Lacks family after the author's research.

Similarly, Troost's *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* and Kiernan's *The Girls of Atomic City* also function in their entirety as Epilogues to the histories they dramatize, both exploring the aftermath of governments' decisions on indigenous or rural cultures. *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* brought to club members' attention the effects of Western culture on small South Pacific islands. In addition to the plot's focus on these effects, Troost's narrative provides a formal Epilogue to describe the impact of the island experience on the author and his girlfriend as fueling the desire to continue travels in developing or non-Western countries. *The Girls of Atomic City* explores the impact of the "Secret City" on East Tennessee's culture and on the United States' relationship to other countries. Interestingly, Joe lives out the Epilogue to the Secret City's history as an employee in the Oak Ridge National Labs.

Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and the July meeting's dialogue on it reveal a significant moment in the club's unconscious conspiratorial formation. *Guns, Germs, and Steel* details the anthropological history of the world's populations and the aftermath, or present day, as Epilogue to the story of civilizations' development. This text claims that history's conquerors, who comprise today's developed nations, were able to conquer because of migratory access to more natural resources and not because of any inherent ethnic superiority or exceptional sense of initiative. It might be argued that this claim runs counter to Western culture's typical narratives of Manifest Destiny and the American Dream that justify the spirit of colonization and conquest. Joe, as a self-described protestant, acknowledged his initial discomfort with deconstructing history as narrated by the victors and his discomfort with anthropological rather than theological explanations of religion. But as a member who expresses willingness to experience transformation through reading and interested in what he calls the "science-y side of things," he reported that his perspectives on the subject matter of *Gun, Germs, and Steel* began to undergo change. As I have referenced, Evelyn, in contrast, marked herself as a political and religious outlier to the group during a brief segment of the meeting, by presenting a case for reconstituting history's usual narratives and a case for disputing scientific explanations of evolution. In presenting this case with "research" she had done to support what Shelley later described as her pro-Western and conservative Christian claims, Evelyn attempted to reverse the current "Epilagic" reality as seen by Books-N-Wine's core members. Core members, in the midst of experiencing their own change in perspectives, politely conversed with Evelyn but did not accept many of her views expressed during this relatively brief moment in the hours-long July 2013 meeting and years-long operation of the club at large.

Other moments of this and other meetings suggest a gradually more noticeable conspiratorial air within Books-N-Wine, an air that in retrospect seems to have been more nebulous when I began research. These possible connections between readers' actions and the texts they read may entail Books-N-Wine's (un)conscious use of the space to separate core member prospects from probable outliers at the same time that it uses texts as rhetorical platforms for self-expression, particularly scholarly texts such as *Guns, Germs, and Steel* which act as Epilogues to their own histories. These possibilities are worth investigating more fully in a future study on communities of readers.

The club's August selection produced less rousing dialogue than did *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder* (as with the October selection of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*) was chosen expressly to allow Books-N-Wine to take a fictional break from the fatigue members experienced while trudging through *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and other non-fiction. *State of Wonder* also allowed the club to revisit to the topic of medical ethics, as explored in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and *The Girls of Atomic City*. Members expressed interest in *State of Wonder*'s somewhat ambivalent cultural stance and intriguing yet "bizarre" plot about a female scientist's experiences observing research into the reproductive capabilities of elderly women in a village in the Amazon forest conducted for the development of fertility pharmaceuticals. This scientist eventually leaves the research site, overwhelmed by the ethical and scientific dilemmas, and the book concludes with little indication of the plot's aftermath, with respect to the pharmaceuticals and the protagonist's life. And while members agreed that the book was a page-turner, they generally felt that they were denied two important experiences that they desire from fictional texts: empathy for the main character and knowledge about characters' lives in aftermath of the plot. Suzanne Keen's *Empathy in the Novel* raises

questions about whether empathic responses to literary texts are successful in transforming readers' attitudes and furthermore whether empathy is a desirable response in Western culture, in which such responses can reinforce patronizing, colonizing, or arrogant attitudes toward other parts of the world. Working out of these questions and seeking out responses from real readers, Keen claims that "middle brow" readers consistently express desires to identify with and feel empathy for characters in fiction, but suggests that literarily-inspired empathy as a definitive factor in readers' transformations needs extensive research to confirm. Books-N-Wine's members' disappointments in *State of Wonder* echo Keen's claims that readers do desire to experience this emotion and suggest that book clubs can garner very specific responses from astute readers of texts such as Patchett's that do not offer a clear object for readers' empathy.

Like *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, the September selection, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* and the September meeting's dialogue on this text revealed another significant moment in the club's (un)conscious engagement in political discourse and its corresponding (un)conscious conspiratorial energy. This text *does* contain an Epilogue to detail the title character's life after gaining recognition and educational opportunities. And another interesting facet is that this book's co-authorship resulted in a lasting relationship between William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer. This relationship is described in the book's "Acknowledgements" section and even in an "About the Authors" section, providing an extended Epilogue to continue the story of William as an African youth with extraordinary vision, initiative, and hope in the midst of a famine that crippled his community. September's meeting had its own dialogic Epilogue, to correspond to this text's form and its particular evidence of co-authorship, and during the club's usual extended "post-meeting" segment explored with much energy several topics: sexuality, religion, and culture, as well as Evelyn's previous visit and the challenges of homeschooling. Unfortunately

two core members Linda and Mitch were not present due to other commitments. The intimate conversations, questions, and answers—between Sarah, and Shelley in particular regarding their thoughts on sexual orientation and religion, as presented in the previous chapter—revealed the mutual respect that can exist when these friends offer slightly differing opinions. These members used their pre-existing commitment to each other and to exploratory conversation to ask and answer questions about this text toward building broader understandings of the world.

Altogether, these texts, club meetings, and members' behaviors and dialogue have a very interesting correlation to popular publications such as Slezak's *The Book Group Book*, a text that compiles the anecdotes of clubs past and present and a text that exists by recruiting clubs to continue contributing—or to continue co-conspiring—in the business of describing and celebrating their own achievements. *The Book Group Book* suggests that current book-club culture is in the process of creating an Epilogue to its own history. Although *The Go On Girl! Guide* doesn't explicitly invite new contributions from club practitioners, it does include a "What's Next?" section to explore the possible outcomes of book-club formation and related community action.

Co-conspiring With Books-N-Wine and Sharing the Research Process

I conclude this chapter by returning to its introductory interests in what it means to be a book-club researcher, collaborating with the subjects of the study who become researchers themselves on an informal basis. The ethnographical impetus present in several fiction and non-fiction reading selections became the principle for club participation and interactions between me as researcher and club members as participants in this study. Participants did not conduct "official" research, but became indirect researchers by using electronic devices to investigate

para-data on reading selections and by searching for information on text-related concepts. In addition, the experience of bonding socially with club members whom I recruited as participants in the study and who were thus objects of my intellectual curiosity gradually transformed to include participants' recruiting me as a member of their club and as an object of their intellectual curiosity. Indeed, Books-N-Wine members asked me about my deadlines, goals, hypothesis formulation, and other aspects of the research process, not only from the standpoint of research subjects, but also from the standpoint of friends. In so doing, they seemed to have a consistent and sincere investment in my process and the success of my project, just as I was invested in members' processes of coming to knowledge about their own experiences.

This mutual recruiting of each other as members of a book club and researchers of what it means to participate in the club under investigation indicates additional areas for scholarly investigation beyond the current scope of the study. Socially speaking, this recruitment was an unexpected follow-up to my initial commitments to being an unobtrusive presence, and was the partial result of Sarah's explicit invitation, from the beginning and throughout the research phase, for me to engage with the club in the manner I deemed professionally appropriate and socially enjoyable. During the September meeting in fact, which was known to all participants as my last "official" observation, Sarah reiterated her invitation for me to continue attending as a *real* member. This prospect of continued participation, oddly enough, fulfilled goals I had articulated during pre-research phases—goals of initiating dialogue with participants beyond the dialogue that is an obvious component of interviews and other official data collection processes. Although doing so at the outset would have created a conflict of interests, engaging in these conversations with club members after completing research posed an insightful experience for the long term. By September, we had all become mutual club members and researchers of the

topics presented in reading selections, and as I've suggested a number of times, researchers of each other and what it means to be "a reader," particularly at the end of each interview when we had completed the official line of questioning.

The unexpected sharing of research and membership roles have important social, political, institutional, philosophical, theoretical, aesthetic and methodological implications, as discussed in both the Methods and Findings chapters. During interviews, participants and I discussed my presence as researcher as affecting their participation and thus comprising part of the data. In addition to discussing the nature of the project (keeping details to a minimum), we remarked on members' alternations between forgetting about and becoming aware of my presence during meetings. Upon several occasions during meetings when conversations turned bawdy or scatological, members joked about data collection, wondering if certain topics of conversation would make it into the final report. Toward the end of the "official" research period, especially during August and September 2013 meetings, members began talking to me during meetings as though I were already a *real* member. An additional indication of the importance of the content of social-dialogic "Epilogues," interviews were always followed by informal but very rich discussions between participants and me when both parties shared knowledge about literary texts and social reading practices reciprocally, thus more becoming co-conspirators with each other, with the reading material, and the individuals, communities, and cultures described therein. In becoming, through reading, researchers of and co-conspirators with distant cultures and injustices they face, and in becoming researchers of each other, we create the just and reciprocal relationships in our processes that are missing in the experiences of the communities in the selected reading.

The core members of Books-N-Wine and I became co-conspirators in the business of forming knowledge outside of academic spheres. The merits of the academy considered, Books-N-Wine and I oftentimes agreed that other spaces and places have their attractions. Putting the academy and other places in conversation with one another creates new possibilities for cultural production and combining the discourse of the academy with that of other communities provides new ways to conceive of *lived* experiences with literary texts as sites of reflection, performance, and action. And so, even though we all have at one point or another identified *with* the academy, learned from it, worked for it, and may still be professionally loyal to it, the academy can sometimes seem detached from other life experiences despite its best efforts to engage with communities outside of its parameters. We in Books-N-Wine do value greatly the epistemologies of “real” people doing “real” things.

Now, that I am a Books-N-Wine member and now that “official” research is over, and now that we are all the aftermath phase—the Epilogue to our history together—what will we do in this dialogic and ideological site where social conspiracy, for whatever purpose, can occur?

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APPENDIX

Initial Interview Protocol

[Introductory script]: My goal is to gather Books-N-Wine's members' perceptions of their experiences of reading literature and participating in this club. I will ask several questions on your experiences, your definitions of book clubs in general, and on other details. You may participate in any way that you prefer. At several points I may ask for more detail.

- What originally interested you in finding (or starting) a book club?
- What originally interested you in participating (or continuing) in this particular club?
How long have you been a member?
- What keeps you coming back?
- What's it like to participate in this club? Describe your experiences.
- In your own words, tell me what happens during meetings?
 - structure, itinerary
 - the nature of discussion
- Can you provide a definition of "book club?"
- Tell me what you know about how book clubs in general operate.
- Can you tell me the "parts" of a club? How do these parts function?
- Or, what factors must be in place or who must be there for a club to operate?
- What's more important/what do you value more/what is more powerful out of these parts?
- How has this group in particular operated?
- Please describe the other members of this club, how you all know each other, how you got together, and how these members interact with one another.
- Describe your interaction with this group, or the way you participate.
- Describe the way others participate. What does this mean to you?
- Please describe the books you read and how they are discussed.
- Tell me your thoughts about the books that the club has chosen to discuss?
 - In other words, what do you like or dislike?
 - What specific thoughts do you have?
 - What are some examples of characters/passages that are meaningful to you?
- What are your thoughts about the club discussions?
- What is the most important aspect of this club?
- Tell me about a session that was especially meaningful to you and the reasons why.
- How do you feel that reading and discussing in this club is influencing you and others?
- How has this club influenced you since you have been a member?
- What were your reading practices like before this club? Or, can you describe *how* you read before participating in this group?
- How might this club influence the way you read, if at all?
- How might this club relate to or represent Knoxville as a whole, or a particular area *in* Knoxville?
- How might this club relate to your life, activities, interests, goals?
- What changes have occurred over time?
- Is there something more or less that you would like to see this book club do?
- What can book clubs accomplish?

Follow-up Interview Protocol

[Introductory script]: My goal is to follow-up on some of the patterns and trends I am discovering, and to seek your experience and knowledge on these. You may discuss or answer these questions however you wish, or not at all. At several points, I may ask for more detail.

- Last time we discussed “what happens in the meeting,” or a typical structure, agenda, or itinerary. Now, I’d like to discuss the structure of the meeting in more detail. I’ve noticed a pre-meeting, meeting proper, and post-meeting as consistent.
 - How did this current structure come about?
 - Is it the product of social needs of group or is it in response to thoughts about book?
 - Can you also describe what effect this has on the conversation and the social dynamics?
 - The content of pre-discussion – how does it set the tone for the rest of the meeting?
 - What happens toward the end of a meeting?
- Also, last time we talked about Books-N-Wine relating to other things. I am really interested in two things: (1) the impact of external activities on the club, such as work, home, or your participation in the homeschooling co-op, and (2) the impact of the club on the outside activities you are involved in. Can you discuss this in more detail, or offer your thoughts and observations?
- A related question: I am interested in how Books-N-Wine sees itself in relation to or in comparison with others (other readers or other clubs) outside of the club.
 - How might you think about this?
 - How might you describe the club to others?
 - What are other clubs like?
 - How is Books-N-Wine different?
- I would like to discuss the recent non-fiction phase of reading selections. What inspired these choices? How were choices lobbied for or negotiated? What was the experience of reading these and discussing them with others? What impact did it have on you individually? What do you perceive as the impact on the club?
- What is your definition of literature, fiction, the classics, non-fiction, popular fiction?
 - Can you provide some examples?
 - I have heard terms like “Pure fiction,” or “sci-fi,” or “romance” or “mystery.” Can you define some of those or describe their characteristics or your experiences with these genres?
 - Someone asked at a meeting “What is really good literature?” Can you define that term in your own words??
 - Someone offered the term “weird stuff” to describe the kind of literature they enjoy. What are your thoughts on this term?
- Members have expressed that Knoxville isn’t an important factor for this club, but what other factors of place, such as meeting/interview location or personalities in the club space might be important?

- Can you imagine what this club would be like if you met somewhere else? For instance, a library, a commercial coffee house, a different area of Knoxville, or book store?
- What is the significance of events happening locally or events around the same time that you're reading a book?
- What is the significance of previous reading selections as context (Ex. *Henrietta Lacks*)?
- What non-club experiences influence your reading experiences?
- How does the process of obtaining reading material affect your experiences?
- How might childhood reading experiences or prior adult reading experiences affect you now?
- How does your professional background affect you as a reader and club member?
- How might reading certain works affect your belief systems or attitudes? And vice versa, how might your belief systems affect how you read?
 - For instance, what are your thoughts on some of the reading selections and conversations about other cultures in relation to your own life or opinions?
 - What do you perceive other's opinions or values are as they encounter these texts?
- Can you discuss book club as a priority or a fixture in your life? Or the reading material as a priority? How does book club affect your patterns during the month, or week, or the day of a meeting?
 - For example, one member said that even when she can't attend, she still reads the book.
 - Another member said that even though she can't always read the book she will still attend. What are your thoughts on that?
- Can you discuss your experiences reading the recent selections? What were impressions of the August and September meetings?
 - Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (Feb)
 - C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (March)
 - J. Maarten Troost, *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* (April)
 - Denise, Keirnan, *The Girls of Atomic City* (May and June)
 - *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (July)
 - Ann Patchett, *State of Wonder* (August)
 - William Kamkwamba, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (September)
 - Can you discuss this trajectory? What does it reflect? Which text has had the most impact on you?
- How does my presence at meetings, or your interaction with me during an interview, factor into your recent experience? How do you see this affecting you individually or affecting the group?
 - What will things be like once I'm not researching anymore, whether continuing to attend or ceasing attending altogether?
- What is your impression of book club's impact on other members?
- How does club negotiate meaning, disagreements or a consensus of opinions?

VITA

Julie Tyler completed her Ph.D. in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in May 2014. During her time at UTK, Tyler came into her own as a writer, researcher, editor, and teacher. As of her graduation date, she has published two academic projects: (1) an article on narrative in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, entitled "Transgressing the Text and Playing Narrative Games: Katniss's Narrative, Real or Not Real?" and (2) a review of Daniel Grassian's *Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip-Hop Generation* (2009) that appeared in a 2011 issue of *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters*. Including her dissertation study, Tyler has also designed or been involved in two other research projects on community literacy. Tyler designed and conducted research on a "Border Literacy" project in Peñitas, Texas in 2012 and served as co-investigator for a "Family Literacy" project in Lenoir City, Tennessee in 2013. Tyler has also been a finalist nominee for two instructional awards in UT's English Department, one for excellence in teaching (2014) and one for excellence in tutoring (2012).

Before her time at UTK, Tyler earned Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees in English at the University of Georgia in Athens, GA. Between each of these programs, Tyler sought professional experience in a number of occupations, including newspaper reporting, teaching SAT preparation skills to high school students, and serving as an adjunct instructor for two small colleges in Georgia. While earning graduate degrees, Tyler presented papers on various topics in literature at several academic conferences. During her most recent conference presentation, delivering the initial version of "Transgressing the Text" at the 2012 Popular/American Culture Association in the South conference, Tyler and two colleagues landed a contract with McFarland Press to publish an edited collection on Collins's work. This collection, *Space and Place in The*

Hunger Games: *New Readings of the Trilogy*, appeared in print in March 2014, and features her article “Transgressing the Text.”

Tyler’s priorities after graduation are to continue pursuing her passions as a researcher, writer, editor, and teacher, always seeking new avenues for intellectual and professional growth.