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## Young adults reflect on the experience of reading comics in contemporary society: Overcoming the commonplace and recognizing complexity

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Library & Information Science

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YOUNG ADULTS REFLECT ON THE EXPERIENCE OF READING COMICS IN  
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: OVERCOMING THE COMMONPLACE AND  
RECOGNIZING COMPLEXITY

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Lucía Cedeira Serantes

Graduate Program in Library and Information Science

Faculty of Information and Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the role of comics as reading material for young people, emphasizing the experience of the readers themselves. The central research problem is concerned with how comics readers construct and understand their reading experience of comics as a reading material and what this says about reader identities and social contexts of reading comics. The focus on readers shifts the perspective from previous research that looked mainly at comics fans and comics as cultural products. Working in the tradition of qualitative inquiry, I adopted an approach informed by hermeneutical phenomenology because it supported the exploration of the significant and unique experiences of these readers, offering “plausible insights” that made immediate the richness and multifaceted nature of the reading experience. The primary methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews and a think-aloud protocol. The sample included seventeen participants, from sixteen to twenty-five years of age, nine female and eight male, who also represented different reading experiences: beginning readers, occasional but committed readers, and expert readers. I recruited participants and collected data in three different sites: public libraries, comics stores and at a university with a large undergraduate population.

Four dimensions of the reading experience emerged from the interview data: 1) the construction of the reader-self; 2) the significant role of the materiality of comics; 3) the institutional contexts of comics reading and; 4) the unique temporal aspects of comics reading in contemporary society. With these dimensions in mind, I emphasize the situated nature of the reading experience that requires the researcher to explore both how the experience is shaped but also shapes the reader-self and how it is embedded in an influential social context. I anticipate that this work will support a change in the way comic readers are conceptualized in Library and Information Science literature and practice. The knowledge emerging from my participants’ experiences and

understandings significantly enhances and seriously challenges commonplace understandings of the reading practices of a historically neglected group of readers.

## Keywords

Books and reading; comics; graphic novels; hermeneutic phenomenology; interviews; material culture; readers; reading experience; young adults; teenagers.

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I came to Western to do my PhD but I ended up doing much more at a professional and at a personal level. Because of this, I feel indebted to some people who were competent and helpful but always recognized the need for a human touch. First, I want to recognize the work and kindness of the staff at Weldon Library, the Music Library, and the Graduate Research Center at FIMS. Second, the staff at FIMS—especially Cindy, Jo, Lili, Marni, Rosanne and Shelley—who always had time to find an answer, to share an adventure that brought a smile to my face, and to have an endless provision of chocolate for me.

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Coming from my home in Spain to London, Ontario, it did not feel like the most hospitable city, but I have managed to eventually call it home. For this, credit goes to my friends at basketball who helped me to stay sane with beers and exercise; the Scone Lady, who made Thursdays and Saturdays great days to get f bed; the staff at the Tea Haus who always were there to give me tea and make me break from the work; and the staff at Milo's who created a great place to finish long days of work.

Anyone who tells you that doctoral inquiry is an isolated, independent experience is wrong (or maybe simply smarter than me!). The PhD does not happen just in your own brain; sometimes you cannot truly advance without the people around you. In this process I developed two new set of families, one Norwegian and one Canadian. First the Norwegians who brought a breath of Nordic fresh air to my mental and physical lives: thank to Åse, Cecilie, Jofrid, and Knut. I feel especially in debt to Kjell Ivar and his family who opened their home and life during my several scholarly visits to Oslo University. They welcomed me like their lost Spanish family member, who happened to speak English all the time!

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	viii
List of Tables .....	xiv
List of Figures.....	xv
Chapter 1.....	1
1 Overview .....	1
1.1 Terminology: A brief clarification .....	3
1.2 Diversity and progression: My personal story as a comics reader .....	4
Chapter 2 .....	8
2 Comics reading: The pervasive fan and the forgotten reader.....	8
2.1 Media and Cultural Studies: The predominance of the fan.....	9
2.1.1 A spectrum of comics reading: From the fan to the casual reader.....	13
2.1.2 From theory to experience: Studies of or about real comics fans.....	19
2.2 Comics in Library and Information Science: Embracing the form, stereotyping the reader.....	26
2.2.1 In search of the reader: An examination of the professional literature ...	32
2.2.2 Clare Snowball and the connection between teenagers, libraries, and graphic novels .....	40
2.3 Comics and Education: Searching for a balance “between the vituperation and complacency” .....	49
2.4 Reading in contemporary society: Dresang, Mackey, and Ross.....	63
2.5 Bourdieu and de Certeau: Informing my stance and grounding the need for a distinct methodology .....	78

Chapter 3.....	82
3 Methodology .....	82
3.1 Philosophical assumptions and interpretative framework .....	82
3.1.1 Methodological standpoint: Hermeneutic Phenomenology .....	84
3.1.2 Phenomenology, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Reading, and LIS.....	88
3.1.3 Reflexivity.....	90
3.2 Roadmap of the thesis research project .....	92
3.3 Sampling and recruitment.....	94
3.3.1 Teenagers and young adults as research participants.....	94
3.3.2 Research sample and sampling techniques .....	99
3.3.3 Access: Recruitment sites .....	105
3.3.4 Access: Recruitment methods .....	109
3.3.5 Ethical issues .....	111
3.4 Data collection methods .....	118
3.4.1 Interviewing .....	118
3.4.2 Think-aloud protocols.....	121
3.4.3 Establishing rapport.....	123
3.4.4 Other representations of the phenomenon.....	124
3.5 Data analysis.....	128
3.5.1 Themes .....	134
3.5.2 Trustworthiness.....	137
Chapter 4 .....	142
4 Portraits: A brief reading history of the participants .....	142
4.1 Alison.....	142

4.2 Baa .....	143
4.3 Daniel Feireday .....	144
4.4 Devi .....	145
4.5 HunterS .....	146
4.6 Jacob .....	148
4.7 Kalo .....	148
4.8 Lorraine .....	149
4.9 Marian .....	151
4.10 Oracle .....	152
4.11 Preacher .....	153
4.12 Promethea .....	154
4.13 Selina .....	155
4.14 Shade .....	156
4.15 Shalmanaser .....	157
4.16 Templesmith .....	158
4.17 Walker .....	159
Chapter 5 .....	160
5 First dimension: Participants talk about themselves as comics readers .....	160
5.1 Readers in the comics community: A tense relationship. ....	161
5.1.1 Differentiating readership through terminology: <i>Graphic novel</i> versus <i>comic book</i> .....	163
5.1.2 Comics reading as solitary and social .....	166
5.2 Always becoming: The tyranny of being a reader .....	168
5.2.1 The construction of a reader-self, knowing about comics .....	170
5.2.2 Comics readers also change: The metamorphosis of a comics reader ..	174

5.3	The exceptional female comics reader: Uneasy squatters.....	177
5.3.1	Solidarity with female creators and characters.....	180
5.3.2	The comics store: A gendered social and physical space.....	182
5.3.3	Women as advocates for comics reading .....	186
5.3.4	Selina: A case study .....	188
5.4	The reading moment, a singular experience: Encountering the reader-self relating to comics as text .....	190
5.4.1	The synergy of text and image in comics: A vital element that inspires reader agency and reading complexity.....	193
5.4.2	Can comics be boring? Bad reading experiences with comics .....	198
5.4.3	Re-reading and satisfaction: Defining a good reading experience with comics .....	201
Chapter 6	.....	208
6	Second dimension: Form and format in comics reading: the importance of experiencing materiality .....	208
6.1	Defining qualities of the comics form .....	208
6.2	The materiality of comics: Affordances of print and digital reading .....	215
6.2.1	My participants as conscientious objectors: A technology informed discussion about the preference for reading in print.....	219
6.2.2	Sensorial and affective connections with print reading materials: comics as objects and memory indexes.....	222
6.2.3	The reader-self archive: Collecting comics to historicize a readers' development and history .....	229
Chapter 7	.....	234
7	Third dimension: Participants and the context of comics reading.....	234
7.1	Readers and the comic industry: The pervasiveness of comics and the awareness of readers .....	235
7.1.1	The increasing ubiquity of comics: Licencing and adaptations.....	238

7.1.2	The awareness of production pressures in comics readership .....	241
7.2	The role of educational institutions in readers' lives: An unfulfilled reality (but a serious possibility) .....	246
7.3	Opportunities and obstacles for access to comics reading: Considerations regarding libraries and librarians .....	257
Chapter 8	.....	275
8	Fourth dimension: Comics reading and the experience of time in the digital age ...	275
8.1	A brief introduction to time in current scholarly research .....	277
8.2	Previous approaches to the issue of time and reading .....	282
8.3	Comics readers, the experience of time, and the possibilities of comics.....	285
8.3.1	Efficiency and time scarcity: How comics adapt to one of the temporal demands of our era.....	286
8.3.2	Resistance: Slowing down the reading experience with comics.....	291
Chapter 9	.....	297
9	Understandings and possibilities: Readers conceptualize reading as a situated and social practice .....	297
9.1	Four dimensions and New Literacies Studies: The inspiration for a renewed approach.....	299
9.1.1	A visual metaphor as the first step .....	299
9.1.2	Reading as a social and situated practice: The influence of New Literacies.....	302
9.2	Significance of the project.....	305
9.3	Future research.....	307
References	.....	309
Secondary sources	.....	309
Primary sources	.....	340
Appendix A <i>Serials Review</i> journal references	.....	344

Appendix B Interview Schedule .....	346
Appendix C Recruitment Tools .....	348
Appendix D Ethics Forms.....	350
Curriculum Vitae .....	353

## List of Tables

Table 1: Types of readers among focus group participants (Snowball 2012, 166).....	42
Table 2: Readers who enjoy GNs (Snowball 2012, 172).....	43
Table 3: Roadmap of the project and related scholarly communications .....	93
Table 4: Recruitment information.....	101
Table 5: List of movie adaptations 2006-2012 .....	127

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Board with ideas for reading as fabric .....	130
Figure 2: Board with ideas for reading and space/place .....	131
Figure 3: Draft of the visual representation of the theme structure .....	137
Figure 4: Visual metaphor to explore the reading experience .....	302



## Chapter 1

### 1 Overview

A question that I have often found myself answering since I decided to focus my dissertation project on the topic of comics reading and readers is how I ended up here. I must confess that this was not the topic with which I started the PhD path. I was always interested in the topic of young adults and libraries, especially after my work in a young adult library. My interest for comics readers grew when I reviewed the professional literature about this topic and recognized a very homogeneous but not explicit understanding of what a comics reader is. At the same time that this interest was growing, the concept of the graphic novel was being slowly embraced by mainstream culture. These moments of transition or rupture tend to be excellent points in time to develop research and my project about comics readers started to materialize.

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the role of comics as reading material for young people, emphasizing the experience of the readers themselves. The central research problem is concerned with how comics readers construct and understand their reading experience of comics as a reading material and what this says about reader identities and the social contexts of reading comics. The focus on readers shifts the perspective from previous research projects that looked mainly at comics fans and comics as cultural products. Historically comics have been a very incredibly popular reading material for youth in spite of the attacks and poor consideration received from adults and educational and cultural institutions. These divergent attitudes towards comics have attracted the attention of researchers, educators, and librarians. However most of the research efforts have focused on analyzing texts—especially lately in terms of regarding comics as *good* literature—along with a consideration of comics as a text and product in the fan experience.

Although the study of comics is multidisciplinary<sup>1</sup> few fields have actually studied the people who read these materials. This is the group which captured my interest. Besides the research carried out in my own discipline, Library and Information Science (LIS), I decided to focus on two other fields, Media Studies and Education. Historically these three disciplines have examined the interest in comics although with certain biases that I will discuss in my Literature Review. These biases create a gap that calls for a new perspective. Since the focus of the study is the experience of reading I also reviewed the works of noted scholars Dresang (1999), Mackey (2002/2007, 2007, 2011), and Ross (1999, 2001) to help me to situate my project among other studies of reading and readers.

My choice of methodology was critical. Hermeneutic phenomenology allowed me to study “how people interpret their lives and make meaning of what they experience” (Cohen, Kahen and Steeves 2000, 5). I implemented this methodology through semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), a think-aloud protocol, and reflexive writing and data analysis. Since readers are the center of this study, sampling and recruitment were necessarily time-consuming and reflexive processes. I interviewed seventeen readers, both male and female, from seventeen to twenty-five years of age who were mainly recruited from three different sites: public libraries, comics stores, and a university with a large undergraduate population.

My hope is that you, as an interested reader, experience an engaged journey similar to the one I experienced as a researcher. This project was mainly one of knowledge discovery and construction where I sought to collaborate with my participants and where my position, and myself as researcher and reader, gradually transformed during the research process. The ideas, process, and conclusions that I

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<sup>1</sup> The affiliation of the scholars who have dedicated some serious scholarship to comics is long, from fields such as American Studies, Media Studies, History, Education, Library and Information Science to Psychology and Economics. Hatfield (2010) notes that this multidisciplinaryity is different from an interdisciplinarity approach, making Comics Studies a potential field for investigating knowledge production and academic silos.

share present comics reading as a sophisticated practice with unique characteristics and this group of diverse readers as committed, conscientious, and reflexive.

### 1.1 Terminology: A brief clarification

After a great deal of consideration, I decided to use the term *comics* as an umbrella term to bring together the many material formats that this form assumes. The terminology about the comics form and its multiple formats is abundant and often confusing for beginning and sometimes expert readers alike. Although I chose primarily to use *comics*, the terms comic books and graphic novels<sup>2</sup> were also often used because they are heavily represented in the discourse of specific fields and research projects, such as Media Studies and library professional literature, but as much as possible I tried to contextualize their use. The choice of the term *comics* has also affected the way I refer to the comic book store: these stores are referred in different ways but I consistently referred to them as comics stores. In most cases, even if comic books are still one of the most visible formats, comics stores also stock trade paperbacks, graphic novels, and comic strip anthologies.

Smith and Duncan say that “there is no distinct medium known as comics” and they explain that “[c]omics is a useful general term for designating the phenomenon of juxtaposing images in a sequence” (2009, 3). McCloud acknowledges the use of comics as a term that includes “comics strips, comic books, cave paintings, Grecian urns, tapestries, stained glass windows, and more” (McCloud 1994, 3). I recognize that at a theoretical level the openness and inclusiveness of the term *comics* can be problematic. However, the focus of this study was the reading of any manifestation of the comics form, not proposing a definition. Participants understood my use of the term and sometimes questioned me about it, especially during discussions about the use of the

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<sup>2</sup> The term graphic novel is heavily cited in sections 2.2 and 7.3 correlating with its prominent use in LIS literature. The term comic books emerge more often in sections with a historical overview such as 2.1 or the one dedicated to the comics industry (section 7.1).

term *graphic novel*. Although terms such as *sequential art* (Eisner) or *graphic narrative* (Chute) might be semantically more appropriate than *comics*, there is not a clear consensus in the academic community about what term to use either. Therefore my goal was to present the study as an inclusive space, where any manifestation of comics reading was accepted, included, and equally interrogated. As well I presumed that potential participants would be most familiar with the term comics.

## 1.2 Diversity and progression: My personal story as a comics reader

I have already mentioned some of the reasons why I decided to study this topic. I am still missing an important one, my personal experience as a comics reader. This history starts at a young age but I certainly cannot be as definitive as some of my participants about the exact moment where and when it started. I can recall series of experiences that made these reading materials integral to my childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. I would like this personal narrative to become a disclosure of possible biases or assumptions that emerge, consciously and unconsciously, during the design and development of this dissertation project.

As a child I recall reading mainly three types of comics: a Spanish cartoon called *13, Rue del Percebe* by Francisco Ibañez, *Astérix* by Goscinny and Uderzo, and *El Capitán Trueno* by Mora and Ambrós. The first work consisted of a splash page that presented a building and its tenants in comical situations; his creator is among the most admired and respected Spanish cartoonists. The second one is a classic *bande dessinée* that always attracted my attention because of the way it combines comedic situations and a satirical approach to History and European culture. The third comic is a classic Spanish adventure comic, similar to *Prince Valiant*. Until recently I did not connect comics with one of my favourite reading materials as a child, a Bible in comics form. I had forgotten about it until my mother reminded me of it, proving our fragile memory in relation to reading habits and tastes. She bought me this Bible when I was seven or eight years old

because she had already noticed my interest for comics and historical and adventure plots. It was a translation from French work and comprised eight volumes.

As a teenager my taste moved towards superheroes and the *X-Men* group became one of my favourites. I also recall often re-reading a hardcover compilation of Spiderman stories that I am not sure how got into my collection. I cannot explain this change in my taste. My only guess is that superhero comics were very prominent in the newsstand that I visited with my grandmother. She would give an allowance that I religiously spent on candy and comics. Reading was never social for me, not even comics, until I started university. During my first two years at university I almost stopped reading superhero comics completely and my interest moved to the Spanish equivalent of underground comics. Every month I went to the newsstand and get the magazine *El Vibora* that compiled stories from different authors (Sabin 1993, 198), often with satirical, edgy, or sexually explicit stories<sup>3</sup>. *El Vibora* was a product of a Spanish comics industry that was beginning to recover from years of dictatorship. The domestic production was slowly increasing at the same time that the market was happily accepting the arrival of American and other European comics. During my early university years, I remember that some of my female friends at the dorms were surprised that I was interested in comics at all and even more that I read something as racy and edgy as *El Vibora*. However, a few of them soon became regular borrowers thus instigating discussions about the content. I eventually grew out of *El Vibora's* angst and my interest for comics entered a period of hibernation, until *Maus*.

I was never interested in the comics industry and I never had friends who read comics so my exposure to industry changes and new titles and creators was very

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<sup>3</sup> I do not want to let the opportunity pass to highlight the importance that publications such *El Vibora* had in my introduction to a wide variety of comics artists and traditions. Antonio Martín, renowned Spanish editor and comics historian, explains this publication's role in the Spanish underground culture during the '80s and '90s in an in-depth article for the website *Tebeosfera* (Martín 2004).

limited. It was not until my MLIS in Pittsburgh that I re-discovered my love for comics reading. I took a course about young adult libraries where one of the assignments was to lead a book discussion activity. At the moment of choosing the book for my activity I saw that nobody else had picked one that looked like a comic. I selected *Maus*. That project revitalized my passion for comics and a mode of reading that I had almost forgotten. This re-acquaintance process with comics came with a drastic change. Comics were not sold at the newsstand anymore and I had to go to the comics store. I must recognize that I avoided for some time that change and went to used bookstores instead where I would find random titles.

The change and evolution of this personal history is directly related to my process of maturity and self-discovery, but I also *blame* it on having available all these different representations of the comics form. I can neither recall feelings of guilt nor anyone criticizing my reading choices. I suppose that I was lucky that my mother only wanted me to read and that my reading was mostly a private activity. I did not consider comics differently than any other reading material and most of the time Jules Verne and *Astérix* would share my reading time. I think that the form and I evolved together, with random and surprising encounters. My reading history mixes origins and formats; it represents the many different formats and storylines available and it is an example of the differences that can potentially affect the development of comics readership.

I move from this portrayal of myself as a reader to an overview of the literature, in which I could not find the kind of reader that I was and am. In chapter 2 I provide an overview of the contested position of the comics reader in Media Studies, LIS, and Education literatures. I approached this study from a methodological standpoint directed by the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology and implemented through semi-structured interviews. In Chapter 4 I describe my participants. Findings are presented in chapters 5 through 8: the construction of the reader-self; the significant role of the materiality of comics; the institutional contexts of comics reading; and the unique temporal aspects of comics readers in contemporary society. My conclusion

offers a visual metaphor that draws on New Literacies scholarship to understand the comics reading experience.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Comics reading: The pervasive fan and the forgotten reader

This review examines the main trends in the academic fields that have produced research about comics reading. The study of comics and comics reading is a multidisciplinary topic with slippery boundaries still in the process of defining itself. The work of Smith and Duncan (2011, 2012) attempts to strengthen these limits and their books are worth highlighting and using as anchors for the discipline of Comics Studies. Henry Jenkins lists the provenance of the contributors for the collection on theories and methods as follows: Art History, Literature, Media and Cultural Studies, Gender and Ethnic Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, Economics, and Philosophy (2012, 1). This rich diversity of research almost disappears when one focuses on the act of reading comics or the relationship between the text and the reader: the field narrows to Media and Cultural Studies scholarly research and to interest regarding a very particular reader—*the fan*. This predominance of research about the practices and understandings of comics fans produces and perpetuates a specific construction or representation of comics reading.

Education and Library Science are two other fields that historically have examined the relationship between readers and comics. This interest is not new and can be traced back to the rise of comic books during the 1930s and 1940s and the subsequent backlash during the 1950s. This historical perspective is important to highlight in light of some present attitudes towards comics reading. As well, I attempt to make visible how both positive and negative stereotypes about fans and their experiences with comics emerge in the research and writing produced by scholars and professionals from these two fields.



## 2.1 Media and Cultural Studies: The predominance of the fan

It is not a coincidence that Media and Cultural Studies equate the experience of reading comics with the experience of fandom, especially if comics fandom is understood as a young, male audience who, for the most part, consume mainstream superhero texts. Wolfe and Fiske report on one of the first major studies about comics reading in these fields in their article, "The Children Talk About Comics" (1948). Ground-breaking and progressive, it starts a path that associates comics reading with the experience of becoming or being a fan. When compared to the dominant negative discourse about comics exemplified by North's column *A National Disgrace* (1941) and Wertham's book *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), their research approach and respect for children's voices is laudable.

Their study notes that "...sociologists, psychologists, educators, and publishers have to date been able to do little but speculate as to how [comics] influence the behaviour, attitudes, and developmental pattern of that generation [of children]" (3). Wolfe and Fiske interviewed children, analyzed "their own reports" and, based on that data, formed "some impression of the motives for and effects of comic book reading [...] in relation to behaviour, interest, and attitudes" (3). The participants were interviewed and then observed while reading a Superman story. During the interviews the researchers noted three different types of comics for which the children expressed an interest: "comics of the Walt Disney 'funny animal' type"; "adventure, crime, and mystery comics of the Superman type," and "educational comics of the True and Classic type" (5). These three types of comics correlate with three reading stages of children. Before reaching ten years of age, children are more interested in the "Funny Animal" comics. Between eleven to twelve years of age, children's interest for "Funny Animal" comics fades and moves to the "Fantastic Adventure" and increases for "True and Classic". In the last phase, comics reading declines at the same time that their interest is mainly focused on "True and Classic" comics (8). This division and the

consequent interpretation reinforce the idea that comics are primordially connected to childhood and that they are a passing reading interest that eventually is abandoned. Wolfe and Fiske connect to this transition a change in the functions that comics play; they explain "[s]ince a child's comic preferences progress through three clearly marked stages, it would appear that the gratification which the child derives from comic reading must likewise change" (9). These stages or functions are defined by the evolution of the readers' interests from the importance of fantastic elements to the prominence of realistic elements, and issues related to character identification. Even though the children present diverse interests and reading habits, the researchers observed them only while they read a Superman title; this focus on the Superman title might be due to the rising market domination of superhero stories. Wolfe and Fiske detect three distinctive functions:

- The "Alice-in-Wonderland function" is characterized by the children's "insistence on variety and on plausibility of action." Superman comics are included in this phase because this character is infallible and invincible and his world is one of clear good and evil and perpetual happy endings. Children also read and re-read more than in other stages (9-14).
- The "Batman stage: the invincibility of the vincible": Superman's oversimplified world, rigid and repetitive narratives, and invulnerable hero stop being satisfying for the reader. Children move to stories where Batman, and other like superheroes, become the preference based on their vulnerability and the emergence of the young sidekick who strengthens the process of identification (14-16).
- The "Reader's Digest function:" children shift interest to comics that are based on actual events. According to Wolfe and Fiske, "artificiality of either character or situation is no longer satisfying to the child who now consciously desires to learn about the real world" (17). Comics are chosen based on their unpredictability and psychological reality, and they are used

for "facts and immediately practical suggestions" (18). Comics reading becomes subordinate to other media and other interests.

Wolfe and Fiske's study also identifies three types of comic readers: comic book fans, moderate readers, and indifferent or hostile readers. The report largely focuses on the examination of the first type of readers, the fans, "whose interest in comics is patently violent and excessive" to the point of potentially neglecting any other activity (22). Interestingly fans are also characterized as "not merely excessive readers" since the study also detects a difference in quality in relation to the function that comics reading serves for fans in comparison to moderate readers (24-25). Fans tend to be physically weaker children who "seek solace in the worship of a distant and omnipotent personal protector, [Superman]" (28). As well, a "marked correlation" exists between neuroticism and being a fan. Thus the fan:

- is "interested only in the general aura of the story, as manifested by its triumphant conclusion";
- lifts "comic reading to a position superior to that of other activities, including eating";
- and extends "to various other activities the habits of thought characteristic of comic reading" (29).

Although the study clearly highlights the "problems" of "excessive" comics reading, its general conclusions about comics reading are, at least, ambiguous. At the same time that it points to many of the traits of a stereotypical modern fan, it also moderately defends reading comics. It studies comics as a material to be left behind by mature readers who use non-fiction comics "as a tool for the real adventure which is life itself" (34). It concludes that most of the behavioural issues presented by fans were not caused by comics but existed beforehand. It also presents some intriguing connections between home, family, and comics readers. Home is a potential factor to 'cause' a child to become a fan and families which provide diverse entertainment or model varied interests to their children generate moderate readers. On the other hand, families

which already include comics readers tend to generate fans (45). This study is a compelling attempt to conduct scholarly research in the midst of negative newspaper editorials and magazine articles.

In his book about ideology, British comics, and their readers, Barker (1989) examines the Wolfe and Fiske study as a problematic example of the “Uses and Gratifications<sup>4</sup>” approach in the study of audiences. According to Barker, Wolfe and Fiske constrained comics to two possibilities, neutral or negative, whereby readers either follow the natural process of growing out of them or they have become obsessed and transformed into neurotic fans (245). The approach itself comes with a series of prejudgments that impede a closer look at the actual reading experience: “timeless needs, which ‘explain’ why people use the media; unargued distinctions between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’; and naïve classifications of media-content” (246).

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<sup>4</sup> The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) approach arose originally in the 1940s (Cantril, 1942) and enjoyed a renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s (especially after the publication of Blumler and Katz 1974). It is complicated to determine the exact roots of this approach. Although some consider it a subtradition of the Effects approach, U&G emerged in response to the “Hypodermic Needle” approach that simply focused on what media did to their audience. The U&G approach presents the use of media in terms of the gratification of social or psychological needs of the individual (Blumler & Katz 1974). It moves the question from media content to audience and theorizes the audience as active instead of passive. The approach springs from a functionalist paradigm, as part of a broader trend amongst media researchers concerned with ‘what people do with media’, why people use media and what they use them for. In its early stages, U&G studies were primarily descriptive, classifying the responses of audience members into meaningful categories, but generally researchers did not seek links between the gratifications detected and the psychological or sociological origins of the needs satisfied. During the 1950s and 1960s researchers identified and operationalized many social and psychological variables that were presumed to be the precursors of different patterns of gratifications. This path was connected to the “cognitive revolution” that the Communications field experienced. During this development audiences were truly conceptualized as active and dynamic. In following decades this approach underwent different developments and its research objectives became more focused; for example, during the 1970s, U&G research started to look at gratifications sought, excluding outcomes, or gratifications obtained (Ruggiero 2000, 6). Some general criticisms of this approach converge precisely on the power conferred to audiences. Media consumers decide how they will use media and how they will affect them, encouraging the idea that consumers simply use the media to satisfy a given need and disregarding the power of the media in society. Ruggiero offers a broad and well organized review of this theory (Ruggiero 2000); as well, he presents some present day possibilities of this theory, especially in relation to the Internet. Lately, the U&G approach is undergoing a revival especially in connection to social media (e.g., Quan-Haase and Young 2010; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 2008)

I will come back to Barker's work in more depth later in this section. Even though his critique is substantial, I believe that Wolfe and Fiske's work deserves some positive attention. There are two characteristics that make Wolfe and Fiske's work unique even by present day standards. First, it recognizes the existence of differences in the experience of comics reading; although focusing on the fan, it shows interest as well for the moderate reader. Second, Wolfe and Fiske grant value in reading comics in that these materials are seen as any other reading material for children, one that eventually the child will grow out of. This idea that a good child will grow out of comics reading is still prevalent and, as I will note, very much alive in the Library and Information Science literature.

This brief examination of one research project serves as an illustrative example, providing both a historical perspective and a relevant departure point for current research about comics reading. Equally, it helps to anchor the abstract and theoretical discussion about comics fans and readers that follows.

#### 2.1.1 A spectrum of comics reading: From the fan to the casual reader

The prominence of Fan Studies as a site of knowledge about the relationship among readers, fans, and comics has resulted in an imbalance in the description not only of the experience but also of the readers themselves. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), Sandvoss (2005), and Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007) critique the privileging of certain theoretical approaches to the research of audiences and fans and offer new theoretical approaches to the topic.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) produce a map of Audience research to argue for the emergence of a new research standpoint. They discuss two major paradigms used in the examination of audiences. The Behavioural paradigm encompasses psychological theories and early sociological approaches; under this paradigm the audience is seen as passive and directly receiving the messages from media texts or events. Against the limitations of this paradigm, the

Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm (IRP) developed; audiences take a more active role, reinterpreting or rejecting media messages. They summarize the standpoint of this approach as follows: "whether audience members are incorporated into dominant ideology by their participation in media activity, or whether to the contrary, they are resistant to that incorporation" (1998, 15). IRP moves in a continuum whose extremes are a Dominant Text or a Dominant Audience, although during the 1980s and part of the 1990s the conceptualization of an active audience moved the pendulum towards the reader end of the spectrum (28-29).

Abercrombie and Longhurst suggest that a series of developments in the nature and conditions of audiences (i.e., increasing intertextuality, media saturation, audience self-awareness, and the increased role of performativity in society), combined with the limitations of the last theoretical approach requires another shift to what they propose as the Spectacle/Performance Paradigm (SPP). SPP attempts to relocate its focus to issues of identity formation and everyday life instead of exclusively looking at issues of resistance or power (36-37). It is important to highlight the fact that issues of power, for example, do not disappear under SPP. Although present, power is no longer the central element but an issue that informs and connects to identity formation. Abercrombie and Longhurst examine fans and enthusiasts as the type of audience to exemplify the relevance of their Spectacle/Performance Paradigm. Presumably due to this focus, researchers in Fan Studies heavily cite their work (e.g., Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005). However, Morley (2006) and Barker (2006) have strongly criticized the work of Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998). For instance, Morley suggests a multidimensional approach to Audience research. He explains that "each of these models [Abercrombie and Longhurst's paradigms] captures—or highlights—a different dimension of media-audience relations. What we perhaps need here is a multi-dimensional model that incorporates insights along all of these dimensions" (Morley 2006, 111).

For this dissertation project it is relevant to look at Abercrombie and Longhurst's examination of fans and enthusiasts because it supports the continuum

that insists on focusing on fans and other extreme readers, ignoring other types of possible audiences. Abercrombie and Longhurst use fans and enthusiasts as their examples to illustrate the change in the nature of audiences and they dedicate an entire chapter to this analysis (121-157). Their interest is centered on three types of consumers: fans, enthusiasts, and cultists. They review how these groups are conceptualized in several research projects. A continuum is developed that situates these groups as a block in the middle, with "petty producers," those who moved from being enthusiasts to professionals, marking one extreme and consumers, those who have a "relatively generalized and unfocused pattern of media use," at the opposite end (140). In contrast with Abercrombie and Longhurst, Tulloch and Jenkins ignore the term 'cult' and distinguish between followers and fans (1995, 23) who are differentiated by the manner in which a fan claims a social identity while a follower does not. Sanvoss (2005) calls for a shift from "macro questions of power, hegemony and subversion to questions of self and identity" (42). His definition of fans and fandom stays away from issues of resistance and assumed disempowerment. He writes: "*I define fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text...*" (2005, 8). Although different and somewhat complementary, these different theorizations of the fan allow for the existence of a continuum that openly challenges the dichotomization between fan and nonfan that Harrington and Bielby argued resulted in the field's scholarly inability to conceptualize normal fanship (1995, 112).

Certainly the emergence of SPP investigations in the study of fandom blurs the pre-existent "strongly marked and patrolled" boundary between fans and nonfans (Fiske 1992, 34-35). The effort of defining a fan usually starts with the process of defining the boundaries of the negative stereotype. For example, Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* noted some of the still prevalent stereotypes about fans: that they are emotionally unstable, socially maladjusted and dangerously out of sync with reality (1992, 13-15). Hills outlines the common understanding of fan cultures:

Everybody knows what a 'fan' is. It's somebody who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band; somebody who can produce reams of information on their object of fandom, and can quote their favoured lines or lyrics, chapter and verse. Fans are often highly articulate. Fans interpret media texts in a variety of interesting and perhaps unexpected ways. And fans participate in communal activities—they are not 'socially atomised' or isolated viewers/readers (2002, ix).

This definition is then used compared to other academic meanings of what fandom is. The multiplicity of conceptualizations of fandom fully emerges from Harrington's survey of Fan Studies scholars (2007). She attempts to pinpoint a common understanding of what a fan is: fans are "distinguished primarily by their degree of emotional, psychological, and /or behavioural *investment* in media texts [...] and/or their "active" *engagement* with media texts" (186). Issues of community, sociality, self-identification, and regularity of consumption also arise. Exploring matters of nomenclature, Pearson (2007) examines the importance of the word fan and how it connects to the object of fandom: popular and mid-brow are fans; meanwhile, when one moves up the cultural ladder, fans become aficionados, cognoscenti or connoisseurs (98-99). Fiske's influential work defined fans as "excessive readers"; being a fan involves "an active, enthusiastic, partisan, participatory involvement with the text" (1989, 146).

Abercrombie and Longhurst claim that because of social changes and developments in the media environment, "'ordinary' audience members are more like fans and enthusiasts than might initially be thought and that [...] sociation patterns are increasingly likely to resemble some of the relationships identified in the fan literature" (1995, 122). However, the focus of audience research is still the *excessive reader*. In the context of research about aesthetics and taste in popular culture, Bird (2003) cites Firth to note that scholars tend to look at the genres that they enjoy as fans and they ignore "the middlebrow consumer, [...] the easy listener or light reader and Andrew Lloyd



Webber fan" (121). This middlebrow consumer is often defined by an emotional or sentimental attachment to the text and it is because of this type of attachment that "for the most part [...] scholars do not care to define what is 'wrong' with the middlebrow in terms of taste or aesthetic judgment; they just ignore it" (2003, 121-122). The result is that researchers are neglecting a substantial experience.

The research landscape generally ignores or understudies mid-brow readers or unproductive readers, while the audiences of fans or enthusiasts is over-theorized. When the discussion moves to the realm of comics *reading*, the false dichotomy that the aforementioned researchers managed to challenge clearly emerges: there are two extreme poles and no continuum, since one is either a fan or a casual reader. Although more examples will be examined in depth later on, two simple cases are noted now to exemplify this scholarly obsession with the fan. Smith and Duncan (2009) define a fan as someone who wants to take part in the dialogue about the medium, a quality which strongly differentiates them from casual readers and consumers (2009, 173). The authors link the identity of the fan to issues of production. Although they do not specify much more about the characteristics of this dialogue, it seems to be influenced by the different types of production as identified by Fiske: semiotic, textual, and enunciative (Fiske 1992, 37-39). Smith and Duncan situate this dialogue in comic book letter columns, fanzines, the internet, conventions, and academic conferences. Furthermore, a degree of publicness also seems implicit in a fan's identity. Fans also make an investment in comics: financial, emotional, and temporal (173).

In his study of American comics, Gabilliet (2010) dedicates a section to fans, looking at the phenomenon from a historical point of view. He notes three types of readers: readers, letter writers, and fans. The first group conveys the majority of the audience and states that "[t]he actual readership is an informal community in which a silent majority coexists with a vocal minority, whose ideas and preferences are not necessarily in line with those of the majority of the purchasers of a given title (257). Brown supports this statement when he contends that ten to twenty percent of the

comic book audience are fans but he recognizes the difficulty of distinguishing between an occasional reader and a fan (2001, 61). Gallibiet blames this silence and lack of “cultural activism” on the inability to “construct a reliable representation of occasional or non-passionate readers” (2010, 257). Comics fandom makes up a substantial portion of the most *visible* comics audience. They live their relationship with comics in rich, diverse, and public ways, making them, in return, a visible, accessible, and active community. Consequently the majority of the studies examining comics readers are focused on fan communities and come from Fan Studies. The object of study becomes the fan experience, not just with comics but with movies, television shows and sporting events. This prominence has overshadowed other experiences with comics as cultural artefacts and more specifically, as reading materials.

The gap in our understanding of this phenomenon can be illuminated with a change in perspective. Hermes (1995) studied eighty readers of women’s magazines and one of her conclusions justifies examining a genre (and any media for that matter) through the eyes of the readers (144-146). She writes:

Uncoerced friendly conversation about everyday media use will reveal traces of how a specific genre becomes meaningful [...]: how a genre is used (the experience of reading it), how it is interpreted (whether it speaks to our experience in general, to our identities), and also what its cultural value is understood to be (145).

To conclude, from the studies examined in this section, it is clear there is a need to broaden the idea of the comics reader as fan as well as a need to shift the research approach to allow the participants’ experiences to emerge. The research reported in this dissertation represents a stepping stone in the process of diversifying the voices that construct the research discourse about comics, and looks at the role of comics as reading materials for a specific population, namely teenagers and young adults.

### 2.1.2 From theory to experience: Studies of or about real comics fans

In this section I review work that moves beyond the theorization of audience and fans to studies that examine concrete audiences or even in some cases, actual readers. However, while none of the following studies centers the investigation on the experience of reading comics their data sources are manifold: industry statistics, meta-analysis of other studies, interviewing. Their objectives are also diverse: examination of the impact of audiences in content, comics and gender and ideology, or the developing of comics communities.

I have already mentioned Barker (1989) and his study of ideology, British comics, and their readers. Although in his work he does not converse with actual readers, his chapter "Reading' the Readers" is a thoughtful and critical examination of various studies about comics and magazine readers (e.g., Baily 1959; Frazer 1987; McRobbie 1981; Sarsby 1983; Strang 1943; Wolfe and Fiske 1949). From his interest in media and ideology, Barker identifies different problems in these studies. The "Effects" and "Uses and Gratifications" approaches are criticized as "they have found only what their theories assumed already to be present" (1989, 247). He also suggests a complex alternative, namely the interplay between studying the texts and thinking about the readers. This approach advocates for the study of a contract between the text and the reader and brings to light the dialogue between them. Moreover, in order to understand this contract, the researcher needs to develop "a picture of the reader as well as the comic, the reader and her/his relation to the comic" (261). In relation to issues of criticism of texts, Barker talks marginally about the importance of distinguishing different types of reader criticism, depending on their origin, including "outsiders," "casual" readers, and "spontaneous" or "natural" readers (256). Natural readers would be able to identify and criticize the contract differently than "outsiders" or "casual" readers, thus recognizing the important role of the reader who is familiar with the text, a sort of fan, but also of other kinds of readers. The role or meaning created by these readers is not relevant for Barker, but it is precisely at the centre of

this dissertation research. Since the main interest heretofore has been placed on fans and their uses of and reactions to comics, the existence of different types of readers of comics can be defined as an unexplored and salient topic in comics research.

Parsons (1991), in his widely cited study of the audience for superhero comics, notes the metamorphosis in comic book readership both in terms of age and cultural sophistication. Parsons focuses on the audience of comic books published by Marvel and DC, again breaking it into three groups (81):

- Fan collectors: they are the oldest, with a higher income and level of education.
- Older non-collectors: these readers are attracted to independent titles, with realistic themes.
- The bulk of the readership: fifteen- to twenty-year-old males largely involved with superhero and fantasy comics.

Parsons recognizes that these groups are not precisely defined and, more importantly, are not mutually exclusive (81). Moreover, when he analyzes the interaction between audience and content and audience and production, the idea of a diverse and active audience is again noted. First, he highlights the necessity of considering both text and reader when seeking the meaning of a particular text. This is evident in his research about *Batman* when he states: "to understand the meaning a given reader ascribes to Batman, one must be able to locate both the position of the individual along the curve of cultural meaning and the location of the specific content consumed along its companion curve" (84). Second, he indicates the influence of the changing demographics of readers as a factor in production during the late 1980s and 1990s supporting the development of comics shops, the incipient independent comics publishing industry, and the development of the medium in general (85). Parsons notes two other factors that make an impact on the content and production of comic books: the communication between fans, writers, and artists and, the evolution of consumers into producers, from readers and fans into writers and artists. These two characteristics

are not exclusive to comics readers, since they are often found in studies about subcultures and other reading communities. For instance, Radway has already noted a high rate of readers/consumers becoming romance writers/producers (1991, 17).

The works of Pustz (1999) and Brown (2001) illustrate two different approaches to the study of comics readers. On the one hand, Pustz's work (1999) describes how comics culture arises from a community that, although diverse, finds the appreciation for the comics medium to be the unifying element (204). On the other hand, Brown's work (2001) focused in one publisher, Milestone Media, and how their comics are used by readers to construct and understand race and gender. Therefore, their research examines comics readership in different contexts and also with different overall purposes in mind. These contrasting approaches help to refine the questions about the experience of reading comics that I have proposed for this project.

Pustz's study focuses on comics culture and community and, to demonstrate how these two function, he continuously examines the friction and conflicts between the mainstream and alternative factions (22). The main site of analysis is a comics store and its employees and customers are the main sources for his research data. However, his work is, for the most part, theoretically and textually based and does not provide readers' insights about the experience of reading comics. Despite this, Pustz's analysis of this conflict between the mainstream and alternative factions offers invaluable insights into the perception and construction of comics readers and fans. Also, through this work one can observe the role that texts and community involvement play in defining the position of each group.

Pustz considers fan involvement as a major factor in defining comics culture. Because of this, he uses the terms reader and fan indistinguishably although the object of study tends to be individuals actively involved with a fan community. In the first pages of the chapter dedicated to study of "the spectrum of contemporary readers" (66-109), Pustz notes that some comics readers "fit the traditional idea of fans," others are described as "fanboys," while a third group does not want to be related to

mainstream comics and “identify themselves as fans for alternative comics” (67). Clearly, there are no distinctions between readers and fans in this introduction and, although Pustz recognizes the existence of “regular readers” who are not as involved with fan activities, he emphasizes that they “remain devoted to and identify with comic books” (68).

Whether about fans or “regular readers,” Pustz’s work reveals some valuable information about the gender and age of comics readers. For example, he notes a strong female membership in the audience of alternative comics (13, 86). The imprint *Vertigo*, particularly the series *The Sandman*, and other alternative titles such as *Strangers in Paradise*, have succeeded in attracting a large and enthusiastic female readership. In regard to age, he connects fandom to the increasing involvement of older and aging readers. As comics were considered reading material for youth, fandom gave “older fans a sense of community and belonging” (107). Beyond the difference in gender distribution associated with mainstream and alternative comics, Pustz notes other peculiarities between groups. Alternative readers include “older, often more literary-minded readers and more women,” “[p]olitically and culturally, they are more liberal than their mainstream counterparts, and many are also involved with various forms of alternative music” (xii). Some comics readers “have come to them from alternative culture: these people listen to alternative music . . . , have nonconformist ideas regarding lifestyle, clothing, and personal appearance, and practice more liberal politics than most Americans” (13). Mainstream readers are labeled as fans by default, and are connected to the stereotypical portrayal of comics readership. Therefore they are not described as thoroughly as the alternative readers. Mainstream readers are generally male, highly involved in the fan community and are interested in comic books about superheroes. Some of these readers embody the characteristics represented by the labels “fanboy” and “true believers.”

Although the basis of his analysis is the conflict between the alternative and the mainstream readership communities, Pustz recognizes the two labels as “controversial”

(83) and introduces the idea of applying them as extremes of a spectrum instead of discrete categories (83). The idea of the spectrum enriches the depiction of comics readers and, especially, their history as readers. It also connects with research and some of the developments in the fields of Audience and Fan Studies that were previously described. The departure from this dichotomy allows the possibility of studying what Barker (1989) labeled as “casual” readers or people who are not immersed in the fan community. For this, the characteristics which define the position of a reader/fan in this spectrum (for example, types of texts read, other cultural habits, and self-identification) need to be defined.

A recent study (Woo 2011), clearly influenced by Pustz’s work, attempts to expand the theorizing of comics shops, especially as sites to extend the understanding of comics reception and further comics studies beyond the reader-text relationship. The importance of the study is undeniable, especially the author’s effort at theorizing the many roles the comics store can play in the experience of a comics reader. It provides “some resources for re-embedding comics-book fans’ reading practices in their generative social context” (Woo 2011, 126). In his conclusion, Woo points at the possibilities that his focus on the comics store and customer practices may provide to comics scholarship, largely to broaden the attention of the field beyond formal and text-focused issues. Woo notes that readers and collectors clearly produce different spaces and their reception should not be assumed a priori. In order to investigate these differences, he points to an issue highly relevant for the purposes of my research project when he writes:

We ought to replace the ideal reader posited by abstract theories of reception or naïvely presupposed by scholarly ‘reading’ of cultural texts with a more realistic –which is to say, theoretically and empirically adequate – account of individuals as socially embedded agents, some of whom may not identify as part of the audience for comics and graphic novels(133).

My research questions and methodology map perfectly onto the matters highlighted by Woo.

With a different approach and research goal, Brown's work (2001) also reinforces the idea of potential multiplicity in the reading experience of comics readership. The overall purpose of his research was to study the comic book production of Milestone Media and "how the adolescent members of the comic book reading audience use mass-produced genre texts in their personal and social lives to construct an understanding of race and gender" (5). The most relevant section for my research is Brown's chapter in which readers' voices are heard. Brown conducted 104 formal and informal interviews and selected eight to study the "parasocial relationships with the texts" (129) and how these same texts "help them form an understanding of masculinity in contemporary culture" (12). Although a secondary purpose of his project, Brown examines two issues particularly relevant for Reading research: the social role of reading and the limits of gendered ways of reading (128-130). The critical role of both social and parasocial relationships for these young male readers causes a disruption of "the gender stereotypes that surround media fandom reading practices" (129). According to Brown, the idea that women read for social reasons and men read for facts is challenged since these male readers read "for a sense of community, either with the characters and the narrative work or with other fans" (129). As I have noted, the topics related to reading were not pivotal to Brown's project, but his work still informs the field of Reading research, demonstrating the potential contribution that a focus on comics reading and readers can have to research about the experience of reading.

Brown's study was mostly confined to issues of masculinity and race, and accordingly, his sample was representative of just one part of an increasingly diverse comics readership (i.e., young, male and focused on superheroes). The in-depth information Brown offers about those eight readers provides evidence of the richness of the experience of reading comic books. More importantly, it evinces the analytical



possibilities opened up by interviewing actual readers. His study raises the following issues that are relevant for this project:

- The influence that external perceptions and stereotypes about comics reading have on actual readers, especially in the way they position themselves as either readers or fans, and as either individual readers or part of a community.
- The relevance of both text and community to attract readers and sustain their interest in the medium.
- The complicated relationship with the text, both as a reading material and as a collector's item. Collecting provides a certain status in the culture and the knowledge about the text, a certain cultural capital. Why and when do readers become collectors?
- The richness and diversity of cultural habits in comic book readers.
- The pursuit of a future career in the industry (writer, artist, publisher, or store owner) or a passionate interest in the Arts and its influence on the development of reading and buying patterns.
- The lack of homogeneity in the reasons to read comic books: the qualities of the story, values represented by the characters, or the search for the correct meaning of a story.

The issues raised but not actively pursued in Brown's project have become part of my project, integrated in both the interview schedule and the analysis.

When studying readers and fans of comics, the motives and intentions of Barker (1989), Parsons (1991), Pustz (1999) and Brown (2001) are varied and hardly comparable. But from their research one issue arises: the potential diversity in comics readership and the variability of the comics reading experience. The discourse about comics readership has historically been located in the analysis of fan communities and the roles and experiences of fans. This pursuit of the fan obscured other roles of comics as reading materials and for reading experiences. Brown's (2001) depictions of eight

comic book readers suggest an alternate path to follow when problematizing and examining comic book readership. In order to start exploring comics readers, readers themselves should be questioned about topics such as the reasons for their attraction to the medium, their personal history as readers, the importance of the idea of community of readers, and their knowledge about the comic industry. The answers to these questions would provide complex and diverse variables to consider when answering the overall question of what it means to be a comics reader in contemporary society.

## 2.2 Comics in Library and Information Science: Embracing the form, stereotyping the reader

Wayne Wiegand in his widely cited article "Out of Sight, Out of Mind," alludes to the tradition in librarianship of "slighting certain kinds of reading" (1997, 314). One of these kinds of reading involves comic books, a material that was attacked by librarians, educators and intellectuals in general, in terms similar to those used for dime novels and pulp fiction. The remarks against these materials were mainly based on issues of aesthetics and quality. Thus the debate was focused on the texts and their possible effects on readers. Unlike in Media and Cultural Studies, in LIS, there has not been a clear evolution in the way the discipline approaches the relationship between readers and texts, particularly if librarians traditionally have dismissed those texts. The question 'what do media do to their audience?' still guides scholarly research and professional reflections. Wiegand calls for a shift in perspective from texts to readers when he points to the lack of information about them as a problem that sustained pejorative behaviour by library professionals. He says, "we have never bothered to investigate seriously why people want to read them" (314). After the publication of this article, a group of researchers has actively responded to Wiegand's call and addressed the lack of information about readers and pleasure reading (e.g., Rothbauer 2004; Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer 2006; Pecoskie 2009; Dali 2010; Rothbauer 2011; Howard 2009, 2011).

The attraction for comics and the number of publications and research about comics in LIS has grown exponentially. However, with this growth a dichotomy has emerged. Libraries are purchasing comics; library journals are reviewing them; programming is being developed around them; cartoonists like Jeff Smith are continuously praising the support from libraries for comics; and, they are becoming a key way to attract the always evasive and unpredictable teenage population. Comics would now seem to have hallowed a spot in libraries. However, when one focusses the lens and examines the image of the comics reader that is being constructed and transmitted, the picture is not as encouraging. In the section that follows, I examine the literature about comics in LIS, pointing at issues of absence and stereotyping in relation to the young adult reader of comics.

Since the 1940s the field of librarianship has paid attention to comics, although opinions and attitudes towards them have changed. An important source with which to examine this evolution is Ellis and Highsmith's article (2000) in which they analyzed the attitudes of librarians through a survey of sixty-five years of professional literature. In summary, in the 1940s and 1950s comics were described as "unworthy" of inclusion in library collections and librarians were worried about their effects on literacy and readers; today they are considered a "legitimate" reading material that deserves a place in most libraries (39).

Although significant for its insights, Ellis and Highsmith's work is primarily descriptive and does not ask critical questions about how and why libraries and librarians embrace the form and what this change means for both comics readers and library patrons in general. The shift from attacking to promoting the use of comic books signifies a change in the professional literature and attitudes about comics. However, the articles and books published from the 1990s to the present day focus primarily on the provision of practical information about the medium: basic matters of language and aesthetics, selection, acquisition, cataloguing, promotion, and censorship. For instance, four issues of the journal *Serials Review* represent this effort to introduce and inform

the library community about the medium. Among other topics, they include articles about the vocabulary of comic books, mainstream and independent publishers and titles, and research libraries dedicated to collect comic books (Appendix A). Two years after the publication of Ellis and Highsmith's article, an event occurs which confirms this shift in LIS attitude, an event that also acts as a major catalyst to materialize and strengthen the shift: one hundred and seventy librarians participated in the *Getting Graphic @ Your Library* an ALA pre-conference, becoming one of the most successful events ever organized by the Young Adult Library Services Association (Graphic moments... 2002). An example of the momentum that this conference generated is the number of regular columns and editorials published at the end of that same year: Crawford started the column "Thought Bubbles" for *Knowledge Quest* and the journal *Young Adult Library Services* dedicated its Fall issue to the topic. Since 2003, *School Library Journal* has published a column by Steven Weiner on graphic novels, "Graphic Novels Roundup" and since 2002 once a year *Booklist* dedicates a special report focused entirely on graphic novels.

Ellis and Highsmith tangentially discuss the topic of readers. Beyond the serious concern about readers that accompanied almost any criticism of comics in the 1940s, 1950s, and beginning of the 1960s, a different relationship is nurtured during the 1980s and 1990s. Readers are heavily used to justify the purchase of comics and the concept of the reluctant reader emerges, for example: "[l]ibraries that offer comic publications report that they bring in reluctant readers and help patrons discover new interest" (35) or "if we are committed to attracting readers and providing all students with popular materials, a trade-comics collection is a must. The appeal of this genre is especially great for disinterested and reluctant readers, but accomplished readers are also fans" (37).

Nevertheless, one characteristic connects both positive and negative views: the lack of research and evidence. Ellis and Highsmith give prominence to this issue when they summarize past articles about comics in LIS:

All of these concerns were most often expressed within the context of broad generalizations unsupported by documentation, either of the source material or of the criticism from other sources. Opinion was presented as fact without benefit of evidence or of a modicum of the scholarly inquiry that one might expect of a "profession" (28).

On one hand, supporters of comic books had and have on their side the evident interest of children, teenagers and adults in this reading material. A deeper analysis of the reasons and implications for this interest has been pursued, but mainly in the field of Education. On the other hand, past challengers based their attacks on non-credible evidence. Nyberg (2002) indicates three types of articles in the early debate about comics (171):

- Articles written by teachers and librarians that shared personal and anecdotal information about their experience with comic books in the library or the classroom.
- Essays or opinion pieces that communicate the author's beliefs but without any support, either from experience or research.
- More formal presentations of research often carried out by education professors at college or university.

According to Nyberg, these distinctions are essential since "while the first and second categories tended to be largely negative, research often did not support the assumptions made about comics books" (171). However, the articles that tended to be reprinted and echoed were the first and second types. An example of this is the wide coverage of Sterling North's "A National Disgrace" (1940), an editorial that was central to the discourse against comics during the 1940s and until Wertham published the widely cited *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954).

Randall Scott notes this lack of research about the audience of comic books in his seminal work *Comic Librarianship: A Handbook* (1990). Scott's work is based on his experience as librarian for the Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University. The

objective of this book was to help librarians manage incipient comic books collection; consequently issues of acquisition, cataloguing and classification are its main focus. However, Scott provides a particularly helpful section on possible future research topics for librarians and scholars interested in comic books. Scott lists seven possible areas of interest to examine about comic book readers. The following three are particularly relevant to my proposed study:

1. The readers. What are the demographics of comic book readership? Who reads comics books and why?
2. The relationship between marketing and content in comic books. How are comics intended for children different from those aimed at adults? How do “girls” comics differ from other comics?
3. The letters pages of various comic books. What are the common concerns? Do the readers appear to influence the editors and creators of the comic books?

Scott is not the only researcher to find a lack of information about the comic book reader in the field of Library and Information Science. In 2007, Tilley defended her Ph.D. thesis entitled *Of Nightingales and Supermen: How Youth Services Librarians Responded to Comics Between the Years 1938 and 1955*, where she studied the opinions and responses of youth librarians to the increasingly popular comic books. In her final remarks, Tilley makes a series of recommendations and indicates possible implications of her research. Among them, she lists the following questions that refer to the issue of readership (249):

- Do your readers benefit intellectually, socially, or emotionally from reading comics?
- In what ways are these benefits similar to reading prose?
- How do these responses compare to their reactions to reading Newbery winning books?
- What do young readers like about comic books?

- What motivates a reader to select a comic book for voluntary reading instead of a different print format?

It is useful to look more closely at these questions. The first three would inspire research in the *Uses and Gratifications* tradition, answering the question *what do readers get from media?* However, the lack of actual research about comics reading, especially from a reader perspective, calls for more attention to questions similar to the last two which situate the reader (and her experience) at the center of the question. Importantly, Tilley notes that the information that would be yielded by addressing these questions was not available to library professionals during 1940s and 1950s. Moreover the situation has not changed: "Youth services librarians did not know the answers to these questions more than half a century ago when they encountered comics for the first time; today's youth services librarians still lack them" (249). Her consideration for this insufficient research about comics reading responds directly to Wiegand's call included at the beginning of this section.

In Tilley's and Scott's questions there is a concern for the reader at two different levels that correspond with the two main conceptual and methodological approaches used to study readers. On the one hand, researchers have used large-scale survey studies at a national or regional level, that seek to define the characteristics or trends of a broad audience. On the other hand, inductive research projects analyze a smaller group of readers and, as a result, identify behaviours, tendencies related to aesthetic decisions along with acquired and personal attitudes. Although these two approaches are often found in studies about reading and readers, examples involving comics readers as subjects are scarce. In contrast, there has been a recent surge in the production of works about comics and graphic novels for librarians (see, for example, Brenner 2007; Crawford 2003; Goldsmith 2005, 2010; Gorman 2003; Kalen 2012; Lyga 2004; Miller 2005; Pawuk 2007; Serchay 2008, 2010; Weiner, R. 2010). However, these publications, written primarily for a professional audience, follow the previously mentioned pattern of providing information about matters of language and aesthetics,

selection, acquisition, cataloguing, and promotion. In contrast, the exploration and analysis of comics readers is minor or anecdotal.

### 2.2.1 In search of the reader: An examination of the professional literature

This section focuses on works created by or for library professionals about comics. First, I summarize previous research for which I examined the LIS professional literature from 2000-2008 about comics (Cedeira Serantes 2013). Second, I conduct a close examination of three monographs and an edited book that, among LIS literature, provide more in-depth analyses of comics readers: Weiner's *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives* (2010), Serchay's *The Librarian's Guide to Graphic Novels for Children and Tweens* (2008), Brenner's *Understanding Manga and Anime* (2007), and Lyga and Lyga's *Graphic Novels in Your Media Center: A Definitive Guide* (2004).

Informed by the Ellis and Highsmith study mentioned earlier (2000), I analyzed 189 professional articles published from 2000-2008 about comics to see how teens are constructed within the context of the discourse on comics (Cedeira Serantes 2013). When examining professional articles, I focused in the following aspects of the relationship between the comics as a medium and libraries: definition, content, highlighted characteristics, and roles. Through their examination, three issues emerged:

- The reader of comics is characterized as one *who lacks*: a reluctant reader, a visual reader, ESL student.
- The difficulty of reconciling a complex medium with a young readership.
- Stereotypes about the medium directly affect the image of the reader.

Graphic novels were presented as tools that solve many issues: low circulation numbers or library attendance, poor reading skills, social inclusion issues. Also, librarians described the content of graphic novels as clearly different from the classic comic books and they consider this shift as a positive one. In recent years comics have



gained a certain cultural status, especially around the creation and dissemination of the idea of the graphic novel. For the general public, and many librarians, this term embodies the evolution of the sequential art from childish entertainment to serious literary form. Theoretically, the inclusion of graphic novels in the library collection means that libraries and librarians support and validate the cultural and reading tastes of the current generation. This idea of evolution brings a major collateral issue: the reconciliation between the challenges and tensions of a medium increasingly acknowledged as complex in content and yet seen as suitable reading material for a young readership.

In these articles, the implicit goal of most authors was to find or highlight a role for graphic novels that validated and justified their presence in libraries, especially in front of educational or library boards and parents. This issue is complicated since parents and boards might not be friendly to this inclusion. As it has been presented, comics were born as an entertainment product for youth but they were also quickly considered a corruptor of innocent minds and were banished from any reading-sanctioning institution (i.e., libraries and schools). However, some librarians found positive arguments for inclusion of comics in their collections, pointing to their usefulness as literacy tools for reluctant and poor readers and also as potential springboards into traditional literature. These arguments that were conceived more than sixty years ago are still present in the discourse about comics in libraries today.

The issue of readership is very much circumscribed to the same utilitarian discourse. For example, a recurrent topic in LIS professional literature about comics and youth is the reluctant reader. Interestingly enough, very few authors actually attempt to set clear boundaries around this ambiguous and ubiquitous term. Library professionals seem to perpetually link comics to an imagined reluctant reader in what these professionals view as a mutually redemptive relationship: comics may redeem their readers and thereby are themselves redeemed as a medium worthy of a place in the library. Professional literature is not just reflecting the utilitarian role that librarians

have already found for graphic novels but it is also actively reinforcing it. Another classic example of this utilitarian role is that of graphic novels as a stepping stone to “better reading.”

Therefore, even though graphic novels are increasingly characterized as rich, complex, challenging, diverse and multilayered reading material, it is commonplace to present teen readers of comics as misfits, loners, reluctant readers and patrons who lack reading skills or discriminating tastes. The richness of the material should potentially imply a similar richness in their readers, but this is not true in the literature. Teen readers—and by extension teen patrons—could be portrayed as savvy, complex, experimental, multimedia readers. They could be easily characterized as readers who have busy lives and are strategic about their reading selections; their reading agendas are packed with compulsory materials from school, thus their reading for pleasure choices might vary tremendously, from a challenging and complex novel to a satisfying and enjoyable series book.

Among the plethora of works published to help librarians with comics, I chose to examine the following four books because they explicitly attempt to address issues related to comics readership. Still, these explanations are small parts in works mostly devoted to support the introduction of comics in the library. Weiner’s collection dedicates one section to the issue of audiences. The four chapters in that section are rather heterogeneous, although three of them are easily included in the LIS approach to the examination of comics and libraries (Boyer 2010; Gavigan 2010; Zabriskie 2010). Ziolkowska and Howard (2010), under the lens of Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow, look into the question of why adult readers of comics choose to read this particular format.

Boyer’s (2010) reflective article provides tips to expand comics readership in libraries from an “already established audience” to an “untapped audience” composed of “persons who disregard graphic novels as a legitimate format and have no desire to sample this section of the library’s collection” (141) or an audience who feels “graphic

novels have nothing to offer them" (142). Boyer does not go much further to describe either audience, existing or potential. This absence might point to a shared understanding between author and reader about the members of these two distinctive groups. Gavigan (2010) tackles the issue of motivating a specific type of reluctant reader, the male adolescent. Her article is part of a body of literature that examines the "boy crisis" in relation to reading and literacy (e.g., Booth 2002; Smith and Wilhelm 2002; Sullivan 2003, 2009). A positive and thoughtful article, particularly for professionals, it offers a sound introductory examination of the topic to focus on bibliographic recommendations: titles about comics for the beginner librarian and actual comics that could be used to develop successful activities for teen male readers. She identifies three reasons to explain the impact of comics on this particular population: variety and choice, visual appeal, and how they act as a conduit to other reading materials (147).

Zabriskie (2010) explores the concepts of ownership and library use "as motivated by graphic novels in a large, dedicated young adult collection" (167). He interviews ten teens described as "long-term library users and long-term users of the graphics collection in particular" (169). These materials are described as "very popular," they also "give good money for budget dollar spent, and act as an entry point for teens to develop pride and ownership in their library" (175). Interestingly, the connection between comics and libraries goes beyond the physical collection. Some of the participants noted that they also read manga and other comics online, so that it is important for them that the library offer internet access. As well, this practice shows the diverse reading practices of teens, sometimes unrecognized, ignored, or condemned by librarians (170). Zabriskie points to the fact that comics "are [not] a magic bullet to instantly increase circulation and program attendance" (175) since there are teen patrons who "would not be caught dead with a graphic (perhaps preferring to be caught undead with a vampire or zombie book)" (175). This prudent reflection is often nowhere to be read in articles examining issues of comics, libraries, and teens

where comics are usually introduced as the panacea that remedies the difficulties between libraries and teens.

Finally, Ziolkowska and Howard (2010) present an essay that it is a strong example of how research on readers can potentially inform practice and defy stereotypes about comics readership. Their research question is simple: why do adult comic book readers choose to read comics? They interviewed nine participants over 18 years of age who also happened to be avid readers and analyze the data through the lens of the concept of "flow," developed by the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi to explain why some activities are so enjoyable and absorbing. Apart from their conclusion, it is also important to highlight the participants' awareness of the social stigmatization of comics and its influence in their self-perceptions as readers (158). Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" state is defined through four principles: control, challenge, feedback and focus. Ziolkowska and Howard's conclusions related to these principles of flow merit full citation:

The sense of control over the reading experience results from the readers' deep knowledge of the conventions of comic book genres and their familiarity with the specific constraints of particular storylines. Comic books provide readers with a dense and multimodal reading experience and challenge readers by demanding both textual and visual literacy and an ability to decode the meta-language of the comic book format. The relatively short length of comics provides readers with tangible feedback; the completion of a comic book, or a series of comic books, gives readers immediate satisfaction and positive feedback. Furthermore, readers' ability to expand their social networks through comic books provides further positive feedback for their reading preference. Finally, readers report that comic books are very absorbing, both in their format and subject matter, and they encourage readers to escape into fantasy worlds (164).

Beyond the fact that Ziolkowska and Howard look at an understudied population in comics reading, these conclusions also provide invaluable information for researchers and practitioners about why and how comics readers enjoy their reading experience, complicating commonplace understandings about comics reading.

The breadth of this collection of essays is laudable. However, when one focuses on the articles examined, it is evident they are still aligned with previous viewpoints and ideas about comics and libraries. The following three works explore the topic of readers/fans and libraries tangentially. Although they do not represent differing viewpoints, it is still important to analyse them because these publications were created to sustain and encourage the work of the librarians who, potentially, support and promote youth's interest in comics.

Serchay (2008, 2010) has written two of the most current and comprehensive works about comics and the many different aspects of their use in libraries. Each of his books focuses on a different group of potential readers, children and "tweens" in the first one and adults (including older teens) in the second. His most recent book (2010) does not mention readers at all, although it talks about fans and fandom. Even when he addresses the question of why comics should be in the library, his reasons are primarily focused on the text, using basic arguments such as the recent popularity of the format and its potential connectivity with other media formats, the positive effect of comics on library circulation statistics and their use for educational purposes. In contrast, the book about youth and comics responds to the same question largely with the "reluctant readers" argument (2008, 57-62). The objective is to prove the efficacy of comics to promote reading among reluctant readers: comics are less intimidating than the "real book" and the format "which often will contain familiar characters, makes it that much easier for the child to comprehend the themes, plots, and characterization" (58).

The idea of pleasure reading is only mentioned tangentially since most of Serchay's arguments are supported by studies produced in the field of Education that confirm the interest of reluctant readers and the lack of harm in reading comic books.

For example, Serchay frequently cites Krashen's (1993/2004) seminal work *The Power of Reading*. This meta-analysis emphasizes the importance of pleasure reading or "free voluntary reading" in order to improve a child's ability to read, write, spell, and comprehend. Among other materials, it highlights the use of comic books as light reading material. It is important to note the use of this influential study because it supports the two roles of comic books that were first established during the early debate about comics. These roles are still present in Librarianship, Education and Reading research: the classification of comic books as light reading, (thus their connection with reluctant readers), and the belief that comic books can be a conduit to "real book" reading (Krashen 1993/2004, 109-110).

The third work under examination, Brenner's *Understanding Manga and Anime*, is a special case since it focuses entirely on manga, Japanese comics. The majority of the book follows the structure of other work dedicated to comics. However, one chapter, dedicated entirely to fan culture, stands out. The world of manga fandom (or *otakus*) is extremely visible, active, and productive. Also, its peculiarities and intricacies may seem even more unfamiliar than those of Western fans and is therefore especially noticeable for librarians working with youth, warranting its own section (193-216).

The perspective taken by Brenner in explaining manga's fan culture is similar to that of the research on fan studies (e.g., Tulloch and Jenkins 1995; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992; Gray et al. 2007), although this piece seeks to inform professionals than to critically analyze the culture. Brenner first explains the origins of the term *otaku* and then examines the many outlets this fan community uses to express their passion for manga. An important part of the chapter looks at copyright issues that arise in relation to some of the fans' activities like "scanlation," the process of scanning and translating unpublished materials in the United States.

Brenner explains why U.S. readers are attracted to manga, providing three reasons (193):

- Manga appeals to teens acclimated to a multimedia world, full of visual, textual and auditory components in stories.
- Readers discover unfamiliar and challenging customs, ideas, and traditions.
- Readers feel they are within an imaginary world far from what most adults read and understand.

Intuitively, her reasons appear valid, and they are probably based on her daily experience with youth and her knowledge about manga. However she neither provides further explanation about the basis for these reasons nor does she refer to readers or the experience of reading manga. Brenner's analysis quickly shifts to focus on fandom and fan communities, particularly issues of participation including how fans organize themselves, the many ways they find to conduct and share their creativity, and the role of online tools to support manga fandom. Although a source extremely useful for practitioners and newcomers to the manga phenomenon, this part of the book does not contribute much to the study of the (personal) experience of readers.

Lyga and Lyga's work (2004) is concerned with the use of graphic novels in the school media center. Their discussion of why graphic novels are useful and needed in the library includes readers, with a focus on issues of literacy. The authors specifically address the issue of visual literacy and reluctant readers. They discuss two groups of students who might lack important skills in relation to visual literacy: those who cannot visualize when reading and those who are dependent on visual clues to keep their interest in reading (3-9). Two groups of reluctant readers are identified: the readers who have difficulty with comprehension and others, mainly boys, who are simply less attracted to the materials generally offered for reading (5).

The objective of the authors is to provide librarians and teachers with compelling reasons to justify the inclusion of comics in the school library and the classroom. Lyga and Lyga concentrate their arguments on the text, the comics. First, they note that "interpreting a story told in pictures is [not] 'dumbing down' the task" (5). They then turn to the argument that "the fantastic and action-oriented story lines

found in so many graphic novels serve to keep students' interest level high. Even a 'slow' moment in a comic book is exciting because it is visual" (13). Comics have the capability of being both complex and simple. However, the readers to target with these texts, according to Lyga and Lyga, are students who are either reluctant readers or lacking some reading skills. Although I certainly acknowledge that the main objective of this book, and many comics librarianship publications, is to justify the usefulness and need of comics in libraries, I find it discouraging that the discourse about readers converges mostly on readers who are lacking skills or interest for reading. Comics are a rich, diverse and multilayered reading material that offer works for almost any kind of reader: reluctant, visual, avid, or genre-focused.

The four works examined in this section are focused on offering librarians information, tools, and ideas to select and acquire comic books and graphic novels as well as related program activities for the libraries that use those materials. With the exception of Ziolkowska and Howard (2010) and Zabriskie (2010), the works examined offer only preliminary discussions about readers (or fans) of comics and the information presented is utilitarian and does not explore reasons behind the readers' attraction for comics, especially from the perspective of readers themselves.

### 2.2.2 Clare Snowball and the connection between teenagers, libraries, and graphic novels

Clare Snowball has addressed the lack of information about teen readers of graphic novels in her recent doctoral dissertation *Graphic Novels: Enticing Teenagers into the Library* (2011) and three previous articles that advanced her doctoral work (2005, 2007, 2008). Her dissertation focused on the connection between graphic novels and teenage reluctant readers and the role that those materials assumed in these readers' reading and library participation. Snowball divided the topic in two distinctive parts with attempts to inform each with the other. One part focused on teens; she talked with them about their attitudes and views in relation to reading, graphic novels, and libraries. The second part introduced the results of library surveys and interviews



with librarians about their graphic novels collections. For the purpose of this review I will concentrate on the first part of her results and analysis, introducing points from the second when relevant.

Early on, Snowball established the lack of research about the connection between teenagers and graphic novels, as well as the fact that the information available tends to be anecdotal and rarely comes from teenagers themselves (2011, 2). Her methodology partly responded to this shortcoming employing focus groups to access the opinions of teens. For the purposes of her research, she needed a diverse population of teenagers: readers, non-readers, library users, and also non-users. To achieve this, Snowball contacted teacher librarians in several high schools and through them she hoped to be able to gain support and participants for the focus groups. She notes that in several cases the teacher librarians were unable to convince colleagues of the worth of the research (2011, 51-52). This negative or passive reaction to the topic could be partially explained by the stigma still attached to the form or simply because of general lack of interest in participating in research endeavours.

Her research sample comprised forty teenagers from metropolitan Perth (Australia) high schools averaging fourteen years of age. The fact that the participants were not just comics readers provides invaluable information about generalizations in the literature about teenagers overwhelmingly liking comics. Snowball looked both at general reading and graphic novel reading. She categorized her participants according to their attachment to reading following the classifications from Beers' work (1998, 1996) and from an Australian based survey of youth reading (ACYL and Woolcott Research 2000). She describes her categories as "subjective, largely due to the subjective self-reporting of reading behaviour of participants" (2011, 166):

- Avid readers enjoyed reading, regularly read books and other materials, and happily discussed their reading.
- Dormant readers enjoyed reading but at the time of their participation in the focus group they declared not having time to do it.

- Intermediate readers spoke positively about reading and enjoyed reading for pleasure, which they did often, but not as regularly as avid readers.
- Ambivalent readers rarely read books for pleasure, but some could describe times they had enjoyed reading a book.
- The group of participants who are clustered under the label “Reading irrelevant” stated that they “hated reading” or “never read.” Some were explicit and vocal about their dislike for reading; consequently they were also characterized as “anti-reading”. Snowball notes that after probing, some of those readers mentioned moments where they had enjoyed reading, mostly magazines but not only those materials.

	Participants	%	Reference Source
Avid readers	16	40%	Beers & <i>Young Australians Reading (YAR)</i>
Dormant readers	4	10%	Beers
Intermediate readers	8	20%	similar to “Book positive rebels” of YAR
Ambivalent readers	6	15%	similar to “Book neutral light readers” of YAR
Reading irrelevant	6	15%	similar to “Reading irrelevant” of YAR

**Table 1: Types of readers among focus group participants (Snowball 2012, 166)**

Although Snowball always reminds us that her data is not generalizable, this small sample illustrates the diversity of attitudes and relationships that teens have with reading. Even more relevant than this division of type of readers, is her correlation of type of reader with her interest for graphic novels. She reported the number of readers who either before or as a result of the focus group enjoyed graphic novels:

	Participants	Like GNs
Avid readers	16	5
Dormant readers	4	2
Intermediate readers	8	3
Ambivalent readers	6	4
Reading irrelevant	6	1

**Table 2: Readers who enjoy GNs (Snowball 2012, 172)**

Again, the size and characteristics of her sample make the conclusions impossible to generalize. However, her interpretation of these numbers deserves a closer look. Snowball concludes that her data supports the idea that “the format will appeal to some reluctant readers” (2011, 172). Among the readers that found reading irrelevant, she justified the lower number of graphic novel readers in that they “felt that graphic novels were not sufficiently different to conventional books, which they had particular antipathy toward” (2011, 172-173). She also justified the low numbers of teens who enjoyed graphic novels or changed their attitudes toward these materials due to the lack of time during the focus groups to really make decisions about titles they might enjoy and also to get exposed to the diversity of the medium. I find particularly noticeable that the data about avid readers does not receive the same attention as the data about reluctant readers. Her only comment about them is that “[t]he larger number of avid readers among the sample than among the general population may be another factor leading to the low number of participants liking graphic novels” (2011, 172). Although I understand that it might have been outside of her research scope, more attention to avid readers and why they found the format either enjoyable or not would have been extremely relevant to complement her results about reluctant readers and also to challenge in another way the connection between those readers and the format. For example, do avid readers share a hegemonic understanding of reading that

immediately makes them doubt the quality or importance of any non-book material? Snowball highlights the connection that her participants see between books and reading, but where and how is this link developed? And what implications does this understanding have for the development of teens as readers? For example, although this issue might have been caused by the structure Snowball decided to implement in presenting her research results, it is noteworthy that during her analysis of teens' attitudes towards reading, graphic novels are only vaguely mentioned as reading materials or used as examples by teen readers.

Snowball presented as a "universal belief" among her participants "the importance of finding the right book, whether it was 'interesting,' 'good' or on a topic they related to" (2011, 59). She reinforces this notion when she concludes that this idea of finding the "right" book leads to a pleasurable reading experience, independent of an actual interest for reading as a leisure activity (2011, 195). Consequently, this idea of finding the "right" reading matter connects with her advocacy for augmenting the choice in reading materials. If teens enjoy reading in different formats, such as magazines, comics, websites, and books, as well as different genres, this variety should be at their disposal.

In her dissertation Snowball highlights family as the main source for reading materials (196). Many teens found books to read among their home collections; in some cases, books were being passed among siblings (2011, 67). The information about other reading materials is less clear, although it is important to note that one of the participants, Sandra, mentioned that her interest for graphic novels grew from her mother's love for the medium. This particular connection between family members and the development of an interest for comics has not been researched in-depth yet and it certainly deserves more attention. In the conclusion, Snowball strongly connected the idea of personal recommendations to the one about finding the "right" materials to read. However, it is significant she focused more on the possible role of librarians and friends could play instead of pointing at the need to explore the actual role of family

members and the home library. Another factor that she highlighted in relation to reading was time. In some cases, reading becomes less of a priority, although avid readers always managed to find time to read (2011, 61-62).

Some compelling and non-traditional understandings of reading are presented in the section dedicated to non-avid readers. Perhaps because most participants understood reading as connected to books (2011, 65), the ones who read or expressed a preference for other formats felt the need to explain their perception of reading or this alternative preference. For some participants, reading was discussed as a "last resort", "not a top priority," or something to do when bored, such as during a plane or long car journey (2011, 63). Through the eyes of Tom, the choice of reading material becomes something rather complex. Snowball explains it as follows:

Tom felt anything in book form was anathema to him. He did enjoy magazines, which were different enough from books to entice him. The pictures in magazines drew him in, but it was not only the pictures that led to his favour. Tom "hated" graphic novels and would not read them, despite their visual content. Even with his topic of choice, Tom said, 'I wouldn't even read a full length book about skating.' It was the combination of a topic of interest (skate boarding), being factual and having pictures, which led to magazines being his preferred reading matter (2011, 64).

Tom disliked all reading. He is also extremely vocal about his dislike of graphic novels: "I hate graphic novels. I don't read them" (2011, 83). He is in the group of resistant readers. However, he clearly reads and has developed a taste for and opinion about reading. Leah is another reader who seemed to have a clearly defined taste that is challenged during one of the focus groups. She likes to read non-fiction, especially biographies, and about "stuff that's actually happening at the moment" (2011, 64). At some point she asked her classmates: "[w]hy would you want to waste your time reading something that is fiction and probably would never happen?...This won't like teach you anything" (2011, 64). Snowball reported that her classmates tried to convince

her otherwise. This interaction serves as an example of the understanding of fiction as the acceptable form of reading. Why do her classmates feel the need to challenge her taste? Would it happen if the situation was presented in reverse?

Another intriguing connection that Snowball made was between April's interest in magazine reading and her status as ESL student. Snowball explains that "[April] learnt English as a second language and liked the pictures in magazines, which presumably helped her decode unknown text" (2011, 66). Although I do not negate that pictures might help April to read the magazine, if one should speculate, she also might just read magazines as one of many support texts on her process of acculturation or socialization. Pictures might simply be a faster and easier way to see what is fashionable or not or who is the most popular singer or performer at a particular time.

Since books are considered the default for reading, these participants do not consider materials like magazines, the Internet, or newspapers as reading, revealing a duality in their understanding of reading that could be qualified as *sanctioned* reading and *real* reading. Beyond confirming the multiple understandings of reading that teens share, Snowball's work also refutes some commonplace ideas about teen reading. In relation to the connection between television or movie adaptations and their success at pointing the reader back to the book, her participants confirmed this connection with Harry Potter products but not with other texts (2011, 66). A second belief that was challenged through the conversations with teenagers was the universal relationship between graphic novels and teens, especially as concerns reluctant readers. Interestingly, one of the librarians interviewed by Snowball especially disagreed about this connection and commented on the diversity of graphic novel readers, even among teens (2011, 181). Another challenged stereotype is the teen familiarity with graphic novels (2011, 171). Although most of them have heard about them, even if just through television shows (2011, 76), when the participants were asked to define graphic novels, their responses were intriguing. For instance, Kylie said, "I think these are picture books"; Anna openly questioned "Isn't it [graphic novels] just like comics?" and Cassie

said, "I always thought comics were like a small magazine, not a book" (2011, 77). Other participants used mixed terms like manga comics and graphic novels comics, or interchangeably used comic book and graphic novel. Snowball also reports on their doubts that certain titles such as *Archie* or *Garfield* are graphic novels. Liam commented about *Usagi Yojimbo* by Stan Sakai, "[w]hat a weird comic book. Like graphic novels are so innocent from the cover" (2011, 77). One does not know if he might be surprised because this title's main character is a rabbit who happens to be a *ronin*, because of the frequent violent fights in the comic, or because of the serious and rather reflective tone of this comic.

Most participants shared a lack of awareness about the presence of graphic novels in their school libraries collection, even the participants who declared themselves to be comics readers. Therefore, the presence of graphic novels could not be equated to knowledge or interest in the medium (2011, 197). These materials were sometimes shelved with the picture books, possibly adding to the students' confusion. The quality of the collections is not examined, but one participant, Ryan described the graphic novels in his library as "all the crappy ones" (2011, 77).

Snowball notes that many students who disliked graphic novels had not experienced them before (81). The reasons for their dislike are varied; some of them simply did not like them. Others are very critical with the visual aspect of comics; for example, Ellen claimed to hate pictures and linked them to children books (2011, 89); David, an avid reader, felt graphic novels were "too short, too simple," "no better than picture books" and he thought that conventional books were "better" (2011, 81-82). Three participants pointed at the difficulty of reading and following speech bubbles (2011, 81), and many readers expressed difficulties when reading traditional manga published right to left.

Snowball also advocates for a necessary expansion of the target audience of graphic novels in library collections. Graphic novels are collected mainly as reading materials for teens, ignoring the titles published for younger readers and adults. The

issue of mature graphic novels emerges with cases of complaints and censorship. She noted that although problems with theft, vandalism, or complaints are not higher with graphic novels than with other materials, graphic novels are still watched more carefully for issues of sexual or violent content (2011, 185). Interestingly, most complaints came from other staff members and in sometimes resulted in self-censorship or the non-selection of certain titles (2011, 157). This behaviour supports the results reported by Horner (2006) after conducting qualitative interviews with seven librarians in North Carolina. Horner found that, in general, librarians have a positive attitude towards comics, but they still have not “acquired the reading protocols of comics” (2006, 29) and their reactions when asked about the literary merit of graphic novels are “more mixed and uncertain” (2006, 21). Snowball reported that the existence and development of graphic novels collections were connected to aspects like the dedication or personality of the staff (2011, 196).

Although the results of these focus groups are not generalizable, it is interesting to see how the connection made between graphic novels and teenage readers is challenged by the readers themselves. From the teens’ voices clearly emerge a complex and diverse understanding of reading. There are, however, two key topics that are revealed but not explored in depth in the thesis:

- Origin of their understanding of reading and exploration of difference between sanctioned reading and *real* reading.
- The role of the family and friends in the interest (or lack of interest) for graphic novels.

To conclude this section, I would like to come back to the history of the relationship between comic books and libraries. Steele (2005) does a remarkable job of summarizing the supporting arguments for comics that librarians and educators expressed during the decades of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s: comics were seen as “literacy tools for reluctant and poor readers, as catalysts for traditional literature, as healthy conduits for fantasy and escape from reality, and even as enablers of social



skills like sharing" (2005, 34). The first two ideas mentioned by Steele are still present in the literature and, as I have shown, are often used to justify the value and place of comic books and graphic novels in libraries. However, at the same time, these arguments help to perpetuate stereotypes about the quality, the use, and the readers of this literary and artistic medium of expression.

### 2.3 Comics and Education: Searching for a balance "between the vituperation and complacency"

The quote selected to introduce this section accurately encapsulates the long-standing and complex relationship between the discipline of Education, its professionals, and the medium of comics. The phrase is part of an editorial that Harvey Zorbaugh wrote for the *Journal of Educational Sociology* (1944) where he reacts explicitly against North's well-known article against comics:

Somewhere between vituperation and complacency must be found a road to the understanding and use of this great medium of communication and social influence. For the comics are here to stay (1944, 194).

These words, and especially the sentiment that echoes, are anything but old-fashioned. The same search for a balanced opinion about comics through the development of a deep comprehension and applicability of the medium has populated the fields of Education and LIS in the last 10 years. The two fields present some similarities in their approach to comics; however, a closer look, especially from a longitudinal perspective, reveals some major differences. The following review of the literature is guided by both the premise expressed in the aforementioned quote and this dissertation's focus on readers.

To start, I would like to note again a distinction made by Nyberg (2002) concerning early publications about the topic of comics. She identified three types of articles that can easily be collapsed in two groups according to their final conclusions and the methods followed to arrive at them:

1. Personal observations and essays: these articles present a negative image of comics, often shocking and alarmist, based on anecdotal information or personal beliefs. In general, their authors were librarians, teachers, and parents.
2. Research articles: these works offered a more objective and moderate discourse, based on research done, mainly, by educators in the classroom environment or by university scholars. Most of the time these publications were unable to confirm the negative ideas defended in the first group of publications.

According to Nyberg, this distinction is important since the first group of publications tended to express a negative sentiment and contradicted the conclusions of the research studies of the second group. However, it is also essential to note that the prominence and overwhelming popularity of the first kind of publications affected the work of researchers in the second group. Nyberg (1994, 133) cites the example of Paul Witty who belittled the results of his own research when summarizing it for the *National Parent-Teacher* magazine. Nyberg notes that, although Witty's research showed the lack of immediate effects of comics on readers' behaviour and academic results, he concluded in that piece that reading comics contributed to "a decline in artistic appreciation and tolerance of shoddy experience and language" (Witty 1942, 30). Beaty (2005, 108-109) raises a similar matter. In 1940, George Hill and Estelle Trent published an article that summarized the results of a research project about comic strips reading among 496 children in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. Their conclusions were that reading comics was a favourite leisure activity: the children liked them first because of the adventure, action, and excitement and second because of the humour. These children's interest in comic strips was very similar to other interests like the radio or the movies. Hill and Trent did call for an increase in research about the educational value and the effect of comics on children. However, in 1941, Hill's position shifted and "he condemned comics for their poor language and morals and their

tendency to teach bad habits” and he also advised parents to “guide children away from comics and toward edifying literature” (Hill 1941, 413-414).

I have previously referred to Sterling North’s editorial “A National Disgrace” (1940). At this point, it is relevant to focus my attention on some of his comments to exemplify the hostile approach to comics that was being infused into public opinion. More than forty newspapers and magazines reprinted this editorial, and the *Daily News*, the source of the article, reported receiving “twenty-five million requests for reprints of the editorial for distribution in churches and schools across the country” (Nyberg 1994, 116). North attacked comics based on quality issues and their effect on young readers: “[b]adly drawn, badly written and badly printed – a strain on young eyes and young nervous systems” (1940, 3). He is also responsible for initiating the “medical” metaphor about comics reading that promoted the image of readers as passive and simply receivers of the comics “disease.” For example, North stated that comics’ “hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories” and that the only “antidote to the ‘comic’ magazine poison [could] be found in any library or good bookstore” (1940, 3). North’s attack was virulent and focused on aesthetic aspects and their effect on readers; basically his main conclusion is that the quality of the comics and the repercussions of reading them directly and unavoidably ruined the cultural taste and the reading habits of innocent children.

Research carried out by educators did not confirm any of North’s attacks and, in most cases, the conclusions corroborated the strong interest of children for comics, their potential for educational purposes, and pointed to the need for more in-depth studies to assure an appropriate use of these materials. I will focus on two issues of the *Journal of Educational Sociology* (1944, 1949) dedicated entirely to research on comics by scholars mostly from Education.

I have already mentioned the editorial by Harvey Zorbaugh, at the time a well-known scholar in Education Sociology, chairman of the department at New York University as well as director of the Workshop on the Cartoon Narrative as a Medium of

Communication. In 1949, he also published a grand scale research study where he tried to discern if the concern about comics among adults at the time was as serious and negative as presented by the media. He conducted a nationwide study in which data was collected from 3000 personal interviews. Although this study is only currently available at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, Zorbaugh summarized the main results in the 1949 issue of *Journal of Educational Sociology*. According to the study's data, only 25 percent decidedly disapproved of comics for children, finding them to be both dangerous to children's character and mental health and to have an undesirable influence on children's cultural development. As happened frequently at the time, newspaper comic strips were regarded higher than comic books; as well, more educated adults were more critical than the less educated. The study concluded that, overall, adults approved comics as a medium of entertainment for children. However, Zorbaugh felt the need to qualify this approval with a note:

Fortunately, this approval is neither universal nor complacent. There is a considerable and healthy ferment of criticism - a ferment that should increase the comics' social usefulness as a medium of communication, but is unlikely to cause any great devaluation of the first amendment. All of which is indicative of a healthy democracy (235).

Certainly a grandiose statement, his comment does not predict the backlash and negative consequences of the Senate Subcommittee Hearings into Juvenile Delinquency (1954) that focused on the connection between comic books and adolescent misconduct and criminal tendencies.

In the 1944 issue, Josette Frank highlighted the appeal of comics to "children of all ages, of high and low I.Q., girls as well as boys, good readers and nonreaders, in good homes and poor ones—they *all* read the comics, and read them with an avidity and an absorption that passes understanding" (214). Recognizing and highlighting this broad and diverse audience is a novelty, and not just in 1944. As it will be presented

later in the review of modern educational research, comics' readership tends to be disregarded in favour of the actual texts, stereotyped, or reduced to reluctant or less educated readers. Similarly, Gruenberg (1944) saw comics as a reflection of millions of readers, "what millions are thinking about, what they want, what they fear, and how they feel about matters of social significance" and because of that "comics deserve the serious consideration of statesmen and educators, politicians and publicists, psychologists and sociologists" (213). Sones (1944) focused on the educational use of comics and he stressed the need for "a technical analysis of this communication device in relation to instruction and learning" (236). Hutchinson (1949) reports on an experiment conducted cooperatively by the Curriculum Laboratory of the University of Pittsburgh and Zorbaugh's Workshop about the use of comics as instructional materials in the classroom. The project defined 'reading comics' as "a well nigh universal out-of-school activity" (236) and sought to connect this leisure and out-of-school activity with the educational experience. The researcher proposed that "instead of being rejected and divorced from school experience, might it not profitably be accepted and related to teaching and learning?" (236). This study also projects to future research in the field of Education that seeks to find room and purpose for comics in the curriculum. It reports on the responses of 438 teachers that received a package with some ideas about implementing comics in the classroom and a copy of a well-known comics weekly. Comics were used in the following subjects: Social Studies, Reading, Personal-Social Relations, Literature and Language and Science. The uses of the comics were also diverse: Oral Story Telling; Reading Exercises, Picture Study, Helping Slow Readers, and Written Composition.

Paul Witty published an article in the 1944 issue of the *Journal of Educational Sociology* about the successful use of visual aids by the Army, among them comics. However, his major research project, which was widely cited by other scholars, was published in the *Journal of Experimental Education* (1941). Both papers sought to fill gaps in the "meager" knowledge (1941a, 101) of the time about children's reading habits, especially comics. Witty concluded that a more realistic approach is needed to

examine and judge comics. For example, Witty found a connection between interest in comics and other recreational activities of the time, such as the radio or movies. Therefore, he put forward an innovative idea: to analyze comics in relation to the other leisure interests a child might have. He noted that comics should not be analyzed on their own since a high interest in them might just reflect a rich and diverse leisure life and a low interest in comics might be reflecting an "impoverished recreational life" (1941a, 104). Finally, in his second paper (1941b) he concluded that "[s]trictures are often made concerning the dire effects of reading of the comics" but the data emerging from his research "do not afford a basis for these diatribes" (109).

Although the majority of these research projects focus on finding relevant uses for comics, they also highlight the lack of rigorous research. This small, but significant sample of articles from educational journals clearly shows the worry of these scholars for the immediate condemnation of the medium and its readers without extensive research. Frank (1944) summarized it perfectly, "[a]s to what the children are finding in them that is so compelling, we have, of course, no actual research to give us specific data. We have only opinion, based upon knowledge and observation of children, and the assumptions of psychologists, psychiatrists, and educators" (220). Sadly, these appeals from Education researchers were ignored and the Comic Code resulting from Wertham's publications and the Senate hearings almost destroyed the comics industry and promoted a series of stereotypes about comics and their readers.

One may think that with this rich, diverse, and supportive past, modern educational research about comics would look very different than that in LIS. Nonetheless, this research still focuses predominantly on the text and how that text can aid in the teaching process and the learning experience. One characteristic that denotes the crosspollination between LIS and Education is the existence of several monographs that potentially could be included in either section of this literature review. I have already examined some texts that approach comic books from the perspective of their use in the school library (Crawford 2003; Lyga and Lyga 2004); however, this is clearly a

hot topic since others have been published recently (Gavigan and Tomasevish 2011; Karp 2012).

Another work that it is influential in both disciplines is Krashen's *The Power of Reading* (1993/2004). Although I have already mentioned it, I consider it valuable to briefly come back to it. This study emphasizes the importance of pleasure reading or "free voluntary reading" in order to improve a child's ability to read, write, spell, and comprehend. Among other materials, Krashen highlights the use of comics as light reading. This classification of comics as light reading is not new or surprising. As I have presented in the historical review, comics were considered another form of entertainment. They were also recommended as tools for reluctant readers and described as potentially being conducive to "real book" reading. In *The Power of Reading*, Krashen defends the same three ideas which, despite the positive message they embody about comics, represent a narrow understanding of this reading material's nature and possibilities, and especially about its readers (1993/2004, 109-110).

After publishing the first edition of this book, Krashen worked with Ujiie (1996) on a research project focused on comics reading. This project built on previous educational research and, since previous research was focused on middle-class children, sought to compare the reading habits of the students in two schools of different socio-economic class. The project also examined the relationship between comics reading, book reading, and reading enjoyment. Krashen and Ujiie found a difference in comics reading habits between girls and boys, but no significant difference between the two schools. The study confirms that those who read more comics did more pleasure reading and also tended to read more books. One of the questions that this study raises is that of accessibility. The researchers were surprised by the fact that, even though comics can be rather expensive, the less-affluent children read as much as the middle-class children. They wondered if the students found less expensive sources for their comics or if the attractiveness of the format triumphed over cost. This might also

reflect the common practice among comics readers of sharing reading materials. During the 1990s, other teachers and scholars decided to explore the possibilities of comics in the primary, secondary, and post-secondary classroom (e.g., Adams 1999; Barron 1991; Freeman 1997; Hall and Lucal 1999; Loewenstein 1998; Snyder 1997; Worthy and Turner 1999; Wright and Sherman 1994, 1999).

Finally, following similar patterns to those present in LIS research, the 2000's reflect an explosion of literature about comics. It is significant that, for instance, in 2009 Diamond Distributors and the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University organized the conference *Graphica in Education: Graphic Novels Come Out from Under the Desk* and a year later, the National Council of Teachers of English conference included many sessions and panels focused on the use of comics. Another potential indicator of the greater relevance of the topic is the increasing number of Master and Ph.D. theses which examine this topic, some examples of which are Ayala (2009), Briebrich (2006), Hammond (2009), Helsby (1999), McGrew (2009), Monnin (2008), Petrucci (2005), Schwertner (2008), Soltero (2004), Spindler (2010), Stone (2010), Ujiiie (2005) and Young (2010).

In the following section, I review the literature from the past decade where I attempt to identify major trends. However, Botzakis (2011a, 2011b, 2009) and Sabeti (2011) deserve special attention because of their special focus on readers<sup>5</sup>.

The subjects and uses reflected in current literature are not much different than those noted by Hutchinson (1949) in the historical analysis. One of the main uses of

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<sup>5</sup> These two scholars are influenced substantially by the New Literacies approach that I will explore in more depth in Chapter 9. Since 1984, when Brian Street published the book that marked the birth of this new movement, scholars working under this umbrella have put forward a more inclusive understanding of Literacy that comprises, combines, and affects discussions related to social, economic, technological, personal, and affective circumstances. The breadth of these discussions has ranged, for example, from issues of identity to the consideration and acquisition of skills. More specifically in terms of the ideas examined in this section, the importance of the New Literacies approach is notable in Botzakis thesis work (2006) and his articles here reviewed. As well, in a more recent article, Sabeti (2013) also uses a framework emerging from a New Literacies approach to explore the literacy practices emerging from an extracurricular graphic novel reading group.



comics in the classroom is related to reading and particularly to the encouragement of reading with reluctant readers and boys (Christensen 2006; Gomes 2010; Lenters 2007; McTaggart, 2005; Norton 2003; Schwarz 2002a). Their use in English courses is directly connected to this previous aspect (Carter 2007b; Versaci 2001; Weiner 2004). A point of difference is the growing diversity in courses trying to integrate comics into their curriculum, from obvious ones such as Art to others like History, Science or even Physical Education classes (Christensen 2006; Cromer and Clark 2007; Greenless 2011; Holt 2006; Mathews 2011; Mullholland 2004; Nesmith, Cooper, and Schwarz 2011; Toku 2001; Vilchez-Gonzalez and Perales Palacios 2006). Also, the increasing importance of supporting diverse literacies in the classroom has provoked a proliferation of articles connecting comics to, for example, visual, media, and multimodal literacy (Carter 2011; Frey and Fisher 2004; Jacobs 2007; Pantaleo 2011; Schwarz 2002b, 2007; Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila 2006; Vega and Schnakenberg 2006). Finally, a group of articles focuses on students instead of subjects or skill sets: students with disabilities (Irwin and Moeller 2010, 2012; Rogers and Mypes 2001; Seidler 2011; White 2011; Smetana et al. 2009) and ESL/ELL students or immigrants (Chun 2009; Danzak 2011; Liu 2004).

The books published in this period mainly present chapters or essays that follow the same lines of thought presented in the articles (Carter 2007a; Cary 2004; Frey and Fisher 2008; Stafford 2011; Versaci 2007; Thompson 2008; Xu, Perkins, and Zunich 2005). Carter's *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels* (2007) collects the contributions of several authors about different ways of introducing graphic novels in different subjects, such as English or History. Each essay introduces a wide range of original works, from *Maus* (1986–1991) or Eisner's *Fagin the Jew* (2003) to *X-Men*. Frey and Fisher contribute to Carter's book and they also have published their own work, *Teaching Visual Literacy* (2008), where Carter also contributes with an article about graphic novels and the classroom canon. The structure and final result of Frey and Fisher's title is very similar to Carter's, although their focus on visual literacy allows the presence of other materials such as picture books. Again, the authors defend the value of graphic novels and define their role in the classroom. Interestingly, Rocco Versaci

contributes to Frey and Fisher's collection with an article that summarizes his own book, *This Book Contains Graphic Language* (2007), about the possibilities of graphic novels as a literary medium. Versaci (2007) highlights the potential of these materials in connection with literary genres such as memoir, reportage, or classics.

These three books share the idea that comics are valuable tools for educators; lack of knowledge and prejudice keep them in the shadow when they can become the perfect tool to connect with a generation of visual learners. Although students are the main players in these contributions, little research is being developed on why they are interested in graphic novels and what role this interest plays in their cultural habits. This is why the research developed by Botzakis (2009, 2011a, 2011b) and Sabeti (2011) deserves special attention.

Botzakis' project examines the lifelong reading experience of a group of twelve adults, eleven male and one female, who read comics and range from twenty-six to thirty-seven years of age. Their relationship with comics is long standing since they have been reading comics for at least seventeen years. Botzakis' publications do not provide an overall reflection about the entire group of participants. At this point, he has published about a group of four readers, Aaron, Kyle, Peter, and Roger (2009) that he described as representative of the group to show "how reading was involved in their lives." Later, he focused on Roger because of his link to many of the purposes of reading as emerging from the research (2011a); and last, he examined Aaron as representative of the idea of an "omnivorous reader" (2011b), although he also explored his purposes for reading.

According to Botzakis, reading serves diverse purposes. The inconsistency of his terminology makes comparison difficult but some purposes can be clearly detected in different readers:

- Aaron reads looking for "inspiration for thought and action." Reading also becomes a "hiding place," "a fodder for personal interactions," "popcorn to

relax with," "a teacher to relay him knowledge," and a "habit that he had to learn to deal with" (2011b 37, 44).

- Roger read to connect with others or as a way to get validation. Reading also acted "as a context for critical reflection" and for "moral purposes" (2011a).
- The group analysis brings up the following purposes: "reading as study"; "reading as appreciation and ownership"; "reading as friendship"; and "reading as search for meaning" (2009).

De Certeau's "poaching" and Foucault's "arts of existence" are key elements of his theoretical framework and are constantly cited to frame the results. The use of de Certeau particularly connects Botzakis' work with fan research developed under the Incorporation/Resistance paradigm. Being in an educational context, it is logical that he expands the idea of poaching to realms of learning and literacy acquisition instead of using it simply in connection to media text interpretation or fanfiction production (2011b, 44-45).

New Literacy Studies is also relevant for his work, especially research by James Paul Gee. Some of Gee's concepts like the *identity kit* or *affinity group* are used to examine and explicate issues related to geek identity and its connection to reading. Aaron is the participant who explicitly talks about geek culture and Botzakis' analysis examines two aspects of his ideas in relation to geek identity and culture. First, Botzakis connects geek identity and culture to Gee's concept of *affinity group* and explains how through reading Aaron cultivates intensive and extensive knowledge that allows him to participate and to be an insider. Although Botzakis does not make this connection explicit, I see how this aspect of Aaron's behaviour connects with Roger's purpose of reading as a dialogue. Roger sees reading as the "prime source for amassing" tools that would help him participate in the overall dialogue that happens when one reads some else's ideas (2009, 121). This purpose of reading as a dialogue connects again Botzakis' work with Fan Studies and the definition of fan proposed by Smith and Duncan: a fan is someone who wants to take part in the dialogue about the medium (2009, 173). For

instance, Botzakis explains that "being a reader is tied into geek behaviour" (42). Hence reading is constructed as part of a skill set, for instance Gee's *identity kit*. Reading then becomes almost an irreplaceable tool or skill that enables Aaron and Roger to achieve their primary goals, for example, to be a member of the geek group. In this case, the identity of reader is subsumed under the geek identity.

Geek identity and culture are also explored in connection to issues of shame and alienation. Aaron defines geek as a "marginal type of fan" (2011b, 42) who possesses a certain amount of connoisseurship and common knowledge: "[a] geek would be someone who likes something a whole lot and is kind of unashamed about liking it, but it's not something that would be brought up at any party" (2011b, 42-43). As I will present in more depth, Sabeti also finds issues of embarrassment and shame in her study of teen students in a comics reading group. Evidently, reading as an activity is not condemned; however, reading comics or reading in the context of geek identity becomes another issue. As the previous quote demonstrates, the participants themselves demonstrate contradictory opinions; a geek should not be ashamed of his taste, yet this is not something to share in public. Aaron later reaffirms the sense of insider community and the feeling of being an outsider in relation to mainstream culture: "I don't think there's any reason we have to make ourselves acceptable. We're socially acceptable within our society" (2011b, 43). I believe these sentiments are directly connected to the stereotypes and perceptions about fan culture that still populate mainstream media. Despite the slow acceptance of many aesthetics, texts, and behaviours coming from that culture (e.g., Farnall 2003; Kendall 1999), media still project an aura of negativity, mainly through humour or alienation, onto the image of the fan or the geek. This issue will re-emerge in my analysis of Sabeti (2011) following.

Sabeti (2011) introduces her article with a short but rather accurate description of the current relationship between comics and Education: "Comics and education is usually synonymous with low literacy level, reluctant readers and a predominantly male audience" (137). This sentence can potentially define the overall relationship between

comics on one side and LIS and Education on the other side. Even more discerning is her commentary about the body of literature in Education. I disagree with how she describes the quantity of studies as “small,” especially in the 2000’s, but I fully agree with her qualitative analysis: “The small body of literature on comics and education is often by, and almost exclusively for, practitioners and such, focuses on *how*, rather than *why* to, use them” (138). Comics are often presented as tools to achieve other objectives: engagement in the classroom or with a topic, new language learning, or even self-esteem. She also points to the recurrent connection between comics and literacy improvement that have not been carefully studied and that is also linked to a thriving industry of adaptations of classical texts whose quality is often questioned (Goldsmith 2010, 189). This thought connects her research with Botzakis’ and my own project. Sabeti calls for more engaged research on questions of understanding rather than implementation. Botzakis points to the variety of readers and their purposes for reading as justification to look at “what people do with texts” before attributing meanings, uses, and functions to texts to be used in the classroom. He reflects “[c]omic books may not be a silver bullet, but used mindfully, with an eye to students and their contexts, they may be powerful resources for sparking student interest and learning” (2009, 58).

How does Sabeti’s research contribute to the search for understanding instead of implementation? Her study reports on the experiences of a group of teen readers in a Graphic Novel Reading Group at a Scottish high school. The group starts with four boys and one girl and grows to nine members. Although her sample is small, her analysis enriches the knowledge about comics readers. Her description of the participants is detailed and challenges the narrow picture of comics readers described previously. The participants are intelligent and articulate students; they do not participate much in class or other extra-curricular activities but most of them are also readers of other formats and they see comics reading as connected to videogame playing. The diversity of the group is reinforced by the fact that for some English is one their top classes while for others it a weak subject. Sabeti also detects a bias towards courses related to Math,

Science, or IT. In combination with the previous characteristics, her final comment about their behaviour as “consistently enthusiastic, unwaveringly loyal and deeply grateful” enriches at the same time that contradicts the negative stereotype in the literature – disfranchised or weak students and/or reluctant readers (140).

The students clearly locate the appeal of comics in the form, not the content, thus connecting with the reading experience that these materials provide, allow for, or encourage. Using Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* (2007), Sabeti examines three major characteristics which emerge from the students’ opinions: the speed with which comics could be read; the combination of pictures and text; and the layout of panels. These factors are clearly interconnected. For instance, to be able to really appreciate comics and capture the visual realm in a work, Groensteen notes that the way we read should be altered: the image should be looked at as “descriptable” instead of consumed like an “utterable” (2007, 121-122). The reader is responsible for this shift, since she can decide to skim pages, just browse the images, or maybe focus primarily on the text. Evidently this choice affects the time employed to read a comic and also the need to re-read some works. Her participants are aware of this behaviour and “...enjoyed the choice to slip into more analytical depth, or linger on a particular image, that a graphic novel afforded” (142).

Sabeti also looks at the social context of reading. The participants recognize that comics are marginalized, both in the school context and society in general (144). Nevertheless, they highlight that reading comics and the reading group become a sort of secret world, reinforced by one of the aspects of what Pustz calls comics literacy: inside jokes, common knowledge, self-referential aspects (144). They are also aware of a side effect of having this secret world. Some students were vocal about their embarrassment about reading comics or being part of the club: ““But, I mean’, said Scott laughing, ‘is it something that you say out loud or in public that you read? Just because you’re going to be stereotyped’” (145). Sabeti showed her surprise “to find that the pupils I worked with still perceived comic reading as a cultish activity” (145) since

comics are slowly becoming accepted in mainstream society. This attitude should not be that surprising since even adults share this negative perception of comics readers. For instance, Snowball mentioned that one of the librarians she interviewed described himself and adult readers of comics as “weird, obscure people” (199). An important question that Sabeti is failing to ask is: has this move towards the mainstream affected in any way the perception society has about their readers? Television shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* keep perpetuating an extremely narrow and laughable stereotype of the comics fan, and by extension, the comics reader. In Snowball’s dissertation, Angela mentioned the television show *The O.C.* as her source informing her about the existence of graphic novels; Angela commented that Seth, one of the main characters, is “like obsessed with them” (2011, 76). This covert reference to the fan connects Sabeti’s work with the conclusions of my previous review about fans in Media Studies and Botzakis research. Graphic novels<sup>6</sup> are one of those texts that are slowly succeeding and achieving a degree of mainstream acceptance. However, the stereotype of the fan has become the standard against which any reader of comics measures herself and is measured by society, independently of the reading experience sought with the medium.

#### 2.4 Reading in contemporary society: Dresang, Mackey, and Ross

The approach that I have adopted for this dissertation research is clearly influenced by the literature on reading and readers. Within this vast body of research, I want to focus on the work of three scholars: Eliza Dresang, Margaret Mackey, and Catherine S. Ross.

Their work focusses on different aspects of the experience of reading. Dresang (1999, 2008a, 2008b, 2009) developed the theory of Radical Change to explain the changes primarily in books for youth and, as a consequence, in the reading behaviour of

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<sup>6</sup> I use this term purposefully because it is under this concept that comics are being accepted

youth. She focused on print materials that share a series of characteristics which she explained as a response, an effort to adapt to the different way digital era youth approach texts and reading. Mackey (2002/2007, 2007, 2008, 2011 ) has centered her research on studies about readers, adult and young, and their literacy practices with a variety of texts and narratives. From the reader/player perspective, her goal is to analyse literacy practices, for example the ways in which participants create meaning or shift among diverse texts, in order to gain a greater insight about the experience of reading/playing in this media-saturated age. Ross (1995, 1999, 2001) focused her research on adult avid readers who read for pleasure, and primarily on how those readers chose the books they liked to read. From the same interviews, she also analyzed the role that series books, a denigrated reading material, had in the reading history and reading development of those same avid readers.

In her 2008 article "Radical Change Revisited" Dresang notes that Radical Change Theory is "the only theory of which I am aware that makes this connection between printed books for youth and the digital environment" (2008b, 294). The connection she is trying to illuminate refers to how the changes and developments in digital technologies were affecting print books for youth. Although she recognizes and explores other possible explanations (e.g., Postmodernism in Dresang 2008a), she believes that Radical Change better explains "the nature and character of these 'changed' books" (2009 93) because "'Radical Change' means fundamental change, departing from the usual or traditional in literature for or reading behavior of youth, although still related to them" (2009, 95).

Radical Change asserts that three characteristics of digital media – interactivity, connectivity, and access - can be used to explain and analyze the changes in print texts for youth, as well as their reading behaviour. Related to these three characteristics, she identifies three types of Radical Change (1999, 17):

- Changing forms and formats;
- Changing perspectives; and



- Changing boundaries.

Although the three types of changes are all relevant for this project, I will focus my attention on the first one because it is there where Dresang includes a brief analysis of graphic novels and also because Dresang has further elaborated their relevance in other publications (2009, 2008b). Then, type one Radical Change materializes in one or more of the following characteristics (19):

- Graphics in new forms and formats.
- Words and pictures reaching new levels of synergy.
- Nonlinear and nonsequential organization and format.
- Multiple layers of meaning from a variety of perspectives.
- Cognitively, emotionally, and/or physically interactive formats.
- Sophisticated presentations.
- Unresolved storylines.

Many comics share one or some of these singularities; however, Dresang only discusses what she defines as “graphic novels” in a brief section as part of a larger chapter dedicated to “graphic books” mainly focused on picture books (81-103). Dresang offers “literary comic books” as an example of an interactive and radical-change format. She describes them as longer, more sophisticated, and often written for a young adult audience (23). Later on, Dresang defines a graphic novel as a “literary comic book” (96) and acknowledges the appearance of some titles of “serious literary merit” in comparison with past titles that were simply a “quick read” (97). In relation to comics, Dresang, maybe inadvertently, is establishing a qualitative difference between graphic novels and whatever was published before the advent of this format. In her analysis, she states that the success and acceptance of graphic novels is due to the “graphic nature and openness of the digital world of the 1990s” (97). These materials are being gradually embraced by mainstream society. She uses two works as examples of the medium: Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986–1991) and *City of Light, City of Dark* (1993), a story by Avi and Brian Floca, and probably a more popular work among readers of

children's and young adult literature. The only element of the medium that she comments on is the "gutter," as explained by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1994). She emphasizes the importance of the "gutter" or "reading the gutter" – the gaps between panels - to explain the readers' attraction for the works that use this medium. The analysis is concise and she does not use the aforementioned variables to examine graphic novels. Neither does she provide further explanation as to why contemporary readers engage with graphic novels. In "Radical Change Revisited" (2008b) she notes that "no change has been more dramatic than that of the graphic novel" (297). However, Dresang still does not provide a more comprehensive or systematic analysis of the format in lieu of her own theory. She simply acknowledges that if Radical Change were to be published today, graphic novels would deserve an entire chapter. In her most recent publication about Radical Change (Dresang and Kortla 2009), the researchers focus their analysis on the concept of synergistic reading and how it explains the aesthetic reading experience, particularly the connection between text and reader. Again, the core of this article is comprised of the analysis of several texts such as David Macaulay's *Black & White* (1990) or David Wiesner's *The Three Pigs* (2001). However, when talking about readers, Dresang and Kortla referred to a researcher who has moved Radical Change theory from texts to readers. Pantaleo's research (2008) is situated in the classroom environment and looks at elementary students, reading, and picture books as multimodal media. The picture books selected by Pantaleo shared Radical Change characteristics as well as other postmodern elements, such as metafictional devices. These texts have much to teach to these young students and readers. Pantaleo finds that these texts often demand skills similar to those required for web literacy as analyzed by Sutherland-Smith (2002): "attentiveness to information conveyed in the nontextual features, acquisition of multiple sources of information, analysis of information, and associative processing" (186).

Although Radical Change theory has informed this dissertation project, the limits of Dresang's theory can be expanded in two ways:

- Graphic novels are noted by Dresang but not examined thoroughly. This dissertation brings new insights to Dresang's study of reading, graphics novels, and new media, especially in the context of pleasure reading.
- Real life readers and their opinions are rarely mentioned in Dresang's work. She successfully constructs an ideal or implied reader that fits the characteristics of a member of the Net Generation. She occasionally brings some youth voices through teachers' comments and the studies of other scholars, but the voice of real readers is not at the core of this work. Pantaleo has successfully applied Radical Change in an academic environment, but this dissertation's goal is to understand the pleasure reading experience from the reader perspective.

On the opposite side of the spectrum in relation to readers' participation is Mackey's research (e.g., 2011, 2007, 2002/2007), where real readers' participation is central to her three major research projects. Also, her projects do not concentrate on media type, but seek to find the differences, interrelations, and commonalities among a rich variety of texts and formats; novels, short stories, e-books, graphic novels, videogames, movies, or poems are part of her research. In Mackey's studies, the pool of participants has also been diverse: elementary and junior high students (2002/2007), undergraduate students (2011), and a group of adults and young adults (2007). Mackey's research project has a wider reach but I would like to think that our projects can engage in a dialogue since both attempt to explicate the relationship that young readers develop with the diverse and numerous media that surrounds them.

In *Literacies across Media* (2002/2007), Mackey concentrates on the experiences of a group of students with a variety of texts: picture books, novels, movies, computers games, and e-books, including some titles in more than one format. It is relevant to note that, even though Mackey chooses a variety of texts, comics are not represented in her selection. However the two students that are the focus of her analysis in two chapters briefly mention reading comics as part of their media consumption (35, 48).

Evidently Mackey could not feasibly study every media text available in contemporary culture; her project is remarkable because of its depth and richness of information. In contrast, she offers comics in her research project with older readers (2007a) and I will focus on her treatment of the topic later in the section. First, I briefly outline the main points of *Literacies across Media* (2002/2007) because this work is where Mackey introduces many core elements for her analysis.

Mackey constructs a sound theoretical framework to examine and explain the experience of this group of readers. Some of her ideas and concepts have informed my project. The concepts of personal salience and fluency of access reveal themselves as basic in the process of selection among texts (2002/2007, 88-92). Participants judge each text according to its own characteristics and merits and they decide which materials to read based on interest (salience) or familiarity with the medium (fluency). These two ideas are relevant when one thinks about comic books. They mix text and image, something we are familiar with as children because of picture books, but that many young adults, and especially adults, leave behind after childhood. Reading comic books activates a series of different skills than when reading plain text so fluency of access is an idea to consider when interviewing readers. As well, the diversity of styles and conventions not just among titles from different countries, but also from different genres, confirms the importance of the idea of fluency.

Two other relevant ideas are those of the physicality of reading and “the aesthetic of unfinish” (2002/2007, 175-76). Mackey dedicates a chapter to look at the physical differences between reading print and digital texts, and more precisely at the role of the hands. Comic books and graphic novels are published in varied formats. In a visit to a comics store a reader can encounter, for example, a 32 page softcover comic book, a trade paperback that collects several comic books, the standard format of an European album, and, a hardcover graphic novel in landscape format as thick as 300 pages long. Evidently, the experience of reading any of those materials is different both intellectually and physically. For instance, the format influences the places where the

comic book can be transported and how easily and where it can be read. Mackey also introduces the concepts of re-workings and re-playing (2002/2007, 174-177) to briefly examine how her participants recognize and navigate through different incarnations of the same text. Among other theorists, she builds on Lunenfeld's concept of "the aesthetic of unfinish," (2002/2007, 175-76; 2008, 132-133), a phenomenon where every text is open to be reworked, where narratives are developed to be unfinished, where the boundaries between text and paratext are blurred (Lunenfeld 1999, 14-15). Mackey uses one of the examples given by Lunenfeld, from the movie *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995). However, I would like to point out that Lunenfeld also uses comic book figures as an example (1999, 16). He qualifies the American publishing industry, mainly dedicated to the superhero genre, as a "model of the perpetual suspended narrative" (1999, 16). This is not a case just of print text, but also other media. For example, Spiderman has been adapted into a movie, a video game, and many non-fiction works that explain the origins and powers of this particular superhero.

Another salient point in Mackey's research is her use of the concept of information ecology or media ecology. Everyday young people face a great variety of texts which require a set of skills beyond reading and writing. In order to understand the experience of reading, or playing as she finally conceptualizes it, Mackey tells us that we need to understand the everyday life of the reader and her specific context. As researchers these individual experiences "emerge as crucial to the working of the ecology" (Nardi and O'Day 1999, 83). Mackey's project is a fine example of how we can reach an understanding of the ecology focusing on individual experiences.

In *Mapping Recreational Literacies* (2007), Mackey decides to investigate adults and young adults because "[t]he concept of fully literate adulthood occupies a strange default position of invisibility—the end-point and measure of literacy education but taken for granted, under-explored, and under-described" (2007, 3). Mackey recruits nine adults from nineteen to thirty six years of age and looks at how they engage in different literate activities in their leisure time, meeting with each of them separately

and finishing with ten hours of taped and transcribed sessions for each participant. In this work, Mackey includes graphic novels and dedicates a section to explain the possible challenges and peculiarities of the comics medium (2007, 108-111). Her conceptualization of the graphic novel is similar to the one expressed by Dresang: "a graphic novel is something like a grown-up comic, a larger incarnation of a popular method of telling stories through words and images" (2007, 108). She previously examined picture books and during the presentation for graphic novels, she makes constant comparisons between both formats, especially because the two main tools of comics, panels and speech balloons, are also present in *The Three Pigs* (2001). As well, Mackey detects a strong link between some of the abilities needed to read graphic novels and hypertext and digital games (2007, 110). Her concluding sentences for that brief analysis of the medium, although focused on the text, are highly stimulating. She notes that "young readers are learning how to manage sophisticated forms of data-handling and interpretation from sources that have regularly been perceived as humble at best, pernicious at worst" (2007, 111). If one shifts the thought, can we say that the readers of these texts are also sophisticated readers? I believe Mackey certainly helps to probe this point for a literacies-based perspective; my dissertation research in part contributes to strengthen this idea.

Before moving to the part dedicated to graphic novels, I would like to highlight some relevant and thought-provoking ideas that emerge from her participants' reactions to the picture book. I share with Mackey the idea that these two formats are close in nature and it is also an idea that is growing in different fields. For example, the 2012 MLA conference dedicated a panel to answer the question "Why Comics Are and Are Not Picture Books?" (Hatfield and Svonkin 2012) and in 2011 *Bookbird* dedicated an issue to look at similar issues through the works of Shaun Tan (Devos 2011; Foster 2011; Tan 2011). Although picture books have traditionally targeted young readers, in the last ten to fifteen years, particularly with the development of the "postmodern picture book," the potential audience for picture books has also expanded. In 1999, Dresang wrote that "[w]ith the advent of the wide spread graphic environment of the 1990s, the

number of picture books for older readers grew exponentially" (83). However, the participants were still surprised to read a picture book and still thought of it as a text created and marketed for younger readers. For Mackey's enjoyment, their reaction while and after reading the picture book were of surprise and delight (2007, 127) and, although "cute" was the adjective more often employed, the participants showed more in-depth reactions (2007, 129). Their expectations about the format were challenged and they seemed to enjoy that. Even though adults should not experience any difficulty reading a picture book (a statement that might deserve further exploration), they found the reading experience motivating, enjoyable, and sometimes even demanding. The demand comes primarily from the change in reading stance and the fact that they also needed to read the pictures, basically from having to forget one's expectations and move "from automaticity to a more alert attention" (2007, 139). Matters of intertextuality also emerge in the participants' comments. Their media repertoire is rich and varied and they use it to explain their reaction to or thoughts about the picture book. For example, Isaac compares the disruptive story in the picture book with a phenomenon he describes as a "smart parody" and that is often explored in *Star Trek* (2007, 134). Seth also includes an intertextual reference when comparing the character of the wolf in the picture book with Freddy from *Nightmare in Elm Street* (2007, 136-137).

Mackey herself also reports that graphic novels break her novel reading process. In reflection about the medium, she writes that she is used to reading "speedy and automatic" (2007, 140) and graphic novels slow her down and interfere with a well-established process. Interestingly, this breakdown in her process produces a sense of insecurity. The following self-reflection about her lack of competence with this form is particularly revealing: "it does not help that I know at all times that it is my own failing as a reader that causes all this trouble" (2007, 141). There is clearly a learning curve to be able to consider oneself a comics reader, a process that is also highly individual. As Mackey also notes these inadequacies serve "as a reminder of the individuality of the process [of reading]" and the limited value of exhortation (2007, 141). The analysis of

her participants' reaction is presented in the same section as that for an online poem and *The Three Pigs* (2001). The exercise the participants carry out with the graphic novels is rather different than with the other texts. Instead of sharing one text, the participants are invited to browse a sample of eleven graphic novels for fifteen minutes, decide if there is one graphic novel they would like to keep reading, and describe their reading process to the researcher. None of them are committed readers of graphic novels and their backgrounds on comics reading are rather narrow although widespread: newspaper comic strips, *Archie*, and *Calvin & Hobbes*. Although none of the participants choose the same comic, Mackey found a "striking similarity" (2007, 140) in their comments; she also described their descriptions as "impressionistic" and found a certain consistency in the vocabulary of their descriptions (2007, 146). All the participants but one managed to make progress to choose a graphic novel to potentially read. At one extreme of the spectrum is Jocelyn who did not like any of the titles offered and at the opposite extreme is Seth who would have taken all of the comics if given the chance (2007, 140). Mackey uses the concept of "good-enough reading" to explain their main reactions; basically "good-enough reading involves finding a personal balance between momentum and accountability to the text" (2007, 147). Some readers highlight the prominence of words and other images but all of them seem to be comfortable with their reading skills in relation to this format. Mackey explains that the short exposure to the format and the fact that neither of them is an expert reader could also have an influence on the results. I would like to put on the table another possible explanation. This lack of expertise or familiarity with the medium can also partly explain why they privilege or subordinate text and image; maybe they have not yet developed the expertise with the medium to read them combined or to identify when the author wants the reader to privilege one of them. However, I would admit that this situation can also denote a simple preference for either text or image when reading.

To conclude the analysis, Mackey speculates that maybe her participants have an attitude towards the medium that supports the idea that "a good enough reading" is



plenty for this format (2007, 148) or that with the diversity of formats in current media ecology, "finding the point of good-enough is actually a reasonable survival strategy" (2007, 148).

Mackey's last work, *Narrative Pleasures in Young Adult Novels, Films, and Video Games* (2011), was published after the planning and development of this project; despite this, I highlight some considerations that inform my own analysis. In this research project, Mackey focuses on narratives comprehension: "I want to explore some story-processing skills and strategies that generate fictional understanding in three specific media: book, game, film" (2011, 3) The group of participants comprised twelve young people from nineteen to twenty two years of age, nine male and three female, who met in groups of three to read a novel, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, watch a film *Run Lola Run*, and play a digital game on Playstation 2 *Shadow of the Colossus*, always from beginning to end. Mackey describes the readers as ordinary. She also addresses the male predominance in the sample, explaining that it is recurrent in samples requiring game experience and her priority is "to gain insight into narrative thinking that included the element of game experience" (2011, 35). Her analysis divides the process of reading, viewing, and playing these three texts in six distinctive moments:

1. How the participants make their initial contact: where the participants position themselves, the stories, and their approaches to them.
2. How the participants enter the fictional realm, in most cases a world of possibilities.
3. How they orient themselves and how the inferences they make influence their stance in relation to the text.
4. How they progress in the heart of the story, and understudy part of the text if compared with the beginning and the end.
5. How participants wrap up the narrative, but also how they reach tentative conclusions during the process to be able to anchor their ongoing interpretation.

In the chapter entitled "Inhabiting the Story" Mackey focuses her analysis on issues of multimodality and intertextuality and it clearly connects with her previous research projects. Even though my dissertation project focuses on comics, discussions about movies, television shows, and other reading materials were unavoidable during the interviews, sometimes because I asked questions about them, other times because my participants referred to other media. Mackey reaches a similar conclusion about her participants: "[t]he first fact about the young people in this project is that they cannot address any explicit question about a single medium or format, no matter how monomodally phrased or intended, from any standpoint but that of multimodal interpreter. However singular the focus, their stance is unavoidably comparative" (2011, 200). In connection with the idea of media diversity, Mackey defends movements of expansion and inclusion in relation to the educational canon in order to support the potential skills youth develop in their everyday lives. She notes that "this project suggest that the loss of that kind of complexity we commonly think of as literary might be radically less than many defenders of book culture may fear" (2011, 217). The comparative stance helped both participants and researchers; the former were able to "articulate this nebulous phenomenon" that it is narrative interpretation and the latter had "a gleam of provisional and fleeting access" to that same process (2011, 216). The "nebulous phenomenon" that my dissertation attempts to grasp is rather different than Mackey's but, as I have said previously, I would like to think that these two projects can engage in dialogue since both attempt to explicate the relationship that young readers develop with the diverse and numerous media that surround them.

Reading is an elusive process. Mackey describes it as unique, personal, distinctive and points to the fact that "the experience inside the black box of each interpreter's mind was specific to each of them and was *felt* and *thought* in different ways" (2011, 201). This is why the more information, from varied perspectives, we can accumulate about this intimate and particular process, the better we will be able to understand the potential needs of youth as readers, students, library patrons, and ultimately as citizens.

Ross's research brings a third lens to the study of reading that complements the more educational or literacy-focused research developed by Dresang and Mackey. These two researchers note the diversity of reading materials, how these materials are evolving and adapting, and how readers are coping with this media saturated environment. Ross's project is focused on adult avid book readers and reading for pleasure, but the ultimate goal in her overall research agenda is to expand the definition of reading and readers. I find particularly relevant the way she exemplifies this diversity with a list of many possible readers: "the commuter scanning the headlines of the newspaper, the serious scholar, the six-year old reading a primer, the video game player looking at an on-screen help file, the web surfer using Google to find information about hotel accommodation in New York City, the Harlequin Romance reader, the reader of Booker-Mann prize winning fiction, and the adolescent reading graphic novels" (2006, 5).

In 1995, in the midst of the success of the criticized *Goosebumps* series, Ross published an article defending the role of series book in the life of avid readers. She first looked at the history of these publications to explain the reasons for the fierce criticism from adults. The struggle and historical animosity that series books suffered is not unique; comics were attacked in similar ways by cultural gatekeepers accusing them of physically and intellectually harming innocent youth. Adults did not consider series books and comics real reading and they were missing from educational and cultural institutions. Therefore, children and teenagers created their own collections and discussed and traded these reading materials away from the vigilant gaze of adults (1995, 203). This collective behaviour among series books readers is not just historical. Interviewed adult readers also commented about the clandestine appeal of reading this material and how books had a certain cachet and were traded "like baseball cards" (1995, 226).

The originality and strength of Ross's research comes from the voices of the readers. Through the analysis of the interviews of adult avid readers she discovered the

supporting and entertaining role that series books had for them, especially in the cases of novice readers or non-readers. Ross pointed to the importance of familiarizing oneself with the conventions of reading, acquiring a “literary competence” (1995, 228). Series books support the development of this familiarity because of some of the characteristics they are criticized for, such as their formulaic plots and structures as well as their stereotyped characters. These elements provide a familiar and safe reading experience, one that is easy to engage with and enjoy. Hence the novice reader keeps reading and starts recognizing those literary conventions.

A second aspect of Ross’s research focused on how avid readers made choices about what to read (1999, 2001). The information from the interviews with these readers supported the development of a model for the process of choosing a book for pleasure (2001, 17-19):

- Reading experience wanted: “the what mood am I in?” test.
- Alerting sources that the reader uses to find out about new books.
- Elements of a book that readers take into account in order to match book choices to the reading experience desired.
- Clues on the book itself used to determine the reading experience being offered.
- Cost in time or money involved for the reader in getting intellectual or physical access to a particular book.

This process shows the complexity and personal investment that avid readers make when choosing a book. She also looked at the process of choosing a book as an information seeking process, and her conclusions complement the more hands-on process described above (1999, 796-797):

- The reader/searcher is actively engaged in constructing meaning.
- The affective dimension is a critical aspect of the reader/searcher’s transaction with texts.
- Readers/ searchers give a strong weight to the value of ‘trust’.

- Reading occurs within a network of social relations.
- Experienced readers / searchers have a well-developed heuristic for making choices that depend on extensive previous experience.

Ross's work is pivotal in the section of Mackey's *Mapping Recreational Literacies* where Mackey explores the issues of selection strategies. Interestingly, she does not examine this process with graphic novels, even though her participants have to actively make a choice about what text to read. For my dissertation, Ross's discoveries provide a starting point for thinking about the many elements that are intertwined in the experience of reading and being a reader. In a small pilot project, I interviewed four comic book readers, expert and novice, asking a similar question: "How did you choose the comic books you read?"<sup>7</sup> (Cedeira Serantes, 2009). Three significant ideas emerged after the interviews and connect with Ross's research but may also illustrate possible idiosyncrasies of comic book readers:

- The boundaries among media formats: readers mentioned, discussed and used as reference several media formats. Even though the questions were centered on their practices with comic books, other media informed and supported their reading practices.
- People, a recurring source of information: other readers can be defined as privileged sources of information. For my participants, other readers were the ones that introduced them to the medium or a highly influential source for supporting or expanding their reading taste.
- Multiple purposes of the comics store: this site becomes a place for information and socialization, depending on the participant. They recognize and appreciate the diverse collection and the staff's specialized knowledge.

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<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the sample and results are not meant to be generalizable; my intentions were exploratory rather than conclusive

I conclude this section with a quote from Ross's article about series books: "[i]f we want to make sense of these reading preferences, we have to let the readers speak in their own voices" (1995, 215). I believe that if we want to know more about the reading experience of comics readers, we need to talk to them, explore the contexts where their experience occurs and how it fits in their overall cultural habits. As Dresang, Mackey, and Ross have shown, reading is not a one-dimensional and disconnected practice; there are many ways of reading and many materials to read. Comics are one of those materials and we have little information about the experience of reading them.

## 2.5 Bourdieu and de Certeau: Informing my stance and grounding the need for a distinct methodology

Christiansen and Magnussen (2000) introduce a collection of scholarly essays with a note about the many and diverse scholarly influences in the study of comics. They organize their review in four parts that basically summarize the different shifts in theoretical approaches in the twentieth century: a structuralist perspective, a psychoanalytic perspective, a critical/Marxist perspective, and a postmodern/poststructuralist perspective. In the midst of this diversity, they highlight the works of Michel de Certeau and Bourdieu as examples of a shift in culture criticism; this shift was in part a reaction to other schools of thought that merely pointed at the negative consequences in the production and consumption of popular culture. So, when one examines the reading or consumption of popular culture, Bourdieu and de Certeau represent a change that encompasses a more dynamic conceptualization of the social subject; popular culture becomes "part of the formation of political consciousness through themes, genres and patterns of perception" (2000, 18). In *Media Studies* for instance, de Certeau's idea of "reading as poaching" has helped to theorize media consumption as a form of everyday life agency, especially in the study of fans. In the case of Bourdieu, his project looked at social distinction and questioned the processes that create and maintain these distinctions and the forms of control and power naturalized through these processes.

A well-known example that employs both theorists is Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992). Jenkins uses Bourdieu to demonstrate how fan communities blur boundaries of taste and value "treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts" (1992, 17). Even more crucial for Jenkins' work is de Certeau's idea of poaching—as reflected in the title of the book—that he uses to lay out "an alternative conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (23)

In my thesis proposal I advanced the possible ways that these theorists could help me to explain the themes emerging from my participants' interviews. For instance, I anticipated that Bourdieu's work in the *Field of Cultural Production* (1993) could assist in the description and critical analysis of the graphic novel phenomenon and especially the shifts in cultural capital and symbolic capital attached to this relatively new format. Others have also identified the appropriateness of Bourdieu to explain some changes in the field of comics production. Brienza has used it to examine manga and its global reach and effects, especially in the United States (2009). Beaty (2008, 2007) and Miller (2007) have applied concepts such as *patrimoine* and the autonomous and heteronomous principles in relation to comics production to explain the changes and developments in the European comics industry since the 1990s. The explanatory power of Bourdieu's framework to examine the comics industry is unquestioned. However, the instances where his framework was applied to examine fans or readers of comics are rare. Brown (1997) is one of the main examples; he analyzed how cultural capital moves and changes among members of fandom communities. His conclusion reaffirms Jenkins ideas, identifying a "shadow cultural economy of comic fandom [that] observes all of the same markers of aesthetic 'good taste' that Official culture does" (28). Bourdieu can clearly enrich the explication of comics production, especially in terms of the notable changes in value in recent years. The way some of the aforementioned scholars used his work highlights the importance and influence of the production side in

the consumption of comics. These writings and Bourdieu's approach helped me to be aware of how production might emerge in my readers' experiences.

The use of de Certeau's *poaching* in connection with media consumption has become fairly common after Jenkins (1992). Poaching signifies a rejection of reading as passive; it transforms into a process of appropriation or reappropriation (de Certeau 1984, 166). Jenkins's work showed the relevance and applicability of de Certeau's *poaching* to the study of fans and the meaning of their practices and it is still frequently used (e.g., Botzakis 2006; Lizardi 2012; Mackey, 2008). In her exploration of competing models of reading in librarians' discourse about pleasure reading, Ross examined reading as poaching as one of the conceptualizations that "has given impetus to studies that use ethnographic methods and in-depth interviews to discover what readers actually do with texts in the context of their everyday lives" (2009, 648).

I should include myself as one of the researchers influenced by this approach. The reader as poacher celebrates the idea of a reader who produces meaning, a reader that uses tactics to navigate the complex strategies built by institutions, a reader who is not a dupe and attempts to navigate and own the imposed structures. The duality of strategies (structures applied to readers) and tactics (readers' resistance methods) also seemed especially appropriate for an examination of the reading practices of a young adult population. For instance, in a rather naïve way, comics could be conceptualized as a tactic employed by youth to experience reading outside of the constraints of the educational or literary canon. Finally, the conceptualization of reader as producer is one that resonates with comics reading. The science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany defined the reader of comics as a "co-producer of the comics text at a level of involvement and intensity just through the nature of the medium itself" (1979, 40).

Again, I am not a pioneer in thinking of de Certeau's work as a strong framework with which to examine the experience of young readers. Rothbauer (2010) explained how the use of de Certeau added complexity to her analysis of the reading practices of self-identified lesbian and queer young adults. However, Rothbauer did not stop with



her examination of the idea of the resisting reader; she theorized a library whose grid of discipline provides “the ground and the ideological resources that are appropriated by users in their tactical use...” (2010). The examination of this second idea in connection with readers’ resistance actually challenges the researcher to investigate a space created by the encounter of strategies and tactics. It moves the research interest from the extremes created by these two concepts to a space in-between, where the reading experience potentially stands. For example, if comics are constructed as a tactic employed by teenagers, how do these readers react to comics being used in educational spaces like universities? When I asked myself this question, I first realized that my preferable way of finding an answer was to ask readers themselves. Second, I soon realized during my interviews that the richness and multiplicity of my participants’ experiences and reflections would be impoverished if I examined them through just one lens. Because of the lack of scholarly research dedicated to comics readers and the reading experience of comics, my objective then became to construct a rigorous methodological approach that would allow me to give comics readers and their lived experiences the center stage in this research project.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Philosophical assumptions and interpretative framework

Following Radway, I believe that “the essentially human practice of making meaning goes on even in a world increasingly dominated by things and by consumption” (1991, 221). Therefore, I sought to establish a methodological framework that invites and allows comics readers to share those meanings with me. In my literature review I pointed out a gap in our knowledge about the experience of reading comics. There are two main issues to address here: first, to expand the understanding of comics readership from just fans to readers; and second, to incorporate and privilege the meanings emerging from these readers to enrich work already done about fans, comics as texts, and the comics industry. The nature of my project is exploratory since I do not have a hypothesis that I am seeking to prove or reject. As in many exploratory and inductive projects, I cannot predict an end result for my project but I can certainly define a path to follow. This path and the relevance of this research are partly supported by a tradition of scholars who have examined the experience of pleasure reading from the reader perspective (e.g., Fuller and Sedo 2013; Howard 2011; Pecoskie 2009; Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer 2006; Sweeney 2010).

This thesis project addresses the aforementioned gap with a focus on the following question: How do comics readers construct and understand their experience with comics as a reading material? This question tries to tap into the singularity of the reading experience and to inform our understanding of reading as an individual and social practice. Therefore, my methodological approach had to allow for the central role of readers’ voices while supporting the exploration and interpretation of the following specific issues:

1. How do readers define and understand the medium of comics?
2. How do readers describe the experience of reading a comic?
3. How does comics reading fit in their overall reading practices?
4. Ultimately, what is the cultural role of comics in the life of teenagers and young adults?

To successfully address these questions, I situate this project and myself as a researcher in the tradition of a naturalistic and interpretative approach to the world. Epistemologically I see meaning as created by my participants' interactions with the world; they interpret the world and themselves using the language and classification schemas in their mind. To support this constructivist/interpretative approach (Creswell 2007, 20-21), I have chosen a qualitative methodology, meaning that I studied "things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 3). Expanding on this viewpoint, a qualitative approach implies a complexity in the world around us that, as a researcher, I do not want to escape or to simplify in any way, but rather to explore and interpret (Creswell 2007, 40). Corbin and Strauss clearly explain this position when they say that "to understand experience, that experience must be located within and can't be divorced from the larger events in a social, political, cultural, racial, gender-related, informational, and technological framework and therefore these are essential aspects of our analyses" (2008, 8). This approach requires a considerable degree of flexibility and openness from the researcher and the project design. The researcher's ideas are provisional and the work should be open to modification and negotiation as new knowledge emerges from the data (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 13-14).

In this context, I am unequivocally positioned as a key instrument in the research process (Creswell 2007, 38). This role requires that I adopt a reflective position during the process of research design as well as during data collection and analysis. In relation to the participants, I am seeking to learn the meaning they assign to this phenomenon

that is comics reading – a phenomenon that I assume is complex and that I know is under-studied, and lacking the reader perspective.

### 3.1.1 Methodological standpoint: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Readers of comics live in a complex world where the experience of reading these materials has a particular significance and plays certain roles for them. Among the different traditions that fall under the qualitative research umbrella, hermeneutical phenomenology has permitted me to explore and interpret these personal and unique experiences. This methodology is most useful when the researcher wants to explore and understand an experience as it is understood by those who are having it, when the topic of study is new, or it has been examined previously but a fresh perspective is needed (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 3). This dissertation perfectly matches these conditions. First, the study of comics as a reading material from a reader perspective is conceptualized as a new research topic departing from the previous focus on fans as audience and comics as cultural products. If one looks at the works produced in Comics Studies or Audience Studies, research on comics readers provides a necessary new perspective lacking in these fields of research. The newness and exploratory nature of the project calls for a methodological approach that both respects and takes advantage of these characteristics. John Budd encapsulates the relevance and appropriateness of hermeneutic phenomenology when he writes that it “opens the inquirer to possibilities instead of barricading avenues” (1995, 304).

Hermeneutic phenomenology has a rich and long standing philosophical tradition as one of the many branches growing out of phenomenology. Husserl (1964) is considered the founding father of phenomenology and the work of his student Martin Heidegger (1962) inspires the hermeneutical turn in this philosophical approach. Nursing and Education are two fields that have embraced hermeneutic phenomenology. In Nursing, Cohen, Kahn, and Steeves develop a concise but comprehensive historical introduction that outlines the different stages of phenomenology, distinguishing a German phase lead by Husserl and Heidegger and a

French phase connected to the developments brought by Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and later on Sartre (Cohen, Kahn, and Steeves 2000, 5-12).

Heidegger initiated the hermeneutical turn of phenomenology; his philosophical project centered on how the concept of 'Being-in-the-World' was manifested and understood through language and speech. Researchers following his tradition "attempt to develop notions of the way human beings give meaning to experience, behaviour and actions, while making sense of the world through understanding and the clarification of speech and language" (Rapport 2005, 127). As Heidegger's student, Gadamer represents another stage in the development of phenomenology, one that makes language, understanding, and interpretation tightly linked. As Budd notes, citing Scheler, "phenomenology is not a methodology...it is an attitude, a way of preparing oneself for inquiry, for seeing" (Budd 2005, 45). The hermeneutical influence, especially as represented by Gadamer, facilitated the development of a more concrete research method that accompanied the philosophical standpoint, thus grounding scientific inquiry and practice (Rapport 2005, 130, 132-133).

Therefore, one can distinguish two approaches to phenomenological work. One of the major differences between descriptive/transcendental phenomenology (Husserl) and hermeneutic phenomenology (Gadamer) is the concept of *essence*. Its rigidity and its pursuit affect the research project and the role of the researcher's knowledge and experience. Essences are the structures that define a certain experience and make it unique. Husserl proposed that one needed to bracket out the outer world as well as individual biases in order to successfully achieve contact with essences (Lavery 2003, 23). However, some scholars defined as "anti-essentialists" have postulated the idea that essences are illusory and in many cases reduce social phenomena to fixed categories or social types. For example, Van Manen embraces the study of essences but he defines them as a "complex array of aspects, properties and qualities" that respond to the question of what something is "while being aware of context, (inter)subjectivity, language, and so forth" (1997, xv). As a consequence of different approaches to the

concept of essence, each branch of phenomenology also develops a different way of understanding bracketing. In hermeneutical phenomenology the researcher is called to carry a constant reflective process related to her own experience and to the issues being researched. Bracketing is not an exclusionary process but inclusive. For example, as a researcher, I referred to my own experience as a comics reader during the interviews; participants expressed curiosity about these experiences, especially in connection to my motivations to develop this dissertation project. This reflective and engaging attitude maps onto one of the main principles in qualitative research, the idea that the researcher becomes an instrument for research (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 192-195; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 82-84; Creswell 2007, 38). Hermeneutic phenomenology requires of the researcher to articulate this instrumental role and acknowledge how knowledge is constructed. Basically, the hermeneutical approach requires the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection, not to push aside biases or assumptions but to make them an essential part of the interpretative process (Laverly 2003, 28; Lowes and Prowes 2001).

Scholars such as Van Manen (e.g., hermeneutic phenomenology) and Moustakas (e.g., empirical phenomenology) represent some of the different ways that this methodology has been applied in research projects (Creswell 2007, 59). For the development of this research project the works of Cohen, Kahn, and Steeves (2000), Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), and Van Manen (1997) were fundamental to construct a sound and solid methodological approach. I used the six basic activities that Van Manen describes to guide each of my steps in designing and carrying out this project (1997, 30):

1. Turn to a phenomenon that is of serious interest and commits us to the world.
2. Investigate experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it.
3. Reflect on the essential themes that characterize this phenomenon.
4. Describe the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.
5. Maintain a strong oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon.
6. Balance the research context by considering parts and whole.

In order to talk about this project from an experiential perspective, I rely on the metaphor of the traveler. The first time that I realized the academic richness of this metaphor was while reading de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). He uses the idea of walking/traveling to explain how we experience the city beyond its physicality and more as a text, where we produce a different city through our everyday practices, a city that we are the only ones who experience it. More concretely, at some point he connects this idea of walking (or traveling) the city with a self-reflective action, "an exploration of the deserted places of my memory" (107). He further explores the idea of traveling in connection with reading a text, with the role of the unrecognized rebellious act of reading: "...readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write" (174). Traveling becomes then an encounter, in the case of de Certeau, between a more fixed entity (the text or the city) and the mutable traveler (a city dweller or a reader).

These ideas stayed with me and emerged again when Kvale and Brinkmann used the idea of the traveller to explain one of the two approaches to the interview process (2009, 48-50). The interviewer-traveller "walks along with local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of their lived world" (48). More importantly, this process "might instigate a process of reflection that leads the traveler to new ways of self-understanding, as well as uncovering previously taken-for-granted values and customs in the traveler's home country" (49). I identified with their approach, one of knowledge construction, where the interviewer or researcher discerns and unfolds the potential meanings in the original stories through her interpretations of those narratives (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 48-49). This metaphor of the traveller encapsulates a second idea, that of the researcher also being transformed during the research process, which is relevant for a naturalistic, iterative, and reflexive research design.

Cohen, Kahn and Steeves (2000, 2) also briefly mention the idea of the journey to explain their stance towards hermeneutic phenomenology. This metaphor supports

the idea that the researcher in hermeneutic phenomenology does not merely report the participants' understandings, but is engaged in a transformational process. A transformational conversation is one where speakers are less focused on the process of reproducing or fixing meanings, but concentrate on exploring the subject on hand and the knowledge that arises, or is being produced, in that process (White 1994, 104-5). This approach is very close to Gadamer's propositions, where he understood interpretation as the process of co-creation between the researcher and participant: "Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject" (2004, 368). Gadamer continues explaining: "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (371).

### 3.1.2 Phenomenology, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Reading, and LIS

Reading is an activity that has many different purposes, facets, and ways of manifesting. One can read for pleasure or for work, or both, to escape reality or to find a specific piece of information, one can read by herself or as part of a club. Ultimately, the strength of using hermeneutic phenomenology is that it offers to the researcher "plausible insights" that get her closer to the experience of the participant and, ultimately, closer to the phenomenon in the world (Van Manen 1997, 9). Hermeneutic phenomenology studies how people interpret their lives and make meaning of what they experience (Cohen, Kahn, and Steeves 2000, 5). Therefore, a pivotal element of this method is its focus on everyday life as perceived or understood by the participants, to the lifeworld, instead of "meanings specific to particular cultures (ethnography), to certain social groups (sociology), to historical periods (history), to mental types (psychology), or to an individual's personal life history (biography)" (Van Manen 1997, 11). Hermeneutic phenomenology "encourages a certain attentive awareness to the details and seemingly trivial dimensions of our everyday . . . lives" (Van Manen 1997, 8).



In various texts Budd defends the suitability and relevance of phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology to address practical and theoretical questions in LIS (2012, 2010, 2005, 2001, 1995). Budd highlights the appropriateness of this philosophical approach for the study of reading and maps out the connections between reading and a phenomenological approach (2005, 54):

- We are conscious of the text through perception.
- This consciousness is an intentional mental act.
- The critical assessment of the text is based on epistemological standards.
- Language, and especially speech, is the focal point of perceptions.
- Interpretative action is applied in an effort to reach understanding.

As previously mentioned, John Budd is a constant proponent of the use of a phenomenological approach in LIS. Its use, although not extensive, has slowly become more common across the discipline (e.g., Burns and Bossaller 2012; Klentzin 2010; Stephens 2008; Templenton 2008; Ciborra and Willcocks 2006). In the case of this dissertation work, the doctoral work of Paulette Rothbauer is a true inspiration and substantial influence. Her work looked at the voluntary reading practices of self-identified lesbian, bisexual and queer young women. In the same way that Rothbauer tried to make sense of the lives of her participants in the context of their reading practices and information needs, I believe my project brings some light to both a neglected population (young adult readers) and undervalued practice (reading comics). Hermeneutic phenomenology strongly supports this research endeavour because it sees research participants "as people who offer a picture of what it is like to be themselves as they make sense of an important experience" (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 50). The importance of participants in this sort of study is undeniable and because of this they deserve a more detailed and extensive discussion that I include in the sections dedicated to sampling and researching with youth.

### 3.1.3 Reflexivity

Initially, I designed the project planning for reflexivity in connection with data analysis; however, I soon recognized that reflexivity was critical during the entire process. First, I recognized that the methods that I implemented, to some degree, constitute and shape the reality that I am trying to describe. Therefore, I was committed to avoiding, as much possible, the “black box” effect in my methodological report – reflexivity is the perfect way to support this process. Kvale and Brinkmann point out the lack of methodological data as a problem for trustworthiness evaluation (2009, 270-271). They recognize the role of improvisation and intuition as well as the absence of clear guidelines to follow when implementing and carrying out qualitative interviews. They highlight the importance of sharing the decisions and reflections during the process and point at the potential role of logbooks and diaries to record that data. Although I did not keep a unique diary for these reflections, such annotations populate my field notes, my transcriptions, and my conference notebooks. For hermeneutic phenomenological projects, Cohen, Kahn and Steeves (2000) argue for a “reflexive stance” where “the researcher is aware of his or her participation in the narratives that are collected and the scientific accounts that are and will be written” (89). As a result, my aim in this section is to produce a methodological report, “to attend to process,” allowing for the complexity and “messiness” of the process to emerge (Law 2004, 153).

Second, Kvale and Brinkmann also privilege the researcher’s role as an instrument (271). This idea is core to any qualitative project making issues of trustworthiness especially sensitive (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 101-109). Consequently, reflexivity became the appropriate way to support my own process of discovery, especially to acknowledge previous knowledge, experiences, and thoughts (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 31-32). Since interviewing is the method I chose to explore the experience of reading comics, as the primary researcher I became the main research instrument, which in turn, increased the importance of my integrity in this process (Kvale and

Brinkmann 2009, 74). A connection can be easily identified between interviewing as a method in phenomenological research, the trustworthiness of data, and the use of reflexivity. Kvale and Brinkmann talk about reflexive objectivity as a process that involves "striving for sensitivity about one's prejudices, one's subjectivity" as the researcher's contribution to the production of knowledge (242). They strive for results that "carry the validation with them" and to achieve this quality "the research procedures would be transparent and the results evident, and the conclusions of a study intrinsically convincing as true" (260). Reflexivity is a much needed step for a researcher who aspires to construct a research project that shares these important characteristics.

Finlay (2002) deepens the connection between reflexivity and phenomenology, as well as the many instances where this tool is useful. Reflexivity is presented as a required process in phenomenological inquiry since "researchers need to look within to attempt to disentangle perceptions and interpretations from the phenomenon being studied" (Finlay 2002, 534). Understanding is a process that "results from a dialectic between the researcher's preunderstandings and the research process, between the self-interpreted constructions of the researcher and those of the participant" (Finlay 2002, 534). Therefore, reflexivity ideally should be present from the conception of the process. The researcher's steps to implement reflexivity at this stage are very similar to the action of "bracketing out" or "reduction" as explained by phenomenologists (Van Manen 1997, 46-51; Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 87-88). This action is often connected to the goal of seeking to identify the essence of an experience. Despite the fact that I do not seek that goal, I wholly embrace the role that revealing my own history as a comics reader plays in the co-construction of knowledge and I shared it in the introduction to this thesis.

My hope is that my short reflection helps the reader to understand my relationship with this project, with its strengths and weaknesses. This reflexive analysis has helped me to delineate "the route to ensuring an adequate balance between purposeful, as opposed to defensive or self-indulgent, personal analysis" (Finlay 2002,

542). I am aware that this stance can be understood as a weakening of my own research, since I will be indicating the threats that could undermine this project. On the contrary, I agree with Finlay when she points at reflexivity "as one way to begin to unravel the richness, contradictions, and complexities of intersubjective dynamics" and that a reflexive analysis "can only ever be a partial, tentative, provisional account" (542-43). I see reflexivity as a process that strengthens the trustworthiness of my data and my analysis as well as my contribution to other scholars who might be considering a similar methodological path. Sharing the missed steps, doubts, and small victories during this long process hopefully addresses in advance some potential questions and concerns and also represents my effort to construct a transparent research project, open to scrutiny and questioning.

### 3.2 Roadmap of the thesis research project

Research Phase	Activities	Timeline
<b>Pilot Project</b>	Interviews and tentative analysis	February-March 2008
<b>Communication of the pilot project results</b>	Presentations at Another New Narrative '09, Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS) '09	May 9 <sup>th</sup> 2009; May 28 <sup>th</sup> -30 <sup>th</sup> 2009
<b>Proposal approval</b>		November 9 <sup>th</sup> 2009
<b>Ethics Research approval</b>		January 29 <sup>th</sup> 2010
<b>Recruitment activities</b>	Presentation at undergraduate course	February 2010
	Presentations at graduate courses	February 2010, May 2010
	Meeting with Youth librarians at London Public Library (LPL)	April 16 <sup>th</sup> 2010

	Free Comic Book Day London, ON	May 1 <sup>st</sup> 2010
	Teen Annex activities	From April to June 2010
	Visits at Heroes comics store	February, March, and October 2011. I visited Saturdays and Thursdays a minimum of twice a month.
	Participation at the Graphic Novel Reading Group. L.A. Moods store	Four visits: April 2010, June 2010, November 2010, March 2011
	London Youth Service Providers meeting	February 14 <sup>th</sup> 2011
	Comic Book Literacy Day at LPL	March 16 <sup>th</sup> 2011
<b>Data collection</b>		March 2010-December 2011
<b>Ethics Research renewal</b>		January 25 <sup>th</sup> 2011
<b>Dissemination of emerging results</b>	Posters: ALISE, UWO Research Day, CAIS.	January 2011; March 2011; May 2011
	Presentation at International Comics Art Festival (Research Award)	September 2011
	Presentation at <i>mediations</i> , graduate students workshop; papers at the CASBC conference and the Researching the Reading Experience conference	April 20 <sup>th</sup> 2012; May 29 <sup>th</sup> 2012; June 11 <sup>th</sup> 2013

**Table 3: Roadmap of the project and related scholarly communications**

### 3.3 Sampling and recruitment

#### 3.3.1 Teenagers and young adults as research participants

Since the 1990s a series of researchers, especially from the Social Sciences, have called for the development of a new paradigm in research with and about youth. Youth have always been of great interest for researchers: their lives and experiences are "...frequently held up as a 'social barometer' of wider societal change (Jones and Wallace 1992), whether for good or ill, and as such are constantly in the spotlight" (Heath, et al. 2009, 1). This central position did not always translate into a careful reflection about fundamental assumptions and attitudes that informed those projects and the need for developing specific research methods. However, these positions have changed drastically since the early 2000's. At the center of this shift was "the conception of children as articulate social actors who have much to say about the world, as people who can be encouraged to speak out" (James 2007, 261). Supported by the research conducted by scholars such as Allison James (1997, 1998, 2007), Alan Prout (2004) and Pia Christensen (2000) this new paradigm flourished and affected the whole research process with children, including design, methods, participation, ethics, and data analysis. Although most of the issues raised by this group of scholars are focused on children and childhood, some of them refer or can be extended to teenagers. Works focused specifically on youth are still scarce (Best 2007; Bennet, Cieslik, and Miles. 2003; McLeod and Malone 2000).

The works of Heath et al. (2009) and Punch (2002a) have supported my process of constructing a research project that is aware of the idiosyncrasies of working with youth. As a first step, Heath and her colleagues (2009, 4-9) claim that youth research is characterized by the following four aspects:

1. A series of age-specific contexts and institutions structure the lives of young people.
2. Their lives are also affected by policies that are specific to their age.

3. The consideration of youth as a crucial developmental stage prompts a widespread anxiety in society that provokes constant surveillance.
4. The potential powerlessness of youth in a research situation.

Acknowledging the presence and potential role of these factors in my work informed my self-reflective process. Punch's work (2002a) supported the implementation phase. She looked at the differences in research with children; her work helped to detect some factors whose effect I wanted to minimize ahead of time:

- Tendency to impose the researcher's own perceptions and assumptions. Punch highlights the benefits of using reflexivity, especially to critically reflect about the researcher's role and assumptions, her choice of methods, and their application (323). I embraced this approach as I explain in depth later in this section.
- Use of language and establishing rapport. As a young adult librarian I found that familiarizing myself with youth culture and attempting to understand what it means to be a teenager was a crucial factor in being able to connect with them. Therefore, my own experience as a comics reader in conjunction with this awareness of youth culture and interest helped me to establish rapport.
- Research context. As much as possible I offered participants several sites for data collection activities so they could choose settings where they feel comfortable and safe (Eder and Fingerson 2002).

Punch (2002b) also explores strategies to facilitate interviewing young teens (thirteen to fourteen years of age). In her conclusions she highlights the advantages of using mixed techniques when interviewing (task-based activities and stimulus materials); however, she also recognizes that the participants did not express a preference for these techniques versus straightforward questions. Her strategies also reveal the potential role that supplementary materials, such as television shows, movies, and other media, have in establishing rapport and initiating conversations. I did

not use such materials, but I scanned the media and collected diverse representations of comics reading. The occasional use of these materials as examples or to elicit conversation was fairly successful. In connection with the interviewing process, Eder and Fingerson (2002) highlight the importance of using “non-directed, open and inclusive questions” in youth studies because these questions leave the door open for participants to “bring in the topics and modes of discourse that are familiar to them” (184). Heath et al. confirm the significance of this approach to distinguish the research process from “the type of question-answer dialogue with which young people are all too familiar from dealings with adults in authority, whether in the context of schooling or in other encounters with ‘officialdom’” (82). Basset and Ristovski-Slijepcevic (2008) examined the difficulties of engaging a group of ethnically and socially diverse young adults in semi-structured interviews. Their project looked at the eating habits and food choices of European Canadian, African Canadian, and Punjabi Canadian adolescents. During this research project the researchers examined several difficulties and possible strategies to overcome them; from their list I have explored the ones that arose as crucial in my research project:

1. **Recruitment and trust.** These two matters are important in qualitative research independently of the participants’ age; however, it is especially relevant in relation to youth. Indirect advertisement using posters was highly effective in the library, but less in comics stores where the role of staff was critical to identify and connect with possible participants as well as to establish my position as trustworthy. In the university setting, public presentations turned out to be the most efficient method to reach undergraduate students. These different recruitment methods were effective because this group of readers demonstrated a genuine inclination to share their thoughts and experiences. In my previous experience with a small pilot project (Cedeira Serantes 2009) participants clearly demonstrated an appreciation for this type of project as an opportunity for communicating. The preliminary conversations and the provision of a clear and non-intimidating explanation of the project helped to build



trust. However, it is important to note that participants expressed a certain surprise about issues of anonymity and confidentiality.

2. **Use of technology.** Although a tape recorder is not an uncommon piece of technology to use, it was possible that its use might intimidate some participants. I did not find it to be a problem for the interviews but some participants expressed concerns about using it during the library and comics store visits. Because of this reason, I decided to take written notes during and after the visits as my method of collection.

3. **Self-disclosure and the insider/outsider question.** Since the first stages of the project I planned to share with the participants my personal interest in comics and, if necessary or relevant, my own history as a reader. This approach is qualified by Basset and Ristovski-Slijepcevic (2008) as "...a key strategy, seemingly helping teens to see the situation less as an exercise in finding the "right answers" to interview questions and more as a two-way conversation" (129). This approach positioned me as an insider, but at the same time required of me to ask for clarification or seek elaboration of aspects that the participants might construe as commonly known for "us" as comics readers. It is common that during interviewing participants feel that the researcher is looking for a right/wrong answer; my position as an insider definitely supported the construction of the interview as a space for exploration and sharing.

4. **Cultural connections.** This matter connects directly with the one previously discussed. Basset and Ristovski-Slijepcevic (2008) highlight that "cultural subtleties play a large part in interviewer-participant interaction; knowing what is likely to be a topic of interest to a particular adolescent population and being able to probe further is essential to a successful interview" (126). Invoking and using knowledge about popular culture to elicit conversation is not a magic formula and requires a certain sensibility and awareness from the researcher. For example, in my case sharing my relative lack of knowledge about superhero comics made novice readers more comfortable and, at the same time, expert readers eager to share their expertise and provide clarifications.

5. **Engaging teens.** Getting participants engaged in the interview process was not a problem, quite the opposite as proven by the length of some of the interviews. In general, participants were eager to share their experiences, their expertise and knowledge, and in the case of novice readers, their difficulties and expectations. My offer of reading recommendations was taken by most participants, either during the interview or later through email. Overall, they were fairly curious about my personal investment in the topic and how it was possible that I could be researching this topic. Certainly they demonstrated an awareness about what is usually considered worthy of scholarly investigation and they were surprised that reading comics has reached that level. Also, eliciting concrete information about their recent reading as well as about their personal history as readers put the participants at ease before tackling more abstract or complex issues.

6. **Logistics.** Basset and Ristovski-Slijepcevic (2008) highlight the importance of being aware of space issues and privacy. In many cases teens tend to lack spaces that can be considered private (129). In the case of my research, most of my participants were older than eighteen years of age and enjoyed a certain level of independence. I always offered them the possibility of choosing the place to meet, with the limitation that it could not be a noisy setting as I had to record the conversation. After several interviews I established the possibility of interviewing in a meeting room at the public library, a suggestion that most participants took and found comfortable.

Although my research topic and research setting is not as complex as the one faced by Leyshon (2002), I sympathize with his approach to create and offer young participants a collaborative research environment. He contends that to study the lives and micro-geographies of rural teens it was necessary to employ “a variety of techniques that they find culturally credible and that allows them to talk freely about their lives and how they situated themselves within arrays of other narratives” (184). One of the core elements of this approach was the idea of “allowing the young people to opt *into* academic research, rather than putting them in a situation where they have

to opt out.” This approach combined with other measures, according to Leyshon, places the emphasis in his research on “collaboration rather than exploitation” (184).

### 3.3.2 Research sample and sampling techniques

The exploratory nature of this dissertation and the lack of previous research projects about the same phenomenon called for a sample where the phenomenon is represented with as many facets as possible. In order to achieve this, Merkens (2004, 167) cites Patton (1990) to propose that sampling should cover extreme cases, typical cases, and critical cases. In phenomenological research, sampling is influenced by the two crucial requirements that participants must meet: 1) they have to have had experienced the phenomenon and 2) they have to be able to provide full and sensitive descriptions of the phenomenon (Morgan 2012, 12; Polkinghorne 1989, 47). It is also necessary to be aware that the diversity among individuals can potentially become a difficulty in phenomenological projects. Although Creswell (2008, 122) notes this problem, I welcomed this challenge and embraced its role at problematizing and enriching the fixed and stereotyped notions that surround the comics reading experience.

My final sample consists of seventeen participants, nine female and eight male, from seventeen to twenty five years of age. In this section I offer some basic information about the participants. For further background information, in the analysis section I have included a series of personal portraits that focus on their relationship with reading, and comics reading in particular. The following sections describe and reflect the way I carried out the process of selection, access, and recruitment.

Pseudonym	Age	Recruitment site	Familiarity with the medium	Date
Devi	19	MIT - Talk	Beginner	05/03/2010
HunterS	20	MIT - Snowball	Beginner	10/03/2010
Preacher	18	MIT - Talk	Intermediate	17/03/2010
Oracle	23	MLIS - Talk	Intermediate/ Expert	09/04/2010
Shade	24	Snowball	Expert	09/04/2010
Lorraine	19	MIT - Snowball	Beginner	27/04/2010
Walker	23	MIT - Snowball	Beginner	21/04/2010
Shalmanaser	20	Library - Random	Intermediate	28/04/2010
Jacob	17	Librarian	Beginner	01/03/2011
Templesmith	20	Heroes	Intermediate/ Expert	05/04/2011
Marian	24	Library - Random	Intermediate/ Expert	18/04/2011
Kalo	24	MLIS - Talk	Intermediate	11/05/2011
Alison	23	MLIS - Talk	Beginner	13/05/2011

Daniel Feireday	23	Comics store staff	Expert	06/09/2011
Promethea	21	Public market - Random	Beginner	08/09/2011
Selina	24	MLIS - Random	Beginner/Intermediate	14/10/2011
Baa	17	Library - Random	Intermediate	12/12/2011

**Table 4: Recruitment information**

Although my personal interest and experience with youth were highly influential for deciding the parameters of this research, my main criteria reflected two different but related needs. First, is the need for more information about the experience of reading from young readers themselves that was indicated and justified in the Literature Review. Second, is the general need for research about youth, especially research involves and actively listens to youth. In response to these needs I established the age range from fifteen to twenty five years of age. Discussing the difficulty of defining youth, Heath et al. agree with the United Nations; definition of youth as aged fifteen to twenty four years; this same definition also guided my choice (UN 2012; Heath et al. 2009, 4). Finally, my methodological choice also helped determine the participants' age range since I was looking for youth who could share their experiences with reading comics and engage in semi-structured, and in many cases, lengthy interviews.

From the planning stages of the project, I sought to establish a sample that reflected different experiences, including beginning readers, occasional but interested readers, and expert readers. As I will explain later in this section, the recruitment tools I developed along with the support and commitment of gatekeepers and participants were crucial to achieve this objective. Although I did not include any reference to gender-related aspects in my research, I was aware that it might become a factor to

study. The balanced gender composition of the sample is an anomaly in average comics readership where male readers and producers are often more predominant. However, this situation could be explained because of the characteristics sought in the sample. Female readership is more evident when reading tastes are expanded to include alternative comics or manga (Lopes 2009, 156; Brown 2001, 98; Pustz 1999, 13, 86). Although I was unable to identify studies that look specifically at the influence of gender in the recruitment process, feminist researchers have discussed the influence of gender, especially in the interviewing process (e.g., Broom, Hand and Tovey 2009; Finch 1993).

In order to construct a rich sample, I planned to combine three sampling techniques: purposeful sampling, theoretical sampling, and snowball sampling. These techniques complement each other in the process of selecting the cases that offer the richest experience. Examining the differences between purposeful sampling and theoretical sampling, Coyne resolves that in qualitative research all sampling is purposeful sampling because “the sample is always intentionally selected according to the needs of the study” (1997, 629). Since I was looking for participants who share an experience, purposeful sampling supported my search for “people who offer a picture of what is like to be themselves as they make sense of an important experience” (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 50). At the same time, theoretical sampling is a responsive approach rooted in grounded theory that reinforces discovery (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 143-157). In an iterative process, sampling is intrinsically connected to the analysis of the data, permitting the inclusion of new or relevant concepts in the search for new participants (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 145). It is also a type of sampling recommended for exploratory projects (Merkens 2004, 169). One of the most important contributions of theoretical sampling to my data collection hypotheses was the active exclusion of readers who were just focused on superhero comics. The discussion in the Literature Review explains the need to research reading comics beyond the fan experience. In relation to this, I must recognize the success of the recruitment tools and the works of gatekeepers and participants themselves since they

acted as successful filters. My research project also offers another salient example of how crucial theoretical sampling can be for the development of a rich sample, especially as a way of counteracting some of the weaknesses of snowball sampling, especially the potential of finishing with a heterogenic sample. After interviewing seven participants, five of whom were undergraduate students in the same program, I realized from the data analysis that their experiences were rather similar, although clearly contrasted with the experiences of my other two participants. At that moment I decided that I would not accept any more participants with that background, with the exception of Daniel Feireday who was also a staff member at a comics store.

Snowball sampling is a technique that facilitates access to closed or marginalized groups. In my case, it worked less effectively among participants; however, attendees to my presentations and gatekeepers became very active at connecting me with possible participants. With the participants' verbal permission, I informed the gatekeepers about the adequacy of their suggestions, thus helping their own selective process. A weakness of this technique is that it privileges clusters and participants who might share many characteristics. However, this effect was mitigated through the implementation of two measures. One is connected to the recruiting sites of the project; I purposefully planned to recruit in three different sites to try to access a diverse population. This strategy is supported by Hays who recommends initiating the snowball sample within several groups of potential participants rather than just focusing on one group (2011, 170). As part of my interview routine, I invited participants to share the research and their experience with anyone who they thought might be appropriate. I always had flyers or professional cards to give them. In connection with the idea of participants opting into the research and respecting confidentiality, I waited for possible participants to contact me. To counteract the difficulties that arose from adopting this position, I tried to make my presence noticeable at the different sites with regular visits and interactions with gatekeepers, as I also tried to make myself available to past participants for questions or recommendations. In relation to snowball sampling, it is important to highlight the work of gatekeepers, especially librarians and

the comics store staff, who went well beyond allowing me to access their work spaces; they also actively publicized my research and constantly referred potential participants.

Creswell comments on the general difficulty of defining the sample size for qualitative study (2007, 126-128). The saturation point guided the size of my sample. Saturation is often explained as the moments where "all concepts are well defined and explained" (Morgan, 2012, 12-13; Corbin and Strauss 2008, 145; Lincoln and Guba 1985, 202). Kvale and Brinkmann connect the number of participants to the purpose of the study and identify the points of saturation with the formula:  $15 \pm 10$  (2009, 113). Morgan explains that usually a group of ten to twelve participants produces saturation and that the researcher should reflect about the number of participants in relation to finding "an adequate variety of perspectives" (2012, 13). Seidman highlights the complexity of determining a number of participants for phenomenological interviewing; he mentions both sufficiency and saturation as criteria to determine how many are "enough" (2006, 54-55). The only number provided in his discussion is twenty-five (as determined by Douglas as cited by Seidman, 2006, 55). My dissertation work maps onto Morgan's formula; I started to detect saturation around my thirteenth interview. Morgan advises gathering at least two more accounts when the researcher suspects saturation has been reached. I followed her recommendation, especially because the participants who contacted me could potentially increase the diversity of the experience I was researching.

Recruiting was the most difficult and time-consuming part of the research project. Heath et al. comment on the difficulty of convincing young people to participate in research projects. This difficulty has been linked to "long term social trends such as social atomisation, increasing personal contact from a range of research organizations (social survey, market research and direct marketing organizations), and a general decline in people's willingness to participate for the greater good rather than for individual gain" (2009, 142). Despite this, I managed to locate and work with a group of teenagers and young adults who were highly committed to sharing their experience



of reading; they reassured me of the value and relevance of the project and, in some cases, found the interview process rewarding for their own personal growth.

### 3.3.3 Access: Recruitment sites

As I have mentioned before, diversity of participants was a main goal of this project and its pursuit was supported through the use of multiple and varied recruitment sites<sup>8</sup>. Each of these sites held the possibility of bringing to the project readers with different stories to tell.

Two of these sites, public libraries and comics stores, are places where reading comics is identified with pleasure reading and with an activity for the most part done by choice, not imposition. Moreover, the use of these sites also supports the idea that participants have to opt *into* the project. The use of high school environments would link reading to academic work and students could possibly feel that they need to opt out from the research project because of different pressures, especially if one seeks the collaboration of teachers for recruitment (Leyshon 2002, 184). Reflecting on the use of surveys, Heath et al. show the steady decline in response rates when using schools because of the excessive number of research requests schools receive, a combination of lack of time and excess workload, and a lack of relevance of direct benefit for the school (2009, 141).

The case of the university is more complex. Although it could be interpreted as an environment similar to high schools, several factors make it different. For example,

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<sup>8</sup> I chose not to include online communities as sites for recruiting participants. The members of these communities often map onto the characteristics used to describe the fan: a high level of engagement and productivity, and a social and shared understanding of reading. In relation to other media, these communities have been studied as interpretative communities where members undertake practices beyond reading such as reviewing or creating their own texts/art (fanfiction). I also was more confident that I could successfully implement the method of semi-structured interviews in a face-to-face environment. In-person interviewing permitted more flexibility in the length of the interview and allowed me to use interpersonal skills to establish rapport with interviewees and create an open and welcoming interviewing space.

the relationship between professor and student and the degree of student anonymity are elements that distinguish both environments. I targeted two courses, one where comics are part of the general reading list, and a second one dedicated to the history of comics; however, the second course was not offered during my recruitment period. I had previously recruited four students in such a course (Cedeira Serantes 2009) and, although the focus of the study was different, it still revealed three non-academic functions of comics that were interesting for the present project:

1. Introduction to the medium;
2. Renewal of an interest left behind in childhood;
3. Reassurance of a reading taste.

An article by Christine Pawley (2009) postulates the salient role that institutions might have for reading studies and complicates in many ways the study of print culture. Pawley defends the study of institutions' roles in response to the two theoretical models that have dominated reading studies, the market model and the resistance model. Her work also influenced my decision of seeking diverse sites so I could potentially access different institutional experiences. Although my project focuses on readers and not institutions, soon the role of institutions emerged as one of many factors influencing the reading experience.

I decided not to anonymise the sites. I explain the basis for this decision in the section dedicated to ethical issues. The sites are as follows:

**1. Comics stores.** In London (Ontario) there are six comics stores. I had visited the six stores and, after informal observation as a customer, I had tentatively decided to focus on two:

- **Heroes** (<http://www.heroescomics.ca/>): This store carries a wide and large variety of titles. Its physical space in some ways resembles that of a general bookstore, with relatively clear signage and organization of titles. Its location is also important because it is close to bus stops and the central branch of the public library. This site became one of the most prolific sites

for research data for two reasons: the composition of their customer base and the active engagement of the owner and the staff. The large and diverse stock attracted a heterogeneous customer base, offering my recruitment process many possibilities. During my visits to the store, staff members were eager to suggest and introduce me to potential participants. During two months I visited the store once a week, following the staff suggestions about preferable days. I purposefully avoided Wednesdays, the day that new comics arrive because the staff advised me that most of their customers those days are heavy collectors and primarily focused on superhero titles.

- **L.A. Moods** (<http://www.lamoodcomics.com/>): This is a store that deserved attention because of the many and diverse activities organized by its owners. Some examples are a monthly graphic novels discussion group and previews to movies based on graphic novels. It is a store that attracts an older audience and because of that my personal contact with the owners was important to gain access to younger readers. Although an extremely gratifying experience, my participation in the reading group did not bring any success at the recruitment process, mainly because of the adult membership.
- Some participants mentioned two of the other stores in the city. I decided not to use Neo Tokyo because of its focus on Asian, especially Japanese, comics. As well, after several unsuccessful attempts at contacting the management of the Comic Book Collector to use their store as a permanent recruitment site, I abandoned the idea.

**2. London Public Library.** This library system holds an important graphic novel collection and most of the titles are part of their teen sections. The central branch houses the largest collection as well as the largest teen section (the Teen Annex). Posters and fliers were placed close to the graphic novel collection at the Teen Annex. During the recruitment process the branch decided to bring together the graphic novels

in the adult section and create a graphic novel section. Flyers and posters were placed in that section too. Other branches such as Jalna and Masonville hold substantial collections and share a high volume of circulation of this reading material. Some basic characteristics of London Public Library's collection and borrowing services are as follows:

- The collection, as of October 2009, consisted of 1,277 unique titles and 5,833 copies divided across the seventeen different branches. This collection can be found in the adult, children's and teen sections of every branch, but it is concentrated primarily in the teen sections. For example, in the Central branch 62 copies are held in the general adult fiction area, while 208 are part of the children's section and 1,049 can be found at the Teen Annex.
- The borrowing data shows an increase in circulation, from 32,626 borrowings in 2008 to 34,924 by October 2009. Again, the majority of the circulation is concentrated on the materials in the teen section, making the library an appropriate place to attempt recruiting teenage readers.

I participated in a meeting of the youth services librarians to introduce my research and to develop a stronger connection with them. Also, as a suggestion from the teen librarian at Central I participated in a meeting of the London Youth Services Providers (LYSP). Besides this meeting, I also participated in two meetings of the Teen Advisory Committee and several teen focused activities such as the Teen Clothing Exchange. Although I did not directly recruit any participants through these actions, during the time I shared with the teenagers I informally conversed with them about reading. These conversations confirmed my suspicion that comics readers as a population are difficult to locate. As well, I experienced different levels of familiarity and awareness about comics among teens, supporting some scholars' work problematizing the close connection between teens and comics assumed in LIS literature (Snowball 2011, 171). The library also allowed me to recruit during Comic Book Literacy Day (March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011), a library program that consisted of many different activities targeting young patrons related to comics. That day I was

approached by many nine- to twelve-year-old children who were very eager to talk about comics, pointing to a future possible research population. This site was especially productive at recruiting what I defined as “random” participants, three participants that replied to my recruitment tools and were not referred by gatekeepers.

**3. The University of Western Ontario.** At the university I targeted two different groups of students: undergraduate students from the Media, Information and Technology program and graduate students from the Master in Library and Information Science. In both cases I visited required courses to access the largest possible population. The choice of this site was a decision made based on convenience. Even though it would probably be easier to recruit from this site, its exclusive or predominant use would have certainly skewed the results and decreased the diversity of the phenomenon. I was very attentive to this possibility and soon after recruiting five MIT students I decided not to continue recruiting in this program.

#### 3.3.4 Access: Recruitment methods

Discussions about recruitment and sampling are core to any qualitative research manual; for the most part, these manuals offer general steps to follow and provide a combination of expected practices and possible missteps. Youth research tends to focus these discussions on the difficulty of recruiting, especially with “at-risk,” “troubled,” or “in trouble” populations. My research does map directly to these populations, although comics reading is a practice that has been disregarded and seen to have marginal value for mainstream society. I would like to reflect about the difficulties and successes of the recruiting process that I think might be valuable for other youth researchers.

One important issue for both the researcher and the potential participant is to define the inclusion/exclusion criteria, to reduce the waste of time and frustration for both parties. In my case, my criteria were as follows:

- Inclusion criteria: age, diversity of comics taste, and reading experience.

- Exclusion criterion: unique focus on superhero comics reading.

These criteria were easy to communicate verbally to gatekeepers; however, it proved to be more challenging to indicate on printed materials, especially without emphasizing the one negative criterion. My concerns at the possibility of highlighting this negative criterion was that it might alienate potential participants or inadvertently create a negative or exclusionary image of my research project in a wary community. Therefore, I decided to focus the text on the inclusion criteria and emphasize the importance of the idea of diversity. I used my knowledge about comics titles combined with genres and titles mentioned by the participants in the pilot project (Cedeira Serantes 2009) to reflect a wide spectrum of readings and attitudes towards comics. Based on those ideas I developed the flyer and poster that can be found in Appendix B. Both tools proved invaluable at recruiting participants especially in the library setting where three participants explicitly mentioned flyers or posters as their reason to contact me.

Although I have already mentioned the crucial role that gatekeepers played in the development of my sample, I want to re-visit it in respect to MacDougall's emphasis on the importance of having relationships in the community to recruit participants when they belong to communities that are hard to have access to or to identify (MacDougall and Fudge 2001, 119-120). It was extremely helpful that gatekeepers felt a personal connection with the research project either because of their involvement with comics or with teenagers (MacDougall and Fudge 2001, 122). In my relationships with gatekeepers I found that it was critical to clearly communicate the project, to be always open to address their concerns, to establish and be responsible of maintaining a constant line of communication and also to always seriously consider their advice. For example, during the meeting I participated in with the London Youth Service Providers several program coordinators asked me to be more precise about what my methodology entailed, especially in relation to time commitment and the type of interviewing. They already had in mind some participants but they were assessed as

special needs cases and the coordinators wanted to know if I was interested and prepared to conduct interviews with them. Although I was extremely interested in interviewing those teenagers, I expressed some concern for my lack of professional expertise to be able to successfully carry a quite abstract, potentially unstructured, and long interview with them. A sincere and direct conversation with the gatekeepers avoided what could be a frustrating situation for the teens.

From these reflections about sampling and recruiting emerge the difficulties and challenges of locating both young adults and readers. The recruitment of teenagers and young adults is clearly addressed in the literature. However, less often one can find discussion about the complexity of finding specific groups of readers or individual readers who do not participate in social activities, leaving aspects of the reading experience uncharted.

### 3.3.5 Ethical issues

In a comprehensive but unsystematic literature review, Allmark et al. (2009) examine the main ethical issues related to the use of in-depth interviewing as a research method in qualitative studies. The authors identified privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, harm, the researcher's role and involvement, and power relationships as crucial issues to be considered by reviewing committees and researchers themselves when setting up a study. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) also offer engaging insights to the matter of ethical guidelines. Their approach to the aforementioned issues is to conceptualize them as "files of uncertainty" and, instead of trying to solve them, qualitative researchers should remain "*open to the dilemmas, ambivalences, and conflicts that are bound to arise throughout the research process*" (69, italics in the original). This approach is closely connected to the use of reflexivity and how the qualitative researcher should take a reflective position in all possible stages of the research process.

I have already addressed the issue of my role as a researcher in the section about conducting research with children and teenagers. Here, I discuss topics of anonymity and confidentiality, informed consent, and power relations.

The protection of anonymity and confidentiality is a critical ethical issue in youth research and a “normative given” (Tilley and Woodthorpe 2011, 209) or a “monolithic given” in qualitative research (Kelly 2009, 444). Even though Tilley and Woodthorpe (2011) and Kelly (2009) agree on the fixed and powerful status of anonymity in research, they defend different approaches to its role (or lack of it) that reveal a healthy and needed debate about this topic. Tilley and Woodthorpe (2011) present a practical approach to the topic and reflect on how anonymity can conflict with dissemination demands, accountability issues, and knowledge transfer, especially in connection with funding bodies. On the other hand, Kelly defends different levels of anonymity in direct connection with the research project claiming that it should be a concept in constant review.

In the case of this research project, to protect the anonymity of the participants I asked them to choose a pseudonym which I used throughout the entire research process and dissemination of results. However, some questions arose during the data collection process that prompted me to reflect about this issue. A participant-centered approach asks of the researcher to be aware of the possibility that some of the participants might not desire to be anonymous. This indeed happened in this dissertation project; during the pre-interview process many participants expressed surprise at having to choose a pseudonym. Moreover, allowing participants to choose their own pseudonyms is often constructed as a way of including participants in the process, but what is the value of this choice when is not exercised? What is the value of protecting anonymity when the majority of your participants actually would want to take ownership of their words and their experiences? In my case, just five participants chose their own pseudonyms, but even those questioned the issue. As a researcher working with youth I felt compelled to give my participants ownership of their



participation, but clearly choosing a pseudonym was not a step in the right direction. I do not consider my research topic especially sensitive or the population I worked with as in a clearly vulnerable position; therefore, avoiding anonymity could have been an option. However, the role and relative importance of personal anonymity was relevant in the case of this project because I had already requested permission to avoid site anonymity. I realized that not assigning pseudonyms to the sites might facilitate the process of deductive disclosure, but I decided not to do so for the following reasons. Full anonymity is challenging to acquire in qualitative studies that require fieldwork and personal contact with participants (Homan 1991; Nespor 2000; Walford 2002, 2005). Nespor (2000) has actually described the process of anonymization as “blackboxed” because of its natural and unquestioned application in qualitative research. In the following paragraphs I attempt to open this “black box” to justify the avoidance of pseudonyms in research sites and places.

Two factors supported my decision to keep the names of sites identifiable:

1. The research sites were crucial to provide access to a diversity of readers.

Because of this, I considered it crucial to provide clear, relevant and useful information about these sites so the reader can discern their potential roles for the participants. Walford (2005) considers that keeping places anonymous obstructs the process of justifying and showing the research interest and relevancy of the site (87).

2. Nespor (2000) supports the disclosure of places because it shows “how economic, political, cultural, and institutional practices produce places and organize them into landscapes within which (or through which) participants, researchers, and readers can jointly orient themselves” (557). In the case of my research, the particular characteristics of these libraries, comics stores, and the university bring different factors to the discussion of what a comics reader is.

I conclude this discussion about anonymity and confidentiality with the words of Wolcott about qualitative research: “To present [qualitative research] material in such a way that even the people central to the study are ‘fooled’ by it is to risk removing those

very aspects that make it vital, unique, believable, and at times painfully personal” (1973, 4). This quote summarizes the thought that guided my hesitations about anonymity. My goal was to maintain a balance between issues that might affect the participants and those that affect the research project itself to create a study that offers both an opportunity to participants to speak in a safe environment and also to ensure a solid and informative research project.

Informed consent is another tool in the process of developing a research project that complies with ethical research. The goal of informed consent is to communicate to the participant the overall purpose of the project and explain the basic steps in the design, as well as possible risks and benefits of her participation in the project (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 70; Seidman 2006, 60-61). Consent documents were developed to comply with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC 1998) as applied at The University of Western Ontario. I also reviewed the forms developed by Rothbauer (2004) and Kofmel (2002) in their doctoral work and the recommendations outlined by Seidman (2006, 60-77). In the case of research with minors, especially children, informed consent should be signed by both the participants and the parent or legal guardian. For this research project, it was important to waive parental/guardian permission. In section 2.1, the guidelines from the Tri-Council (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC 1998) establish five conditions needed to waive the parental/guardian consent:

- The research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects;
- The waiver or alteration is unlikely to adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects;
- The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration;
- Whenever possible and appropriate, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation; and
- The waived or altered consent does not involve therapeutic intervention.

Grisso (1992) also analyzes instances where provision for waiver of parental/guardian involvement is appropriate. His conclusions are similar to those presented by the Tri-Council document but he notes two other exceptions that focus on the participant:

- Parental consent will not operate to protect the child.
- The maturity of the minor makes parental consent superfluous.

The reasons presented to bypass parental consent in this research project were based on three conditions. First, because of their age the participants can be classified as mature minors who have independent decision-making capabilities (Grisso 1992, 121; Tymchuk, 1992, 129). Second, the requirement of parental/guardian permission might reveal a reading interest that is still not unanimously approved and supported by educators, parents, and society in general. Ross (1995) commented on a shared clandestine feeling which readers of series book experienced during their childhood and adolescence. This feeling grows out of their need to escape the vigilant gaze of disapproving adults; series book reading becomes something that children and teenagers fully share with their peer group and becomes part of their culture, an activity that excludes adults. Although comics are slowly gaining a certain consideration, sharing this reading interest might not be desired or comfortable for participants. Finally, the research project entailed minimal risk for participants and they might benefit from sharing their reading experience with an adult who values and shares their reading taste.

During data collection I experienced a situation that confirmed my position about parental consent. During my Saturday morning visits at the comics store I often encountered parents visiting the store with their sons and daughters. Instead of approaching the youngsters directly, I decided that it would be more respectful and safe to approach the parents for permission. I explained my research project to the parents and they often directed me to the teens themselves to make a decision about it. However, in three cases the parents did not allow me to talk to the youngsters and

did not offer any further explanation for this decision. I did not pursue any further contact with these teens but I observed one collecting a flyer from the store counter.

Although most of my participants were over eighteen years of age, it is still relevant to discuss the issue of power asymmetry, especially as addressed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, 33-34). As a specific professional conversation, they detect the following potential problems in the research interview:

- The interview entails an asymmetrical power relation: the interviewer defines the complete interview process (situation, topic, questions, possible follow up, and termination).
- The interview is a one-way dialogue: the role of the interviewer is to ask and the role of the interviewee is to answer.
- The interview is an instrumental dialogue: the conversation is a tool to gather descriptions, narratives, texts and not a goal in itself.
- The interview may be a manipulative dialogue.
- The interviewer has a monopoly of interpretation.

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), the issue of power is hard to eliminate from the process but a reflective process about the role of power in the production of the new knowledge can help to ameliorate possible constraints. Raby (2007) stresses the importance of the issue of power relations in projects where children and adolescents are participants. She recommends the use of participatory action research when possible, as a method that allows adolescents to be social agents instead of mere objects of study. For cases where this method is not appropriate she points to feminist methodologies such as "open-ended interviews, an acceptance of participants' experiences, disclosure of research aims, researcher reflexivity, and returning transcripts to interviewees for comments" (54). These techniques were considered and included in the design of this research project. I always communicated clearly with my participants about my reasons and intentions for embarking on this research project

and in some cases they expressed an interest in my future career and the role of this research on it.

As a researcher it was important for me to establish some sort of reciprocity mechanism (Eder and Fingerson 2002) with my participants. For example, it was captivating to see one way of reciprocity in action, especially with readers who did not share a large network of readers and were excited to share their experiences. This is a practical example where adolescents can receive something from their participation in the study, for instance, "a greater sense of empowerment, a greater understanding of their own experiences, or both" (185-186). I believe that this opportunity also brought a sense of validation and respect for their reading habits and personal taste. This approach is close to that defended by Seidman who sees the only form of reciprocity possible as that "which flows from my interest in participants' experience, my attending to what they say, and my honouring of their words when I present their experience to a larger public" (2006, 109). Beyond this, I always offered participants reader's advisory services. Participants took advantage of this offer in different ways: during the interview time, later on over email, or especially during the thinking-aloud protocol. In two cases, participants also expressed the need to learn more about how to find comics in the University library.

My intention was to bring to the interview process a sense of acceptance, respect and value towards the experience of reading comics and my hope was that sharing that feeling with participants created and sustained this idea of reciprocity. The only "measure" that I can bring to show my success is the nine participants who actively engaged with their transcripts, elaborating some ideas, correcting comics information, and providing further clarification to some questions I posed by email. In the end, the purpose of this research project was to understand the experience of reading comics, a marginalized experience that is not highly valued in several sectors of society. Thus, I hope that a project like this one will increase awareness and understanding for these readers, especially in cultural and educational institutions.

The goal of this section's discussion was to reflect about the process of keeping a balance between issues that might affect the participants and those that affect the research project itself. My final goal was to create a study that provided participants with an opportunity to speak in a non-judgmental environment at the same time that I developed a solid and rigorous research project.

### 3.4 Data collection methods

#### 3.4.1 Interviewing

"The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subject's point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 1). This statement summarizes the appropriateness for my project of Kvale and Brinkmann's approach to qualitative interviewing. Since the use of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach denotes my interest in exploring, describing and interpreting the social phenomenon of reading comics from the perspective of the readers themselves, the most appropriate methodological technique to use is one that privileges the voices of the readers over theories and structures.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, 109) posit that the semi-structured lifeworld interview is based on the idea that knowledge is neither in the interviewee nor in the researcher but in the process they share where they are co-constructors of knowledge. The authors represent this idea with the concept of the "inter-view," a social and inter-subjective approach to interviewing (2009, 18). The process itself is close to a conversation, but because of its professional or scholarly purpose, it follows a specific pattern and technique (2009, 27):

- It is semi-structured because it pursues a balance between the open everyday life conversation and the closed and fixed questionnaire.
- It uses an interview guide that provides a structure, centers the interview themes and contains possible questions.

- Its transcription and sound recording, in combination with observations, other textual artefacts and journal notes, constitute the materials to analyze for meaning.

The final interview guide is provided in Appendix B. This guide was extremely helpful to keep the interview focused. In the development of the script I followed the suggestions given by Kvale and Brinkmann about how to conceptualize this type of interviewing document: it includes thematic questions that help to produce knowledge and dynamic questions that help to build rapport and a relationship between interviewer and interviewee (2009, 131). I would like to highlight the success of the first two questions, and especially the one about their history as comics readers, as both thematic and dynamic questions. Although I conceived of them as dynamic, they proved to be critical questions. The answers provided by the participants acted as shared knowledge, almost as building blocks, between the participants and me. We used them heavily to build rapport and we also referred to them in comparison with answers provided to other questions. It is also important to balance abstract questions with more tangible ones, allowing the participants and me to talk about the experience of reading comics from different angles (Van Manen 1997, 66-67). The guide was modified on two occasions to add questions about reading comics in print and digital forms and questions about good and bad reading experiences. I consciously considered the inclusion of these topics after the analysis of the first five interviews. This corresponds to the iterative design of the project.

Although I embraced my role as an active listener it was not done without difficulty. In some cases it was quite demanding to recognize the "situational clues" that would allow me to shift directions during the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 139; Seidman 2006, 81). My handling of this role certainly improved after several interviews but I would like to mention the emotional work that this interviewing style requires. Finding a balance between keeping a conversational style and staying focused on research questions is not an easy task. Achieving this balance is not the only factor

influencing the length of the interviews, but I think there is still a correlation. The longest interview happened to be with the penultimate participant and lasted for 120 minutes while the first interview was the shortest with 47 minutes. The average length was 70 minutes and eight interviews lasted for longer than one hour. I did not feel satisfied with my comfort and interview style until my fourth interview, providing another reason to continue recruiting beyond the first signs of saturation.

In my research proposal one of the actions that I connected to the iterative design was the process of transcribing each interview before proceeding to the next. This intention quickly seemed almost unmanageable, especially because of the unpredictable flow in the recruiting process. However, I found alternative ways of staying close to the interview data. I listened to the interviews at least three times before finishing the transcribing process. During that process, I recorded notes that I included in the transcribing process that helped later in the analysis stage. I also happened to hit a hard recruiting stage after eight interviews, a time that I employed to transcribe and analyze those interviews and also disseminate some emerging results.

I always offered the interviewees the option of choosing a place that they were comfortable with. Working with teenagers, Eder and Fingerson mention this approach as fundamental, especially seeking places where they feel comfortable and safe, or with which they are already familiar (2002, 183-184). However, it was particularly helpful to have some options in mind since they often seemed not to have preferences for any particular place. Probably this situation also speaks to the participants' comfort with the research topic.

I conducted all interviews in public places (e.g., coffee shop, library, university, and market). As much as possible I tried to conduct the interviews at sites that were close to other possible places to carry out the thinking-aloud protocol. The proximity to the two sites facilitated the development of an observational activity to support triangulation of data. As I will discuss later this proved to be a good tactic. Also, after my ninth interview I was experiencing some issues with the recording sound, so I



proposed to conduct the interviews at private rooms at the public library or the university library. I did not do it without hesitation, thinking that it might impose an excessive sense of formality. To my surprise, all of the last eight participants embraced that option and I conducted the interviews in those spaces. I do not have grounds for comparison but it is interesting to note how participants quickly owned that private space. They occupied the table with comics if they brought them or even ate during the interview.

The interviews were audio-recorded. Although Seidman notes the controversy over this recording process, he encourages it for in-depth interviews since the participants' thoughts "become embodied in their words" and summarizing or paraphrasing would compromise the interpretation (2006, 114). The transcription was verbatim, barely omitting any verbal information and just in some cases omitting off-topic conversation. Since the intended use of these transcripts is not a linguistic or conversational analysis, verbal and nonverbal signs such as false starts, or coughs were not transcribed unless considered relevant for the overall understanding of the conversation. Member checking was sought to ensure the trustworthiness of the data; I emailed a copy of the transcript to each participant and received replies from nine participants. One of them provided just corrections, while the other seven commented on their transcript and answered several questions where I asked them to elaborate some ideas.

### 3.4.2 Think-aloud protocols

Think-aloud protocols are a commonly used research method in studies about information seeking and retrieval evaluation in LIS (Oh and Wildemuth 2009). Think-aloud protocols have been widely used to study the "search tactics, processes, and strategies of people who are seeking information (Oh and Wildemuth 2009, 179). It is interesting to note that this method is often used in combination with other methods; in LIS studies, these other methods have primarily been transaction logs and interviews. In relation to the possibilities of this technique, Branch (2000, 2001)

confirmed its suitability for gathering information-seeking data and encouraged its use for exploring other topics in library and information science (121). In the case of this project, this method was justified as a way to gather data that complemented the information produced during the semi-structured interviews.

Nursing is another field where think-aloud protocols have been widely applied. Fonteyn, Kuipers, and Grobe (1993) defend their use in problem-solving tasks. Combined with retrospective data, for example from interviews, it “provide[s] a fairly complete and detailed description of subjects’ reasoning during a problem-solving task” (440). Aitken and Mardegan (2000) also indicated that thinking aloud, associated with concurrent and retrospective verbal reports, “offers the advantage of providing an accurate presentation of the decision-making processes” (852).

The goal of this study is not explicitly related to the participants’ information gathering or information selection processes. However, I expected these activities to activate the many and diverse issues that impact and surround the act of reading. Some of these factors, based on Ross’s studies (2001, 1999), might be: the role of the art versus the text in comics; the knowledge about publishers, authors, and artists; the importance and sources of recommendations; and the differences between sites of access and the staff working at those sites. The data collected in this activity was not as critical as expected, but the activity itself proved to be very valuable. Through this activity the participants and I established a different rapport. They requested recommendations and shared some of their favourite readings and creators in a more relaxed manner. It became a moment where they reinforced or elaborated on their thoughts. During the interview sometimes it was complicated for participants to explain certain details because of the lack of comics. It seemed to be reassuring for them when I mentioned the possibility of revisiting those topics again during the activity. This activity also became a perfect moment to enact reciprocity since the majority of participants requested my opinion about past, present, and future readings and other culture related matters.

I did not expect participants to be uncomfortable with the audio recording of this activity. However, the carrying out of the activity was much different than an interview. Although I thought that writing notes would be more intrusive than using the recorder, some of the first participants seemed more uncomfortable with the idea of being followed around with a recorder while speaking about comics. No participant expressed this clearly or in a direct manner but during the first activities, participants were very conscious about the presence of the recorder. Maybe the use of a small portable microphone could have solved the issue but I did not think about it at the time and decided to take brief notes while we conversed.

### 3.4.3 Establishing rapport

The goal of in-depth interviews is to understand a phenomenon from the participants' perspective and to achieve that goal, establishing rapport is crucial. Seidman (2006) conceives rapport as a "balancing act [that] implies getting along with each other, a harmony with, a conformity to, an affinity for one another" (96). The relationship to be established should be friendly but not a friendship.

In a study about the voluntary reading practices of self-identified lesbian, bisexual and queer young women, Rothbauer (2004) brings together a series of strategies to build rapport with a sensitive and young population of participants (38-42). I used her strategies on the design of my project and now I reflect on their relevance and efficacy for my own project:

1. Provide a clear statement about the interview's purpose, my expectations of the participants and my own role during the interview. I discussed these elements with the participants; I especially emphasized that they did not have to reply to any question they were uncomfortable with and that what I was interested in was their experience, therefore there were no right or wrong answers, just their story.
2. Self-disclosure: the participants in Rothbauer's research project were lesbian and queer young women, thus sharing the researcher's own sexual orientation was a successful strategy for building rapport (38-39). Although it did not have the

same importance or value as in Rothbauer's project, I shared my own story as a comics reader when I considered it useful or necessary. I believe that showing that I had a sincere interest in the medium helped to create a cordial and respectful environment.

3. Issues of confidentiality: reassuring the participants that their confidentiality will be protected helps to create a safe environment for sharing. However, Rothbauer notes that a strong emphasis on this issue also brought a certain initial discomfort to participants because it added excessive gravity to the process. As I have explored previously when examining anonymity and confidentiality, I shared the same experience as Rothbauer. They did not understand the necessity of a pseudonym. As well, some participants expressed curiosity for the length and detail of the informed consent.

4. Invitations and requests to meet again if desired or needed: Follow-up meetings were not necessary except in one case. For the rest, other questions were satisfactorily addressed through email exchanges.

5. Participant control over locations and times for the interviews: in Rothbauer's study, just one participant chose the interviewing location; the rest were chosen by the interviewer. I also shared her experience. In most cases it was a process of negotiation where the participants relied on my expertise to offer some options and they made a decision based on those options.

#### 3.4.4 Other representations of the phenomenon

The main source of information in hermeneutic phenomenology is the human being who experiences the phenomenon that is the object of the research. However, this is not the only source of information. Creswell highlights the role that "depictions of the experience outside the context of research projects" has to understand the multiple layers that construct a certain experience (Creswell 2007, 61-62). He mentions diverse sources such as descriptions from novels or poetry or representations in paintings or choreographies. In similar but more specific terms, Van Manen lists several sources that can be potential sources of data, highlighting the role of literary and

artistic depictions (1997, 70, 74). In some cases the researcher collects these representations and in other cases the participants themselves provide them as part of their understanding of the phenomenon.

I am aware of the importance of media culture in our society and how it influences our construction or understanding of certain experiences. Because of this I actively scanned media products to collect and potentially use the diverse representations of comics reading and readers available in popular culture. These representations can be found in many formats, some of which are comics, documentaries, television shows, and novels. I did not study these materials following any systematic methodology, such as discourse analysis, but I was attentive to any replication or connection between any conceptualization in these representations and information provided during the interviews. For example, increasingly television shows refer to comics as graphic novels and they still also perpetuate the stereotypes and practices of comics fans over other kinds of readers. A perfect case of this example is the show *Big Bang Theory*, mentioned by several participants. The show mixes geek and comics culture, focuses on superhero comics and collection practices, and the experience of reading comics is often equated with the memorization of superhero mythology. Other examples of television shows with comics creators, readers, or comics-related plots are:

- *Bones*. Season 1, episode 12: The Superhero in the Alley.
- *Castle*. Season 2, episode 06: Vampire Weekend. Season 4, Episode 02: Heroes and Villains. This television show is also an extraordinary case of media synergy where one of the novels created by the fictional author and main protagonist is adapted and published as a graphic novel. Its release is publicized during the Heroes and Villains episode when Castle visits a comics store as part of the investigation.
- *Criminal Minds*. Season 3, episode 10: True Night.

- *Heroes*. Broadcast from 2006 to 2010. The show's plot and production was rooted in superhero narratives and aesthetics. Also, NBC created a series of graphic novels linked to the show and available through the show's website.
- *The O.C.* Broadcast from 2001 to 2007. Especially during seasons 2 and 3 the show focuses on the interest that one of the main characters, Seth Cohen, has for comics. He even creates his own title *Atomic County*.
- *Smallville*. Broadcast from 2001 to 2010.
- *The Walking Dead*. Broadcasted from 2010 to present.

It is also impossible to deny the influence that movie adaptations have on how readers' experience or understand the world of comics. In my interview schedule I included a question about the similarities and differences between experiencing a book, a comic, and a movie. Even though I included it towards the end of the schedule, the topic of movie adaptations and their influence on discovering comics often emerged earlier in the interview. The following list is not meant to be comprehensive, but it includes many of the movies adapted from comics that opened in the past six years:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| • Ratner, Brett. Director. 2006. <i>X-Men: The Last Stand</i> .                | • Wright, Edgar. Director. 2010. <i>Scott Pilgrim vs. the World</i> .                   |
| • McTeigue, James. Director. 2006. <i>V for Vendetta</i> .                     | • Vaughn, Matthew. Director. 2010. <i>Kick-Ass</i> .                                    |
| • Satrapi, Marjane. Director. 2007. <i>Persepolis</i> .                        | • Favreau, Jon. Director. 2010. <i>Iron Man 2</i> .                                     |
| • Snyder, Zack. Director. 2007. <i>300</i> .                                   | • Schwentke, Robert. Director. 2010. <i>Red</i> .                                       |
| • Story, Tim. Director. 2007. <i>Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer</i> | • Besson, Luc. Director. 2010. <i>The Extraordinary Adventures of Adèle Blanc-Sec</i> . |
| • Raimi, Sam. Director. 2007. <i>Spider-</i>                                   | • Ketai, Ben. Director. 2010. <i>30 Days of</i>   |

Man 3.

- Johnson, Mark Steven. Director. 2007.

*Ghost Rider.*

- Toro, Guillermo del. Director. 2008.

*Hellboy II: The Golden Army.*

- Leterrier, Louise. Director. 2008. *The Incredible Hulk.*

- Favreau, Jon. Director. 2008. *Iron Man.*

- Bekmambetov, Timur. Director. 2008. *Wanted.*

- Znyder, Zack. Director. 2009. *Watchmen.*

- Sena, Dominic. Director. 2009. *Whiteout.*

- Hood, Gavin. Director. 2009. *X-Men Origins: Wolverine.*

- Mostow, Jonathan. Director. 2009. *Surrogates.*

- Hayward, Jimmy. Director. 2010. *Jonah Hex.*

- White, Sylvain. Director. 2010. *The Losers.*

*Night: Dark Days.*

- Vaughn, Matthew. Director. 2011. *X-Men: First Class.*

- Spielberg, Steve. Director. 2011. *The Adventures of Tintin: Secret of the Unicorn.*

- Favreau, Jon. Director. 2011. *Cowboys & Aliens.*

- Branagh, Kenneth. Director. 2011. *Thor.*

- 

- Campbell, Martin. Director. 2011. *Green Lantern.*

- Gosnell, Raja. Director. 2011. *The Smurfs.*

- Whedon, Joss. Director. 2012. *The Avengers.*

- Nolan, Christopher. Director. 2012. *The Dark Knight Rises.*

- Webb, Marc. Director. 2012. *The Amazing Spider-Man.*

**Table 5: List of movie adaptations 2006-2012**

Finally, I tried to participate in any comics related activity that happened in my city. As well, I found especially interesting my visits to the Toronto Comics Arts Festival

in 2009, 2010, and 2011. This festival reminded me of other small festivals I have previously attended in Spain and Brussels where the focus of the convention is not primarily superhero comics. Also, for example, European and Japanese creators are regular visitors and webcomics always have a reserved spot in the festival. Although I did not use these materials and experiences in any systematic manner during the interview process, it was extremely useful to have them as part of my personal knowledge and life experience when interviewing. When the interview process is as fluid and reactive as in this study, I never knew when a certain piece of information could be helpful to draw a comparison, connect several thoughts, or help elaborate a difficult point.

### 3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology is a process focused on the text, reading the text and re-writing it to bring to life the co-constructed knowledge of the researcher and the participant and to finally create a phenomenological text (Van Manen 1997, 111; Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 81). The process that guides this kind of analytical effort takes different forms, but, as Lavert notes, it is not a “finite set of procedures” since it arises from “pre-understandings and a dialectical movement between the parts and the whole of the texts of those involved” (2003, 30). Thankfully for novice researchers some scholars have found defined a series of step to guide this analysis. The steps I followed were inspired by the suggestions developed by Cohen, Kahn and Steeves (2000, 76-82) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2000, 201-217). The documents produced during and after the interview are the following:

- Eighteen audio files, nineteen hours and forty-five minutes in total length. There is one participant whose interview ended up divided in two files because the audio recorder ran out of batteries. Between my notes and the interview guide, the participants and myself managed to locate and explore again the two topics lost because of the technical issue.



- Thirty four text files: there are two files for each participant. One file contains simply the transcription. The total number of pages for those files is 282 pages. The second file contains the transcription, the notes from the think-aloud protocols, the information from the emails I received from the participants and my analytical work. The page count for those files is 408.
- Three field notes notebooks: these notebooks accompanied me to interviews, conferences, and events that might be relevant for my topic of research. Relevant information for analysis was included in the participant file.

According to Cohen, Kahn and Steeves, at the core of this process is the movement from the field text to the creation of a text that stands alone in front of an unfamiliar reader (2000, 76). These scholars also point at the artificial linearity that such process takes in many cases. They avow that the core of these analytical steps should always be the circular and dynamic design that hermeneutical phenomenology implies. These are the five steps they suggest:

- Active listening and thinking about meaning and development of tentative labels.
- Immersing oneself in the data.
- Data reduction: work with the text to eliminate digressions or verbal tics and, for instance, place together discussions about the same topic.
- Thematic analysis: this phase entails line-by-line coding and deep work with the text to identify themes, bring together pieces of texts about the same themes, and identify exemplars that capture essential meanings of themes.
- Writing and rewriting: the exemplars aforementioned are summarized and re-written to try to gain insight and understanding of the participants' experience.

For the analysis of interviewing material, Kvale and Brinkmann differentiate between general approaches and specific analytical tools. The former mix different

methods and techniques or focus on more theoretically informed interpretations; thus knowledge about the subject matter plays a more central role. The latter tend to rely on a single mode of analysis and a set of procedures or rather definitive steps (231). In the case of my research project I combined the approach that they defined as bricolage (231-235) and the techniques of meaning condensation (205-207) and meaning interpretation (213-217).

According to Kvale and Brinkmann, the bricolage interpreter “adapts mixed technical discourses, moving freely between different analytic techniques and concepts” (233). In my case, I combined approaches suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann and Cohen, Kahn and Steeves. Bricolage helped to strengthen the process of bringing out significant connections and potential structures in the text. I also used this approach to attempt to maintain a bird’s eye view over the data, especially after the first phase of analysis. This perspective and making constant contrasts/comparisons allowed me to construct themes that truly emerged from the participants’ data. As well, I have used charts and diagrams to visualize the emerging meanings, to support a virtual dialog between different participants’ contributions, and to develop the visual metaphor I explore in my discussion about the reading experience.

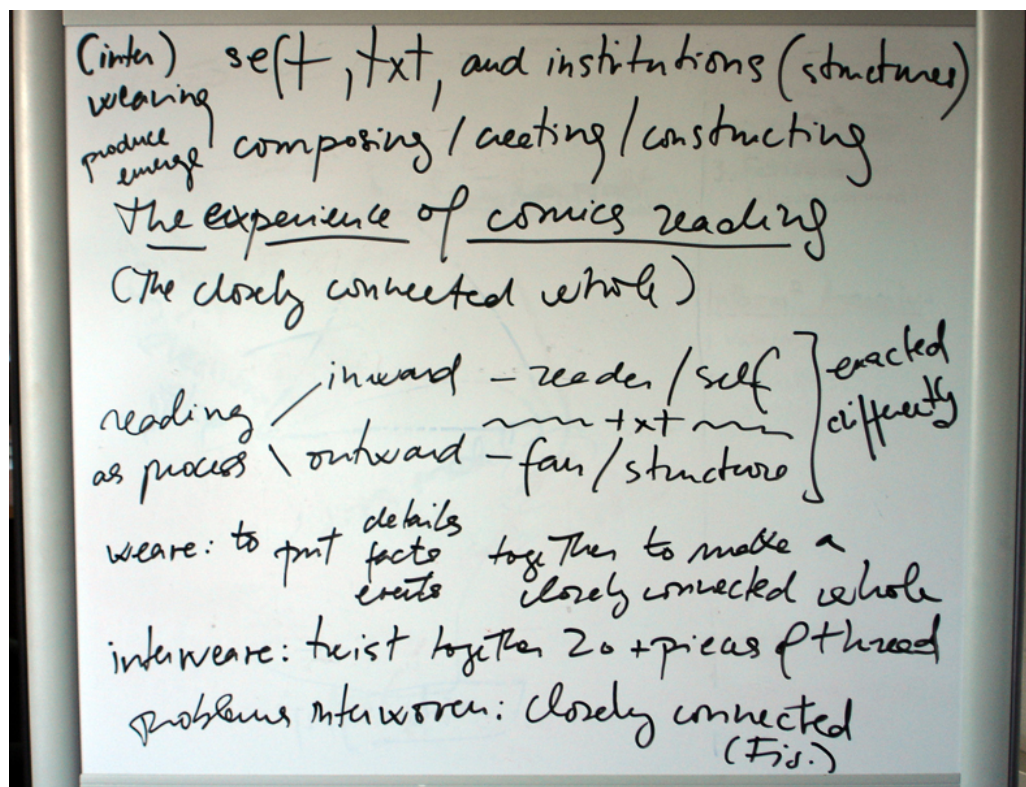


Figure 1: Board with ideas for reading as fabric

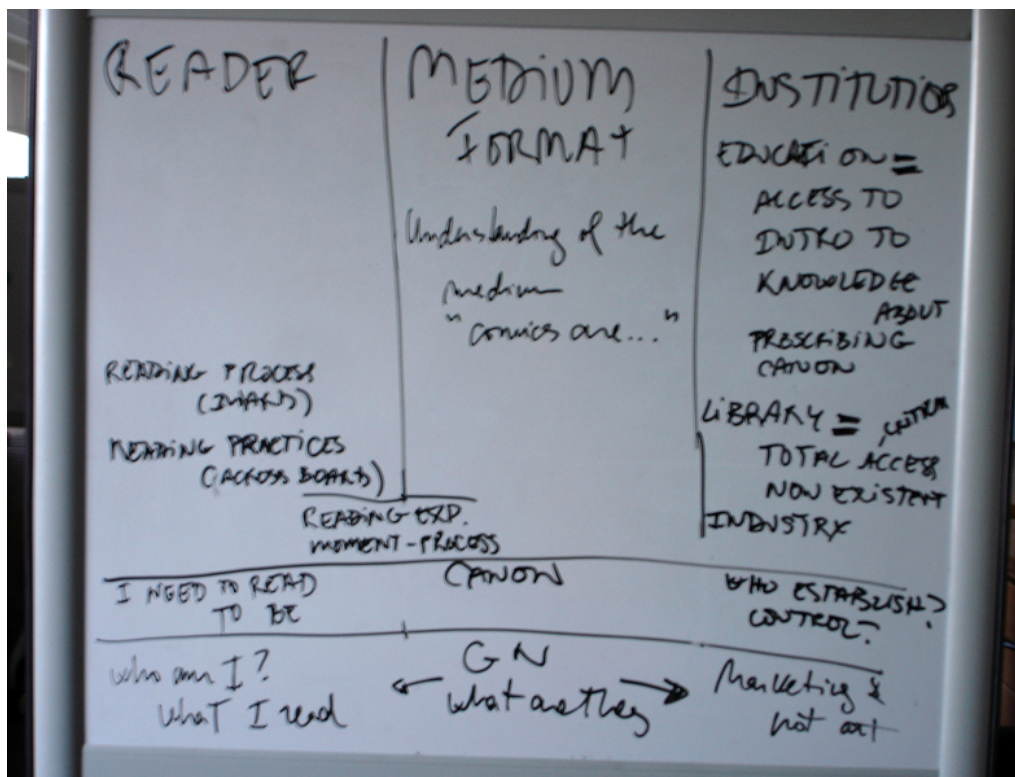


Figure 2: Board with ideas for reading and space/place

Meaning condensation “entails an abridgment of the meaning expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations” (205). It is similar to Cohen, Kahn and Steeves data reduction phase, but Kvale and Brinkmann offer a more detailed explanation of the process, guiding the work of a novice researcher:

- Reading the interview through to get a sense of the whole;
- Determining meaning units as expressed by the participants;
- Restating the themes of the natural meaning units from the participant’s point of view but as understood by the researcher;
- Interrogating the meaning units according to the purpose of the study; and
- Creating a descriptive statement that ties together the essential, non-redundant themes.

Meaning condensation was complemented with meaning interpretation. The second technique stands out in Kvale and Brinkmann's examination; they approach it from different points of view, even providing an enlightening discussion about the idea of *real* meaning (217-218). I was particularly taken by their exploration of the different contexts of interpretation and their influence in the process of questioning the text. The role of the different contexts connects directly with issues of reflexivity and trustworthiness of data. These are the three interpretational contexts that Kvale and Brinkmann explore:

**1. Self-understanding:** this first context keeps the interpretation close to participant understanding and connects directly with the work done in meaning condensation. The form of validation of this interpretation is obtained through member checking. As I have mentioned previously, nine participants actively engaged with their transcripts and helped me in the process of analyzing their contributions.

**2. Critical common-sense understanding:** this context widens the frame of understanding and it can be implemented in different ways since the only premise is to extend the understanding beyond the participant but without applying any theoretical or academic prism. Kvale and Brinkmann do not clearly identify the community of validation for this content, simply defining it as "audience validation" in contrast with member and peer validation for the other two contexts. My approach to this issue was to collapse my validation system for this context and the following one, distinguishing them on the basis of content rather than community. Therefore, I presented the tentative results of my research after nine participants as a poster at three different conferences. My goal with these presentations was to check the coherence and sense of the understandings that I was producing. Also, I often shared them with other PhD colleagues, seeking that idea of the critical common-sense.

**3. Theoretical understanding:** this context of interpretation brings a theoretical frame to the search for meaning. The scholars and arguments presented in the Literature Review section guided this project and in some way, I tried to set the voices

and arguments of my participants in contrast to some of those arguments. My intention in the project was to focus on the experiences narrated by the participants and to share their understandings, not to directly apply theoretical frameworks as the only way of creating meaning. However, towards the end of my analysis I detected a strong connection between the understandings of my participants and the field of New Literacy Studies. I pursue this connection in the concluding chapter. Community validation was sought from peers at the International Comics Art Festival, and especially from my supervisors, professors, and peers from the LIS and the Media Studies program at a graduate workshop.

The process of analysis required me to be constantly immersed in the data and working with my own thinking process, mainly in the form of writing. I kept the connection with data through listening and transcribing. I developed notes both in-text and off-text while transcribing. Tentative themes and categories emerged from each of the interviews. I kept those themes and categories in constant dialogue with each other, allowing space for the co-production of themes that connected aspects of their experiences as well as the development of a themes' structure. The singularity of the participants' thoughts and experiences with comics was always present and, as much as possible, highlighted in the analytical process. The way I understood this long and complex process was one where I was in front of an ensemble of data constituted by seventeen different pieces. I examined and understood each piece and also tried to build relationships among them. I used those relationships to analyze the initial whole from different perspectives, thus enriching my understanding and hopefully that of the potential reader. In my discussion, I tried to organize those relationships into a new whole, a new ensemble that honours and represents in a different manner the data I started with. Basically, this process describes in my own practice the effort to apply the steps that materialize the metaphor of the hermeneutic circle (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 72-74).

### 3.5.1 Themes

The idea of finding themes or thematic analysis is a constant in the interpretation of the text under hermeneutic phenomenology. Morgan (2011) and Van Manen (1997) explain themes in very similar terms. The former talks about them as “experiential similarities” (33) while the latter defines them as “structures of experience,” as tools that “[give] control and order to our research and writing” (79).

These themes do not emerge solely from the data, as in a coding process following grounded theory, but they arise from a collaborative process between the lived experience as understood in the participants’ narratives and the researcher’s lifeworld. This idea of co-constructing knowledge or co-developing themes is congruent with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Van Manen recognized that finding themes is not a simple skill that can be learned or taught (88). He makes several attempts to offer more concrete definitions or explanations of how themes connect to a phenomenological project or to the described phenomenon. In this process, he offers four qualities that try to get at how themes are emerging as “lived meanings” (88):

- Theme is the needfulness or desire to make sense.
- Theme is the sense we are able to make of something.
- Theme is the openness to something.
- Theme is the process of insightful invention, discovery, disclosure.

Understanding that the previous qualities might be rather abstract, but Van Manen also presents four ways in which the theme might relate to the phenomenon under study (88):

- Theme is the means to get at the notion.
- Theme gives shape to the shapeless.
- Theme describes the content of the notion.
- Theme is always a reduction of the notion.

These approaches are similar to the ones previously described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) although they combine them as a way of meaning condensation. In a sense all these authors are trying to offer a way to co-create meaning. Their differences are rather helpful, even complementary, for a novice researcher as myself who might need different ways to approach a task that is, at the same time, abstract, intimidating and satisfying.

Looking at my own process of developing themes, I can see an evolving pattern. After the analysis of the first nine interviews, I detected three preliminary and basic themes that I characterize as more descriptive than definitional. As a researcher I was still very much attached to my participants understanding:

1. **Perception of the medium:** The participants described the medium of comics as more experimental and riskier than other cultural and media products. However, they were also aware of the move towards the mainstream due to several factors, including the emergence and establishment of the term "graphic novel" and the movie adaptations from comics materials.
2. **Reading experience:** There is a difference between reading comics and engaging with other media products. For the most part, comics allow for a quick immersion in the plot without compromising the thickness or challenge of the storytelling.
3. **Role of the library:** This role varies tremendously among participants. For some the library is a crucial place to access their comics; for others it does not exist.

These following themes emerged after engaging in a longer analytical process, the constant re-reading and working of the texts, as well as the increase in the number of participants analyzed to fourteen:

1. **Self-identification and construction of comics experience:** this theme focusses on how participants construct and examine themselves as readers

of comics and how they describe the reading experience and connect it or detach it from other cultural products.

2. **Understanding of the form:** although I explicitly asked a question about the difference between comics and graphic novels, participants go beyond my question and undertake other issues of terminology and especially concerns about the comics industry, other media industries, and cultural creation in general.
3. **Institutions:** first I focused the results on the use of the library, but the idea of the influence of multiple institutions soon became evident. The family, the library, the school, and/or the university are places where comics' reading gets directly or indirectly introduced, encouraged, supported or even attacked.

In comparison with the final structure and themes reported in the analysis and discussion section, some of the themes remained stable while others became categories or part of the conceptualization of another theme.

Finally, from the beginning of the analysis I felt inclined to work with the themes in a visual way. This impulse became a critical part of my own understanding, especially when the themes were evolving to a more stable stage. The need to work visually with the themes came first, but I soon realized that this need was also responding to the necessity of creating a thematic structure, a pattern that connects themes so in conjunction they can highlight "important commonalities of lived experience from different angles" (Morgan 2011, 33). According to Morgan (2011), one of the advantages of complementing the analysis with some graphic illustration is that it "facilitates an overview of the total pattern, which a sequential written description may not do" (39). As I have been insisting from the beginning of this project, the idea is not to impose a scientific explanation over the participants' descriptions but "to look *with* participants at significant aspects of the experience in order to relate them to one another and to the experience as a whole" (40).



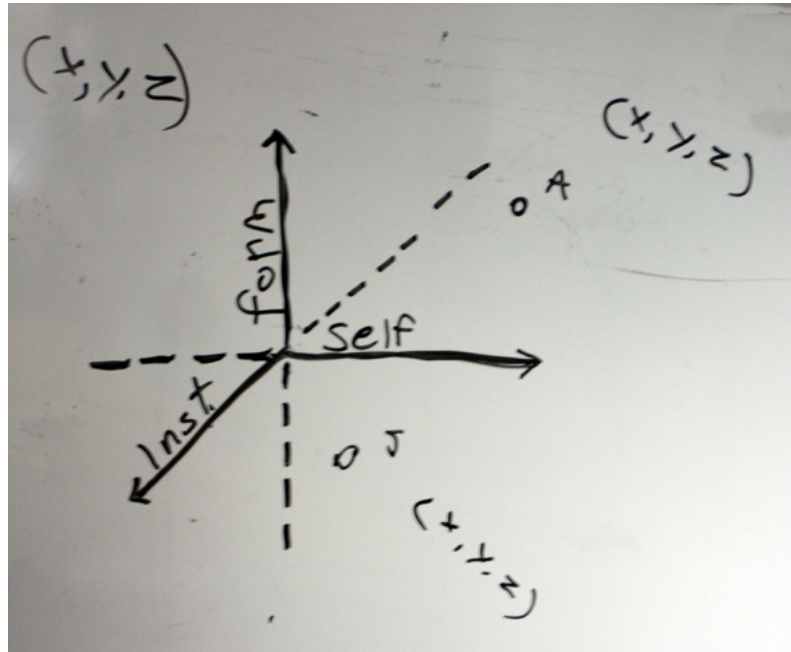


Figure 3: Draft of the visual representation of the theme structure

The intellectual struggle to create this visual representation was also critical to develop a deeper discussion and understanding of the metaphor of space/place within the reading experience which I discuss in the findings.

### 3.5.2 Trustworthiness

The concept of trustworthiness refers to the goodness or the quality of the data coming out of a naturalistic research project; it is the rough equivalent to the concepts of validity and reliability in positivistic research. Its aim is to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 290). Lincoln and Guba developed four criteria to judge it: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (1985, 294-301). They also recommended a series of actions or techniques that in different ways address those four criteria:

1. **Keeping a reflexive journal and taking field notes.** This technique is also core for the development of a project guided by reflexivity. It allows the researcher to note biases, expectations, hypotheses, and questions that arise previous to or during the research process (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 109, 281; Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000,

88; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 112-113). I collected field notes about relevant encounters during my visits to the comics store, comics conferences, and conventions. I also kept notes about the interviewing process. These notes effectively supported the reconstruction and reporting of the data collection and analysis process, especially pointing at relevant events or theoretical or methodological shifts (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 123-124).

**2. Using thick descriptions.** Thomas Schwandt (2007) states that “to thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode. It is this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick” (296). This technique is not strange to researchers under the phenomenological umbrella. Van Manen (1997, 152) and Cohen, Kahn and Steeves (2000, 72) note its use to create a text that presents and explores the phenomenon in its complexity. It also helps readers to make decisions about the applicability of the research methodology and the transferability of results to other contexts (Creswell 2007, 209; Lincoln and Guba 1985, 316). It is necessary for the qualitative researcher to always be true to the data and rich, thick descriptions support this important characteristic (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 16). Norman Denzin coined the phrase “thick interpretation” to emphasize the interpretive nature of this activity and has drawn on Geertz's later work to support the inseparability of description and interpretation. According to Ponterotto, thick descriptions allow for thick interpretations, and without thick interpretation “written reports of research will lack credibility and resonance with the research community, the research participants themselves, and with the wider audience of readers for whom the report is intended” (2006, 542). Thick description is present in my methodology section where I have attempted to describe my sample, the settings, and the procedures I have followed in order to situate my understanding and consequently the results. In this way I have tried to apply the notion that “thick description of results flows smoothly from a method section that is thickly presented” (Ponterotto 2006, 547).

**3. Member checking.** Lincoln and Guba consider member checking “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (1985, 314). It gives an opportunity to the participant to react to the data and the results of the research. The idea is that any disagreement or clarification will send the researcher back to the field and strengthen the exploration of the phenomenon (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 91). In my case, the feedback I received from participants was mainly explanatory, meaning that they expanded their thoughts about some question. With the transcriptions I also included some specific questions that pursue different objectives. In some cases I was looking to explore possible themes that had not been part of the first encounter; in other cases, I was looking for clarifications or further explanations. An example of some of these questions are:

- What does a perfect comic have to have? For example: type of story, type of art, feelings that it provokes;
- Describe a good reading experience and a bad one with comics;
- What do you think of reading comics over digital platforms such as tablets, iPhones or e-readers? Would you do it? If so, how does it differ from the experience of reading print comics?

**4. Peer debriefing and external audits.** These two activities represent the need for an external check in the research process. Cohen, Kahn and Steeves recognize the difficulty of hiring auditors for doctoral students or novice researchers because of financial reasons (2000, 91). However, the constant sharing with peers of barriers and success during the research process provided me with a safe space to keep me focussed on transparency and accountability. The role of the peer is described by Lincoln and Guba as that of a “devil’s advocate” who probes biases, explores meanings, and clarifies interpretations (1985, 308). Specifically for phenomenological research, Morgan (2011) points to the existence of an interpretative team as a requirement (69). This group provides critical feedback and provisional interpretations, and supports the long-term analytical process. I did not set up a formal interpretative group; however, my two supervisors did work very similar in spirit to that expected of an interpretative group.

Also, the same PhD colleagues that I previously mentioned in relation to providing “critical common-sense” became essential in the process of fleshing out the themes’ structure. Finally, I also consider my efforts to communicate my project in conferences as a form of peer debriefing.

**5. Triangulation.** Researchers implementing qualitative research projects tend to use triangulation as “a strategy that allows them to identify, explore, and understand different dimensions of the units of study, thereby strengthening their findings and enriching their interpretations” (Rothbauer 2008, 893). I triangulated methods of data collection and data sources, using both interviews and think-aloud protocols. As I mentioned previously in the section about think-aloud protocols, the information gathered in these activities was not as critical as expected but still played an integral role during the analysis process. The notes produced on those meetings confirmed and supplemented the information from the interviews.

The combination of these techniques supported the objective of creating a rich and accurate text so readers can understand my interpretation and at the same time also reach their own understanding (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 92).

To conclude this section, I list factors to be considered by LIS researchers who are carrying out naturalistic studies. The list emerges from the experience and reflections of three LIS researchers who examined the issue of gaining access in three of their own qualitative projects (Carey, McKechnie, and McKenzie 2001, 331-332):

- Respect for participants and their points of view.
- Respect for and sensitivity to the participants’ lifeworlds, their families, their schedules and their needs.
- Flexibility to adapt strategies and recognize when approaches are not working.
- Time for developing trust, especially when the researcher is perceived as an outsider.
- Recognition and keeping of trust.

- Role negotiation.
- Reciprocity.

These issues have been addressed through the implementation of different methods and research practices. In the end the issue that connects these seven issues is the relationship between the researcher and the participant. As researchers we are curious and intrigued by the knowledge that we are uncovering; at the same time, we are also research tools. However, we should never forget to cherish and respect the relationship that we develop with our participants because they are the ones opening their minds and their worlds to us. The final objective of a respectful and successful methodology is to provide a safe and trustworthy experience for those participants. During the interview process my main intention was to bring a sense of acceptance, respect and value towards the experience of reading comics and especially in relation to the participants' individual experiences. Personally this experience has been a perfect example of the traveler metaphor that I introduced at the beginning of this section. The process of interviewing and constant analysis surely instigated "a process of reflection that leads the traveler to new ways of self-understanding" (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 49) and definitely to a process of transformation.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Portraits: A brief reading history of the participants

The provision of the following participants' portraits responds to two important elements of my methodological approach to data analysis. First, these snapshots are my attempt to open a window into my interpretative process in relation to the idea of the hermeneutic circle and the continuous examination of the part and the whole (Van Manen 1990, 33-34). Reading through these portraits one can move more easily from the analysis of one individual to the understanding of the group and also see the sample as a whole. This constant movement between the parts and the whole makes the interpretations arise "through a fusion of the text and its context, as well, as the participants, the researcher, and their contexts" (Laverty 2003, 30). It also provides a point of connection with my personal history with comics and gives readers a glimpse into the richness of the thoughts and comments shared by my participants. Finally, these descriptions also support the development of thick description. This technique is crucial to ensure trustworthiness. In relation to the sample, thick description entails describing participants fully, without compromising their anonymity.

The information provided might or might not be relevant for the understanding of my interpretation, but it is certainly useful to understand this sample, its complexity, and appropriateness for this project.

#### 4.1 Alison

Alison is twenty-three years old and I recruited her at the university site. She is a graduate student. Above all, Alison is a reader. Comics are neither her main nor her unique source for reading experiences. Her attraction for poetry and her permanent questioning about her status as a comics reader are distinctive characteristics of her participation. The last three titles she was reading at the time of the interview were *Black Hole* by Charles Burns, the *Scott Pilgrim* series by Bryan Lee O'Malley, and *Lucky*

by Gabrielle Bell. She identifies Drawn & Quarterly and Fantagraphics as her favourite publishers. As favourite authors, she talks about Chris Ware, Daniel Clowes, Neil Gaiman, Alison Bechdel, Ariel Schrag, and Craig Thompson. She also reads webcomics such as *xkcd*, *Achewood* and *Girls with Slingshots*, but she tends not to follow them regularly. She does not generally watch movies, but she mentions *Persepolis* and *The Dark Knight* as movies based on comics that she enjoyed. She does however watch television shows; for example, she is re-watching *The Wire* and has also re-watched *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer* many times.

She points to an illustrated Bible as her first memory of reading anything that was illustration heavy and notes the difficulty in differentiating between picture books and comics. As a child, she used to spend summers in Germany and recalls reading *Donald Duck* and *Alf* in German because her language skills were not very strong. She does not recall reading comics during middle school. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade she encountered *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, which became a signpost in her reading history. After that, she says she did not stop reading comics. Another memorable moment was reading *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi as part of a common reading program for incoming university students; the program required the students to read the graphic novel and participate in discussion about comics in general and that reading in particular. Her work at a bookstore supported her comics reading habits and exposure to new titles but currently the library is her primary source for comics. .

## 4.2 Baa

Baa is seventeen years old and I recruited him at the public library. He is a high school student and originally from Brazil, but he attended high school in London. He started to read comics when he was very young. It is rather typical in Brazil as a reading practice to recommend to young children *Turma da Mônica* [Monica's Gang], a Brazilian comics franchise based on the adventures of a group of seven-year-old children. This title started as a comic strip in the 1960s but it has grown tremendously: films, television shows, video games, and for some time even a theme park. In order to

reinforce Baa's interest in reading, his mother encouraged him to read this comic. His brother is also a comics reader. He recalls becoming more actively interested in comics around eight, in connection to manga. The internet and anime played an important role in discovering and expanding his interest for manga: "...I was always very connected to internet so since an early age I had influences from all over the world I guess." The last three comics he has read are *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, actually re-read in connection with a school project; *Daytripper* by Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá; and the second volume of *Phonogram* by Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie.

Although he was familiar with some superhero characters through cartoons, he mentions the movie *Spiderman* as key to pursuing this new reading material; a podcast also supported this exploration. *Watchmen* is the title that he points to as pivotal in his reading history. He was twelve or thirteen when he read it and it moved him to find more titles by Alan Moore. He also highlights the quality of *Maus* and *Blankets*, particularly in relation to the art.

### 4.3 Daniel Feireday

Daniel is twenty-three years old and I recruited him at one of the comics stores I chose as recruitment sites. He is an undergraduate student and also works at a comics store. Daniel's first memories about comics mix the experiences and practices related to reading and collecting comics. During his childhood summer vacations his mother would use comics as an incentive for him to read. He would read a comic to her and when finished, she would give him money to get another one at the convenience store. In the city his father would take him to the comics store and he remembers the experience as "cool because the entire store was devoted to comics." Superhero comics played different roles during his childhood and adolescence. As a child he and his friends would share their knowledge about superheroes and do role-playing with different characters. At high school his relationship with comics moved from social to private and the importance of these materials declined because of the surge of other interests such as skateboarding. Despite this shift he recognizes that because of his



personality and status during high school, it was also easy for him to identify himself with the character of Peter Parker, Spiderman's alter ego. Daniel started collecting when a friend of his father gave him some preservation bags. The bags became a catalyst for the process of storing, organizing, and preserving individual issues. Around the same time he acquired some promotional comics for the movie *Batman Returns* at Zellers, a department store. He tries to collect titles that he also enjoys reading and has a certain nostalgia attached to them: "[I will buy comics] that I would want to read myself, and it just has a synergy to it, it's not just nice illustration, it's also the nice story and it has to do with the history of this character that I liked since I was young."

A defining moment in his history as a comics reader is when he started to work at the comics store. He realized that his understanding and his perception of the comics medium was fairly narrow, focused almost exclusively on superhero comics. Through some introductory readings provided by the store owner, he expanded his taste and knowledge about comics. He recognizes that in high school he might not have liked the comics he enjoys now because the development of one's taste is very much connected to the person one is or becomes. This evolution is reflected in the last titles he has read: a *Mome* anthology from Fantagraphics; an omnibus volume *Captain American* by Ed Brubaker; *Shortcomings* by Adrian Tomine; and *Torpedo* by Enrique Sánchez Abulí et al. He also comments on how his time for reading comics has slowly decreased because he spends a lot of time reading news and articles about comics and other interests on the Web.

#### 4.4 Devi

Devi is eighteen years old and I recruited her in the university site where she is an undergraduate student. The last three comics she had read are *Squee* and *I feel sick* by Jhonen Vasquez, and *Hellsing* by Kouta Hirano. During the interview the authors that she used as focal authors were: Jhonen Vasquez as an example of both narrative and art style, and Dave McKean as her favourite artist. She does not have clear alliances with any publishers but she identified Dark Horse as one that she often enjoys. Even though

she mostly uses manga to define her taste and preferences, she cannot highlight a publisher. She also reads webcomics and prose, especially satire fiction, although she states she feels a stronger connection to comics.

Her first memory about reading comics is *Archie* comics. She recalls seeing the comics at the grocery store; as a child she enjoyed reading and because of that she says that her mother bought one for her. From that moment on, she never stopped reading comics. The Internet helped her to develop and expand her taste; she discovered webcomics and, through her interest for anime, also manga.

Although she does not read superhero comics often, she identifies Spiderman as a character that she has followed since her childhood. This interest in Spiderman started with movies and cartoon shows and finally with comics. He is one of the only superheroes that she follows, along with Harley Quinn. In a subsequent email she expressed an interest in the couple The Joker and Batman and what they represent; she cites three comics titles *Hush*, *The Killing Joke*, and the *Arkham Asylum*. This interest moved her to write a final essay on Batman for a university writing class. Although her taste was already rather diverse when we talked in the interview, now she recognizes and embraces this diversity, wishing to maintain it for the future.

Manga is the reading material she is more knowledgeable about, thus she can define and share her taste more clearly. For example, when asked about a type of comic that she would not read she mentions *mecha* manga, a genre of manga which focused on robots and machines as central to the plotline. She does not like the central role that action plays in those manga. Also, she expresses certain contempt for *cutsy* or *chibi* manga, which she links to her understanding of mainstream manga. She also mentioned participating in an anime convention.

## 4.5 HunterS

HunterS is nineteen years old and I recruited him at the university site where he is an undergraduate student. His passion for comics is fairly recent and he connected

this interest to the months before the release of the *Watchmen* movie in 2009. He recalls that as a kid he thought that comics were “dumb.” He heard later on about graphic novels but thought that they were “too nerdy” for him. He talked about being aware of the “serious work” that was being created but still he felt that they were not “[his] thing.” The shift in his opinion is connected to the movies *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen*. His sister, who is also a comics reader, recommended the *V for Vendetta* comic after he had watched the movie. When the *Watchmen* movie came out he made the effort of reading the comic first.

It is important to highlight that in his household both his mother and sister also read comics. According to his description, it seems they have been doing it for longer than he has and also have a distinctive influence on what he reads. He seems to be surrounded by other comics readers and some sort of informal recommendation network has been established, although none of the members seem to hold a dominant role. The last three comics he read were the first three trade paperbacks in *The Sandman* series by Neil Gaiman. His mother and his girlfriend recommended them to him. Another friend recommended the work of Jhonen C. Vasquez. In turn, HunterS has also recommended the work of Ellis to this same friend. This network seems to have an important role in reinforcing his interest and his relationship with the medium. At the moment he is reading the fifth installment of *Transmetropolitan* by Warren Ellis and a collection of *Dr. Who* stories in comics form. He often watches cartoon shows such as *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*.

He declares a longstanding interest for science fiction as a genre; it is something that he has been interested in and reading since he was a child, although the reasons behind this interest have changed. Comics that are too close to reality are the ones that he would not read. He gives *Maus* as an example of the kind of comic he is referring to but, at the same time, qualifies this potential negative reaction saying that he would read realistic comics if they have a “really, really good story like *Maus* was.”

## 4.6 Jacob

Jacob is seventeen years old and I recruited him through snowball sampling. He is a high school student. Jacob's first memories about comics are of reading *Asterix* albums by Goscinny and Uderzo that his parents bought for him, in part because he went to a French immersion school. He describes his parents as very supportive of any reading endeavour and comics were treated as any other reading material.

He is interested in art and is planning to go to a high school that focuses on art programs so he often uses comics as materials for inspiration. He works at the public library as a page and is exposed to a lot of comics there. The last three comics he has read are *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by Eric Shanower and Skottie Young, an adaptation of *Frankenstein* by Jason Coble, and a comic in French about the history of rock & roll that was going to be withdrawn from the library collection. He refers to adaptations as one of his favourite things to read because of the potential familiarity with the story but also the novelty of seeing how a creator personalizes the same story; he uses the example of *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman. At the same time he expresses certain contempt for comics titles based on or adapting successful children series such as *Nancy Drew* or *The Babysitters Club*. Although he reads comics more than he watches cartoon movies, he uses the example of Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* as stories that he enjoys. Reading comics and watching comics are his first options for entertainment.

## 4.7 Kalo

Kalo is twenty-four years old and I recruited her at the university site. She is a graduate student. She describes herself as a late bloomer in relation to comics reading. Even though she was familiar with superheroes through television cartoons, she did not start reading comics until she was around sixteen or seventeen as part of what she describes as a "cultural awakening." Some of her friends at the time were comics readers and recommended titles to explore. Before this time her access to popular

culture in general, and comics and young adult literature in particular, was restricted by her parents' expectation of what reading should be: school related and productive. She highlights the importance of taking two courses in university that included or were focused on comics. These courses diversified her taste but especially, according to her, helped her to know how to read comics properly.

Kalo declares Drawn & Quarterly to be her favourite publisher because she feels that "they really care about quality over quantity." At the time of the interview she was in the middle of reading two series: *Filth* by Grant Morrison and *Ex-Machina* by Brian K. Vaughan; she had also recently finished *Skim* by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki. She is also reading science fiction books; she thinks she needs to catch up in her reading because there are many titles that she did not read when she was younger. Her primary way of accessing reading materials, including comics, is purchasing them; she states she has a certain collector's attitude and notes the importance of owning the materials. As a comics reader, she says that she is neither an avid nor a casual reader, but something in the middle.

#### 4.8 Lorraine

Lorraine is nineteen years old and I recruited her through snowball sampling. She is an undergraduate student. Lorraine's memories about comics are varied and diverse. She recalls reading the funny pages in the newspaper as part of her process to learn to read; for example, she qualifies the funny pages as a "safety net" in comparison to the complexity of some news articles. Between the ages of ten and twelve her older sister became her main connection with comics; she wanted to keep up with the conversations that her sister and a friend had about comics so she started reading *Sailor Moon* by Naoko Takeuchi. Her first reading years were focused on manga, especially the magazine *Shonen Jump*. However, she says that "it has lost a lot of its novelty." Specifically, something changed when she was fifteen or sixteen years old: she watched the movie *Sin City* based on the comic by Frank Miller and around the same time she also read *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* by the same author. These titles helped her to

discover *Watchmen* and "that opened me up [to] what was out there, outside of manga." She expresses a strong interest for drawing and a respect for the work of artists.

This variety of styles is well represented in her last three readings: the fifth volume of the *Wet Moon* series by Ross Campbell; the first volume of *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo; and the first trade paperback of the new *Tank Girl* by Jamie Hewlett.

Lorraine describes her family as "literary"; her parents are big readers and she connects their love for reading to the one that she and her siblings share. She and her sister bought and read comics and their parents seemed to have a neutral role, neither supporting nor objecting. Currently her father has become a frequent reader of comics, especially since the discovery of Gaiman's *The Sandman*. Her brother has also become a reader and both siblings share trips to Heroes and recommend titles to each other. Lorraine describes her brother's taste as "eclectic," mentioning the following titles to clarify: *Louis Riel* by Chester Brown, Frank Miller's work with Batman, and *The League of the Extraordinaire Gentlemen* by Alan Moore.

The role of the comics store is central to her reading history. She recalls the closing of the comics store in her home town as a step back in the development of her taste. She equally praises the advantages of having three stores in London that she visits so she can be exposed to a diversity of materials. She says that her interest for comics is renewed partly because she has access to a place to go and shop for them.

Another important source for guidance and recommendation about reading is a professor in the MIT program at the university. Her involvement with comics has increased after our interview; she has helped to develop a radio show at the university radio about the role of women in comics and also started to work at a comics store.

## 4.9 Marian

Marian is twenty-four years old and I recruited her at the public library. She had recently finished her university degree. She described herself as an omnivore reader of comics; when she was a teenager, she would read almost any comic on the library shelves. The comics she had recently read are *Unwritten* by Mike Carey and Peter Gross and *Beast* by Marian Churchland. Other comics that she mentioned during the interview are *Blankets* and *Carnet de Voyage* by Craig Thompson, the *Akira* series by Katsuhiro Otomo, *Essex County* by Jeff Lemire, the French series *Dungeons* and the work of the French author Boulet.

The first comic she recalls seriously enjoying is the comic strip Garfield. However, her reading history starts with the French comics she read at the school library she attended. She was familiar with series like *Astérix* by Goscinny and Uderzo, the *Smurfs* by Peyo, or *Léonard* by Philippe Liegeois and Bob de Groot. She always enjoyed drawing and art so she paid special attention to comics. She does not recall reading superhero comics but she did watch the television cartoons for Spiderman and the X-Men. In grade 9 she moved to a house closer to a library and started to visit it more often. There she discovered the series *Elfquest* by Wendy and Richard Pini which a family friend she respected had already recommended. This series introduced her to independent comics and self-published authors and allowed her to fantasize about creating her own comic. Connected to this experience, she started to research more about the form itself and read the classic *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud.

Around grade 12 she remembers starting to buy more comics, especially boy's love manga. She was part of an informal group with other three female friends who read manga and boy's love manga was Marian's specialty. She stopped reading manga after high school. She worked at a bookstore and read comics during her breaks. The library is her primary source for comics but when she buys any title, she often uses online bookstores.

#### 4.10 Oracle

Oracle is twenty-three years old and I recruited her at the university site where she is a graduate student. The last three comics she has read are *Power Girl* with Amanda Conner as the artist, *Batgirl* by Gail Simone, and *The Muppets, the King Arthur* by Roger Langridge. Oracle offered numerous titles as examples of her taste and preferences in comics reading. Although at the beginning of the interview it seemed that the focus of her reading interest was superhero comics, she quickly mentioned other examples that proved a diverse taste: *Runaways* by Brian K. Vaughan et al., *Books of Magic* by Neal Gaiman et.al., *Hellblazer* by James Delano et al., *Y: The Last Man* by Brian K. Vaughan et al., and *Fables* by Bill Willingham et al.. Her favourite publisher is DC and she identified Vertigo as her favourite imprint for non-superhero titles. *Strangers in Paradise* by Terry Moore plays an important role among her reading habits. She gives this title as an example of an exceptional title in relation to her usual taste as well as one of the comics she regularly re-reads.

*Calvin & Hobbes* by Bill Watterson and *Archie* were her introduction to the medium at a very young age. She remembers simply being attracted to them, nobody pointed to them as reading material. However, at her home there were stacks of *Archie* by Bob Montana et al.; she recalled reading them with a friend as something social, sharing the titles and commenting the storylines. She expressed a certain hesitation over naming *Archie* as one of her introductory titles. She did not start reading comics regularly until she saw them at the public library, beside the teen books. Around the same time some of her friends were also reading comics and introduced her to titles like *Blankets* by Craig Thompson. She mentioned actively participating in Free Comic Book Day and also some conventions, like the Toronto Comics Art Festival. She mentioned *Fruits Basket* by Natsuki Takaya as an example of the type of comics she would not read, but recognizes a lack of knowledge to recognize what mangas are good.

She reads fewer books and comics before going to bed because she spends more time reading on the Web. She also used to carry some reading material with her



when traveling or commuting but now that time has been primarily taken by podcasts; despite this, if she were to read something, it would be comics.

#### 4.11 Preacher

Preacher is eighteen years old and I recruited him at the university site where he is an undergraduate student. The last three comics he had read are *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *Preacher* by Garth Ennis, and *Y: The Last Man* by Brian K. Vaughan. Tracking the origin to his attraction to comics is a complex task. He mentions his older brother as an influence, they bought and read comics together. His sister is also a comics reader; it is interesting how he describes her reading taste: "...intellectual comics [...], the more realistic ones..." He links his interest to comics during his childhood to the Saturday morning cartoons and his curiosity about the superhero characters in those shows. In connection to this interest, he highlights the experience of visiting the Universal Studios in Florida as a key moment in solidifying his interest in comics, and more specifically with the publisher Marvel.

The role of movies based on comics is also very important in his history as reader. The wave of superhero movies in the last seven years brought him back to comics. His interest for keeping up with those adaptations moved him back to reading comics and, at the same time, required him to expand his taste and also explore what he qualifies as more independent titles such as *Sin City* or *Dark Knight Returns*. Previously he had been a faithful Marvel reader, but the recent Batman movies opened his taste to DC titles: he read *The Killing Joke* by Alan Moore, discovering *Watchmen* afterward.

He enjoys the social aspect of comics and although he needs solitude for reading, he enjoys the sharing process that comes with reading. Also, he equates reading comics with reading for pleasure, especially with escapism and being immersed in reading. Finally, he wishes he could read more, he sees reading as an activity that is

good “intellectually” and expresses a certain disdain for people who say that they do not like reading.

#### 4.12 Promethea

Promethea is a twenty-one-year-old student that I recruited randomly at a public place. Her history with comics starts really young although she cannot specify the specific age. She recalls reading newspaper strips and specific titles like *Archie* and *Calvin and Hobbes* as well as *Star Trek* comics that her mother had around the house because of her passion for the franchise. She describes those as “boring” but thinks that probably they were the first she read. She remembers being a little bit of an outsider at school because she did not have cable at home and she would only watch TVO and other public stations. Her brother is also a comics reader and they played together as kids imitating characters from comics and other books.

She describes herself as an avid reader and mentions T.C. Boyle’s *The Inner Circle* as one of the last books she enjoyed and compares it with the movie *Kinsey* to describe why she liked it. Currently she is reading the second volume of *Promethea* by Alan Moore and J. H. Williams III and *The Swamp Thing* also by Alan Moore. She has a difficult time defining a comic that she would not read; for example, she cites *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* by Jhonen Vasquez as an example of a title that she would not read again. She decided to try it because the aesthetics reminded her of Tim Burton movies and she describes it as both “awesome” and “disgusting.” She likes the show *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* and she confesses to enjoying it even more now as a comic than when it was a television show.

In her close circle of friends, there are readers like her and others that she qualifies as “basement comic book stack collectors.” About the last, she says she admires their commitment and passion and somewhat envies their knowledge about the medium. She tried to take advantage of their recommendations. She had a great

experience with comics in grade 9 or 10, where her teacher included *Maus* and some Joe Sacco comics as readings for the courses on politics and 20<sup>th</sup> century history.

Finally, she is a usual visitor at Heroes, where she sits down on the floor sometimes to browse titles without anyone disturbing her. Even though she recognizes that comics stores are more male dominated spaces, especially because of the comments of a female friend, that it is not her personal experience.

#### 4.13 Selina

Selina is a twenty-four-year-old graduate student and bookstore staff and I recruited her at the university site. She recalls *Archie* comics as her first connection with this medium. Her mother would buy an issue for her and her sister to read when they went grocery shopping. Her “first memory of really reading graphic novels” is from much later, during her university years. In her last year of university she serendipitously ended up picking *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi from the library and read it. After this first reading, she never actually stopped reading graphic novels and developed an eclectic taste. The last three comics she read were *Ex-Machina* by Brian K. Vaughan and Tony Harris, *Street Angel* by Jim Rugg and Brian Maruca, and volume one of *Strangers in Paradise* by Terry Moore. Other titles she mentions having read and enjoyed for diverse reasons are *Birds of Prey* by Gail Simone, *Lucifer* by Mike Carey, and *From Hell* by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell. She struggles when she has to identify a particular type of comics or genre that she likes. She used to say that she liked superhero comics but during the interview she realizes that her taste is more complex and harder to articulate.

There are two issues that constantly emerge in the discussion about comics with Selina. First, she sees a tremendous potential in the medium in connection to literacy and especially to raising awareness about political and social issues. She makes an explicit connection between zines and comics. Second, gender issues in comics also

become a trend in our interview. She raises the issue in connection with comics readership, comics stores, production of comics, and her identity as a reader.

#### 4.14 Shade

Shade is twenty-four years old and I recruited him through snowball sampling. He works in telecommunications. He recalls comics being at home and receiving them as gifts from an early age; he thinks he treated them the same as any other toy. As a kid he recalls being frustrated with serialization because he could not remember to keep up with the titles he liked. The process of consciously developing a taste for comics happened during his last years in high school. It was part of a general process of expanding and establishing an individual taste; a friend recommended *Sin City* by Frank Miller and after that he recalls reading *Dark Knight Returns* by the same author. He used to read a lot of manga such as *Naruto* by Masashi Kishimoto or *Bleach* by Tite Kubo, but at some point he decided that these titles were not enriching his life experience. However, this is not his general perception of manga, since he still praises the quality of *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo.

It was difficult for him to recall the last three titles that he read but he came to the interview with a collection of issues from titles that he is currently reading. The last three titles that he ended up talking more about are *Shade: the Changing Man* by Peter Milligan, especially because of the artist Brendon McCarthy, an issue of *Sweet Tooth* by Jeff Lemire, and the first issue of *Flash* by Geoff Johns. He likes DC better because he finds their character development more intricate and he constantly refers to these stories as mythologies. He describes Vertigo as the imprint where creators can take chances and experiment. He reads both single issues and trade paperbacks. He links his issue purchases to the need to know where stories go; he does not have the patience to wait for the story to be complete and published as a trade paperback.

Interestingly, he uses comics as reference materials for conversations with friends and also for other activities, such as inspiration for tattoo designing. Because of

this he claims that many of his comics are highly annotated and full of sticky notes. This behaviour probably connects with his disregard for the library and, in contrast, his heavy use of the comics store, where he has a pull list of at least fourteen titles. He used to read comics online but he has abandoned that practice because he finds it strenuous for the eyes and also because he likes to hold a comic in his hands.

He has read prose work from comics authors like Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, or Garth Ennis. He also talks about prose authors he enjoys like Stephen King, Kurt Vonnegut, and Chuck Palahniuk.

#### 4.15 Shalmanaser

Shalmanaser is twenty years old and I recruited him at the public library. He works as an IT professional. He remembers having read *Archie* comics when he was seven or eight years old; he got those comics either at the children's section of the library or from the variety store. He describes his relationship with those comics as casual, he does not recall actively seeking them either. His parents also used to buy them for him and his brother. When he was older, around fourteen or fifteen years old, his interest grew after reading *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, a comic that his father recommended to him. He says, "...I never really expected a comic to be like that, to be so complex and actually be for an adult..." His father was not a reader of comics but he would read comics reviewed in newspapers and then recommend them to Shalmanaser. His father also read and recommended *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. This suggestion from his father was important at the beginning of his more serious initiation into comics, but he qualifies the recommendation as an exception.

The last three comics he read were *Richard Wagner's the Ring of the Nibelung* adapted by Roy Thomas, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, and a collection of short stories based on H.P. Lovecraft works. Beyond these titles during our conversation he highlights the reading experience of *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman, and *Bone* by Jeff Smith. He also tends to follow authors and series more than

publishers. For example, he names Neil Gaiman as one of his favourite authors, even beyond the comics world since he has also read some of his prose work. He expresses a lack of confidence in manga, especially because of the influence that its popularity has on its quality. Despite that, he mentions *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo and some horror titles, like *The Enigma of Amigara Fault* by Junji Ito, which he enjoyed and found unique. In general, he reads more non-fiction than fiction and this preference is also reflected in his non-comics reading. The last books he read are *Freakonomics* by Steven Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner and a history book about Italy. He defines himself as a casual reader, both of comics and prose.

#### 4.16 Templesmith

Templesmith is twenty years old and I recruited her through snowball sampling. She is an undergraduate student. She does not have clear and definite memories about her first encounter with comics but she connects it to several different childhood moments. Since there were no boys in the family, she thinks she was exposed to comics in school; she recalls having read Spiderman in grade 3. A friend's older sister had comics around the house and she remembers feeling drawn to them. The local comics store was too far away from her home, so she says that she did not start reading until she could get there by herself, around grade 9 or 10 and especially after getting her first job. In grade 7 or 8 she identifies a pivotal moment in her reading history with comics: the class read a graphic novel adaptation of *Hamlet*. She says "that was really when it clicked that wasn't that much for little kids' thing to do, it was really diverse." Nobody else in her family was interested in comics and she remembers her mother commenting that comics were keeping her away from other types of reading and how she should have outgrown them. Currently, Templesmith notes that her mother is learning to appreciate them.

Templesmith describes herself as a reader and reflects about her taste in comparison with her friends in the following terms: "I'm all over the place in everything that I like." Despite that she can find genres or topics that she is more inclined to read.

In general she reads or watches materials that are non-fiction, preferably historical fiction, biographies or autobiographies, and anything with some connection to politics or social criticism. In comics, her taste extends to genres like horror and crime comics, and horror is also a genre that she enjoys in movies. She has been at some conventions like Fan Expo and Anime North, the last one accompanied by her younger sister. The three comics that she is currently reading are an omnibus for *Silent Hill* by Scott Ciencin, a manga based on the television series *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. Reading is important in her everyday life; she tries to read every day, especially while commuting, but also in the evening.

#### 4.17 Walker

Walker is a twenty-three-year-old undergraduate student who I recruited through snowball sampling. The last three titles he had read were *V for Vendetta*, the graphic novel adaptation of the animation movie *Waltz with Bashir* by Ari Folman and David Polonsky, and a Frank Miller comic. His introduction to comics came through one of the required courses in his undergraduate degree. He remembers the course and the instructor fondly and he still stays in touch with him.

He is committed to topics related to politics and that interest dominates some of his media consumption, including comics. He does not align himself with a particular form of media, but describes himself as being literate in videogames. For this media, he is seen as an expert; however, he seeks advice for comics, books, or movies. Because of this, guidance is an important process for him although he expects to develop a solid knowledge base soon through reading. For him it is also important to acquire the titles in which he is highly interested; he describes himself as a reader and developing a small collection of his readings is important for him. He is very conscious of market forces in his consumption patterns, including media. Because of this, he tends to be suspicious of adaptations, something that he sees as a current trend in media. He is open to read almost anything if it comes recommended from someone he trusts.

## Chapter 5

### 5 First dimension: Participants talk about themselves as comics readers

[...] Actually, I wasn't sure if I should sign up for this study because I wasn't sure that I read enough [...] I've read them fairly intermittently throughout my life like, there's been times when I've read a lot of them and times where I haven't...like in middle school I don't think I touched a single graphic novel [...] I don't like getting anything from Heroes and I'm not familiar or superfamiliar with the Marvel and DC universes...there's always people out there who read more than you.

Alison

Alison's words introduce the main themes discussed in this section. She expresses some doubts about her adequacy to be a participant in the study. She hesitates because her reading and consuming practices do not fit the characteristics that define either her understanding, or the pervasive understanding, of what a comics reader is or does. Even though in my recruitment tools, I neither mentioned the word fan nor included any superheroes titles, Alison still compared her reading history and taste to those commonly expected of the comics fan. First, she questions her level of commitment because she is not a highly committed reader. Second, she neither uses the comics store nor buys comics at any other venue; her main source to access comics is the public library. Third, she says she does not know much about the two main superheroes publishers. Her last sentence, "there's always people out there who read more than you," goes full circle, returning to the idea expressed at the beginning of her statement, raising quantitative notions to challenge again her commitment to the medium but also comparing herself to an external -and always more avid- reading community. Inadvertently Alison is responding to a very particular understanding of the comics experience. This understanding closely corresponds with Hill's (2002)



perspectives of the fan experience:

It's somebody who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band; somebody who can produce reams of information on their object of fandom, and can quote their favoured lines or lyrics, chapter and verse. Fans are often highly articulate. Fans interpret media texts in a variety of interesting and perhaps unexpected ways. And fans participate in communal activities—they are not 'socially atomised' or isolated viewers/readers (2002, ix).

Clearly the connection between the fan experience and comics has colonized the experience of reading comics, especially in mainstream culture, leaving almost no room for the possibility of other recognizable experiences. If you are committed to read comics, inevitably you are, will become, or are expected to be, a fan.

In the following section I explore how the concept of the fan emerges as the normative experience when the participants attempt to define their relationship with comics and also with the comics community. To be a comics reader becomes a personal project, a process towards becoming an ideal reader that is often defined in both comics and mainstream culture by the fan experience. In this process of comparison, various elements stand out in the development of the reader-self: reading as private and social; the role of knowledge and gender; and the search for a positive reading experience.

### 5.1 Readers in the comics community: A tense relationship.

To define her comics reading, Alison appealed to both quantitative (i.e., not reading enough) and qualitative (i.e., not knowing about superheroes) aspects while Devi appeals to consumer practices when she says that "I'm not the type that goes and buys one [single issue comics] every week." Although Oracle defines herself as a "comic book geek" and the most avid reader among her friends, she still compares herself to a

fan community that is very present on the Internet and described by her as “much more obsessive and knowledgeable.” This process of comparison between the personal experience and the prevalent one—or the one more accepted in the comics community—is not encountered just by beginning readers. Daniel, one of the most experienced readers, does not explore extensively the differences between fans or readers. He does, however, note some patterns in the comics community, especially in connection to the slow apparent acceptance of comics into mainstream culture. For Daniel, comics reading is in itself a distinctive and still rather confined activity when compared with other media practices. For him this singularity of comics reading means that you almost immediately become part of a subculture. Inside of this community he then recognizes the existence of different experiences that he links to the different exposure to the diversity in comics production. In this subculture he identifies two different tiers. The first one is strongly defined by comics reading because, as he questions, “100% of the population watches movies, 80-90% of the population listens to music...what percent of the population reads comics?”. Thus comics reading becomes a distinctive practice, one that creates difference because it has not yet been completely co-opted by mainstream society. The second tier zooms into this subculture looking for readers who enjoy comics the way Daniel does; that is, he is looking for those who “really go there and experiment with what is available.” He decries a lack of experimentation and points at superhero comics as an example of the *status-quo* in the comics community:

When you get into that percentage of the population that do read comics, how many of them really go there and experiment with what is available. Or they are just like me when I was a teenager or a kid and read superhero stories.

Daniel does not talk about fans and readers but about exploring the medium to its full potential. However, in the previous quote, he points at the potential barrier created by the ubiquity of superhero narratives. The comics community as a presence,

intentionally or unintentionally, plays a strong role in enforcing pre-existent "strongly marked and patrolled" boundaries between fans and nonfans (Fiske 1992, 34-35). Although Fiske defined these boundaries in terms of an insider/outsider relationship, the diversity of experiences present in my participants exemplify that these boundaries are active not just in that dichotomy, but also in an in-between territory: what is the experience of a reader who does not want to become a normative insider—fan—but who already is more than an outsider? I attempt to explore this in-between territory in the following sections. I begin by describing an evolution in the acknowledgement of comics. The words of Oracle and Kalo contextualize this process of distinction. Kalo thinks that comics are going through a process of "recognition and awareness" but she detects some worry in the community over how this process might influence the medium. Oracle reflected on her experience in the community and connected this same process to an issue of numbers and exclusiveness: if too many people like comics, it is not cool anymore, especially because "they don't like it for the right reasons."

The first element comics readers underline is the use of the term *graphic novel* that becomes an instrument to support this expansion of the form of comics and whose emergence and popularity has ignited considerable controversy in the comics community.

#### 5.1.1 Differentiating readership through terminology: *Graphic novel* versus *comic book*

Kalo perceives a tension created around the emergence of the term *graphic novel* that potentially materializes differences between long-time and new readers:

I definitely feel that tension from the people who are 'oh, you just want to make it all fancy, or the fancy word for comics, why do you need a fancy word for comic books, why do you have to analyze them?' Those kinds of people who say they are just comic books'. Because maybe those people have been reading them for a long time...of course I'm making a lot of assumptions here.

Although Kalo tempers her observations by declaring the possibility that she is just making conjectures, she is definitely reflecting a common stance in the comics community.

However, Kalo is not alone in her reflection. Baa makes a similar observation. He believes that people use this term because they have a prejudice against comics: "you are trying to avoid something by creating this other trend, but there's nothing wrong with this [comic books]." Interestingly he does not point at other readers or the comics community but to the way media uses the term: "[...] when you have a story that it's not superhero related, or it's more serious, people tend to call it graphic novel, for BBC to quote. But to me there's no difference." Daniel recognizes a similar phenomenon. He compares it to a branding strategy where the term *graphic novel* has become representative for all comics, and therefore, a term designating format has evolved into the signifier for the entire medium. As he says "it's this weird anomaly of branding and marketing where they've done such a good job that it becomes the thing, that is what I sort think is happening with graphic novels."

Daniel and Baa point at external agents as the promoters of the term *graphic novel*. In the case of HunterS we can see how effective this phenomenon has been. He has not been reading comics for a long time but he defines himself more as a graphic novel reader. He defends the use of this designation because he thinks that "comic book readers are usually more like, they're more into the superhero stuff and usually the stuff that goes along with that, like, the collectors' attitude, the memorabilia attitude." HunterS defines his comic reading in contrast to key elements of the fan experience and also closely connects the narratives published in graphic novel format to his other reading interests—science fiction with a socio-political angle. Basically the term *graphic novel* has become a synonym for narratives he enjoys, as a way of filtering among the myriad materials published in comics form and perhaps distancing himself from the stereotype of the fan.

Devi's attitude towards the use of this word is almost labyrinthic. Although

some of the thoughts she expresses could be constructed as contradictory, I believe that they actually highlight the net values that can be possibly attached to one word. On the one hand, for her the term *comic book* is used to denote a certain qualitative difference in storytelling and narratives, rather similar to HunterS's. On the other hand, Devi connects the use of the concept *graphic novel* to a group of readers that enforces a particular comics taste, primarily in opposition to mainstream comics. She continued her discussion describing the people who would actually care about this qualitative difference as "snobs," people who she has seen at conventions "having in-depth conversations about something and you can tell that you don't want to be part of it because they're going to rip you apart like 'what comics do you read?' 'I don't read those!' if you read super mainstream comics." Finally she also noted that she had not encountered a lot of people who used *graphic novel* but if she would, she would tell them to "get over it! Just because you are saying it's a comic book doesn't make it any lower, it's still a really cool thing." The term *graphic novel* is used as a form of distinction. Devi sees how inside the comic community it can create exclusion and collaborate in the creation of a hierarchy of taste with which she does not seem to agree.

In summary these readers link the use of the term *graphic novel* to two different trends in the comics community:

1. New readers use this denomination in opposition to *comic books* to mark a difference in the narratives presented and a qualitative difference in the storytelling. This use is seen as an attempt to conceal or hide the history of comics as a denigrated reading material. Also, mainstream media tend to link the term *graphic novel* to literary narratives or to a recent maturing process of the form, thus perpetuating the previous connection (e.g., McGrath 2004). Some long-term readers and fans are critical of this use.
2. Groups of members in the community actively use these terms to designate an aesthetic difference inside the community. *Comic book* is a term linked to superhero comics and mainstream publishers while *graphic novel* designates

more risqué storylines, artistic drawing styles, and independent publishers.

This usage of the terminology is encapsulated by Daniel's observation as follows:

I think anyone who sees a comic that isn't published with a staple, something that has a spine and it's bound, generally they perceive it as a graphic novel although 80% is a collection of comics and the only reason we have the word graphic novel is because somebody in a marketing department came up with it...because comics, a comic book connoted something for youth, it connoted the idea of story for a younger audience, comic books and funny books they were for kids so to make a graphic novel, that sounds sophisticated and intelligent and we can market it to the type of audience that we want to, right? And now it's used in a completely wrong context.

The richness of this explanation is readily apparent. In these lines Daniel summarizes issues of value and audience, the history of the form, and points to the influence of marketing strategies. I will revisit this discussion in section 7.3 since it is also highly relevant to the use and organization of comics in libraries.

### 5.1.2 Comics reading as solitary and social

Although in recent years scholarly interest in social reading events has increased (Long 2003; Rehberg Sedo 2011; Fuller and Sedo 2013), reading has often been conceptualized and studied as a solitary activity. The central role of fans in comics culture has always helped to conceptualize comics reading as a social activity connected to the comics store and/or conventions. The participants in my study offer a wide array of scenarios and experiences that certainly extend the idea of comics reading as both individual and communal. Lorraine sees fan-based engagement as being subject to the influence of the larger community and, in her particular case, as a sort of "companionship." Conversely, reading itself is defined as private and individual:

[About readers] Yeah, and something even more of an individualistic experience. A reader is going to keep reading, it doesn't matter if it's uncool or a lot of people aren't doing it. That's their interest and they're confident in that way. A fan is someone sort of like me, that, like that companionship, that sense of community.

Selina delves into the idea of reading in general and comics in particular as something solitary. Reading creates moments for her "to just be invested in my own thing." She is not surrounded by comics readers either, with the exception of her sister, so sharing is not a primary activity connected to reading. A different view is held by Preacher who recognized a priceless duality. In line with Selina he describes reading comics as something "sort of therapeutic" and he looks for privacy and quietness to read because "you want just to immerse yourself." He complemented this classic depiction of solitary reading by praising the possibility of conversing about comics because "[it] can help you to find better comics, can make you think about things you didn't know you read, the significance, the underline, the subtext of a story that you didn't even pick up on, someone can tell you that." He concluded this reflection with the thought that "the social aspect is a great part of it but not necessary." The idea of social reading as something optional can be one factor that helps to explain the different stages that a reader can undergo in her reader history.

Two opposing experiences are those of Alison in comparison to Daniel and Marian. For most of her life Alison was a solitary reader. She developed a taste for comics in university but never had a group of people around her with whom to share her comics reading. However, she has recently connected to a group of comics readers and she is enjoying the recommendations and discussions they have. This is an informal group that she describes as diverse and without hierarchies. She also accentuates the fact that there are other female members. She even connects her recent increase in comics reading to the influence of this group. In contrast with Alison, Daniel and Marian recalled this social aspect of reading as part of their adolescent experience. Especially

relevant is Marian's case since she developed an informal reading club about manga with two other friends, where each of them was in charge of a different manga genre. As she explains:

I was the boy's love 'specialist' and then this other girl had mainly really classic ones and then this other girl had romantic ones 'specially and another one had more edgy or darker vampire type of things.

Although currently she described herself more as a solitary reader, this activity was primary in her social life during high school. Membership in a group like this, as with any book club, can potentially affect the way one reads a comic since reading is done both for oneself and for sharing with the other group members. In the case of Daniel, reading is described as primarily social during his childhood and early adolescence; his reading became more private as he grew older although, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, he does still feel part of something larger, a "subculture." This conceptualization that Daniel describes is similar to Preacher's experience where comics reading can be both solitary and social. Daniel has developed a singular relationship with comics reading, one that has evolved from reading superheroes and being eminently social to something more private and that enjoys the diversity of the medium. This strong sense of reader-self helps him to look at the comics "subculture" and look for equals, for those who "really go there and experiment with what is available," making his reading experience occasionally social.

These perspectives complicate the comics reading experience since it described as not just a social event that allows the individual to be part of a fan community, but also as a private activity which then becomes social because of diverse reasons, including the need for sharing, for discussion to understand, or for companionship.

## 5.2 Always becoming: The tyranny of being a reader

As I have mentioned already in this section, these groups of readers repeatedly compare their practices and experiences with those of the fan. I have already looked at



how they negotiate this process externally, both with and against the comics community. Now I look at the internal facet of this process, at how this constant comparison creates a sense of progression, and especially at the role that knowledge plays in this process.

In the Literature Review I discussed the scholarly focus on the study of the fan but also how some scholars like Gabilliet (2010), Pustz (1999), Parsons (1991), or Barker (1989), pointed at the presence and need for more research about what they labelled as “casual readers,” or the bulk of the comics readership. Most of these scholars also developed a continuum that usually implied two extremes with the uncommitted reader on one end and the *fanatic* on the other. Some of the participants’ explanations about their own relationship to comics or that of their friends map onto this continuum. For example Promethea has a relatively large group of friends who read comics and she clearly distinguishes two groups among them, the ones who “will read [comics] but don’t expend the hours of finding the information and putting passion behind their passion” and the ones who “are those basement comic book stack collectors and can tell you basically any issue from any author, from anything.” Explaining his attitude towards reading, Jacob again describes a moderate approach to comics reading in comparison with one that easily maps onto the fan experience:

Although I’ve heard of people who get addicted to it and can’t stop reading and stuff and gets a lot of time...that’s not how it is for me, I don’t think that’s how it would ever be just simply because that’s not really what I’m looking for, I’m not looking to escape into the world of comic books, I just like comic books, like most of people like books.

Even though passionate and reflective about comics, in this continuum Kalo curiously positions herself in the middle, as she says “I’m not causal, but I’m not super, super intense.” Baa describes himself as “an avid comic book reader” and also introduces the powerful role that knowing plays in the reader-self: “I am enthusiast in some aspects but there is a lot that I don’t know in superheroes, things that happen way

before I got to know it so there is a really big chunk of the industry that I don't know." Even though he is fairly knowledgeable and as he puts it, "graphic novelly," he emphasizes the aspects that he is not familiar with or that he would like to explore more.

Although not all participants express an interest in becoming recognized fans of comics, most do express, at least, an intention to know more about comics. For some like Preacher these two intentions go hand in hand: "If I want to say I'm a comic book fan I should know sort of the origins and the style of the most influential authors." The importance of knowing about creators, publishers, plotlines, and the industry in general emerges as an influential factor when they define their present reader status and their desired relationship with comics reading<sup>9</sup>.

### 5.2.1 The construction of a reader-self, knowing about comics

For my participants one of the most important ways to materialize one's investment and engagement with comics is through knowledge. Some of them connected their identity as readers to "knowing" about the medium and about the creators. I have already mentioned Preacher's position; similarly Oracle clearly states that she has "an interest in knowing more about the various DC universes but I'm always going to be sort of catching up." Oracle is not the only one who mentions this idea of constantly catching up. HunterS and Kalo share similar viewpoints. For HunterS reading comics does not seem enough to be able to choose among the comics on the store shelf, "you have to actually study it, really get into it to start to be able to pick something up." Kalo started to read comics in her adolescence and although this might

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<sup>9</sup> Before I move to an examination of the role of knowledge in the process of becoming a comics reader, I would like to acknowledge the importance of gender for this topic. Most of the thoughts that follow come from female participants, inviting one to situate this examination under the umbrella of a gender perspective. I will take this approach in section 5.3. However, as Preacher exemplified with his reflection, male participants also engaged in this topic. This prevalence of female participants might simply indicate that they are more sensitive to or aware of the value of knowledge as a signifier of status in their constant struggle to be admitted as part of the community. Therefore, this becomes a topic that describes a situation in the community at large, with a notable contribution from the female participants.

seem a young age, she thought that it was already too late and she felt like she had to catch up, realizing pretty soon "that wasn't going to happen, I would need at least three life times to try to catch up with some of these stories that been going on...they are like soap operas!" She is also one of the participants who better explains the usefulness, almost necessity, of studying comics. In her case, it certainly goes beyond the superhero universe, since she took a university course about comics and graphic novels at the University of Toronto that, according to her, helped to define and expand her taste and equipped her with a rigorous approach to reading comics. Her comments about the course were extremely positive but she also pointed to some resistance from some students who "took the medium very seriously but then didn't want it to be 'academicized' ...I'm trying to think of a word, like, taking into the world of academia." This negative reaction is interesting as comics are slowly entering the educational realm and the reaction of students and readers of comics to this introduction might be a topic of interest.

In many cases the process of acquiring knowledge about comics becomes a personal project, part of the discovery and construction of a very particular self. The role of knowledge is significant because it emerges in connection with different aspects of the reader's experience. For example, for Alison knowledge is something connected to any reading experience; she sees herself as and wants to become an informed reader. For this she consults different sources for information about authors before and after reading their work. Shade integrates comics reading into his everyday activities. He uses the art as inspiration for tattoos and he likes to own comics because he often refers to them for ideas in conversations with his friends. For Baa learning about comics is connected to achieving a constant awareness of quality comics to read. Likewise Preacher tries to select readings that are "relevant to pop culture [...] culturally relevant things." Lastly, Kalo's discovery of comics was part of a larger process of introduction to new media, a new student community, and the exploration of the nerd/geek identity:

But for me, I was kind of like having a cultural awakening at the time of

my life and I was trying to take in as much culture as I can. I don't know if it was conscious or not but that was definitely what I was doing, I was listening to music I have never heard before, watching movies that I've never watched, and so when my friends were like 'you got to read these comics'.

In the case of Devi, Selina, and Promethea, the function that comics knowledge played in the construction of their identities as readers and their sense of belonging to the community is notable and rather complex. Again, a conflict emerges from the dissonance between how participants perceive themselves as readers and who they think they need to be as comics readers to be perceived as such and be part of the community. Although they are committed to the form they do not know enough to consider themselves part of this imagined reading community. On the one hand, Devi believes that one should know about creators because they deserve acknowledgment/recognition and she regrets not being more knowledgeable about publishers. On the other hand, she talks about the "comic book snobs", groups of readers who are easily recognizable at conventions because of their judgmental attitudes. She would also like to participate in in-depth conversations about comics and feels knowledge is clearly needed to have an informed discussion. She reflects about how she sees her future role in this community: "I possibly, I wouldn't shut anyone down like I see those people are doing but...I think once I get more into the culture I'll have an opinion and I want to voice. I like debating. And if someone reads the same things, going back and forward, it would be interesting." Even though she could be considered a rather knowledgeable reader, Devi still perceives her place as an outsider because she does not fit the expectations to be able to be an insider and active participant. She sees her future participation in these conversations as a tool to bring change and openness to the community.

The discussion with Selina involved feelings about inclusion in and exclusion from the community. In her case, they were also accompanied by an instance of self-

awareness where she realizes the conflicting positions she holds: she thinks that the comics community—especially the superheroes community—is rather inaccessible for beginners but at the same time she wishes to be part of it. She explains this as follows:

I'm sitting here criticizing what I think is maybe the access point to a medium as being extraordinary inaccessible. So here I am criticizing this but then I'm going on about how I really have to be precise about this and the other thing which is all I think evidence of the fact I have this unbelievable impulse to fit in to that thing.

She describes the knowledge issue in connection to community construction and identification, comparing it to what happens in other fan communities:

with Trekkies or with graphic novels or with whatever, everybody [...] had to sort of defend their interest so I wonder if that sort of affected people in terms of thinking I have to be able to mount this defense to why I'm interest in these things and as a result of this I feel like I have to know everything about it.

So for her the need to know about her object of interest goes beyond mere personal interest and it might be connected to community construction and boundaries. At the same time she talked about this knowledge acquisition in terms of an external imposition, she feels like "I need to know everything" and not knowing makes her feel like an outsider.

Finally for Promethea the need to know does not make her feel like an outsider. Even though she recognizes she does not have a lot of knowledge about comics, especially in comparison to some of her friends, her comfort at the comics store makes her feel part of the community. However, she still expresses a strong feeling about her lack of knowledge: "I'm really bad with names and titles, I hate it, it makes me feel so useless..." Her sense of community and self-worth seems to be partially linked to knowledge. Her passion for the medium, her admiration for members who possess vast

knowledge, and her declared eagerness to learn are not enough to avoid the feeling of being “useless.”

### 5.2.2 Comics readers also change: The metamorphosis of a comics reader

Historically reading comics was described as something that readers eventually “grow out of,” thus constructing this kind of reading experience as transient and trivial, with hopes of no permanent damage being done as readers moved up the reading ladder. The parents, teachers, and librarians who allowed for comics reading also expected in many cases for this to be a phase in the reading development and aesthetic growth of young readers. If readers became committed to the form, their experience was immediately described and understood in terms of the fan identity and the practices that come with it. Consequently comics readers were meant either to learn what they needed and leave comics behind or to become truly avid comics readers, therefore privileged as fans. A recognizable identity as a comics reader is momentary and visible only in passing. In comparison, when one looks at the fan experience, scholars have been attempting to explore and explain it in connection to a continuum. As I have previously explained this continuum can go from simple consumers on one extreme to petty producers on the opposite, with fans, enthusiasts, and cultists somewhere in the middle (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 140). A simple take on this spectrum is the one that situates *followers* on one end and *fans* on the opposite (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, 23). The variables in this spectrum are always related to different levels of investment and engagement as well as the assumption of a social identity. Therefore the experience of being a reader usually corresponds with that of followers or consumers, often defined by lower levels of investment or engagement. Readers are often included in the group of fans for whom experiencing media texts is something “among many of their hobbies that do not shape their identity and that may be temporarily limited” (Busse and Gray 2011, 431).

In contrast with these two different perspectives of the reader, one transient

and other less engaged, my participants' reflections open a door for a more complex and richer conceptualization. I have already discussed the complex role that *knowing* plays in the definition of a reader's identity. Connected to this idea of constructing a reader-self is a possibility often not discussed, that is that the reading engagement with comics can be expanded, cultivated, diverse, and cumulative.

Daniel's personal history with comics exemplifies complexity and multiplicity. His life experience with comics is an example of mutation, expansion, and diversification. Like many others, Daniel's comics reading experience started as a leisure activity supported by his mother who bought him comics to encourage his reading habit. As he grew up Daniel kept reading comics and started to focus primarily on superhero titles. Buying and reading comics also shifted into a social activity that he shared with friends. However, his relationship with comics changed during adolescence. Reading comics had to compete for time and attention with other new interests like skateboarding. Reading comics lost its social and public status and became an individual and private activity. During those years he became an avid reader and his interest for collecting comics became even more intense. This intensity also created a problem. The financial commitment of buying comics and his loss of interest for superhero comics almost made him abandon the medium. He carefully explains it:

When I was in high school it was just a lot, it was a financial issue, it was a lot of money to be spending on the same thing, I was very close minded to the medium, I was just reading the superhero stories and after a while you start to think...superhero stories are great but when that's all you read it can take its toll, the same sort of story, plot, there's a villain, there's a hero, there's something in between. There wasn't just enough variety in what I was reading and that's one of the reasons, other than financial, that I was sort of...that I drifted away a little bit. But once you get really engulfed by the medium, you see the vastly different things that people are doing with it, then there's no going back.

Daniel clearly remembers that he was not exposed to “the vastly different things that people are doing with [comics]” until he started to work at the comics store. The owner introduced him to alternative titles like Chester Brown’s *I Never Liked You*. Daniel recognizes that his understanding and knowledge about comics was very narrow. At the same time he is not sure if his teen self would have enjoyed these alternative comics “because of the type of person I was and my mindset at the time.” Preacher also describes a similar experience around the discovery of *Maus* (1986–1991):

I think *Maus* was actually the first one [non superhero comic] I tried to read when I was 13-14 but just the look of it and how much text is on each page kind of put me off, ‘forget this, I’m going to read *X-Men* or something’...But reading it now, it’s an enjoyable read.

Daniel’s and Preacher’s words explain very simply the idea that sometimes there is a time for certain reading materials. In the same way that their taste for comics diversified, some readers also came away from their negative opinions about comics in general. HunterS “thought of comics as dumb” and “graphic novels as too nerdy” and Alison “thought they were lesser than the classic fiction.” It took the influence of some important people in HunterS’s life and the exposure to certain titles for Alison to overcome this stereotypical understanding.

Daniel now considers comics as an important part of his life and defines his relationship with them as “more than just leisure and entertainment,” at the same time expressing that he “wouldn’t say that I’m a slave to them.” Although his work at the comics store and his diverse and considerable knowledge would situate Daniel’s identity closer to that of the fan, he still wants to distinguish his relationship by noting that it is one among others. In the end what this section shows is that the development of a reader and her relationship with comics reading is multifaceted since taste, engagement, and commitment can change under different circumstances. A reading history with comics can start with Archie comics or with superhero stories. It might be something that starts either as a social or solitary activity and shifts to the opposite. In



most cases, however, readers end up enjoying the form, appreciating and wanting the diversity that it can potentially offer. These experiences also support the idea that readers do not need to *grow out of* but *grow with* comics. Finally, this analysis connects the ideas discussed here with the ones in the sections about the reading moment and the general discussion about the form, suggesting that as soon as these issues are pulled apart for the sake of explanation, they soon come together again to give an accurate idea of the reading experience. The words of Kalo summarize these ideas well:

As much as I love those superhero stories, it's the medium itself that I fell in love with first and then I was really interested in exploring and I really hope that I keep trying to find people doing really cool things with it and push the boundaries of what people think of comic books should be.

### 5.3 The exceptional female comics reader: Uneasy squatters

I think that sort of goes with girls not really thinking that comics are for them.

Oracle

Oracle's words invite the following reflection: why do girls think that comics are not for them? To explore this one can take the route of textual analysis and explore why comics are media products that women do not find relatable or attractive. Another route is broader and explores issues in the community. Since most comics are created and published with a certain readership in mind, the fact that girls do not think that comics are for them might also point at the fact that women are, more often than not, outsiders to this readership and this community. This second approach is the one that interests me the most and the one that helps to bring together different considerations that many of the female participants raised. This is a theme that emerged as a response to the participants' struggles and uneasiness with the comics community and culture. I did not include this topic among my research questions nor did I explicitly address it in

my interview schedule. I was sensitive to it because it had previously emerged in my pilot study in connection to browsing the comics store. However, I explicitly decided not to include it to see if the issues of gender in comics readership would naturally emerge, thus helping to support the currency and relevance of this discussion.

Moreover, this approach links my study to a previous work that looked at the idea of women as outsiders in comics culture, Nyberg's (1995) book chapter *Comic books and women readers: Trespassers in masculine territory?* To begin it is important to note the pertinence and relevance of her examination. Nyberg highlights how gender identification can indeed be problematized if researchers stay away from "texts and fan communities that seem to be clearly feminine" (1995, 213). Her proposition, that she follows through in the previously mentioned chapter, is to look at a group of women who "find pleasure in comics books, a form of popular culture that seems to appeal almost exclusively to a masculine audience" (1995, 213). Nyberg refers to her discussants as "trespassers" because that term points to the way "they treat the constructed gender boundaries as 'fluid' and trespass both in the text and in a more physical sense by their participation in the process of purchasing and reading comics" (213). In my study, female participants joined in as readers of comics, not as women readers or fangirls. Furthermore, the issue of gender was mainly raised by female participants who reported on their personal experiences and *tactics* to navigate comics culture and to carve out a space in it, as well as on the challenges to produce a satisfactory reading experience. These shared concerns point to a shared experience as female comics readers that in turn also reaffirms that there is a common understanding of who a comics reader/fan is and what she does. Female participants discussed: how gender is or is not an issue in relation to their identity as comics readers and the stereotypes about female comics readers they confront and fight; their awareness of and difficulty in finding satisfactory female characters and creators; the negotiation of male-dominated readerly spaces; and the role of other female readers in the introduction to the format. After exploring these themes I will focus on one participant, Selina, whose experience integrates many of the aforementioned issues.

Scholarship about media and women has examined two overarching themes: how media support a certain socialization (and construction) of women through issues of representation and how women use media, especially products designed specifically for them such as romance novels, soap operas, or targeted advertisement. Ang and Hermes (1996, 110-113) present a similar summary of the study of gender and media to suggest a different approach to the topic, one guided by the following question “how [is] gender [...] *articulated* in concrete practices of media consumption?” This approach opens up more possibilities when looking at the practices and feelings of my participants in relation to texts, spaces, and community expectations. This is an approach inspired by ethnographic studies such as Radway’s (1991). However, my study expands and enriches this approach because my female participants are consuming and reacting to texts that have been mainly produced for a male gaze as well as navigating a culture and community that is predominantly defined by male agents. Comics have not always been dominated by a male audience. At the height of their popularity during the 1940s, funny animals, teen humour, and romance comics made this medium popular with both adolescent and preadolescent boys *and* girls (Gabilliet 2010, 31-32; Parsons 1991, 69–70; Wright 2003, 127-18). Since then North American comics culture has become predominantly male territory and Trina Robbins, a creator and researcher, has made it her personal task to collect and reflect about the presence (especially the lack thereof) of female creators and characters in the comics industry and community (1993, 1996, 1999, 2001). Her work has served as an inspiration for more recent scholarly works that also focused on texts and the creative sphere of comics (Chute 2010). For publishers the notable success of manga with female readers, especially since the 2000s, became an economic motivator to try to find ways to replicate this success. A noteworthy example was Minx, a short-lived DC imprint that clearly targeted a female young adult audience. From 2007 to 2008 Minx published twelve titles that had in common teen and young adult female protagonists. The reasons for the imprint’s cancellation are unclear and it has received rather unusual attention from the press and comics online community, reflecting the opinions of readers, creators, and

critics (e.g., DC cancels... 2008; Gustine 2008; Johanna 2008; McDonald 2008). Some considered the female audience in comics as not as large and strong as expected. Others criticized the lack of time given to the project to establish a name and audience and the fact that the imprint never made it into general bookstores where the target audience tends to shop. However, little is known about that target audience, the female comics reader. Since publishers tend not to share their readership information, researchers tend to work with general and out of date statistics such as the ten percent Lavin cited in his article about women in comic books (1998, 99) or they compile anecdotal information, other researchers' reflections, and news reports (for a recent example, see Scott 2013, 2.5-2.7).

Recently some scholars have focused their attention on the female fan or *fangirl* (Healey 2009; Scott 2013; Busse 2013). Although necessary and pertinent, these works still leave Nyberg's research (1995) as one of the only academic efforts at discussing readers instead of just fans. Because of this I will use her outcomes as a backdrop for this examination. Among the four women she interviewed, two were casual readers and two committed readers and all of them were interested in superhero comics. These women commented on some problems that they found in the texts, primarily the repetitive storylines that portray violent action and less character development and the offensive portrayal of women. They connected these problems to the intended audience of comics, men and boys.

### 5.3.1 Solidarity with female creators and characters

Some of the female participants in my study actively support female creators or comics with female characters they enjoyed. Oracle was the most outspoken and knowledgeable participant on this issue. She mentioned creators like Gail Simone and Amanda Conner as reasons to follow certain series as well as to justify the purchase of single issue comics. Although she had a rather negative view of *Preacher* by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, especially because "... it's like absolutely testosterone and everyone says fuck every second word," she kept reading it because of the uniqueness of the only

female character in the comic. Oracle discussed in length issues of representation, especially physical and costume related, of several superhero characters. In similar terms Lorraine noticed that the presence of strong female characters, such as Tank Girl, guided her purchasing habits. At the same time she avoided titles that created a “spectacle” around the female body, describing it as “distracting.” She linked this behaviour to her general interest for media “that presents ideas outside of the mainstream, that really challenges the way I look at the world” and she found that graphic novels are especially good at this. Devi was less vocal about gender issues but the two characters that she mentioned during the interview happened to be female: first, the Batman character Harley Quinn who she describes in length and with whom she overtly identifies; and second, a supporting female character in Jhonen Vasquez’s *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* who becomes the main protagonist in *I feel sick* (1999–2000). Devi is aware that the creator does not often focus on female characters so she was intrigued to see “what the writer would do.”

Instead of concentrating on specific characters, Alison expresses an interest in how manga generally allows certain gender fluidity in its stories and characters. She talked about the manga genre Yaoi/Boy’s love with curiosity because most creators and readers are women. She comments more specifically on the fact that women enjoy reading this genre even though the main two protagonists are male but recognizes that this peculiarity might allow women to explore either role in the romantic relationship, thus expanding and experimenting with gender, sexuality, and sex roles. Alison is also one of the many female readers who mention, with certain frustration, the title *Y: The Last Man* (2003–2008) by Brian K. Vaughan. This particular comic presents an apocalyptic scenario where any living being with a Y chromosome dies, leaving a world populated exclusively by females, with the exception of the main protagonist and his male monkey. She started to read the first volume but quickly abandoned it with strong feelings, “I was really mad, it was too much [...] it just bothered me a lot.” Selina read and liked the entire series but she still found it very “problematic” in its portrayal of women. Kalo referred to that series as a bad reading experience and explained in more

detail what exactly she found problematic about it and how it does not meet the expectation it creates:

When I started reading it, it is very cool and there's a lot of really original stuff going on with that series but I've found that...from Brian K. Vaughan, he's sort of like, this is what this type of woman is, and this is what this type of woman is, his little stereotypes to just be so annoying, even though his drawing style, well, not his but the artists, I really love the way the series was looking and I like the premise and the plot was a really cool and original idea, that was just getting to just too annoying for me to read so I read three issues of the paperback and I just gave up on it, so I didn't finish it.

One of Nyberg's conclusions points at the simplicity in the argument that women do not read comics because there are no appealing female characters (1995, 217). Although the many themes that my participants revealed strongly support this conclusion, I cannot reject the role of female creators and characters as clearly as she does (1995, 216). This is a particularly complex topic that has attracted the attention of scholars and the media. One difference might lie in how issues of representation have become entangled with other matters like the general quality of the medium or the differences between mainstream and independent publishing. The continuing presence of representation issues could make the topic less important, exciting, or pressing. However, for this group of readers this is still an issue of relevance in their process of searching for or carving out a space in the comics community.

### 5.3.2 The comics store: A gendered social and physical space

Even though participants in Nyberg's study shared strong feelings about the staff and space of the comics store, Nyberg explored these comments solely in connection to potential problems of access to alternative comics that might be more interesting to female readers (1995, 211). Although consistent, this analysis might be

too narrow. Woo describes comics stores as institutions that sustain comic book culture and are “integral” to its reproduction in North America (Woo 2011, 133-134). If we consider stores from that perspective, they become settings where different practices are perpetuated or challenged, not just simply places to access comics. Based on Goffman, Woo explains how the store can serve two purposes. These two purposes depend on the way the members of the comics community are conceptualized:

When subcultural participants are viewed as a ‘team’ (Goffman 1959, chap. 2), then stores provide a back region. If, however, they are viewed as individual performers, then this ‘sanctuary’ re-emerges as a front region for self-presentation and status competition. Fan communities tend to be structured in terms of social capital and field-specific forms of cultural capital, such as knowledge and collections (Fiske 1992, Brown 1997), and comic-bookstores are one arena where capital may be accumulated and displayed (Woo 2011, 132).

Although a valuable approach, it is interesting to note how the insertion of gender in Woo’s theorizing can potentially make the idea of ‘team’ disappear since the presence of women in the community is still challenged even when they conform to the stereotypical conceptions of fan. For example, female readers are constantly reminded of their difference as Kalo describes:

You’d walk into a comic book store, everyone working there is male, and you walk in with a group of males and maybe someone will be like ‘uhu, you’re the only girl in this store,’ one of those things...it was never an issue, I don’t take them seriously.

Devi and Oracle described similar sentiments and connected them with their experiences in other male dominated settings. For example, Devi is a gamer and mentioned often being singled out as a female gamer. Oracle also connected this feeling to her time at university where she majored in Math. Although she did not recall

any concrete negative experience, she thought that her lack of knowledge was often associated to her gender. Consequently, for women readers the idea of the store as a 'sanctuary' disappears, almost becoming a fighting ring, a place of struggle and affirmation. Although the work of geographers like Massey (1994) has reiterated the obvious role of gender as an important element in the construction and perpetuation of spaces and places, the words of these participants confirm its importance in the case of the comics store.

Templesmith is a frequent visitor to one of the comics stores. She compliments the store and the staff and has a comprehensive knowledge of the store's stock. However, she also recognized that she has been at the receiving end of comments that, for example, stereotype her comics taste as a female reader with phrases such as "the *Astro Boy* section is in the back" in reference to the preference of female readers for manga titles. In the case of Oracle the uncomfortable situation is harder to pinpoint. Even though she has considerable knowledge about comics titles and creators, Oracle still felt rather self-conscious asking for help because she thought her taste was constantly being scrutinized. From this insecurity emerges an overall issue where the store is perceived as a place where the fan –with an expected gender and level of knowledge- seems to be the only customer welcomed.

Alison and Promethea initially do not express discomfort with the prevailing male presence at the comic book store. However, when I asked them to expand on that first reaction, in both cases the conversation moved to the topic of staff, though each provided different nuances. Alison has historically been a solitary reader. She has never had strong ties or connection with comics culture and, until recently, she has not shared her interest in comics with a regular group of friends. In regard to comics stores she says that they "feel like there's a lot of men in them but it's not...I've never felt uncomfortable in them." When I asked her to expand on that thought, she connected this neutral experience to her minimal interaction with staff. She uses the space as a place to browse, to discover new titles that she then will look for at the library. She



recognizes that the space is primarily male but points to interaction with staff as the moment where uneasiness could potentially emerge.

The case of Promethea is even more interesting because of its singularity. She tries to visit the store as often as her busy schedule allows, sometimes to purchase comics and other times simply to sit on the floor and read. When I asked her about her level of comfort visiting the store, she first expressed surprise about the inquiry itself saying that "I can't believe that that's even a problem for you to be asking me a question." She immediately praised the staff and highlighted her relationship with one particular employee who she described as "an amazing person" and "the bomb." When I mentioned to her that other female participants expressed certain uneasiness with the predominantly male presence in comics stores and the fear of being judged or singled out, she recalled a conversation with a female friend whose experience was not as pleasant as hers. Interestingly, Promethea first indicates that a behavior like that can be experienced anywhere, "that's an everyday thing, not even within comic book stuff, you find that everywhere." She is not oblivious to the possibility of sexism but she still cannot believe something like this happened at the store she often visits. Then she proceeded to re-visit the conversation with her friend focusing especially on how that particular experience could be the result of her friend's own insecurities and perceptions or perhaps an interaction with non-regular staff. Staff often develop these personal relationships with frequent customers who have pull lists and visit the store weekly and with whom they have conversations about plots, characters, or particular titles. Again, these customers tend to map directly onto the fan stereotype as described in the literature review. During my time visiting and recruiting at different stores, I witnessed some of those interactions. However, Promethea does not fit this profile either. She does not mention comics as the catalyst for the development of this personal connection with staff, nor does she describe the store as a preferred place to socialize or talk about comics. It seems that the comfort she experiences comes from treating the store as any other space. She is not actively trying to fit into comics culture although she expresses an interest about knowing more about it and expresses a

certain admiration for the people who have vast knowledge about it. She is definitely not uncomfortable with her position as a beginner reader and does not show any concern about asking questions or having to demonstrate any knowledge about comics.

The case of Promethea serves as a positive exception that might help to further examine the metamorphosis of the comics store. The role of this place can potentially become less defined because of the diversification process in their clientele. The store is still mainly perceived and perpetuated as the place for the committed male fan, but beginner readers and female readers are visiting comics stores with different expectations. Thus previous dynamics might be questioned and either reinforced or changed.

### 5.3.3 Women as advocates for comics reading

The gendering of the comics stores is also noticeable when the participants talk about reading mentors and their first memories about comics. Daniel recalled how his father would be the one taking him to the comics store. Conversely, the context of the first time reading comics involved his mother buying him comics at a convenience store during the summer holidays. Often the memories that involved mothers or sisters tended to be connected to everyday activities like grocery shopping and mostly away from the space of the comics store. Unquestionably, society understands reading as a predominately female activity. Among other factors, this feminization of reading is often used to justify the lack of interest that boys have in reading. In contrast comics reading is predominantly described and understood as a male activity. In my project fathers, brothers, and male friends are often mentioned as the ones introducing my participants to comics reading. But the increasing importance of mothers, sisters, and female friends should not be ignored. In my discussion of Snowball's research (2011) I have already pointed to the need to study the role of the family in the encouragement of comics reading. Although it was just one incident, Snowball also reported the role of a mother and an older sister. In the case of my study their role is less anecdotal. For

instance Daniel, Selina, Devi, and Promethea describe similar scenes when I asked them about their first memories about comics reading: they recounted moments where their mothers bought them a comic to encourage their reading. As an example, Daniel remembers that:

It would happen in the Summer when my family would go up to my mother's cottage, there was a general store there and they have one of those spinner racks and if I could read the comic to my mother she would give me money to go and buy another.

Although this recounting reinforces a general role of women as supporters of reading, one should not deny the potential influence that having women recommending comics can have in the perception of comics reading and culture. For example, in the case of HunterS his comics reading has been impacted by female readers. His mother's and sister's interest in comics was developed later in life but it has been crucial to change HunterS' perspective on comics and to support his reading interest. They encouraged HunterS to explore titles such as *The Sandman* (1991–1997) or *V for Vendetta* (1989). His girlfriend is also a comics reader and she often recommends titles to him. Another late bloomer is Oracle's mother who, although not an avid reader of comics, is open to reading the comics that her daughter recommends. Although Jacob inherited Spiderman comics from his dad, he also highlighted his mother's role in supporting any kind of reading and especially at not judging his interest for comics. Also, a female friend of his sister is the person he shares his interest for comics with the most. In Jacob's case it is important to mention that his mother is a librarian and similarly to Walker, their role at encouraging reading in general is especially significant.

Both Preacher and Selina commented on how their respective sisters had a different comics taste from theirs. In the case of Preacher, "she was never really into the superheroes, but she did like stuff like *Maus* (1986–1991), more I guess, like intellectual comics that aren't so much doing for the fantasy but just, the more realistic

ones I guess." Selina's sister is quite the opposite and "she's obsessed and she knows all the story arcs that [the character] Wonder Woman ever had..." she buys single issues of television adaptations like *Buffy* (1999–), *Angel* (2000–) and so forth and she is "really up on mail listserves [...] she's more 'I need to read what's new' and so she'll tell me 'oh, there's a new something, something' or 'they put out this'..." For Promethea and her brother reading comics was something ordinary since their mother is a big *Star Trek* fan and comics and science fiction novels were always present in the house.

The role of these female family members and friends help to blur the boundaries around the activity of reading in general and the exclusivity of comics reading as a male activity in particular. This blurring becomes even more apparent when one focuses the analysis on one female reader as I will in the following section.

#### 5.3.4 Selina: A case study

Up to this point I have tried to disentangle the different issues that emerge in relation to female readers and comics reading. It is valuable to see how these issues come together in the experience of one participant, Selina. During the interviewing process she engaged in a continuous and thoughtful process of self-questioning and self-discovery. Many of her observations reflect on her position as a female reader in relation to comics reading and comics culture.

As with Oracle, Selina gives prominence to Gail Simone as "one of the only female writers that I've ever seen out of DC or Marvel." She also mentions buying comics with her mother and her sister at the grocery store and compares her taste with her sister's. Similarly to Oracle and Devi, Selina mentioned the lack of female staff in comics stores but she presented some conflicting thoughts about that place. Unequivocally she states that "as a female I feel particularly uncomfortable in comics stores." She quickly starts unfolding this statement especially in connection to The Beguiling, a store in Toronto. This comics store has two levels, the first where customers can find graphic novels, fanzines, art books, and children's comics and a

second floor that looks more like a traditional comics store, holding more single issues from the big publishers like DC, Marvel, and Image as well as mainstream manga. While she is explaining these spaces Selina expresses an interest in working at a comics store and, although as a customer she feels more comfortable in spaces like the first floor, she would prefer to work on second floor to make it “more accessible for people.” On each of the floors Selina sees represented a different cluster of comics culture and, especially with the second floor, also a gender. The second floor represents the traditional comics culture, with superhero characters, convoluted storylines, and male fans and staff. Also in connection with this second floor she immediately raises the issue of knowing about comics:

I don't know the name of every title, I don't know the name of every single issue, I don't know the entire story arc of Batman per specific author, I don't know all of these things, it doesn't mean that I don't want to know but I feel because I don't know that stuff that particularly male employees look down on me that way.

Therefore Selina clearly connects a concrete space with a particular gender and a common stereotype of comics fan. In contrast with all these issues she comments on the possibility of opening a store in Toronto run just by women where customers could comfortably show their inexperience or ignorance about these superhero narratives. For example, she explains that a customer could come to the store and say: “I'm totally interested in reading about Batman, I don't know where to start and I don't know all the story arcs but I want to start somewhere and then move forward...” But the presence of female employees would not be the final solution to her discomfort at the comics store since she also says that “I would never go to The Beguiling and ask that, ever! Even if there was a female working there, never!” She did recall a satisfactory experience with a female staff member at The Beguiling and during that recollection she connected her discomfort with male employees to her self-perception as a beginner reader, connecting the conversation of gender to a problem of perceptions and expectations

imposed explicitly through the comic book culture and especially at the comics store:

For me, I would say more than anything [...]it would be my own lack of confidence on my knowledge and so I can say that I will feel...my experience has lead me to feel particularly uncomfortable asking a male comic book or graphic novels, no, only comic books, a comic book employee a question generally.

After this discussion about gender and comics reading describing the experience of female readers still simply as outsiders in comics culture would be thoughtless. Nyberg conceptualized her participants as trespassers. I see mine as squatters. They have been part of comics culture for some time but they are not seen as legitimate members yet. They seem to be searching for a balance where they become part of comics culture but they also want to change the culture and carve out their own space in the process. In the words of Templesmith I find a hopeful but still realistic summary of this process of change and opportunity:

I think the [comics] culture is trying to mesh, like I said before, it used to be for little kids or boys only, because of a lot of the superhero stuff but now with the rise of everything and the mesh of culture I just think...it's not a big of an issue anymore.

#### 5.4 The reading moment, a singular experience: Encountering the reader-self relating to comics as text

It's a feeling, literally that you get from reading [comics].  
And the more I get this feeling when I'm reading them, the  
more I like the comics.

Baa

As part of the interview I asked my participants to tell me about a reading that they enjoyed and one they did not. This question was intended to create a space where

my participants could talk about the moment when they are reading and what makes some moments good and others bad. What I understand as the reading moment—or the reading event as I will denominate it in the conclusion—refers to the instance where text and reader encounter each other. I can trace the reasoning behind the intent of zooming in on this particular instance of the reading experience back to de Certeau (1984). In the process of exploring how readers become producers and reading an active practice, de Certeau explains how text and reader relate in “an interplay of implications and ruses between two sorts of “expectation” in combination”; those expectations are the ones of the readable space—the text—and the actual reading of the text—the practices and concrete interpretations by a reader. In the case of de Certeau he is further exploring the ideas of strategies and tactics. Comics as texts come with certain characteristics beyond the narrative, such as production or cultural value. As well the reader-self comes with a history and assumptions. In contrast my focus stayed at the interplay between the text and the reader. I was trying to explore salient characteristics or elements that positively or negatively define this interplay in the context of comics reading.

Exploring this topic was not an easy matter and readers did not find it as easy as focusing, for example, on the characteristics of one particular work. The introductory quote is part of a longer reflection where Baa explores why reading comics is different from other media. He talks about a feeling that comics provoke in him. He cannot explain this feeling much more but this idea of comics inspiring a certain state, a certain sensation is the most satisfactory way of describing it for him. He is not the only one who refers to a feeling when reading comics. Kalo expressed difficulty in characterizing this feeling and added to her explanation a particular mood she tends to be in when she chooses comics. She was not satisfied with that explanation either and kept coming back to the topic through the interview. Later she sent me an email addressing the issue again and explaining it as follows:

Although this seems like a simplistic way of looking at this, I thought

about it for a while and this is the best I can come up with. It's just a 'feeling,' so it's very hard to explain why I sometimes read comic books and other times novels. It has nothing to do with a specific emotion (i.e., I don't read comic books only when I'm happy), but sometimes, it seems to have to do with how much time I have. I'm a very slow reader, no matter what I'm reading, but comic books are slightly quicker than novels for me. So sometimes my choice of a comic book over a novel is based on convenience (i.e., how much time I have on hand), and at other times, I make a decision based on a 'feeling' that I can't really explain other than the desire to be stimulated visually.

Kalo suggests two reasons to read comics. One is connected to convenience and her own characteristics as a reader. The experience of time, personal and social, emerged repeatedly when talking about comics reading. Participants mentioned having time to read and the different rhythms that comics reading permit as primary issues in relation to choosing comics as reading material. Because of the singularity and novelty of the topic of time, as well as its role in my final analysis and understanding of the reading experience, I explore it independently in chapter 8. The second reason to choose comics for Kalo is based on the attraction for one evident and rather unique characteristic of comics, their visual elements. Selina expands even more on the description of possible reasons to enjoy comics, pointing to the difficulty of clearly defining it:

I think graphic novels for me sort of combine the intellectual necessary participation with the 'I don't have to think as much' but then, my second impulse is to say that's rudimentary and that's not actually how I feel because I feel that there's a lot of graphic novels that are actually really challenging to engage with...I'm trying to think of something...but anyway, there are some that are like, I would never say that, it's incredibly challenging to participate in the structure or the format or the



art, or something like that, so I'm not really sure what I'm saying now....I'm having so many epiphanies...

During the pilot study I became aware of this difficulty and tried to come up with the best way to support this unfolding. For that study I asked participants to compare reading comics with reading books or watching movies. Although initially the question sought to deepen understanding of the similarities and differences between these formats, this comparison really helped the participants to respond, especially the beginner readers. Many of their explanations expressed particular ways of approaching these different media but also how comics foster and even promote a different relationship with reading. They talked about reading comics at different moments during the interviews but this question functioned as an anchor to explore the comics reading experience. It helped them to put themselves at the center of the description when they were talking about the peculiarities, strengths and weaknesses of their reading experiences with these three different formats. Ultimately this question became the heart of my work towards unfolding the reading moment with comics. First, it showcased the complexity of this experience while still not preventing comics from being a favourite pleasure reading option. Second, it gave a framework for the many aspects that make the experience of reading a comic different, unique, and preferable.

#### 5.4.1 The synergy of text and image in comics: A vital element that inspires reader agency and reading complexity

Comics provide the conditions to sustain a very particular reading experience. The format, combining textual and pictorial information, is extremely rich, with many layers of information to decipher. At the same time this combination and the way it is used by creators gives readers the possibility of choosing different rhythms to take in this information. Participants consider the relationship between the textual and artistic content in comics as a crucial element of the reading experience. Daniel explains it in terms of a synergy, of a complementary relationship:

You can read a comic quickly but you're not necessarily reading it at all. With comics I try not to go too quickly because you're not taking everything in, there's a lot of visual information there, it's almost like reading between the lines of a novel. No, I wouldn't say text or images are more important than the other, I think there's a synergy between the two of them and when reading comics, sequential fiction or nonfiction, you have to be conscious of that and you have to realize that they're complementary not contradictory, if that makes sense.

In comparison with other media for Lorraine the way text and image work together affects the amount of information to which she needs to pay attention. As she says "there're so much more, it's such a different amount of information for your brain to take in." Having to deal with this amount of information provokes different reactions but one is common to several readers – the idea of "slowing down." Shalmanaser explains with more detail:

It's that they can do something that neither books nor movies can, [...] you can get an idea and you can put it down in writing and have all the time in the world to look at it, all the detail that you can ever want and there's so much effort put into every page that it's [...] it's almost like you have time to go over it without taking too much time, you have all the visuals of a movie except that there's much more detail, you have all the time to look at them, taking the details, and you have all the plot of a book but without all the descriptions and you still have all the key parts of a plot with all the fantastic...It's almost the best of both worlds...

Although I examine the issue of time and reading in more depth in chapter 8, it is relevant to mention it here because of its strong relationship with the issue of readers' agency. Furthermore, it also reveals an understated complexity in the reading experience. Agency and complexity work together to make readers feel like they are both being challenged but still have control over the experience. In contrast with the

discourses of comics as a light reading or easy reading, Preacher talked about a sense of reward and labour, "...with the comic you are really working to understand it. You have to read every word and interpret it and make connections, 'oh this character was here,' 'oh this guy needs this.' With a movie you can just sort of tune out and let it play." Cartoon mastermind Will Eisner further explains the work that comics readers carry out:

The reader is expected to understand things like implied time, space, motion, sounds, and emotions. In order to do this, a reader must not only draw on visceral reactions but make sense of an accumulation of experience as well as reasoning (Eisner 2008, 49).

Jacob insists on this idea of comics as "less passive" and explains it in terms that indicate a higher degree of awareness of the medium and self-reflective position while reading. In his case this stance is partly justified because of his interest in art but still shows continuity with the ideas previously presented by other readers. Jacob says that "if you're looking at a graphic novel, it kind of makes you think 'Oh, I like that art style, how can I emulate that? I like the way the characters are speaking, I like the dialog in the graphic novel.'" For him it is harder to have this same experience with a movie.

Alison did not talk about being active or passive but she highlighted a difference in her relationship with the text, especially in contrast with reading prose. Alison is a conscientious reader and the lessening or lack of text in comics opens new possibilities in her reading experience. She says that the lack of text makes her "stop and notice the art a little bit more and it also makes me try to get inside the characters' heads a little bit more because they're not telling me what they're thinking." In contrast, when reading prose, "I have trouble stopping myself [...] and thinking about what I'm reading or thinking about what the characters are thinking that the author is not telling us because they'll describe the movements of them or gestures, it's harder." Similarly Kalo observes the imposition of external and strict timelines in both novels and movies while comics offer her more freedom to choose a rhythm, to go backward and forward, to re-

read certain parts. These reflections make her reconsider some previous thoughts she shared about her speed reading of comics. The complete quote deserves our attention:

When I'm in a movie usually I'm being lead, I'm watching what...the timeline is someone else's, put out for me, I can't...like, when I'm at home I sometimes rewind, 'can we watch that again?' but when I'm in the theatre I won't do that, obviously. And with a book there's a pretty strict timeline put out for you as well. In a book, with what the author is trying to get you to feel, how time is passing and when I'm reading it sometimes I'll read something I'll be like 'argh, wait, what happen, this again' so I'll turn back a few pages and then re-read, but that happens very rarely. With novels, I don't know what it is but I'm more reluctant to go back and re-read. But when I'm reading a graphic novel I said earlier, sometimes they're faster but then, they're really not that faster. I think that's a misperception on my part because I still read something or I'll see something and then I'm constantly looking 'oh, yeah, there's this and I didn't notice that and then flipping back and forth between the pages..."

In Kalo's words one can observe a preference for having an active role when reading. The medium of comics is based on sequentiality but, unlike prose or movies, the elements that construct the sequence, a structure built with frames, images, and text balloons as basic tools, is readily available to the reader. For example, while Scott McCloud theorized the importance of the gutter in the reading experience (McCloud 1994, 60-69) calling "the reader an equal partner in crime" (68), Templesmith talked about the crucial role of "the space between the panels" –the gutter—as the place where thinking happens and allows her even more enjoyment: "and it's weird with comic books because it's not the same with regular books, when you pause between frames and you think about the scene and how it plays out, that I love."

Based on the words of these participants agency in the reading experience seems to be something both required and supported by the comics language.

Furthermore, this agency also links the reading experience of my participants with the theoretical reflection about comics reading that writers like Delany (1979) or scholars like Hatfield (2005, 2009) have defended about the strong relationship between readers and comics. In an interview with *The Comics Journal*, the science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany defined the reader or viewer of comics as a “co-producer of the comics text at a level of involvement and intensity just through the nature of the medium itself” (1979, 40). Delany is clearly defending an active role for the reader in the process of reading, locating also the nature of this active association in the language. Hatfield also centers his examination of the medium, defining it as the ‘art of tensions’ (2005, 2009). However, importantly, in the process of explaining his approach he also critically reflects about the relationship between text and reader. Because of the different tensions intrinsic to the comics language, from the reader’s perspective “comics would seem radically fragmented and unstable. Therefore comics readers must call upon different reading strategies, or interpretative schema, than for the reading of conventional written text” (Hatfield 2009, 132). The experience previously shared by Alison, for example, complements the theoretical work that Hatfield has developed.

In the end there are many different ways to describe this relationship and how important it is for the reading experience. Hatfield gives a perspective that focuses on the complexity and diversity of the medium:

The form uses diverse means to solicit and guide reader participation and always involves choosing among different options—different strategies of interpretation, different ways of understanding. There may be much more going on than mere “picture reading”: comic art is characterized by plurality, instability, and tension, so much so that no single formula for interpreting the page can reliably unlock every comic (Hatfield 2005, 66).

Baa sums this up perfectly when he talks about the relationship between text and image bringing back the combination of mystery and power to the reading

experience: “the images along with what the authors want to convey makes the format almost kind of magical.”

#### 5.4.2 Can comics be boring? Bad reading experiences with comics

In her focus groups with teenagers Snowball encountered some participants who disliked graphic novels and declared not wanting to read them (2008c, 113). Some of my participants also talked about bad reading experiences with comics. As presented in the literature review, librarians and teachers position comics as a medium overwhelmingly liked and enjoyed by youth. Professional journals praise the many factors that make comics attractive to readers and the many benefits they bring to their institutions. My participants also reflected a majority of positive experiences with comics. Most of them are aware of the criticisms and controversies around the form so they shared a strong discourse in favour of this reading material. However, some participants also used this opportunity to chat about what aspects of certain comics made their reading experience and their relationship with the medium unsatisfactory. These reflections showed a considerable knowledge about the form and deep care for their relationship with it.

Boredom was a sentiment that participants mentioned recurrently to describe bad reading experiences. Some of the titles that participants mentioned as bad reading experiences were relatively surprising. For example, Preacher described a bad reading experience as one where “you get too bored” and used his several attempts to read *The Sandman* (1991–1997) as an example. This is a title that has become part of the official canon and because of that Preacher decided to give it a chance. However, the experience was not a good one, as he says, “the beginning didn't grip me and I lost all motivation to keep reading [...] The artwork was a little weird as well.” Because of its status he did not reject the title completely, saying that he might give it another chance eventually.

Alison also talked about boredom when she referred to reading the title *Trinity*

(2009) with Superman, Batman, and Super Woman as main protagonists. She connected this dull experience to Superman, a character who she describes as “boring, really pro America and isn’t a very complex character,” especially in comparison to Batman. She did not completely blame the comic and also pointed to her ignorance about superheroes as something that might have reduced the attractiveness of the title. Alison also had a strong reaction to *Y: The Last Man* (2003–2008) and stopped reading without finishing the first volume. For Alison, this comic was an opportunity to describe and examine what a world in survival and reconstruction mode and populated just by women would look like. Brian K. Vaughan’s take on this story did not impress her; she compared it to writer John Updike who usually “is transparently writing about his own fantasy” and concluded saying that “it just bothered me a lot.” Kalo gave the title a little more time but also abandoned it after three trade paperbacks. Selina qualified it as “problematic” but she still read the entire series and declared she liked it. However, she does have a problem with the representation of Arseface in *Preacher* (1996–2001). Although the character has a long story arc in the comic, she cannot stand its treatment, finding it “bloody offensive” and “loath going back to it.” Although she recognizes the edginess and richness of the series, the cruel treatment of this character makes it impossible for her to tolerate the comic. In these comments we can see reflected problems of representations, either gender or people differently abled, showing that readers look for something beyond mindless entertainment in comics. Also, the example of *Y: The Last Man* (2003–2008) showcases the complexity of the reading experience, especially in long and serialized titles like this one, where three readers offered a range of negative reactions. *Wet Moon* (2004–) by Ross Campbell is described in a similar contrasting way by two readers, Devi and Lorraine. For Devi this is another title that provoked boredom because of the “whiny and unrelatable” characters with “boring lives” and she quickly stopped reading the series. In contrast Lorraine praised the diary sections and blog entries that accompany the same comic because it makes the characters “really really real.” She enjoys the series, currently in its sixth volume, especially because of its portrayal of young women although she declared that

the aforementioned narrative technique gets slightly “irritating” once the series carries on.

Readers associated other factors that provoke an unsuccessful reading experience with the comics industry. Although I will examine this connection in depth in section 7.1, some examples are warranted to illustrate bad reading experiences. For instance, Shade criticizes a common practice in the world of superheroes publishing, especially by DC and Marvel, where titles and characters get re-vamped and re-launched. His reflective analysis deserves a full quote:

A bad reading experience would be what Jeff Leob did to the Hulk series. Greg Pak had taken a hold of the series and shunted the Hulk off onto a far-away planet where the series transformed from a ‘monster in the world’ to ‘a monster on a planet of monsters.’ He created the Hulk as a gladiator warrior, inspiring the hearts of his fellow slaves to become the king of their planet and went so far as father a child. Shortly after they re-started the Hulk series at number one (with Jeff Leob) and returned the Hulk to his brutish ‘hiding from society’ concept. It was shame, but at the end of the day the property belongs to Marvel and it's in their best interest to return their properties to an easy-to-access state.

Shade had commitment to an approach to this character that he clearly considered innovative and experimental, especially for an experienced reader like him. He recognizes that these characters are not simply protagonists in storylines for his consumption, but properties that publishing companies use at their leisure to attract consumers to their franchises. Jacob also reflects about economic issues and production when he criticizes his experiences with adaptations of series like Pokemon or the Babysitters Club. He considered them to be often published just because “[publishers] know kids are going to buy these, it’s more like a franchise, more than ‘we want to make a cool graphic novel,’ ‘we want to showcase our art,’ ‘we want to tell a story or re-tell a story’...” Adaptations are an important genre for Jacob and I will



explore his appreciation for it later in this section. What is salient here are the connections he makes between commercial products and lack of singularity and how that negatively influences his reading experience. Evidently, this perspective is not unique to comics but it is meaningful to indicate its presence.

#### 5.4.3 Re-reading and satisfaction: Defining a good reading experience with comics

After looking at some basic aspects that make a reading experience non-successful, I want to wrap up this section introducing two concepts, re-reading and satisfaction, that help define the opposite, a successful reading experience. Participants have generally used these aspects in combination: satisfaction tends to be a reason to re-read a comic and the impulse to re-read a particular work becomes an indication that it provides a satisfactory experience.

Comics are reading materials that participants strongly relate to reading for pleasure. Devi uses them as a break from all the reading she does in her English degree. Preacher says that reading comics "it's just interesting, I can enjoy it, I get surprised, I'll laugh, I'll cry, you know, I think it's much more fun to read a comic." He finds comics "sort of therapeutic" when he is worried or stressed. However, reading for pleasure does not mean easy or simplistic reading:

With the comic you are really working to understand it. You have to read every word and interpret it and make connections, oh this character was here oh this guy needs this. With a movie you can just sort of tune out and let it play.

Kalo supports this line of thought and even though she generally finds comics enjoyable, her intense approach to the reading process contrasts easily with "some people still reads so much for just the distraction!". How then do these participants decide if they are actually enjoying a pleasurable experience?

In her study of reading/playing in different formats, Mackey (2002/2007a) shares the concepts of salience and fluency as crucial in the process that her participants follow to select among different texts (88-92). Participants in her study judged each text according to its own characteristics and the merits of the format and they decide which materials to read based on interest (salience) or familiarity with the medium (fluency). In the case of my participants these two elements are implicit in their reflections. As I will further examine in the following chapter and the section about the comics industry, they often highlight the unique narratives and storytelling that they find in comics in comparison with other media. As well, even though they present different familiarity with the form, they clearly enjoy it and find it rewarding. Therefore a question emerges: if saliency and fluency are the factors that participants use to select texts, how do they describe the subsequent reading experience? The concept of satisfaction and the process of re-reading help to explore this question and especially how readers decide that a certain comic or a certain reading experience is truly pleasurable.

In her article about the experience of re-reading, Hunsberger (1985) connects re-reading to two different but often complementary needs. When readers re-read, they are looking to deepen their understanding of or their control over the text. In other cases, especially with beginner readers, Hunsberger indicates that re-reading might be "just a pleasure" (163). She finds "the essence of re-reading" in the activities of interaction and sharing:

The reader interacts with the text and through it with the author in the pursuit of further questions and answers and of a familiar and secure world in which to dwell. Sharing also occurs between readers who seek, through continued dialogue with each other and the text, a mutual interpretation of the text so that they may establish a shared world. [...] Thus, while one aspect of the re-reading activity is done alone, re-reading very fundamentally involves engagement with both author and other readers-

two differing but vital kinds of interaction and sharing (166).

I find the idea of considering re-reading as social reading as very compelling and attractive. However, few of my participants frequently engaged in activities that connected reading at a social level. Re-reading was a common practice. Reading was constructed as an individual experience where social interaction with other readers was often cited as an opportunity to discover new titles. Despite this situation I do not want to reject completely this position. As I explained before a reader like Preacher highlighted the search for solitude for reading and also the social aspect of reading because it “can help you to find better comics, can make you think about things you didn’t know you read, the significance, the underline, the subtext of a story that you didn’t even pick up on, someone can tell you that.” Preacher’s words are consistent with Hunsberger’s explication. However, despite this comment, Preacher still concludes that “the social aspect is a great part of [reading] but not necessary.” His conclusion reasserts how multidimensional and entangled the reading experience is.

The idea that readers re-read just for pleasure can also be slightly revised. For instance, Kalo first connects the act of re-reading to the repetition of a pleasurable experience. However, with comics that she describes as the “good stuff” this process also offers the possibility of discovering even more richness and depth. Therefore we can again connect the processes of exploring meaning and enjoying pleasure. Kalo tends to know by the end of a comic if the work needs to be read again. In some cases she encounters comics that basically need to be re-read because of their density; she gives the autobiographical work of Harvey Pekar as an example, where the cartoonish but cluttered art of Robert Crump combined with Pekar’s heavy and sarcastic writing usually demand slow reading or re-reading. Shade talks similarly about how intricate comics, like *The Invisibles* (1996–2001), benefit from a second reading where “[I] really opened my eyes to all the concepts and story elements that I missed the first time.” Re-reading becomes a tool to obtain both meaning and pleasure.

Although maybe optional with other media, re-reading is an activity that several

readers considered crucial and almost intrinsic to comics. Baa defines re-reading as constitutive of the comics reading process. For him, most comics "...were made to be read more than once due to the amount of things you can absorb and perceive as you keep on looking." Lorraine said "you got to re-read" because "you read it differently every time!" She does not re-watch movies but with comics she believes that after one reading it is difficult to fully appreciate a comics work and time is necessary to process the text adequately. Baa and Lorraine support the presence of a process of discovery in the action of re-reading. For them it is less about repeating a feeling already experienced but about the certainty that if the first encounter was good, the nature of the medium will make a second encounter still good but different. Hunsberger describes a similar quality and makes it dependent on the text. Referring to Lser she points to the idea that the text itself has to be rich enough to sustain a second reading experience (Hunsberger 1985, 162). Then, one can consider the need to re-read as a subjective factor to measure quality. For example Marian bases her purchasing decisions on the basis of the potential a text has for re-reading. Baa goes even further and declares that the feeling of desiring to re-read is crucial in deciding if he has enjoyed a particular comic. He expressed this clearly when he says that "I measure if I really like something or if it really touches me on the amount of times that I want to see it again."

Jacob reveals another potentially interesting perspective about the theme of re-reading. He differentiates a work like *Scott Pilgrim* (2004–2010) that he had purchased because he expects to re-read it, from with adaptations like *Coraline* (2008) or the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (2009), that he believes he would not re-read. His explanation about re-reading *Scott Pilgrim* is similar to other participants' comments: "...it just has lots of stuff that you don't notice the first time reading it through, lots of little jokes that are just passing you by cause you're so immersed in the story." However, he also has a preference for adaptation, a preference that he explains in the following terms:

You already have an idea of what the story is going be like, so I like that

because in a way it can almost be more surprising than a new story because sometimes new stories can be boring but I think when you have a graphic novel that it's an adaptation people can do something that really surprises you.

The process of re-reading is presented as one of discovery, looking for missing details that a rich work offers. Although he does not want to re-read adaptations, adaptations in themselves are already re-readings from the creator and the reader perspective. When you read an adaptation, you expect a certain amount of fidelity, a certain connection with the narrative you already know. Still Jacob says that there is also an element of surprise and novelty. His words are consistent with one of the three perspectives that Hutcheon presents to approach the study of adaptations: "we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (2013, 8).

Although re-reading plays an important role in the comics reading experience there is also a group of participants who do not often re-read. Their hesitation is not based on a different understanding of the form or the reading process but on an external factor, the lack of time. Both Alison and Daniel declare that because time is scarce and "there's a sea of new stuff," they would rather invest in reading new comics. Even with them, however, there is a connection between re-reading and quality. Daniel hoped to have time in the future to read his "most highly regarded" comics, works like *The Photographer* (2009). Even though Marian is a re-reader, she also mentioned lack of time as a barrier for re-reading certain works like *The Sandman* (1991–1997). Since she is now acquainted with the complexity of the work, "I would need to be sure that I have some time to devote to it."

In regard to the concept of satisfaction, I need to focus on Marian since she was the participant who clearly connected this concept to a good reading experience. This feeling is not unique to comics for her as she uses it to describe any reading experience. Identifying the different factors that make a reading material satisfactory was not a

straightforward task. She tentatively points at the following characteristics to define a satisfactory reading experience:

Well, it would have a story that's very, that would resonate with me, that would be either very emotionally compelling or really moving in some way. It's like any book right? The kind of book where you close it and you keep thinking about for days or weeks or months afterward and it really sticks with you.

As examples, she offered three highly diverse titles: *Blankets* by Craig Thompson (2003), especially because of its involving story; the manga *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo (2000–2002) that she defines as a “rollercoaster”; and the Québécois series *Paul* by Michel Rabagliati (2000–) or the bande dessinée *Ordinary Victories* by Manu Larcenet (2005) both narratives that provoked an unexpected emotional impact.

Together Marian and I tried to explore the idea of satisfaction in more detail in relation to comics. One thing that was important was that she focused on the works: she did not connect a satisfactory experience to any external factor or situation but just to elements of the work she was reading. For Marian the feeling of satisfaction is connected to several different aspects of the work:

- Plotline and textual content: “[Sandman] was really rewarding to read because you never knew what was around the corner and it was well thought [out] and well written.”
- Art: art is what attracts her but “you can have the best art ever but if you don’t have a good story then it’s worthless and probably I’ll stop reading.”
- Emotion: something that resonates, that stays with her, that surprises her, a balanced experience between merely entertaining but with some careful reflection.
- Length: she expresses a preference for comics that are heavier on text or that create a detailed narrative. For example, she says that “a manga volume it would take an hour to read and then it’s like, ok, I have to find another soon or

otherwise I'll forget what was happening or I'll just waste an hour. I don't know. [Pointing at *Unwritten*] This one has more text in it. A trade is kind of...worthy...not worthy but I just find that there's just more satisfaction." She gives *Blankets* and *Akira* both as examples of complex and intricate texts.

These aspects help Marian to describe what she looks for in a satisfactory reading experience: works that were carefully written and plotted, with rather personal artwork and either large, dense graphic novels or serialized works. These elements can easily be connected with Mackey's concepts of salience and fluency. Marian is describing elements that reveal personal and formal features that construct personal salience. However, the issue of fluency is slightly more complicated. In the case of comics and this group of readers, the form is not connected solely to the issue of fluency. How the form is used or experimented with becomes a component of the salience of a particular work. Comics that create a challenging reading experience with their use of the form, especially for participants who are recurrent readers, become preferred and important in the development of the reader-self. The readers feel less fluent during the process, but stronger at the end. This is what a satisfactory reading experience sometimes entails. Thus comics are not always chosen by young readers because they are light or easy reading.

As Mackey's continuous exploration of media, reading, and youth (2011) shows, there is still room for development and analysis. Baa emphasizes his need and interest for the comics reading experience when, after he describes the form as "magical" and shares the "overwhelming power" that comics have with him, he concludes: "I don't know if you can put it in words."

## Chapter 6

### 6 Second dimension: Form and format in comics reading: the importance of experiencing materiality

#### 6.1 Defining qualities of the comics form

And then you have a comic, that if they're done really well, blends the two [text and image] perfectly! And they do [it] in a way that none of the others [media] could, it's something that I don't know anywhere else could offer it.

Shalmanaser

In this section I am exploring the elements that define the comics form for my participants. These elements emerged as part of the discussions about taste, selection factors, and reading preferences. Through my previous analysis of the importance of text and art in relation to the reading experience I have already established the crucial role that this combination plays for readers. But its importance is not just crucial for an enjoyable reading experience; it is also the medium's definitional element. What makes comics different is the successful combination of visual and textual elements. The cartoonist Eisner explains the importance of this symbiosis perfectly:

The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (eg. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (eg. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit (Eisner, 2005, 8).



The words of Eisner show a deep knowledge and care for the medium and attempt to demonstrate how comics are more than funny pictures, but also a literary and artistic exercise that, to be successful, requires mastery in combining both fields. To contrast and complement Eisner's words it is pertinent to go back to the way Baa defined the medium, as well as the words from other participants. I am particularly taken by Baa's exposition because of the use of the term "magical," as if there was something inscrutable or mystical in what comics do: "The images along with what the authors want to convey makes the format almost kind of magical." Taken on their own, neither words nor images render such magic. It comes from their amalgamation on the page. HunterS, a novice reader, already appreciates the importance of this combination:

A lot of them could be written in a novel format and be just as entertaining but on the other hand they lose something too because you wouldn't have the art, you wouldn't have the vision that they're trying to portray, actually shown to you.

For Marian the reasons given to make the economic investment of buying a comic is the combination of a story that "sticks" and "appealing" art. Although it is almost undeniable that the result of the mix is fairly attractive for readers, as Eisner pointed out there are two "regimes" that "become superimposed" and my participants recognized them and also commented about their separate qualities.

That some participants highlight the visual qualities of comics is not surprising. Marian: "I think it's not, you're not reading it properly if you aren't giving the attention to the pictures." Going back to the relationship between text and image, Daniel spoke of their complementarity and how this balanced relationship is crucial for enjoying the medium as it deserves. At the same time he stated that he chose comics based on "aesthetics," as he explains: "[...] a lot of stories are critically acclaimed but because I don't identify with the artists or what the visuals are [I don't choose them], that's a major influence for me when deciding what to read." Although one might think that

holding these two thoughts at the same time might be incompatible and even show a certain inconsistency, Daniel soon provides another piece of data to make his selection process completely logical. He says that his favourite comics are those “when a writer is the artist, so one person has complete control over the entire look, feel and tone to a book.” Daniel looks for a certain “feel” in the art that he usually finds in works developed by a sole creator. Daniel’s taste and aesthetic decisions are also informed by his other personal interests such as photography.

In contrast with Daniel, Shalmanaser has a preference for comics that have more than one artist because he believes that those multiple artists always bring something new to the story. The example he offers is *The Sandman* (1991–1997). Delving deeper into his consideration of a good comic, he mentions a combination of length and depth:

I want my perfect comic to be really long, long enough that everything is being detailed, everything is going in depth, all the characters are fleshed out, all the environments are fleshed out especially, having big panoramic pictures with tiny, tiny details, you can look at a single page for twenty minutes just looking at all the details.

Another important characteristic that defines comics for Shalmanaser is that “by nature [it] is still something that you can pick up and read it whenever you want pretty easily.” This characteristic builds a great expectation about the form since for him it needs to seek a balance between length and depth, but also be rather accessible. He usually finds the solution in the “pictures” since “a comic should still focus mainly on what it has going for it, the pictures. That’s what makes a comic different than a book. It has the chance to explain, to show rather than to describe.” Preacher also points at visual elements as a distinctive characteristic of comics: “I’m just grateful that there are books with pictures in them.” At the same time that participants like Shalmanaser and Preacher emphasize the importance of this visual component of comics they do not forget other narrative elements. For example, Preacher speaks of comics having plots

that “tend to be as dense” as those conveyed in a novel; the main advantage is that pictures makes them more accessible.

When discussing content delivered in comics some participants highlighted a fleeting but common characteristic defined by an attitude, a stance that they perceive in comics storytelling that relates to an alternative approach or a contesting quality. Oracle encapsulates this quality when she describes her reaction to the masturbation scene in *Blankets* (Thompson, 2005, 145-148): “Whoa! You can do anything in comics! This is crazy!” While Kalo used the adjective “crazy” to describe the results of mixing text and image, Oracle uses this term to communicate the narrative edge that she finds in comics. In the scene to which she is referring, the main character (and author, as the work is autobiographical) is portrayed masturbating. The sequence can be described in many ways: explicit, poetic, charged and so forth, but for Oracle it denotes a special freedom and openness in the topics and representation in comics.

Shade provides another supporting argument for this perception of the medium. In his media experiences he intentionally looks for “things that can make me just tweak the way my mind works a little bit” and he found such risqué and inspiring concepts in the world of comics. When he is explaining in more depth what he finds special about the ideas that are put forward in comics, he constructs an imaginary line between mainstream society and some comics narratives:

The fact that they’re pointing at these taboos, the fact that they are talking about the things that people are so not wanting to talk about, that they think you shouldn’t be talking about.

This line defines comics as a medium where conformity is not expected and a certain rebellious attitude is also encouraged. Lorraine explains her preference for media that “presents ideas outside of the mainstream, that really challenges the way I look at the world” and she finds that “graphic novels are really good for stuff like that.”

Devi reinforces this understanding but she expands the conversation to issues of production and accessibility:

I think it's published more often because if someone wants to make a very weird movie no one knows about it and they're hard to find, but if you go to a comic bookstore there's thousands of choices that you can make, if you really look, and even Heroes they have an Indie section for non-mainstream comics.

As that quote indicates—and section 7.1 will explore more fully—these readers are aware of market and economic constraints as well as the narrative ubiquity and media power of the superhero franchise in comparison with the relative freedom of alternative presses or self-published authors. Looking closer at plotlines and genres Alison identifies some genres that she definitely explores more in comics:

There're some things, certain genres in graphic novels that I don't feel like I really see or even enjoy in prose...I really liked *Lucky* and I really liked Ariel Schrag stuff, which it probably comes off as really annoying and whiny in prose and I know that people think that some of that is...I don't know, but just the navel gazing

The *slice of life* is a genre that has exploded in the comics market, especially among independent and alternative creators and publishers. Alison gives *Lucky* (2006) by Gabrielle Bell and the autobiographical work of Ariel Schrag (1997, 1999, 2000, 2004) as two examples of this genre that she has enjoyed. In comparison with her interest for the *slice of life*, Alison notes her lack of reading in science fiction comics, even though it is something that she often reads in novel form. Marian and Baa agree with this view that there are certain stories or genres that work better as comics or that they would feel more inclined to read as comics. Interestingly they talk about the same title, *Scott Pilgrim* (2004–2010), but they choose it for different reasons. Marian says about it that “it really works” and that it is “just fun.” It is a type of narrative that she often reads in

comics form but she is not equally inclined to read as a novel. In contrast, Baa praises the “humour” and the combination of “simplicity” and “the profound story” conveyed in *Scott Pilgrim* (2004–2010). As he says: “I think it’s so deep, so beautiful and a lot of people think that it’s simple, just a story but you can take so much from it.” The previous discussion has exemplified a web of elements that makes comics attractive to readers, indicating a complex reading experience. The mix of text and image still emerges as the most salient characteristic primarily because it brings together this web of elements and creates something new and unique to the comics form. This mix is, as Preacher says, what makes difficult stories “more accessible,” “enjoyable,” and “appealing.”

Preacher’s choice of terms might point to a strong connection between comics reading and reading for pleasure. Although my participants do make this connection, once again they do not do it without offering considerations for critical reflection. Some of the contrasting opinions about this topic emerge from participants’ awareness of the reductive approach that this connection brings to their preference for comics. Comics as pleasure reading often is equated with light reading and this position contributes to a lack of seriousness for comics as respected reading material. This contention points to some of the assumptions that need to be problematized in the understanding of reading for pleasure and its relationship to comics.

In the section about good reading experiences, I briefly noted the issue of comics and pleasure reading. I looked at how Devi used comics as a break or how Preacher found comics “sort of therapeutic.” In a similar spirit to Preacher, Lorraine describes graphic novels as “nice comfort” for when she is in a “bad mood,” “bored,” or has had “a bad day.” Promethea also talks about comics as perfect for moments when she needs a break. She provides an interesting contrast though: while she praises the experimentation and depth in a comic such as *Promethea* (2000–2005), she also gives it as an example of a reading material that she would use for a break. It is also interesting

to see Marian talking about escapism as a positive quality that she looks for in comparison to some of the comics that she does not enjoy reading:

Things like those, Joe Sacco, going to war, war countries, and write-detailed journalistic accounts of it. I'm like, noo, maybe I want more escapism than that.

Marian needs "more escapism" whereas readers like Daniel and Jacob are suspect of escapist reading pleasures. For example, Daniel's childhood readings were mainly focused on superhero comics and he described them as "just something that I liked to do." Jacob sees something negative in this idea of escaping and explains it as follows:

I'm not looking to escape into the world of comic books, I just like comic books, like most...people like books, I think they're interesting to read, enjoyable to read and generally enjoyable just be able to see all the different art styles they can come up with.

In a spectrum of reading experience with comics, Daniel and Jacob would be on opposite extremes with Daniel as an expert and highly committed reader and with Jacob more as a sporadic reader. However, both of them have clearly internalized the idea that reading lightly or just for fun is not entirely acceptable. Other readers somewhat agreed with their approach and brought certain gravitas to their description of comics reading. As mentioned beforehand, Preacher links comics reading to reading for pleasure. However, he also describes the reading process in terms of hard work, such as "...with the comic you are really working to understand it." Along with Preacher, Shade carefully articulates how his definition of pleasure tends to escape notions of comfort and is closer to ideas of challenge and progress:

I'd rather read something that I don't know I like and figure out why I like it or figure out if I like it, that process, it's better for me than comforting, like everything is going to be the same...

Even though all my participants read comics in their free time, the combination of these diverse accounts indicates that they distinctly do not want their comics reading to be taken lightly. It appears that they are attempting to reconcile the stereotypes around the medium with the diversity and complexity that they find in the form and in their own experiences. They might read to have fun or for a mental break but that does not immediately indicate that they choose comics or reading experiences that are simple, easy, or light. They construct and understand comics as a form full of possibilities, where alternative stories can be told through a combination of elements that make them unique. They appreciate the medium being used to its full potential, implying a certain knowledge about it. At the same time this is the medium for pleasure reading because of its accessibility and effectiveness in storytelling, a consideration that I will fully explore in the chapter about Time.

## 6.2 The materiality of comics: Affordances of print and digital reading

The fact that these things [comics] contain ideas, this is the closest thing you're going to get to holding an idea, this is the closest thing an idea is gonna become to being physical.

Shade

In 1998 Martin Eberhard, NuvoMedia's founder, discussed the advent of e-readers in a newspaper article and shared a thought-provoking position about reading and the potential of e-readers. According to Eberhard, e-readers' goal is "to extend reading" since "[...] reading isn't about feel and smell and the sound of pages turning. Reading is about the words, the content. While I'm in my living room, it's nice to read a book. But otherwise it's not always the most convenient way" (cited in Mandel 1998, C1). This thought is part of a line of thinking that privileges the power of the narrative, the content, in contrast with the potential affordances/capabilities of the material aspect of reading, often linked to the idea of *print nostalgia*. One might think that this brief note is rather outdated, from a time where developers were still fighting

to convince consumers of the merits of e-readers. However, it is not an isolated instance. In a corporate letter included in the advertisement for the Kindle and also included in the device itself, Jeff Bezos declared that

[o]ur top design objective was for Kindle to disappear in your hands - to get out of the way - so you can enjoy your reading. We hope you'll quickly forget you're reading on an advanced wireless device and instead be transported into that mental realm readers love, where the outside world dissolves, leaving only the author's stories, words and ideas (cited in Brown 2009, R1).

The material aspects of reading are discussed as intruders in an otherwise intellectual and potentially smooth experience. It is not a surprise that both developers support a position where content is prioritized in the experience since if the material aspects of reading are not considered, the convenience that technological devices bring make the act of buying a print book rather nonsensical.

In comparison with this stance, the centrality of these material aspects was a prevalent topic of importance for my participants. I integrated this line of discussion in my data collection after the interview with Shade. In 2010 and 2011, when the interviews took place, technologies such as iPads, tablets, and e-readers were emerging as important players in the reading experience but they were not as prevalent in popular and scholarly discourse as they currently are in 2014. Shade initiated this discussion in relation to acquiring and reading comics in digital form, primarily to read on his computer. This practice was mostly reserved for comics he could not find in print form. Later, even for those, he decided that digital reading was not comparable to reading in print:

Actually I got to the point too where I didn't like reading comics on my computer, even when it was the only thing that I was doing I would prefer to have the book. And even now, if there's a series that I can't find



I will try to hunt down and pay more than they're really worth just because I don't want to read them in my computer screen. I don't really know why I like to have them in front of me and read it. I don't know. I just can't stand reading a screen I guess.

There are two important ideas in his quote worth highlighting now. First is how he struggles to be able to express why he gives more value to the print form. This struggle is not uncommon and when I asked other participants about their opinions about reading in print or digitally, they generally expressed difficulties in saying exactly why they found reading in print more rewarding. However, this effort often came with a rich reward for me as a researcher with thoughts such as the one that opens this section: reading a comic in print is "the closest thing you're going to get to holding an idea." Later I will explore similar thoughts that connect the experience of reading comics in print form to pleasurable, sensorial, and affective experiences. The second idea concerns the role digital devices (in Shane's case represented by the screen) take as a point of reference to explore and express thoughts about reading in print. This role, inspired by Shane's conversation, was clearly anchored in the dichotomy of the print book versus the e-book. However, during the process of analysis I realized that the overarching theme in this discussion is the role and affordances of the material object in the reading experience. This material object potentially can be a printed book, an e-reader, an Ipad, a tablet, or a computer. This approach to the discussion avoids the reductive confrontation of print versus digital and recognizes the complexity and multiplicity of the reading experience. This holistic approach is the frame in which I intend to situate, explore, and understand the strong interest that my participants expressed for the unique affordances of reading in print form.

Centering the discussion on the material object connects this analysis to the work of book historians, media scholars, material culture researchers, psychologists, and designers. For instance, Cavallo and Chartier in their volume looking at the evolution of reading in the West, identify a strong connection between book-as-object

and reading practices: “[t]ransformations in the book and transformation in reading practices necessarily went hand in hand” (1999, 15). Readers and texts are both produced and encounter each other in the midst of cultural, social, and historical contexts. These contexts consequently affect the practices and experiences that are possible or even acceptable. From a historical perspective texts have certain material circumstances and those circumstances affect the modes of reading, the habits and practices of reading over time. Roger Chartier goes as far as to say that “there is no text apart from the physical support that offers for its reading (or hearing), hence there is no comprehension of any written piece that does not at least in part depend upon the forms in which it reaches its reader” (1994, 9).

It is thought-provoking that this material aspect is embraced and highlighted by historians but tends to be peripheral to other studies that focus on the reading experience, at least until recently and mainly because of the emergence of reading devices. I would like to look at the book-as-object, not in isolation, but as part of an experience and everyday practice such as reading. Psychologists, media scholars, designers, and material culture researchers have also looked at the book and other print reading materials. In these cases books are usually examined beyond their connection to reading and these diverse explorations support and enrich my emphasis on discussing the material aspects of the reading experience. For example, books-as-objects occupy a relevant place in Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s study about household objects and the feelings that these households’ inhabitants developed towards them. Among many other objects books “are special to people because they serve to embody ideals and to express religious and professional values” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 71). Media scholar Ytre-Arne (2011a; 2011b) examines women's magazine reading as a media experience in a project that connects with Joke Hermes’s pivotal study (1995). The special attention that Ytre-Arne gives to differences between print and digital reading is of particular interest for my project (2011b). Other researchers such as Mangen (2008; 2009) and Rouncefield and Tolmie (2011) examine the relationship between reading and new devices in different

contexts but in both cases materiality unavoidably is or becomes a main factor of study. In discussions of the relationships between people and the objects they own and use, it is not surprising that the concept of pleasure is of interest for designers (Hara 2007; Jordan 2006; Ruecker 2002). When usability is the center of the design process people are simply thought of as users. However, the introduction of pleasure moves the discussion to people's "hopes, fears, dreams, aspirations, tastes and personality" (Jordan 2002, 377). One of the main changes that pleasure-based approaches bring to product design is a holistic conceptualization of people, "as rational, emotional and hedonistic beings," and advocates for the design of products "as living-objects with which people have relationships" (Jordan 2006, [1]). I will elaborate on this approach using my participants' insights to illustrate how closely it corresponds to their ideas of pleasure in the comics reading experience. Notions of pleasure were implicit in the conversations with my participants not only since our conversations were framed by asking them to think about comics that they read for pleasure, but pleasure was also primary in their use of sensorial and affective terms to describe their preference for print comics.

### 6.2.1 My participants as conscientious objectors: A technology informed discussion about the preference for reading in print

It would be easy to perceive my participants' preference for print comics as luddite or technophobic behaviour but in this section I explore a less intuitive and I hope a richer position on why readers enjoy print reading. This discussion attempts to consider some criticism about the study of technology use and non-use and connect them to some of the behaviors shared by my participants about using or non-using reading devices such as tablets, e-readers, or iPads.

My participants were well aware that declaring their preference for print comics might immediately identify them as technophobes. As Templesmith explains "I don't say by any means that I'm against technology because I play a lot of videogames too but I don't know, it's not the same..." The use of videogames is frequently mentioned as

a proof of their comfort with technology. Several of the participants described themselves as active videogames players (e.g., Templesmith, Oracle, Demi, Kalo, HunterS, and Shalmanaser). They often also said that they either owned or are not opposed to owning an e-reading device and were aware and recognized the potential benefits that their use could have. However, they also recognized that the reading experience would change. After disagreeing with the disappearance of print reading materials, Kalo said that she does not “want to close my mind to the possibility of using a reader; however I do think that my relationship with the book will change.” Baa commented on the comfort of reading comics on the iPad in comparison with the iPhone or a computer, showing a preference and familiarity among the different technologies available. He commented as well on the ease of access to comics through some apps and a level of discrimination on what to read or not in digital form:

I tried to read in the iPhone, iPad and the computer and I would say that the best experience I had was in the iPad, it's good but I would never read a full graphic novel on it and it works on a superhero story. I downloaded the *Marvel* app and I really like it but imagine reading *Watchmen* or something like that it wouldn't work.

Shade expanded on the strengths of e-readers and tablets, pointing to the integral role that they potentially can play for readers who live in areas without access to bookstores or comic bookstores. In general participants acknowledged the convenience of e-readers and tablets, especially for storage and transportation, as well as the possibilities of connectivity and multitasking. In comparison with these affordances, they highlighted print as a choice because of its intrinsic limitations that suddenly become considerable advantages. Reading comics in digital environments can happen on computers, e-readers, or other mobile devices and any of these devices often provide the possibility of connectivity and multitasking. The choice of print then becomes the choice of disconnecting, of isolating ourselves. When these readers chose print materials it was in many cases because they were seeking isolation and

concentration. For example, Alison comments on how while reading on the computer the reading experience is different and she feels tempted to do fact checking and multitask: "I don't like being on the computer very much and I get distracted if I'm reading it on the computer, I'll open up other tabs and do other things" and "I just think that when I'm on the computer I feel like I need to be clicking things all the time or something." Devi expressed a similar worry because she "can't focus as easily on the art and become easily distracted by other things on my computer." The preferences of these readers are not unique. Ytre-Arne reports on how one of her participants eloquently explains that her preference for print magazines is based on the fact that she likes that "...the picture in front of me is quiet" (2011a, 471).

This active avoidance of certain technological affordances to support a particular kind of reading experience can be linked to the research that some scholars have been developing to problematize and expand the concepts of digital divide (e.g., Reisdorf, Axelsson, and Maurin Söderholm 2012; Selwyn 2003; Selwyn 2006) and technology resistance (Bauer 1995). Selwyn calls for questioning in the discussion of non-users of ICTs to look beyond the simple idea that lack of connectivity is a deficiency or an impediment to the fulfillment of a citizen's role in society. To achieve this he first surveys and then interviews non-users and infrequent users of ICTs revealing relevant behaviours that can further enlighten the discussion in this and future projects about digital reading (2006). He acknowledges certain deliberate behaviours to avoid technology or connectivity such as techno-Sabbath and that simple access and knowledge about technology are not synonyms for use. For example, according to his research, "...the most prominent rationales cited as underlying interviewees' continued non-engagement with computers involved a lack of relevance or 'life-fit' of computers" (2006, 284). Selwyn identifies "making sense of and acting upon the 'meaning' of technology in their everyday lives" (289) as two guiding themes for the study of why many of the interviewees did not use computers. These themes could and should be investigated in connection with the use of any technology, such as e-readers and tablets, and everyday practices, such as reading for pleasure. Selwyn also describes

computers as a “peripheral” part of his participants’ lives (2006, 288). This descriptor is connected in some cases to the fact that computers can be left at home or at work so creating distance with them is relatively easily. Nowadays technology is harder to leave behind so the efforts to distance oneself from it are also harder and something as simple as ‘taking a day off’ from technological devices is more and more challenging. In this context the print book becomes an easy object with which to sustain a practice such as reading without the burden or the pressure to multitask or to be connected.

In this short section I have examined my participants’ preference for reading print mostly focusing on why they might avoid new reading technological devices. I was especially interested in putting forward explanations that were not anchored in dichotomous discourses such as technophobia, technophilia or *print nostalgia*. As Rouncefield and Tolmie (2011) also explain in the conclusion of their study:

The reason for such continued coexistence, as our research suggests, rests on how the choice and use of physical or digital books is embedded within the social organization of the environment within which a book is being used, and what particular activity is being accomplished at that time (2011, 159).

These discourses polarize the potential explanations instead of looking for ways to research how the co-existence of both reading materials and the potential work that readers do to select texts, moments, and spaces are adequate for each.

### 6.2.2 Sensorial and affective connections with print reading materials: comics as objects and memory indexes

At this point it is relevant to return to a discussion of the quote that opens up this chapter since it is at the core of this analysis. Shane praises the fact that reading print comics is “the closest thing you’re going to get to holding an idea” and that it is also the closest instance of an idea becoming “physical.” The use of the verb ‘hold’ and the notion of the potential ‘physicality’ of an idea mark the importance of reflecting

about sensorial aspects in the reading experience, an activity that it is highly abstract. Shade is not alone in expressing these ideas. Other participants use similar terminology and express a similar sentiment. For instance, Kalo speaks of the uniqueness of “picking up a book”; Templesmith talks about enjoying “holding a book, and smelling it”; while Preacher says that “[...] nothing compares to actually holding the story in your hand.” In a similar research project that focuses on women readers and magazines, Ytre-Arne also reports the use of this sentence ‘you can hold in your hands’ when participants tried to explore the differences between reading print magazines and their online version on the computer (Ytre-Arne 2011b, 471). Ytre-Arne highlights the difficulty that participants had explaining the importance of this characteristic:

While most informants wanted a magazine to hold in their hands, they did find it difficult to explain why this was important. It is no surprise that these dimensions of magazine reading are difficult to put into words. Reading is generally thought of as a cognitive process, and most people would probably find it easier to discuss interpretations of texts than to explain physical dimensions of media experiences. Most informants used general phrases like ‘it feels different’ or ‘it’s more special’. Nevertheless, the quotes cited previously provide some clues (2011b, 471-472).

Although I completely agree with the difficulty that participants have in expressing what characterizes print reading in comparison with digital reading, I want to consider my participants’ comments as more than just clues about these characteristics but also thoughtful and descriptive reflections about their experiences. Some of them turn to certain commonplaces such as the smell or touch of the print comic but even the repetition of these depictions helps to establish their importance. Moreover, comments such as those from Preacher or Shade explore relevant ideas about the embodiment of the reading experience and the importance of print comics for such embodiment. This embodiment and the materiality of print comics are expressed and appreciated in different ways by different participants.

The first approach that I am introducing is that of the book-as-object, one that Kalo, Daniel, and Marian explore almost expertly. Kalo expresses a strong preference for works published by Drawn & Quarterly (D&Q) because she “feel[s] that they really care about quality.” The context of this statement was a discussion about the purchase of comics where she refers to quality in relation to both content and container. Daniel describes D&Q as a “close second” to his favourite publisher, Fantagraphics, and D&Q’s status is mostly motivated by the material quality of their comics production. Marian introduces the work of the artist in this discussion about production. Although Daniel also mentions the differences between creating with pen and paper versus a Wacom tablet, Marian truly expands on the connection between artist and reader when she says “...it’s a little bit closer to the artist in a way if it’s on paper, that’s how they were working initially, on a Bristol board or something.” This idea of the reader being closer to the artists through the media that supports the work shows a respect for the medium and an inclination to see it as a form of art. It also supports the connection that some readers seek with the creator as one of the pleasures of reading. Marian makes this need for a physical object even more evident when she says that “sometimes I’ll buy a book and it’s just, it’s almost as much for the story as it is for ‘I want that object’ I just think it’s really neat, it’s like having a piece of art in your wall in a way.”

The comic does not become just any object, but an art object for her. This understanding of the comic, for instance, also explains why she has acquired some webcomics in print. Enriching this web that my participants create about the comic-as-object Baa gets even more specific when he talks about paper: “Also, there are different kinds of paper, so I guess that if I read on an e-book I just don’t get the same quality of...maybe with time, it could but...there’s certain kinds of papers that are really good to read [on].” Although Baa is the only participant who refers to paper as an element to consider, his comment allows me to bring into the discussion the work of designer Ken'ya Hara, whose words are thought-provoking in relation not just to print comics, but to book printing and its future:



Thanks to the rise of electronic media, paper can finally behave as it can and should- as an intrinsically charming material. If electronic media is reckoned a practical tool for information conveyance, books are information sculpture; from now on, books will probably be judged according to how well they awaken this materiality, because the decision to create a book at all will be based on a definite choice of paper as the medium. How fortunate an issue this will be for paper (Hara 2007, 201).

Hara's description of electronic media as a "practical tool" connects directly with previous quotes from my participants describing the differences between digital and print reading materials. Moreover, Hara connects the future success of books to "how well they awaken this materiality" and he describes paper as "an intrinsically charming material." Hara might be a bit hyperbolic in his discussion but his depiction of paper as 'charming' acknowledges the presence of a viewer/reader who needs to be charmed, attracted, or fascinated by the experience of touching, holding, and even reading the book. I do not deny that his words could be characterized as perfectly fitting in the discourse of *print nostalgia*. Nevertheless, this rather extreme position helps to accentuate the importance of a turn to the material as a contrast to the omnipresent digital. To extend Hara's focus from paper to the general design of a book, I briefly discuss some points brought up by Jones, a design scholar, in an article where he introduces a new framework to understand material and meaning-making aspects of book design. Jones concludes his literature review about materialism and dematerialism in book design with the following thought:

Accordingly the book designer's task becomes one of synchronizing the different elements of the book, to achieve a unity, a 'pervasive quality' or 'atmosphere'. A quality that is affective while sympathetic to the text and the act of reading by not compromising on issues of readability and legibility (Jones 2011, 262).

The use of terms like “atmosphere,” “unity,” and “pervasive quality” to describe the balance that book design should achieve clearly seeks to harness similar qualities as those described by my participants. More importantly, Jones gives the same relevance to the act of reading as he does to the text in this task of book designing. Although he mentions practical aspects such as readability and legibility, the quote as a whole captures the effort to create a seamless but, most importantly, sensorial, maybe even possibly affective, experience between text and reader.

It is clear that material characteristics of print reading materials have a role – major or minor in combination with other factors- in the reading experience. Now it is time to come back to my participants to inquire into the reading experience and materiality even further. In order to explore the singularity of print reading, participants often made an effort to examine what happens during the reading experience. Baa tells us, “...when you are reading digitally the reader [i.e., reading device] has to be really good for you to get this experience.” What is the experience he is referring to? He previously described it as follows: “you go back and forth so you can look at the little images, the bigger picture, the way the borders are set you can get something from it...” He connects print to a kinetic and visual experience, to the careful observation and absorption of the comics art. As highlighted in the previous section and section 5.4.1, the uniqueness of comics at communicating through text and image is especially important. Art tends to provoke a more immediate reaction, what Goldsmith calls the “visceral pull” in her explanation of the difference between readers’ advisory with graphic novels and with other books (2010a, 6). Devi also focuses on this visual component of comics when she says “the art is different when it’s on a page than when it’s online. [...] Not actually different but it feels different.” Commenting on this difference from the production side, Daniel concludes that “...anything analog versus digital there’s always people that prefer one over the other. I’m a mixed bag, digital is easier, it’s more efficient, it’s faster...but it produces a different look, different sound, different feel.” Like Hara, Daniel also uses terminology related to convenience to describe digital production and insists on the idea of a different sensorial experience:

the final product will look, sound, and feel different than one created with “pencil and paper.”

My participants find that reading in print has a different ‘feel,’ notably distinctive from reading in digital environments. In her research Ytre-Arne described the sentence “it feels different” (2011b, 472) as too general and decided that it did not point to anything particularly significant. However, Jones considered the use of ‘feel’ significant as it “introduces emotion into an account of the experiencing of a book” (2011, 262). To explore the importance of this verb, Jones briefly brings into the discussion the work of philosopher Mark Johnson and the concept *flow of experience*, explained as “unified wholes (gestalts) that are pervaded by an all-encompassing quality that makes the present situation what and how it is” (2007, 73). For my project there is another quality of the *flow of experience* that is more relevant. Based on Dewey, Johnson explores the idea that “[a]n identifiable, meaningful experience is neither merely emotional, nor merely practical, nor merely intellectual. Rather, it is all of these at once and together” (2007, 74). This effort to bring emotion, practice, and intellect into the full experience of reading highlights the importance of the recurrent use of the verb *feel* to explain the experience of looking at the art of print comics or simply reading in print. For these readers, reading a print comic *feels* like a whole experience “pervaded by unifying qualities that demarcate them within the flux of our lives” Johnson 2007, 75). These “unifying qualities” can include, for example, the fact that when you are reading a print comic, container and content are one. This is something very different than reading on a tablet or e-reader, where the container stays the same for different narratives. Shade again illuminates this point when he explains how he enjoys “[t]he paper, the book, the whole package of it in one physical thing, I guess I prefer that.” Therefore, as a reader, a print book is “the whole package.” That raises the question: why is this important? Johnson’s explanation speaks to the importance of the print material in a reading experience during the reading event. However, there are other potential contexts where the collapse of content and container become relevant.

Morineau et al. pose the question about “whether the electronic book is able to serve in the same way as the paper book as a contextual index for the retrieval of encoded information” (2005, 334). Morineau et al. are exploring the ability of the e-book versus the paper book as a “external memory trigger” (2005, 329) and they conclude that “it does not provide the external indicators to memory that the classical book does, in that it does not serve as an unambiguous index to indicate a field of knowledge on the basis of its particular physical form” (346). I believe that the idea of the book as a contextual index can be expanded to serve as an index for one’s reader-self development and history, thus concur with Johnson: one reader, one context, one narrative, and one book can help make one experience whole and identifiable. The work of Turkle (2007) about the role of objects as “companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought” (2007, 5) supports this idea of print books as indexes of our history as readers and the development of our reader-self. As a final example for this section and as a bridge to the next, I would like to bring Kalo back to the discussion. She talks about herself as a collector of both books and comics. However, she does not preserve them in mint condition, as she says “they are in my condition”: she writes on them, marks them, and re-reads them. In this process she creates traces of herself and her reader-self that can be preserved and revisited. I will further examine the relationship between collecting and reading in the following section. My objective in introducing it here is to present its direct connection to the idea of the print reading material as an index in the story of the reader-self.

In this section the question has not been if reading in print is better or worse, more effective or less effective than reading in digital form. What my participants have helped us to explore are the ideas about how the change of media can potentially change our relationship to reading and our relationship to the reading material. I do not deny the possibility that in the future readers will develop relationships to reading devices in ways similar to what is currently happening with cellphones or computers (Beer 2012). However, each of those relationships deserves exploration in its own way and more research projects need to look at their co-habitation in everyday life.

### 6.2.3 The reader-self archive: Collecting comics to historicize a readers' development and history

The comics collector is a character that often collides with that of the comic fan. However scholars such as Gabilliet argue for the consideration of collecting as just one of many practices that a fan can embark on and not the one that completely defines him (2010, 256). Interest in collectors and collecting practices is apparent even in LIS and collectors have been compared to librarians (Serchay 1998). In this section I am going to look at the practice of collecting, not from a perspective focused on value but rather on use, mainly reading. None of my participants defined herself as a collector, even though many of them engage in actions that are very much part of the practice of collecting. For example, Daniel talked about how comics triggered his interest in collecting and remembered the moment when he started doing it more seriously in 1994 when a friend of his father gave him some preservation bags for his comic books. He is also one of the participants that made the connection between collecting and reading: "[I will buy comics] that I would want to read myself, and it just has a synergy to it, it's not just nice illustration, it's also the nice story and it has to do with the history of this character [i.e., Spiderman] that I liked since I was young." Daniel does not deny the element of nostalgia that sometimes accompanies the act of collecting:

That [comic] had been around since 1965 or 1975 or what not, the hands it might travel through and kids back in the day would have read it and now it's something that I can look at and sort of, see it as a cultural artifact from the time too which is nice too, whether you're looking at the ads or you're looking at the stories 'cause a lot of them are relevant with, especially Marvel, with what it was in vogue at the time or not.

None of his arguments reveal an economic interest. He talks about collecting what he likes, what he reads, what might have some historical (or nostalgic) value. This approach to collecting is not completely new. In a larger study of the 'nerd-culture scene' in a Canadian city Woo highlights that in the comics audience "an increasingly

important distinction" has emerged between practices of collecting and reading (Woo 2012, 181). Woo describes with certain curiosity the practices of two "active comics fans Solo and Mr. Fox" who, despite their buying habits, decided to categorize themselves as readers. Woo focuses on Solo, who has a sizeable collection, but still defines and interprets her practice "as principally about characters and stories, not objects" (193). This description moves her practices closer to Daniel's and further from collectors who care primarily for the economic value.

In my study, I do not see the appreciation of comics as objects as a contradiction with defining oneself solely as a reader. What interests me is why readers value the accumulation and preservations of the comics they read and what meaning(s) they take from those collections. In the case of many of my participants, collections of comics serve as active archives of their reading experience that help them to remember and share who their reader-self is and how it has evolved. For example, Templesmith shared her inclination to sometimes try to sell or exchange some of the titles that she has not particularly enjoyed. However, she has "a really hard time parting with them, even if I don't really like them I kind of...I want to keep them just in case I ever like them." It is almost as if Templesmith was collecting to give opportunities to her future reader-self to re-discover titles. So Templesmith's archive does provide a rich portrait of her taste, including titles she enjoyed and others that she did not but that she hopes she will, given the right time or mood.

A second rich example is that of Shade. He initially criticizes the behaviour of collectors who "would get all the covers, all the variances." He then defines his approach to acquiring comics:

I just want to read it and the fact that I keep it all is more just so I can read it later or even use stuff for reference sometimes or writing references. Just to keep them, they are kind of like trophies, I guess.

Interested in the practice of using comics as references, I asked him about writing about comics. He corrected me immediately and clarified that his reference use was personal:

If I have an idea, if I'm telling somebody 'oh, you know, there's this theory' and I know a comic that explains what I'm trying to say, I'll pull it out and see, this whole section is what I'm trying to explain maybe.

In a sense Templesmith and Shade are defining, materializing, and sharing their reader-self through the creation and maintenance of these collections. Another relevant note is that none of the participants referred to digital comics when talking about their collections. Again, this behaviour is not unique and the work of the anthropologist Daniel Miller connects my participants' attitudes towards their collections with some of the behaviours shared by his participants in his studies that look at things and how we establish relationships and affective connection to objects in our daily life (2008; 2010). For example, Miller describes some of Simon's things, one of the participants in *The Comfort of Things* (2008), as follows:

That's why it's important to [Simon] to have the music physically out there, as vinyl and CDs. To possess it, ideally to see it within reach, so that, like a cook's ingredients, they are all at hand when he needs them. It's desperately sad that so much has to be in storage at present, but one day there will be shelf after shelf of these ingredients of life, ready for him to mix and savour (48).

These characteristics are not unique to his music collection as Simon also expresses a preference for printing his photos, "to be there as external objects" (52). Simon's need for present and physical collections and his use of them are similar to the way Shade talked about his comics' collection.

One final purpose of comics' collections identified by some of my participants was sharing. To share one needs a personal collection in print form. Alison is one of the

participants who relies on the public library more heavily to find her reading material. She is perfectly happy with this arrangement except for one issue. As she explains, the impossibility of sharing her recommendations is rather inconvenient:

The one reason I think that would like to own is to be able to lend them to friends because sometimes it's like...I recommend a book and I have to [suggest] 'maybe your library has it' instead of 'ok, I can give it to you'.

Baa is also interested in sharing his comics. However, in his case the inconvenience related to format since sharing digital comics is rather difficult:

Actually the practicality to switch with my friends, I like that a lot, [...] I'm not jealous of my comic books, I like to share with people that's one of the things that an e-book wouldn't benefit me.

I have presented different reasons for why my participants maintain or desire to start print comics' collections. These reasons are not connected to the economic value of the comics but to the preservation and sharing of the reader-self. When Daniel acquires a Spiderman comic he is connecting his present reader-self to his child one, almost creating a sense of continuity that makes the development of his present (and more heterogeneous) taste an even richer story. Templesmith does not discard some titles to give her future reader-self the possibility of discovering them. For Shade comics can become a way of explaining not just his reader-self but himself. All these different behaviours serve to enrich one of the landmark texts about collecting, Benjamin's *Unpacking my library* (2007). This text reads as a reflection about the purpose of creating a book collection and the relationship between the collector and the books. Benjamin seems more interested in establishing the importance of the history of the book as object and how this aspect matters to the collector. However, he also introduces the idea that the collector does not collect just objects but also memories. For example he says that "the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books" (60).



This link between memories and books helps to reinforce the role that collections can play as archives of the reader-self. There is an even more powerful thought that Benjamin leaves for the final lines of his text:

That for a collector-and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be-ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them (Benjamin 2007, 67).

Here Benjamin recognizes that the collection is as much a history of the books as a history of the collector who has created it. Scholars already mentioned such as de Certeau (1984) and Jenkins (1992) have theorized and researched the role of readers/viewers in the process of activating different texts. Research such as Bourdieu's (1993) has grounded our knowledge about the path a text takes to become valued and consequently valuable for readers, collectors, and society in general. However, there are fewer examples of scholars who focus on the reading experience and attempt to explore what readers put of themselves into their reading materials, the meaning that these materials acquire, and how they represent the reader-self. Coming back to the initial quotes, where materiality was described by producers as an impediment, as something that separates reader from the text, in this chapter I sought to illustrate how my participants describe and explore this material dimension as an element that defines and changes their reading experience in a qualitative way. As Johnson explains, "meaning is embodied. [...] Meaning emerges as we engage the pervasive qualities of situations and note distinctions that make sense of our experience and carry it forward. The meaning of something is its connections to past, present, and future experiences, actual or possible (Johnson 2007, 273). Hopefully the materiality of reading helps to create the meaning of the experience and the effort that the participants go through to make sense of its role helps them in return to explore and develop their reader-selves.

## Chapter 7

### 7 Third dimension: Participants and the context of comics reading

In “Beyond Market Models and Resistance” Pawley (2009) criticizes a dichotomy in the scholarly approach to research about reading and readers—the market model and de Certeau’s resistance model—and defends an approach that looks closely at the institutions of reading. She states that “[u]sing organizations as a middle layer of analysis can bridge the gap between structure and agency and between macro and micro views” (2009, 74). According to Pawley, my study would fit as a study in agency and micro views because of my focus on the comics reader. My participants enriched my examination by taking me on a path similar to the one Pawley proposes. My participants pointed to the power of media industries and the present and potential roles of libraries and educational institutions in relation to their comics reading. Although my participants’ reflections about the comics industry could fall under what she describes as the market model, their thoughts about formal and informal institutions such as universities, libraries, or the family revealed the importance that surrounding structures and institutions have in the comics reading experience. These reflections characterize my participants as aware of a complex and influential context and depict informed and engaged reader-selves. For example, during the think-aloud protocol Marian shared her surprise and happiness when she discovered that Brussels devotes a museum to bande dessinée and Tintin. For her the existence of such an institution symbolizes the different status that French and Belgian bande dessinée enjoy in comparison to North American comics culture.

In this section I focus on the comics industry, educational institutions, and libraries even though other institutions were also mentioned. The family and the comics store figure in my earlier analysis of the reader-self. Readers were aware of the role and powerful influence of different institutions but foremost these institutions

became sites where comics reading was introduced, encouraged, or denigrated, directly or indirectly.

### 7.1 Readers and the comic industry: The pervasiveness of comics and the awareness of readers

[Pokemon-like titles] just seem like, how do you say it, I don't want to use...like cash-cows almost. They're just making the graphic novels because they know kids are going to buy these, it's more like a franchise, more than 'we want to make a cool graphic novel,' 'we want to showcase our art,' 'we want to tell a story or re-tell a story'; it's just like...

Jacob

In her exploration of children's media and the concept of "supersystem," Kinder states that "most of the children [she] interviewed at the video arcade were terribly naive about money and the capitalist system, [but] they seemed keenly aware of the dynamics of consumerist desire" (1991, 123). Kinder paints a portrait of her participants as people who know what they want but do not seem to know much about where it comes from or why they want it. Although just one example, this sentence often came back to my mind when I listened to my participants as they mentioned issues related to the comics industry and the influence of economic pressures in the creation of comics. The age difference in my participants (Kinder's children ranged from six to fourteen years of age) probably influenced their knowledge and awareness. However, this presentation of youth readers and consumers as dupes, irrational fans, or simply unaware is not uncommon.

In my research project, despite diversity of experiences and expertise with the form, participants showed sensitivity and awareness of issues related to the role of the media industries in their reading experience. This topic frequently emerged in relation

to explanations about their tastes, favourite creators or storylines, and access to comics. This awareness connects to a small but increasing scholarly interest in the production and economic facets of comics. I briefly review some noteworthy examples and then concentrate on my participants' reflections.

Although Beaty's focus is to explain the recession in the North American comic book industry, in the process he gives an all-encompassing summary of the American industry, including the greater role that manga and European comics have been playing in that market (2010). This article provides an introductory context to some of the issues raised by my participants. I have previously touched on Lopes's (2009) and Gabilliet's (2010) books. Both researchers examine the American tradition of comics from a cultural history perspective and devote some serious attention to the development of the comics industry. Norcliffe and Rendance (2003) describe and critique the production of comic books from a creators' perspective. They present it as a case study to examine the geography and time patterns of the division of labour in cultural industries. Rogers (2012) contributes to the "Production" section in Smith and Duncan's *Critical Approaches to Comics* (2012). Among several chapters that focus on individual creators, Rogers presents a piece that asserts the suitability of a political economy approach to analyze comic book production. Similarly to Norcliffe and Rendance (2003) Rogers compares the differences of artisan and industrial models for production focusing on the process of preparation of a single comic book issue. Brienza's research focuses primarily on the acceptance of manga in North America, specifically looking at manga's influence in changing the practices of comics producers in particular and the comics market in general (2009; 2010; 2013). These kinds of analyses are not particularly abundant because, as Brienza claims, they require "a high level of access to a particular set of people, the producers themselves" (2010, 107) and consequently to the information that publishers (or media conglomerates) accumulate about sales, distributions, and readers as well as the practices put in place to produce and market a comic. It is not in the publishers' interest to share this information but

despite this both researchers and, in this case, readers express a curiosity and interest in the topic.

This section will focus on these dynamics as expressed by my participants and complemented primarily with the work of McAllister (1990; 2001). His work explains an important shift in the comics industry that still is relevant for the present situation and also points to the emergence of current trends. According to McAllister it is important to keep in mind that the comic book industry<sup>10</sup> is characterized by increased conglomeration and ownership concentration. Such characteristics do not just affect corporate investors but have profound implications for the future of the industry (and readers), both in terms of its economic stability and the ideological diversity of its content (McAllister 2001, 15).

In order to organize the abundant but dispersed thoughts shared by my participants I frame the following discussion with two of the three key areas of study identified by Rogers for exploring a political economy approach to comics (2012, 146). First, I will look at the practices of licensing, especially in conjunction with the abundance of comics being adapted to movies. Although these practices are usually implemented to generate additional revenue, in terms of reception they have different consequences. Second, I will look at the systems of production and how participants are very aware of the impositions and restrictions that impinge on creativity and productivity.

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<sup>10</sup> In this case, I use the term 'comic book' because it is McAllister's choice and because it also refers to the mainstream industry whose main publishing format was still the single issue, or comic book, and superhero based storylines.

### 7.1.1 The increasing ubiquity of comics: Licencing and adaptations

But since [the comics are] in the movies, on tv, around us everywhere and more people are...it feels like more people are reading them.

Kalo

As Kalo expresses in this quote, comics narratives seem to be all around us. The extension from print media is nothing new<sup>11</sup>, especially when looking at certain superhero narratives. However, the movement toward conglomeration in media industries combined with the generalization of processes such as remediation and transmedia storytelling have increased and reinforced the pervasiveness of comics narratives. The availability of these narratives in different media (i.e., movies, clothing, toys, television shows, cartoons, and videogames) supports their perpetual presence in the media landscape, creating a continuum where at one end readers are exposed to known storylines and characters and at the other they have the opportunity to discover new narratives. Licencing and adaptations are two important production strategies to support this continuum.

During the 1990's licensing became one of the major sources of revenue for comics publishers and their parent companies. Publishers had to achieve a delicate balance where the quality of stories continued to maintain readers' interest but also allowed for the development of characters that were attractive for the licensing portion of the business (McAllister 2001, 17). One of the consequences of licensing is that major publishers consolidated their presence in other media. Since then most superhero comics publishers such as Marvel, DC, or Image have become "license farms" (Rogers 2012, 147) for their parent corporations or other larger media industries such as cinema

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<sup>11</sup> DC iconic superheroes began appearing in film serials in the 1940s, extending to animated, live-action television programs, radio shows, merchandizing, and feature films (Rogers 2012, 147).

and television. Film and television cartoons have become a major source of visibility for comics in mainstream culture. For example, the WB network<sup>12</sup> was central to DC's efforts to develop several cartoon shows based on superhero characters as well as the successful live-action series *Smallville* (2001–2011) and more recently *Arrow* (2012–). In 2000, Marvel began its successful run of movie adaptations based on X-Men, Spider-Man, and more recently Iron Man and the rest of the Avengers. In this continuous process the ultimate game changer happened in 2009 when Disney acquired Marvel Entertainment. The long-term consequences of this establishment of a powerhouse conglomerate in youth and family entertainment are still to be determined.

The importance of franchises and licencing (and the process of adaptation that often comes with them) is noted easily in the comments of my participants. For example, they describe the distinctive role that television cartoons and movies had in their development as comics readers. When he was younger, Baa's reading was dominated by manga titles until he watched the first *Spiderman* movie (2002) and then decided to explore superhero comics. Because of his strong identity as a comics reader Shade feels a sense of obligation to watch movie adaptations and to be aware of what happens to storylines and characters with which he is already familiar. Preacher watched superhero cartoons but the adaptations of comics from Frank Miller and Alan Moore became a catalyst for a process of discovery, as he says, "it really started broadening my horizons when the movies came out." In these and other cases the connection between cartoons, movies, and comics was evident because of the ubiquity of superheroes. However this does not always happen. Baa shared how he did not realize that the movie *The League of Extraordinary Men* (2003) was actually an adaptation of a comic. Adaptations are not always successful or positive. Shade is very critical of the different attempts of adapting one of his favourite characters, the Swamp Thing:

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<sup>12</sup> A subsidiary of Time Warner like DC itself and later on replaced by The CW.

They are baaad, they just, just...There're no words to describe them, they're just bad movies. And they gave everybody the worse idea about those comics too, that was the worse thing, you tell people [that] one of my favourite things I've ever read is *Swamp Thing* and they'll be like 'what?!' and it's probably because of that movie because the movies were so bad, the television show was soo bad, there's two of them and they still screwed it.

Clearly the comics selected to be adapted and the budget and creative teams in charge of those adaptations are affected by financial constraints in the production process. Walker states that "the big money is really not looking at generally anything meaningful" while Oracle identifies superhero adaptations with "summer blockbusters" and therefore her expectation is for low quality movies. She also questioned the decision of adapting *Watchmen* (1987) to film instead of a television series in the same spirit as *Walking Dead* (2010 –). She cannot give a more coherent explanation:

I really liked *Persepolis*, I think that did a really good job but I guess, they're not trying, that's not trying to be the budget summer blockbuster and that's what all the superhero movies are going for. I think they kind of...I don't know. It does not always make sense. I think *Watchmen* could've been a great miniseries or something but, it's like, we need a three hour movie full of punches to the face so...that what you get.

These two comments and the one that I present following show that readers have developed a sensibility, almost a commitment, to be informed about the process of production. To wrap up this line of thinking I return to Jacob whose quote opens this chapter. I chose Jacob because he is not one of the most avid or experienced readers in my sample but he did express a remarkable knowledge and commitment to the form and everything that surrounds it. He is also one of the only readers attracted to adaptations, especially from fiction novels to comics. However, this commitment is not without criticisms. For example, he has strong views about the adaptations of series



that he often sees at the library such as *Nancy Drew* (2005–2010) and the *Hardy Boys* (2005–2010) stating “it seems that [publishers are] cashing in.” This thought connects with and expands the introductory quote where he identifies a lack of artistic pursuit in some of the works that are being published. His comment also informs a scholarly discussion about the reasons to construct transmedia stories. Bolin explains how these stories can be “driven by both artistic and non-artistic motivation” (2011, 98) and audiences, especially young audiences, are often constructed as consuming these narratives without an awareness of these constraints or motivations. Jacob has a preference for what he sees as artistically motivated stories and attempts to point out those that are just market motivated. This is not an easy task in the current media landscape and Jacob’s inclination to even just identify these characteristics shows considerable sophistication in his reading practices, especially if one keeps in mind his status as a less committed reader.

#### 7.1.2 The awareness of production pressures in comics readership

McAllister discussed the concentration of production and distribution in the comics field and how that affects “its economic stability and the ideological diversity of its content” (2001, 15). These two processes are intimately connected since to maintain an economic balance publishers see economic predictability mostly through conventional or already successful storylines, such as those of superheroes (2001, 33). Equally important is the fact that the materials with more lucrative licencing agreements tend to be linked to those same successful storylines. Thus independent and alternative storylines (considered less profitable) get fewer opportunities to be adapted or, in other words, less exposure in an overly saturated media landscape. Without the marketing support that adaptations such as *300* (2007) or *Watchmen*<sup>13</sup> (2009) enjoyed, it is extremely difficult for non-superhero titles to achieve any

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<sup>13</sup> Neither of these titles is part of mainstream superhero narratives but both enjoy a high recognition and consideration because of their authors (Frank Miller and Alan Moore), their critical reception, and their unofficial canonical status.

moderate economic success. Another way in which the importance of economic success and its effect on reading practices emerges is the evolution (or lack thereof) and longevity of storylines. Oracle and Templesmith, for instance, share their anxiety about how some of their favourite titles might not make it to the more stable and durable trade paperback format. Although Oracle does not usually buy single issues, she explains why she felt compelled to do it for one title, *Power Girl* (2010):

I like the character [of Power Girl] and when she got her own title, oh, that's really cool I love to read that in trades. But I know it won't come out in trades if the series doesn't succeed... so I kind of felt that I might not get to read it because it didn't publish enough because not enough people would buy it...I'm just shooting myself in the foot.

Oracle is presented with a conundrum: she does not like to buy single issues but if a title does not have enough success it will be discontinued. Discontinuing means that the series might not get enough issues to be compiled into a trade paperback or the publisher might not consider it profitable enough to make the story available in that format. Templesmith finds the uncertainty of this scenario to be "stressful" and describes a dedicated process to keep track of this possibility where she is always vigilant of publishers' announcements.

Control over characters and ultimately creators' output is another way of ensuring that content is less risky, a production strategy of which my participants are highly aware. Oracle talks about her active support of positive female superhero characters and female creators. However, this support is tainted by uncontrollable and unpredictable industry movements. Within a couple of months' time a female character that was rather complex and core to the story development could easily become an objectified female superhero. Oracle also offers the example of one of her long-time favourite titles, *Hellblazer* (1992 – 2013), which has gone through multiple writer and artist changes affecting to the focus of the story. As she explains:

The new stuff, it just didn't seem to be connected to [the previous life of the main character], just the tone seemed totally different and I didn't know if I was gonna get a story I would like or not.

Shade expresses a similar frustration in relation to the developments of the Hulk character. He connects those feelings directly to the process of revamping characters to attract new readers: "It was shame, but at the end of the day the property belongs to Marvel and it's in their best interest to return their properties to an easy-to-access state." Creator changes and storyline shifts are usually risky endeavours since they can alienate faithful readers such as Oracle and Shade. However, publishers tend to seek the renewal of their readership and, especially in the superhero universe, tend to count on the fidelity of fans and collectors. An example of Marvel's effort to capture a new generation of readers is *The Ultimate Marvel* series that started in the summer of 2000. It focused on updating the style and narrative of superheroes like Spider Man or X-Men and also eliminating some of the many intricacies that made the storylines too obscure for new readers. One of the most successful works was also one of the first published, *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000–2009). The Ultimate universe was rebooted in 2009 and again 2011. Some of these reboots were accepted and celebrated by readers but others did not achieve any success.

Lack of diversity in content might seem to be in opposition to another important theme raised by my participants—the comics form as an edgier and more alternative media form than others. However, it is consistent with scholarly research about the comics industry. McAllister explains this contradiction during the 1990s in the midst of the initial major conglomeration in the mainstream comics industry:

Industrial influences on comic book content are numerous, diverse, and at times contradictory. Some factors, such as the new adult market, appear more likely to encourage cultural criticism at fundamental levels; others, such as increased licensing activity, would seem likely to perpetuate legitimation of dominant values and viewpoints. The level of

cultural criticism is a relative one. The new independents, despite their willingness to take production risks, are still more constrained than the undergrounds of the 1960s. The sometimes superficial criticism of the independents, then, may become the most radical voice in the industry (1990, 69).

As explored in section 6.1, participants perceive the comics form and the narratives encapsulated in it as representative of voices and themes that are rare in other media. They talk about an attitude or a stance that they perceive in comics storytelling. In the context of production and the industry Devi connected these edgier or more experimental possibilities to the lower investment cost and the visibility that the comic bookstore offers to more alternative works:

I think [alternative material is] published more often because if someone wants to make a very weird movie no one knows about it and they're hard to find, but if you go to a comic bookstore there's thousands of choices that you can make, if you really look, and even Heroes they have an indie section for non-mainstream comics.

Walker goes even further and reflects again about production costs and the potential to create more innovative or radical stories:

It is easier to find texts about social justice or leftist thinking-type-focused texts in novels or graphic novels but in movies it's really hard to get the independent films that are doing it. Especially because of the time commitment of creating a movie and the resources, it's funny that the more resource intensive is the shortest medium.

Shade summarized these different reflections with a sentence to describe his overall approach to media: he looks for "things that can make me just tweak the way my mind works a little bit." This thought presents comics as a medium where conformity is not expected and a certain rebellious attitude is also encouraged. This

group of comments can paint an idealized portrait of comics; however they should be read in conjunction with previous criticisms. Participants like Selina, who reads both superhero and alternative comics, provide a final reminder of the considerable power of mainstream media. Her words provide a counterpoint to the celebration of comics as an alternative medium and also speak of the rich reading experience that these readers seek:

I mean, generally I have rants about the medium just depicting what is commonly understood to be the main point of view which...is very disappointing, the one thing that I do to keep, you know, sort of abreast of is...these tiny little efforts that different publishing industries or different publishing companies rather, try to do to make amends, to try to be more representative, I think that these efforts are an absolute waste of time. Because they are not sure if they will make money they aren't going to do them and find it extraordinarily frustrating.

All of these contrasting comments demonstrate a complex and involved understanding of the medium. This understanding allows for the recognition of market power and pressures as well as a belief in the real possibilities of the medium to be an alternative storytelling medium. This multiplicity speaks of the need to explore and maintain an open path between scholarship that looks at comics audiences (in a broad sense including collectors, fans, and readers) and those studies that focus on the comics industry, both mainstream and independent.

## 7.2 The role of educational institutions in readers' lives: An unfulfilled reality (but a serious possibility)

I don't think we should pose it, you know, 'this graphic novel as the ideal solution to all reading problems,' I also don't think that you should only have kids that are having a hard time reading reading graphic novels. I mean, if kids are growing up with that impression now, this is a fundamental medium that deserves equal recognition, that [position] bears negative consequences on, obviously, the people, the kids that are reading this, as opposed to something else, as well as the medium itself. [...] Obviously I don't know the intricacies of teaching and blah, blah, blah, but I think that graphic novels are really, really, really, enabling thing.

Selina

In the Literature Review I presented a brief historical overview of how educators and Education scholars have used and studied comics. In that overview I highlighted the changes noted since 2000 when a positive trend that recognizes and promotes the value of comics as tools in the classroom emerged to overcome the lack of knowledge and prejudice that kept them in the shadow. In general terms comics are praised for their value to connect with a generation of visual learners. Nevertheless, it is still problematic that very few studies focused on the pleasure reading practices of students, addressing questions such as why youth are interested in graphic novels, what role this interest plays in their cultural habits, and how these themes can potentially inform the educational practices related to reading and youth. When set against this overview, the comments and thoughts of my participants are evidence for how this emerging positive trend impacts their learning and the development of their reader-self in general.

In my study participants mentioned educational institutions in both positive and negative terms. The negative comments were centered primarily on reading for school work and how this work dominated much of their leisure time. From these negative aspects emerges a close link to the experience of time in contemporary society, a connection that I examine fully in chapter 8 but which warrants a brief note here to provide fuller context for my participants' position. School work, especially at the postsecondary level, is perceived as a major impediment to the joys of reading for pleasure. Participants associate the activity of reading with educational work; thus reading is not directly perceived as a pleasurable activity. More importantly school work, and the reading connected to it, takes up much of the time that participants have outside of class or work. Walker and Lorraine summarize these two positions. Walker refers to reading as "the last thing I want to do":

School actually messes with [my reading routines and reading time] quite a bit because I have to read...spend so much time reading things that I wouldn't choose to read that the last thing I want to do when I put down that book is go read something else.

Lorraine speaks directly to the issue of time: "...school really limits the time, the time for comic books unfortunately but I try to read." Other participants such as Devi, Kalo, and Daniel described similar experiences and, as I will discuss in the following chapter, one result of this time scarcity is that participants make careful and informed choices to take advantage of the little time at their disposal to engage with comics.

Educational institutions such as universities and high schools are also positively described as places where comics are discovered or where readers' knowledge about them expands. Educational institutions and the professionals who work in them emerge as places and people with the potential to play an important role in the status and development of comics as a well-regarded reading material, both for pleasure and for school work. Most importantly, this role is not circumscribed to their life as students

as the exposure and knowledge they acquire in schools also impact their personal life by informing and strengthening their reader-self.

The use of comics by educators can also support a general process of acceptance and increased cultural respectability for comics. During the interviews readers shared the path they followed in the discovery and enjoyment of comics and, in some cases, this process was marked by facing and overcoming stereotypes about the form. For example, Alison remembered how reading *Maus* (1986–1991) in grade 10 helped her understand comics as a more serious medium. Promethea recalls several enriching encounters with *Maus* (1986–1991) in classes about 20<sup>th</sup> century history and politics. Templesmith also comments on the fact that many people think of comics just as the superheroes genre and for “little kids.” She used to agree with those opinions but she was exposed to a graphic adaptation of *Hamlet* in high school that helped her recognize the diversity and possibilities of the medium. Finally, Selina’s “rant,” as she describes it, illustrates the important role that she believes comics can have in the classroom:

I don't really know the specific teaching strategies that one would use but I think graphic novels are really, really important and I think classrooms that don't have graphic novels in them are doing a serious injustice to their students. I think there're a lot of kids out there that could interact in a much more fundamental way with the same stuff if they had an opportunity to read graphic novels. They adapted all sorts of different Shakespeares, whether it's on manga form or this one or that one, they've adapted all that stuff and I just think that it's incredibly important...that's my rant.

It is compelling to see that Selina’s “rant” is not unique and Jacob articulates a similar position. He sees the possibilities that using comics in the classroom create and interestingly also refers to adaptations but from a different angle. Jacob is in high school and is getting ready to take some extracurricular art courses in another program.



Because of these courses he was considering different ways in which he could apply or improve his art skills within his current classes. Jacob commented about a possible assignment to make *King Lear* more accessible while applying some of his artistic skills:

The units that we're doing in my English class are based in *King Lear*. So, once again *King Lear* is notoriously a difficult play to read, for high school students, it's one of the harder plays and I just decided that it could be like *Frankenstein* where I didn't particularly enjoy reading *Frankenstein*, and so far I haven't particularly enjoyed reading *King Lear* because there's so much vocabulary that it's kind of outdated and it's just not the language that teens are used to, at all. So I just think that it could be a really compelling and interesting story if it was more straight forward, also I just love doing art and having goals that I can achieve so trying to make a graphic novel adaptation of *King Lear* I think would be a fun thing to do and also would be an assignment for school, I think the activity for this unit is to make like some kind of adaptation of the play.

Following this detailed explanation I asked him if any of the teachers in his high school used comics and his response was categorical: "no one has used them at all." Jacob's suggestion is not an innovative one but it corresponds to many recommendations proposed by educators and scholars. It speaks loudly of the need and place that students and readers see for comics in the learning process. Although educators are finding strong and relevant connections between comics and the curriculum, students simply respond to the presence of these materials and the opportunity to explore them in independent and creative projects.

Jacob explains the case of a possibility not realized but not all the examples are about the lack of use. Some participants shared their experiences using comics to carry out their school work. At the time of the interview, Baa was working on an independent project for his English class about *Watchmen* (1987). He wanted to analyze the influence of this particular work in the development of the comics industry. He expressed

enthusiasm and excitement about the support that his teacher showed about the project as this particular work informed Baa's understanding of the concept of graphic novels. When I questioned him about what he thought a graphic novel was he started his explanation with the following sentence: "I had to research that for my project so I'm going to say what I would say before that." Clearly this one project has already made a difference in his conceptualization of comics as a form and graphic novels as a format. Devi was also allowed to write a final paper about the relationship between the characters of Batman and The Joker which deepened her knowledge about this superhero through reading three highly praised storylines: *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1990), *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1990), and *Batman: Hush* (2003). Lastly, Marian wrote a term paper for a fourth year undergraduate course exploring the concept of fetishism in relation to the work of one of her favourite cartoonists. These examples support the idea that when students can work with and around comics in their school work, they have the opportunity to show their care for the form and also to further their knowledge about it. Readers demonstrate an intrinsic eagerness to explore it.

But school work is not the only way that comics can emerge in relation to educational institutions. This presence of comics in the life of the student can take different forms. Alison gives an example that speaks about the serious consideration of comics not just as meaningful reading material but also as an educational tool and cultural reference. In her first-year *Persepolis* (2003–2004) was selected as the reading choice for a common reading experience. This type of activity was inspired by city-wide initiatives such as the currently widespread One Book, One City programs (OBOC). These activities are what Fuller and Rehberg Sedo describe as *mass reading events* (2013, 4-5). In their study dedicated to this shared reading phenomenon, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo do not look in detail at higher education events but their introductory chapter briefly mentions how some educational institutions have embraced them for different reasons, such as connecting the learning community with the city or supporting the acclimatization of first year students (2013, 5). Alison praised the

campus-activities and formal lectures about comics that were part of that program since these activities allowed her, for example, to meet other students interested in comics. As she describes it “that was also the first time that I met somebody else that really liked graphic novels too, I guess because I really didn’t know anybody before.” It is important to note that the selection of a work such as *Persepolis* (2003–2004) potentially can also help to make students aware of the diversity of the medium. *Persepolis* (2003–2004) is both written and illustrated by a female creator, it is an autobiographical story with black and white art, and was published originally in French. Compared with the North American mainstream comics industry, its topic and art style bring it closer to more alternative and independent works. It is also a translation, something of a rarity in a comics market still accustomed to American works. The sum of these factors makes *Persepolis* (2003–2004) an enriching choice. This is a rather simple way in which educational institutions can help to expand the understanding and appreciation for the medium of comics. This expansion of the medium does not mean to overlook the superhero narrative since educators have also the opportunity to integrate a shift in the perspective of how superhero narratives are discussed with students (Klock 2002).

To further explore the potential influence of educational institutions in comics readers one participant, Kalo, exemplifies how the presence and use of comics could have notable repercussions in the reading and educational life of a young adult. Kalo was one in a group of readers who recalled *bande dessinée* titles such as *Les Aventures de Tintin* (1930–1986), *Astérix* (1961–), and *Fantasio-Spirou* (1948–1968) as among their first encounters with the form. This exposure was motivated by the presence of French albums in the school libraries’ collections at their French immersion schools. This presence is not very surprising if one considers the strong role that *bande dessinée* plays in French popular culture. As well this role could also translate into an important function of *bande dessinée* in the teaching of French in Canadian schools. The official bilingualism in Canada could give both educators and students exposure to a different way of producing and experiencing the comics form, in this case to French-Belgian

*bande dessinée* the largest comics industry in Europe and one of the three strongest world-wide. However, beyond the exposure in the school library, *bande dessinée* was not actively used in the classrooms. In contrast with Marian, who quickly recalled her experience with French comics as a kid, Kalo forgot to include these titles when I questioned her about her first comics readings. She brought it up during the discussion about reading foreign comics. She considered titles like *Les Aventures de Tintin* (1930–1986) and *Astérix* (1961–) to be childhood readings and tied them to her school experience, clearly differing from the discovery process she underwent during adolescence, which was mainly centered on American titles. She recalled those French comics being extremely popular in her school library but not used during class activities:

No, they didn't use them in class. They were in the library, we had a library class so we would go and sit around and read so that was often...those were often the books that were taken off, they were good. But I really didn't have a big conception of what comics were then.

In this quote, beyond remembering how comics were not used in the classroom, she introduces another important idea for my analysis when she says that she “didn't have a big conception of what comics were then.” This acknowledgment shows her care for a deeper understanding of the form, one that she will access during her university degree. Her oversight of this childhood experience could have been influenced by the restrictions that her parents set around her popular culture consumption. As Kalo explains:

My background is Lebanese, I moved here from Lebanon, I was very, very young, my parents didn't have an opportunity to go to university so when I was younger they were very limiting on what I have access to in terms of pop culture because they wanted me to be very school focused.

However, this position becomes even more intriguing since Kalo did not perceive her parents having an issue with reading teen series. Kalo again brings some light to the issue:

I had my teen series and I got that fix too, they never had an issue with. I think it really had to do with the format because it looks like a book, you pick it up... 'she's reading therefore she's doing something good for herself,' but they didn't think that way when they saw pictures, because they think it's so easy to read a comic book.

The question that emerges from this situation is thought-provoking: what would happen if comics were used as part of the curriculum? Certainly it would not ensure a change in the parents' understanding of what is worth reading, but an opportunity for discussing comics might have emerged where Kalo's interest for this reading material would have been sanctioned by their educational use. In this quote Kalo comes back to the issue of her past lack of knowledge about the comics form and identified it as the source for not enjoying them enough and thus not making them worthy of discussion with her parents. She explains it as follows:

When I was a kid that was part of it, it was, there's a lot of reading [about the amount of text in *Tintin*] and also I wasn't reading the panels, I was just reading the words. I can tell, I can remember, that's what I was doing because if I were reading them then I'm sure I would have enjoyed them more than I did back then, which is why I never gain much of an interest at the time to really push and oppose my parents point of view, because I didn't hold a lot of stake on it.

Although Kalo quickly clarifies that her parents are not as strict as they used to be, this opposition was one important factor that hindered her development as a comics reader. It was not until her last years in high school when she describes going back to reading comics as part of a process of "cultural awakening." This process was

supported and expanded later in university. Contrasted with this first limited experience with comics in educational contexts, Kalo had fond memories of her second experience with comics during her university degree. Her first significant encounter was as part of a general survey course in the first year where she read Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996). This reading helped her to discover comics beyond the mainstream market that she explored during high school. Although she was already familiar with the quality of Vertigo comics, she described a different experience with Seth's work: "[...] I could recognize there is a distinct style to it and there's a different....It almost feels like a different agenda too, maybe, that the author has."

This was a first important step in her development as a reader of comics but a second and more important one materialized when she took an elective course that focused exclusively on graphic novels. She remembered that it was one of the hardest classes to get into. Many students wanted to sign up for it because they thought it would be an easy course but "it was really challenging!" as she notes. She even recognized that she had some unfair expectations about the course, probably informed by some widespread stereotypes about comics: "I thought it was going to be more fun, and it was a lot more fun than other classes, I thought it was going to be all fun, I think it's what I meant to say. So, that was my bad."

Kalo cites several comics as examples of what she discovered in this course; she focused a little more on three titles: *Fun Home* (2006), *Jimmy Corrigan* (1995), and *Watchmen* (1987). About the first she especially noted the use of intertextuality and the effort required to unpack the story. About the second she highlighted the need to help to figure out the "...many chunks without dialog which can be hard for some people to read, because they think that they're not actually reading." About *Watchmen* (1987) she said that it was "very poignant, even if it was twenty years after the fact." It is also relevant that she noticed a group of students who had been comics readers for longer. This group had already internalized the reading process and exhibited a deeper

knowledge. But she was happy to see that the course was also a learning experience for them and she explains why:

There were people in the class who were those avid comic books readers and [the professor] challenged them too, and you could tell that he really wanted to because they came into the class thinking 'I'm going to get a 90% because I've been reading comics since I was eleven years old' and they were wrong because the exam questions were really hard and there're so much more to think about. That was the first time I read *Watchmen*, was in that class and you can't just analyze dialog or plot, there's so much more to analyze in what's going on in the actual format of the book and it threw some people off, it threw me off a bit.

Kalo is describing a strong learning experience where both beginner and expert readers get to learn about comics. This experience stayed with her and it recently made her reflect in more general terms about the skills and knowledge needed to learn how to properly read comics. While she volunteered in the library teaching basic literacy skills:

I had my recent realization that there's a comic book literacy, I should have realized then but for some reason I still...I didn't until I was trying to teach it to someone...I was 'wait, there are all these things to take into consideration'.

In contrast with Kalo, a beginner reader such as HunterS expressed a more ambivalent sentiment about learning comics literacy. His ambivalence might be connected to the association between his classmates' lack of interest in comics and some prejudice against the form:

I think it's sad about it is that we have to spend so much time in class, in tutorial explaining the people how to read comics and because they come across 'oh, I've never read a comic before' and they didn't even

read the funny papers or anything like that, they wouldn't touch a graphic novel, they wouldn't touch anything, so they don't get the whole concept of like, left to right, but then down but then occasionally...Just when it comes to people who reads a lot of comics it's just sort of intuitive knowledge of how the story supposed to, how text progressing through it, it confusing the hell out of a lot of people that haven't read it before and then it gets harder to have a discussion with them.

I find HunterS's insights revealing at two levels. First, he clearly points to the need to address comics literacy; this is a set of skills that is not intuitive and evidently in need of teaching support. From his comment emerges the notion that there is a need for addressing visual literacy skills and that being born in a society that relies heavily on visual messages does not always correlate with being an expert able to decipher them. This statement again should not be understood as young people being illiterate or unaware. Both extremes are equally damaging but the integration of comics in the curriculum as another medium and literary form that informs the educational process of readers is warranted. Second, HunterS challenges the stereotype that presents all young people as interested or inclined to comics reading (Snowball 2011, 181). To wrap up, I again rely on the words of one of my participants. As a result of her two experiences in university Kalo defends a higher visibility of graphic novels in the English curriculum. She describes the program as "one big survey, you're just trying to get in as much, get your feet in a bunch of different forms, as much possible" and thus the presence of graphic novels is encouraged as another form that students should get familiar with. She simply defends that her exposure to the form "helped to round out my degree a lot more."



### 7.3 Opportunities and obstacles for access to comics reading: Considerations regarding libraries and librarians

One of the most difficult things to do about learning, about starting to read a graphic novel from the library is that there's absolutely no opportunity for continuity. I could find book 2 of *Ex-Machina* and then never find it again and have no context to start the book. Not that I wouldn't read it for that reason, I probably would but I don't know if that would play into if I didn't even know they were there. That's my beef with library graphic novel collections, too small and no context.

Selina

If I'm at the library, I'll try all kinds of things.

Oracle

After my nine interviews I first determined the position of my participants in relation to the library as one of extremes: it was either nonexistent for some or crucial for others. After I finished the interview process, this rather simplistic position became more complicated. Those extremes were still present but a spectrum rather than a dichotomy represented a more genuine portrait of the role that the library plays in the lives of these readers. Some such as Shade and HunterS do not use the library at all mostly because they have rich personal collections or social networks that provide the comics and information they need. On the other extreme, readers like Oracle, Jacob, and Alison use the library as the main point of access for comics. In between there are participants, like Lorraine and Kalo, for whom the library had a role in the past either when they were younger or when they were not as financially secure as they are now. They simply use the library as another way of accessing media but it is not a primary

method. In this section I will examine this spectrum paying special attention to the critiques and praise of how libraries have supported (or not supported) the reading experience of this group of readers. My goal is to offer some important considerations for the library community at large about how to improve service to this diverse and rich population.

As I have discussed in the Literature Review library literature tends to conceptualize comics readers as readers who lack reading skills or discriminating tastes: reluctant readers, English as Second Language readers, readers at-risk, or visual readers. In turn, it is interesting to see how readers also have preconceived notions of what library collections hold. Even frequent visitors, such as Oracle, shared those notions. At the time of the interview the adjective that best described her relationship with the library was “experimental,” as reflected in the introductory quote. She started visiting the library for comics during her adolescence when she discovered that there were more to comics than strips and teen series. Interestingly though she just came upon the comics at the library; she did not look for them purposefully since, as she shares, “the library hadn’t really occurred to me like a place that I could get comics.” She clearly has a more sophisticated conceptualization of the library, yet she is still aware that there are certain materials that the library might not collect, like one of her favourite mangas, *Gunsmith Cats* (1996–2002). About this manga she says that “I think probably it was sadly too dirty for the teen section.” I have previously discussed the problems that arise from thinking of comics as reading materials just for young readers and, interestingly, for a long time comics purchases were circumscribed to the teen section of the library. I will later explore some problems that this identification creates for access among my participants.

Devi often uses the library to access other kind of materials but she thought that the comics collection would probably not match her taste. She basically said about the manga collection that “[the library has] just the mainstream, like I said, the cutesy ones, that I’m not interested in.” Walker acknowledges his lack of use of the public library,

mainly because he likes to own his reading materials. This predisposition to ownership does not directly correlate with a pessimistic opinion about the library holdings. However, he expresses a hesitation about this collection when he says the following: "...I'm not sure what the library has in terms of graphic novels or graphic novel collection so it's...a lot of the things I'm interested in anyways are kind of abstract or probably hard to find in public library systems." Although the statement is not as direct as Devi's, this comment still expresses certain preconceived ideas about what the library holds or not. This is relevant to his personal taste, primarily texts about "social justice or leftist thinking" that he has difficulty finding in the library. Finally, Preacher went through a similar experience. After the interview we visited the campus library to carry out the think-aloud protocol. The main reason for this site was that he was not aware that the university library held comics and he wanted to explore them with me. He acknowledged visiting the public library at his hometown where he often browsed the comics section. He was also highly interested in seeking my advice about how to search the academic library catalogue for comics, a rather complex search process because of cataloguing and classification reasons that I discuss later.

This selection of participants showcases the issues I will expand on in this section. These issues serve as an introduction to the shortcomings but also the possibilities in the acquisition, organization, and access of comics collections in libraries. Interestingly, these and other later issues do not differ much from the ones that practitioners have been trying to tackle, especially in recent years when the size and importance of these collections have presented singular challenges. As Tarulli explains in the introduction to her chapter, "with the recognition that graphic novels are becoming high-demand items in libraries, the problems that were initially hidden by a relatively new and small collection are beginning to surface" (Tarulli 2010, 214). The issue of how to catalog, classify, and collocate the comics collection has not had enough attention from scholars. The intrepid ones who have decided to tackle it are also the ones who are most in need, the practitioners, especially from academic libraries and special collections (Artacho Orihuela 2002; Fee 2013; Fee 2008; Markham

2009; O'English, Matthews, and Lindsay 2006; Weiner 2008; West 2013). As well, a selection of relevant reflections and studies are shared in the monograph edited by Robert G. Weiner (Weiner 2010b) where both Hartman (2010) and Weiner (2010a) looked at local solutions implemented in their public library systems while Tarulli (2010) provided a more encompassing essay that touches on the array of problems and potential solutions to cataloging and classification issues. Finally, the evidence of the timeliness and need to advance these issues is reflected in the continuing interest shown by MLIS students (Cunningham 2012; Pyles 2012; Wright 2009) as well as that of major institutions such as the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC). In 2004 OCLC promoted an open discussion about what changes in the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) might support better classification and access for comics, specifically the problems that emerged with graphic novels (Beall, [2004]). This discussion was wrapped up in 2006 and some of the recommendations and results were implemented in the classification schemes (Beall, n.d.). Clearly, "it seems as if, more than any other collection in a library, graphic novels have been difficult to accept, catalog and shelve" (Tarulli 2010, 213). This brief overview of some of the most recent and relevant commentary on the organization of comics helped me to contextualize the comments of my participants. I did not conceptualize this section as a space for scholarly discussion about organisational issues of comics, but rather as a contribution from my participants to this stimulating conversation. Also their reflection might serve as motivation to insist on the need to continue this discussion because of its strong implications for access and use of the collections from the user perspective.

The problem brought up by the term *graphic novel* is a starting point for the discussion. Currently this term is often used to refer to the materials in library collections that group together works in comics form. The term has also been integrated in the DDC although its use is still controversial. As Goldsmith notes *graphic novel* "doesn't go far in describing either format or artistic intent, except to the initiated" (Goldsmith 2010, 188). Although I am not going to embark upon an extended discussion about its use, it is important briefly to note it and also to direct the reader to

some of sources that seriously interrogate this term, exposing and dealing with the many complexities from different disciplines: Chute and DeKoven 2006; Fletcher-Spear, Jenson-Benjamin, and Copeland 2005; Goldsmith 2010; and Hatfield and Svonkin 2012. The importance of the usage of the phrase is exemplified in the following exchange I had with Alison when I questioned her about it:

Alison: Yeah...I think I usually call them graphic novels...

Lucia: Why do you think is that?

Alison: I don't know, that's what they are called at the library and stuff like that.

This exchange illustrates the influence and reach that the use of this term can have. Alison embraces it because it is the one employed in the context where she accesses comics more frequently. Daniel discussed this term in length with me and detected several problems that may directly affect the way comics are handled in libraries. As Daniel explains:

Anyone who sees a comic that isn't published with a staple, something that has a spine and it's bound, generally they perceive it as a graphic novel although 80% is a collection of comics and the only reason we have the word graphic novel is because somebody in a marketing department came up with it...because comics, a comic book connoted something for youth, it connoted the idea of story for a younger audience, comic books and funny books they were for kids so to make a graphic novel, that sounds sophisticated and intelligent and we can market it to the type of audience that we want to, right? And now it's used in a completely wrong context.

Daniel connects his general critique to issues of marketing and image shift. However, he also points to the fact that many of the materials that are being called

graphic novels actually are not. Fee, a Digital Collections Librarian at the State Library of Pennsylvania, mirrors Daniel's perspective:

95% of "graphical novels" are not graphic novels at all but trade collections. What does this mean? A graphic novel, like *Maus* or *Persephone* [sic.], is a one shot item, or at most a novel spread over several volumes only with more pictures and less text. The cataloging on these, which often have only a single person on both art and text, is like the cataloging and classification on the latest Jackie Collins novel or a New York Times bestseller. It is one and done with maybe a mention of awards or movies adapted from the volume. A trade collection, on the other hand, is a new format reprint of a collection of formerly somewhat independent items that are tied into a long run of an ongoing publication. They are serials, midway between the floppy monthly comic book and the monographic series (Fee 2013, 37).

For Fee many of the problems of the cataloging issues connected to graphic novels could be solved "by one simple realization" (Fee 2013, 37) expressed in the previously presented quote. He compares the level of cataloging for these materials and the needs of their users to the ones often associated to music cataloguing (again, a format and not a genre). This problem often emerges in any research endeavour about the organization of comics. For example, discussing the limitation of her project West quickly recognizes that "the identification of 'graphic novels' as a genre heading remains controversial. Many cataloging practitioners argue that graphic novels are a format rather than a genre, while others have advocated for the term's use as a genre heading to improve access" (West 2013, 312). As part of her study on the use of tags, West also looks at the effect of the inclusion of the term *graphic novel* in the 655 MARC field. In the same manner as Fee she also points to the example of music (2013, 307). Her results do not uncover a clear correlation between adding this tag and increased circulation loans. Therefore, she concludes that it is "an interesting topic" for future

research among the many issues affecting the access to graphic novel collections (2013, 315). Clearly the conversation about terminology and its implementation in formal and informal classification systems is one to continue since the clutter that this issue brings to cataloging and classification processes directly affects collocation and thus access.

Daniel mentioned the use of the term *graphic novel* to help separate the new comics production from the usual connection to youth audiences. In direct relation to this some participants commented on the age division of the comics collection and how this affected their accessibility. For example, they commented on the lack of, or the difficulty to access, a comics collection for adults. Oracle was the first participant to note this issue and although the library system addressed it soon after, the difference in the size of the collections is still notable. Selina expressed surprise when she stressed the presence of a comics section for adults at the branch she used to visit in a large library system. She quickly proceeded to criticize its selection:

They do have an adult section now! But it's laughable, they got a bunch of random single issues, they have to flip through, they're in boxes and it doesn't make sense to me.

Alison also expresses a frustration that might simply be caused by a common library practice. The different shelving practices between the teen section and the adult section clearly impedes her access to the comics:

It's actually really annoying cause they have a really clearly defined section for the teens, some of the stuff I read is shelved there so it's fine but the adults, the graphic novels are thrown in with the general fiction.

The practice of differentiation between teen and adult collections is commonly followed in libraries with small comics collections where they only start separating the comics when the collection grows large enough (Goldsmith 2005; Miller 2005). This issue of interfiling is even more important because of one of the major ways participants accessed the library collection: browsing. Alison remembers "looking at all

the shelves trying to see if I could find [the comics], because they have a sticker on them that says graphic novel.” Marian neatly captures issues of collection diversity, size, and organization. She offered this explanation when I questioned her about the influence that being able to read in French brought to her beginning reading experience:

Well, probably it gives you a wider range of comics to be exposed to, [other] than just newspaper comics which probably it'd been my only thing at that age that I would have read. So I would have been reading *Garfield* and I don't even know if I would read the newspaper page at home but there was a humour section. I remember the library, I tried to remember how it was organized because this is before either graphic novels actually existed or before I knew existed. But there was a section that was near the art instruction books and it had the strips there and that's where I would go if I was looking for something at the library. And I don't go back there because I don't know there's that much stuff. At some point I was reading *Cathy* which is just an odd choice for a little kid to read since it's about this woman in her thirties but that was one of the things they had, it was very limited. I would have read that probably and they were all black and white and the French ones which the edition is beautiful, full page, colour, they have longer stories too and that was also very different from the newspaper ones.

Beyond the other issues, one action that is crucial in this recount is browsing: Marian does not remember speaking to the librarian or using the library catalog, she does recount independently browsing the collection. Participants stress the importance of the information about the visual style that they gather through the process of browsing comics and that helps them to make their reading choices. For example, I was witness to the richness of this process during my interview with Jacob. He vividly described the process he follows to decide if he is interested in a comic:



But more so it's based on art style so I usually, obviously on the shelf I can just see the spine so I'd usually look at the spine and if I think it's a well-designed spine then I know, ok, this person has the same aesthetic preferences than I do. So then I might take the book out, look at the cover and see what is this, you can get a general idea what the story is about, from the cover.

This is not a process reserved only for comics readers. As Ross describes some of her avid readers also examine spines and covers (2001, 18). However, it is again the importance of the visual component that makes this process more significant for the comics reader. During the think-aloud protocol Jacob commented on how physical characteristics such as colour, size, cover, paper texture, art simplicity, and text quantity strongly affected his selection process. Marian also mentions "looking for a cover that looks shiny." Selina supports the importance of the physical, and especially the visual, elements of comics when she is confronted with the binding practices of her previous academic library:

Our library did this weird thing where they were binding [the comics] to try and protect them but because of that the outside of the spine looked completely different [...] The only reason I know this is because they had *Persepolis* bound and I knew *Persepolis* was a graphic novel but I'd never read it, but it was bound with a red cover and printing. And then there was one beside it that they hadn't bound yet and it was another Satrapi's.

As I have previously mentioned with Preacher the use of the catalog to find comics is not an easy task, both at academic and the public libraries. Two participants compare the practice of browsing with searching the catalog. Kalo says that "when it comes to using the library, I don't ever use the catalog to find particular things, so I'll come here and browse." However, she also identifies a major weakness of this approach. She is aware of the high circulation of these materials and on one hand she is

enthusiastic about it. On the other hand, it impedes her favourite and preferred way of accessing the comics collection. She explains it like this:

I find the collection here in particular...it's good but nothing is ever there for...it seems like it's always used up a lot, which is good! It's something I get really excited about when I come and see that but for a browser like me it doesn't necessarily work.

Tarulli recommends the use of new discovery tools since they “allow for faceted searching and browsing of cover images within the library catalog” (2010, 219). However, this solution might not be viable if readers avoid the use of the catalog in general. The second participant, Selina, expands on the reason to not use the catalog beyond the lack of physical references. Relying on her experience working at a bookstore, she explained that she preferred shelf browsing, especially for comics, to be able to give advice to people. Because of this she describes the catalog as “un-useful.” Subsequently, Selina and I engaged in a rather long conversation about the gaps and problems that she saw in the way comics were cataloged in general, not just in libraries. The discussion started while commenting on one of her favourite artists and illustrators, Adam Hughes. She complained about not being able to find all his work at the library with one search. As she explains, “I might want to read other things that he’s designed and I can’t search by that, so I have to google everything by Adam Hughes, which is really annoying. I just want my catalog to do it for me.” Although not in a very clear manner, she expresses a similar but more complicated frustration in relation to the series *Fables* (2001–):

I would, I think, that searching for graphic novels in the catalog can be reeeally challenging because if you don't know...let's say...I'm thinking of something like *Fables* where everything is under... it's the *Fables* universe but then, like I don't read *Fables*, but they got *Jack [of Fables]*.

*Jack of Fables* (2007–2011) is a spin-off series from *Fables* (2001–). This is not a novelty but unlike other comics series, it does not have a character such as Spiderman or Superman in common to create links between records, but rather an ensemble of characters who share a literary universe. The challenge for cataloguers is to convey this information in a way that creates links between works. Again Tarulli points out this problem when she says that “many graphic novel fans bemoan the fact that the classification of graphic novels and their subject content do not pull together relationships or similarities” (Tarulli 2010, 219). Clearly Selina is one of those fans. This is an important cataloging problem that could be related to lack of knowledge and time on the part of professionals.

Another problem is the consistency and accessibility of series. In the quote at the beginning of this section, Selina again laments that “that there’s absolutely no opportunity for continuity.” But she is not the only one. When one is a committed library user, starting a new series is not easy, as Marian explains:

I get most of my comics from the library and I find it’s a pain to read serialized things. I think I have to save it for... when I start a series has to be either really gorgeous looking or highly recommended and then I’ll start reading it. Because first I have to find the first volume and then try to get all the other ones, requested them, and everything.

The problem of accessing serialized materials is not unique to comic readers, but it becomes significant when many of the materials they read are actually published in that continuing format, instead of as *one-shots* and or as graphic novels. It speaks to issues that should be addressed and made clear in discussions about collection management policies. If, as library scholars and professionals, we would like to support the idea of the library as a welcoming place for comics readers where they can explore and expand their reading interests, we should seriously question how we are doing this in order to lessen reader frustration. As early as 2005, Goldsmith already acknowledged the difficulty of the topic of giving access to comics collections. In 2008 Fee concluded

his article about FRBR and comics with the following thought: “if more libraries would enhance the cataloging of their collections, even if only copy cataloging with additions based on local users, we would see both wider use and better recognition for this format” (2008, 188). After this discussion it seems that both professionals and readers are having similar questions and still trying to find answers.

I have very briefly mentioned that one of potential reasons for the difficulties resolving the cataloging issues with comics is the lack of knowledge or familiarity of librarians with the form. This is subtly reinforced through the lack of interaction with librarians reported by my participants. Even though browsing is their main approach to accessing comics at the library, the difficulties that they report suggest that a better relationship with librarians is a solution. For example, Shalmanaser is a reader who was very familiar with the collection at the library. During the think-aloud protocol it seemed that he could have commented on every comic in the collection. However, when I asked him about his interactions with the librarians he replied that they were nonexistent. I asked him to expand on this answer and he replied the following:

I never really thought about it before, it’s just something that I’m not used to doing, asking someone for help when I can just look for myself, but now that you mention... I probably wouldn’t ask a librarian for a comic suggestion, it’s not the kind of thing that it seems they would know much about. You can see the comics collection in this library only has a very small section of the total reading material and it is on the youth section so I’m almost certain they just probably wouldn’t know much personally about it. And so there’s so little to choose from usually it’s pretty easy to go through all of it.

Selina spoke about exploring new types of comics, such as manga, but to be able to do it comfortably she would need some support. As I presented in section 5.3.4, Selina is not comfortable in the space of the comics store. In the process of explaining this, she also reveals her opinion about librarians’ knowledge: “... it would be the ideal

thing going to a comic book store cause they know way, way more than librarians.” Although these comments can be simply based on stereotypes or lack of interaction with librarians, two recent studies show that Selina and Shalmanaser are not completely misguided.

Williams and Peterson (2009) wanted to determine the extent to which academic libraries that serve programs accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and by the American Libraries Association (ALA) collected graphic novels for teens since their presence might serve as an indicator to examine the exposure that future librarians and teachers have to comics. Primarily they were surprised by the divergence in the number of holdings and even just in the presence of comics. For example, the average number of titles held was lowest in the southern United States, but at the same time the institution with the highest number of GGNT<sup>14</sup> holdings was in that region (2009, 171). One of the results that they could establish was that:

library science students, students at doctoral and research-oriented institutions, and students in the western United States are more likely to find graphic novels suitable for teenagers in their library collections than are teacher education students, students at primarily undergraduate institutions, and students in the southern United States.

In their conclusion Williams and Peterson highlighted that “without access to graphic novels, future teachers and librarians cannot learn to evaluate them, assess their appropriateness for instruction, and use them to promote reading to teenagers” (2009, 172).

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<sup>14</sup> This acronym refers to the list Great Graphic Novels for Teens, one of the many booklists prepared by the Young Adult Library Association. Every year a group of professional librarians selects and recommends graphic novels and illustrated nonfiction for between twelve to eighteen years of age. It can be accessed at <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/ggnt>

As a complement to the previous study focused on collections, Downey and Davidson (2012) examine the use of graphic novels in graduate-level library and information studies programs. The authors surveyed instructors teaching in graduate programs at American Library Association accredited institutions, specifically those who taught classes primarily focused on literature and materials for children and young adults. I find the results rather inconclusive since on the one hand they say that comics are “in fact being assigned and taught (at least in the programs the responding instructors teach in),” but on the other hand, they “do not know how frequently or entirely in what context” (2012, 79). I find their conclusion more helpful since they highlight the need for teaching graphic novels beyond the youth population and the public library (2012, 79-80). The inclusion of the format in examples, projects, and courses beyond the ones dedicated to youth materials would definitely support the exposure of future librarians to the form and hopefully to its main characteristics and complexities as well as to the potential needs of their readers.

One final theme that I explore is the frequently occurring comparisons between the library and the comics store, and between borrowing and owning comics that emerges from my participants’ talk. The comparison mostly refers to the difference in collections and the different ways that participants used them. At a more theoretical level, I want to frame this discussion in the context of a previous section that I dedicated to participants creating their own collections (i.e., reader-self archives). During the think-aloud protocol Alison shared that she was often rather overwhelmed at the comics store and that she found the size of the comics collection at the library manageable. However, she kept visiting the store because “I get ideas of things that I can look for at the library ‘cause [comics stores] have everything.” As I have discussed previously, Promethea is one of the female participants who is more comfortable visiting the comics store. During the think-aloud protocol she expressively characterized her feelings about the size of the comics store stock: “There’s too many, it’s unfair!” She also praised the comfort of the store and how she could browse without being rushed; interestingly, she wrapped up this thought saying, “it’s like a library!” In

contrast, Oracle is a habitual library user and recognizes the limitations of the collection but also one of its big advantages: “the library doesn’t really have a lot of, not usually more variety than the comic bookstore but it is sort of a low risk way of, to try out a lot different things, like a broad sweep.”

The idea of the library as a place for discovery has already been conveyed by Oracle in the quote I selected to introduce this section. However, this idea of discovery is further defined with the notion of being “low risk.” This notion identifies the library as a place where not only you can discover new comics but also you can do it without assuming a financial risk. Several participants mentioned the potential unfairness of comparing the size and depth of the comics library collection with that of the comics store. Nevertheless the library will always have the advantage of the being public and free. For example, Lorraine comments on the differences between collections but her financial possibilities soon emerge as a factor in the reflection:

Absolutely, this is, [comics reading is] a developing interest for me so I’m just trying to figure out what I like and stuff speaks to me, stuff that I don’t like. As much as I like just go to the library and see what else is out there, you can’t deny that that selection available at Heroes, all that intermingling of stuff that I’ve never read and stuff that I really want to read but can’t afford.

Lorraine’s position describes a contrasting duality where she praises the store collection but at the same time expresses frustration because she is not in an economic position to fully access it. In the section about the creation of a personal collection I examined the idea that this group of readers did not develop these collections based on the comics’ potential economic value but as a way of historicizing the progress of their reader-self. However, economic issues of another sort emerge in this discussion. Ross (2001, 19) mentions money as one factor that influences the process of avid readers’ process to select a book, but her study does not fully explore this factor. In the case of my participants, the question I am confronted with is a little narrower but still

compelling and relevant: how does personal income affect (or not affect) the use of the library?

Alison describes her position as a student as one where money is not “lying around,” contributing to her frequent use of the library. In her case, it is also interesting to see how the availability and exposure to comics through the library might motivate her to consider ownership. Similarly to Oracle, she does not want to risk much, in this case in her purchase, so she says that “if there’s something that I had already read and that I really liked, I would consider buying it.” For Jacob, his library use is explained by two circumstances. As I noted before, he works at the library so he holds a deep knowledge about the collection. He also described comics as “not particularly cheap to buy.” Selina directly connected her financial position to her reading habits; her detailed explanation deserves a full quote:

I would not read anything that I have to buy. When I worked at the bookstore my opportunities were limitless because we could buy things and we got paid for reading things so we could do good recommendations but I won’t, if there’s something I really, really want to read and it’s not available in the library I usually won’t read it. There have been cases, like, *Y: The Last Man* I was dedicated to reading it, I was working at the time which it was probably helpful, but I bought it and it was an emotional, financial commitment but generally if I can’t get it at the library I won’t read it, which is sad but...I think about...I can still pay my rent so I’m still in a higher income bracket than a lot of people so if that’s my option, think about the option for other people who are in lower situation that they can’t even do that.

Selina describes the process of buying a series as both an emotional and financial commitment, something that directly reflects of the avid readers interviewed by Ross (2001, 19). These connections to Ross’s interviewees show that even with a certain amount of difference, there are still similarities among any kinds of readers. The



case of Templesmith is equally informative. The idea of the library as a place for exploration also subtly emerges when she says that she is more “lenient” with the comics. The main reason for this lenience is because “it’s free.” When she started reading comics she “read whatever I could get from the library,” even comics that she did not particularly like. She said she did that until she found a job. This statement describes an extreme eagerness to explore the form. At the time of the interview she found the location of her local library branch inconvenient but she confirmed that in the summer she was going to attempt to visit more often because “it’s a lot better than paying for them.” Finally, she commented on the fact that one of her favourite titles, *100 Bullets* (2000–2009), is not often available in public libraries. Because of this she feels compelled to buy the trade paperbacks. Related to the purchase of these volumes, she explains that all of her friends are “in the same economic boat” and because of that she is “big for trading out books and getting books from my friends.” The idea of owning the comics is one of the factors that some participants use to explain why they do not use the library more often or even at all. Devi, who uses the library for other materials but not comics, recognizes that using the library “saves me money. Again I love collecting and I know if I like it, [...] I’m gonna buy it.” As I have mentioned previously, Shade likes to own comics because he uses them as reference material. In contrast with previous readers, Shade also justifies this stance as a buyer because “I have the ability, I have the funds to buy them all.”

At this point I want to come back to the question that I posed at the beginning of this discussion: how does personal income affect (or not affect) the use of the library? It is important to highlight how having access to comics through libraries is critical to many of these participants. I am describing a group of teenagers and young adults while not part of an extreme low-income bracket still have limited budgets to fulfill their desire for comics. This is especially significant in times of high economic pressure. Therefore, the presence of comics in libraries allows many of them to keep doing something they enjoy and something that makes them active and engaged readers. A second point to remember from section 5.4.2 about bad reading experiences is that

comics are not an all-mighty reading material, not all comics are good, and comic readers do not like every comic. Taking this idea into consideration highlights the importance of selection and acquisition practices to build diverse and strong comics collections. Finally, in the case of readers for whom the library was their main introduction to comics or the place where their taste was exposed to different kinds of comics, the next question I pose is the following: would this group of readers be the diverse and devoted readers they are if the library was not there to support and, in some cases, expand their exposure to comics? My direct answer is that they would not be. Although from a sample of readers, the issues raised by my participants point to the influential role of libraries and highlight the importance of the processes of selection and acquisition of comics, also placing more emphasis on the education that future librarians receive in connection with these reading materials.

There is no better conclusion to this section than going back to the words of a participant who clearly demonstrates the positive influence that libraries had and have, not just on her reading history, but also on the definition of her reader-self. While describing her reading habits in grade 9 Marian highlighted her interest in a particular work, *Elfquest* (Pini and Pini 1978–2003, 2003–2007), that she borrowed frequently from the library. In the same conversation she proceeded to describe her reader-self as an “omnivore.” The use of this term was based on Marian’s practice of reading anything from the library shelves: “whatever else was on there, [...], I was kind of an omnivore at that point ‘cause I was just reading anything out of that shelf.” It is difficult to correlate Marian’s current reading practices—she is a committed and diverse reader of manga, European comics, webcomics, and a variety of North American comics—with her teen reader-self. However, it is important to acknowledge that the cause of her *indiscriminate* reading practices was the library shelf.

## Chapter 8

### 8 Fourth dimension: Comics reading and the experience of time in the digital age

I remember with *Blankets*, I sat, it was a Saturday and I remember sitting at the Denver Public Library and just reading it, in one afternoon, not really looking up.

Alison

Reading, like other everyday practices, has temporal and spatial dimensions. When Rosenblatt defines reading as a transaction, she also says that it involves “a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (1982, 268). Readers describe these circumstances in different ways. As an example, I offered the quote from Alison; she talks about reading the graphic novel *Blankets* (2003) in terms that are recognizable for many readers, describing a particular reading experience, in a particular place, with a particular pace and duration. In my research into the experience of young adult readers of comics, time emerged as a critical and recurrent factor that affected their depictions of reading experiences. The relevance of time resides in its potential to explain the importance and resurgence of comics as reading material. Parents, educators, and librarians have often centred the explanation of youth’s interest in comics based on the material’s visual component. On the one hand, this component is undeniably relevant in the process of understanding and enjoying comics; on the other hand, it is worrisome that this element is too often connected to ideas of “light reading” or “easy reading.” My research (2009) along with studies by Botzakis (2011; 2008), Sabeti (2012; 2011), seeks to open up new lines of debate about this issue. In this chapter I attempt to examine the connection between reading, comics in particular, and the experience of time in order to expose a growing complexity in this relationship. I argue that this complexity partly arises from the dual processes of adaptation and resistance to the temporal requirements that readers live under in the

digital era. As an example of this processes I put forward the following thought shared by Shalmanaser:

I think the thing that gets me about comics [...] is that they can do something that neither books nor movies can [...] it's almost like you have time to go over it without taking too much time, you have all the visuals of a movie except that there's much more detail, you have all the time to look at them, taking the details, and you have all the plot of a book but without all the descriptions.

In these words Shalmanaser succinctly summarizes the temporal duality in the comics reading experience that I explore in this section. First the sentence "you have time to go over it without taking too much time" introduces an idea of efficiency; the characteristics of the medium provide a quick, but also satisfying, reading experience. In the sentence "you have all the time to look at them" Shalmanaser describes a different condition, one that I relate to processes of slowing down, of deceleration, even resistance, to the way time is experienced in current society.

To be able to successfully explain this dual role that comics play, it is important to understand the temporal experiences and requirements that surround readers. Therefore I will first set out recent discussions in the discipline of Time Studies about acceleration and deceleration in contemporary society, especially in connection with subsequent conflicts between clock time, social time, mediated time, and inner time. This review is not meant to be comprehensive but limited to concepts that can inform the contextualization and interpretation of my participants' experiences. My work is not the first one that looks at issues of time and reading and because of this I will introduce previous studies that examine the relationship between time and reading. These scholarly works mostly come from a time-use perspective, but there are also some unique examples from a phenomenological approach that help situate my work in connection with a particular attitude towards the reading experience. Finally, after establishing this context, I will bring to the discussion my participants' thoughts and

experiences that form the core of this analysis. As I have already briefly introduced with the words from Alison and Shalmanaser, these participants bring to the table the overall question of comics' potential contribution (supportive and/or antagonistic) to the experience of time in contemporary society.

## 8.1 A brief introduction to time in current scholarly research

Time has become an important element in the explanation of structural, social, and economical changes, especially in connection to late capitalism and emergent digital technologies. The concepts of *time-space compression* (Harvey 1990), *timeless time* (Castells, 2000), or *dromology* (Virilio 2006) are examples of time's prominent role at explaining the society we live in. Time has also become a critical topic in the study of everyday practices. Early arguments that connected time and everyday life can be seen in pioneering work from Durkheim (1976), who declared that the rhythm of social life is the basis for time, or more recently in Lefebvre (1992/2004), who defended the study of quotidian rhythms to explore the connections between individuals and the social.

The concept of acceleration is directly connected to time; in the digital age "time is characterized by acceleration, speed and instantaneity" (Reading 2012, 144). Rosa and Scheuerman also note the importance of acceleration in current analyses, but they also observe an apparent inconsistency. While "*acceleration* figures as a striking feature of prominent diagnoses of contemporary social development" (2009, 2), this phenomenon also lacks of a strong sociological analysis and "too often the simplistic claim is made that in modern societies more or less everything is speeding up" (2009, 2). As a consequence, Rosa has embarked on a scholarly project focused on the exploration of social acceleration and late modernity temporality from a Critical Theory perspective. His work (2010; 2009; 2003; Rosa and Scheuerman 2009) becomes central to this analysis because of how it invites the introduction of a temporal perspective in the examination of everyday practices, in this case comics reading.

Rosa identifies three analytical and empirical categories to analyze how social phenomena are affected by social acceleration (2009, 81). These three dimensions of social acceleration are technological acceleration, acceleration of social change, and acceleration of the pace of life. In the explanation of the third dimension, Rosa brings up the concept of *scarcity of time* (2009, 85-87), a concept that is central to the discussion of my participants' interviews. Rosa explains that intuitively technological acceleration should bring an increase of free time. Since technological acceleration should decrease the time we need to carry out daily activities and processes, there potentially should be more time to use for leisure. Basically Rosa says that "if less time is needed, time should become more abundant" but if the result is that time has become scarce, "this is a paradoxical effect that calls for a sociological explanation" (2009, 85). To achieve this explanation, Rosa indicates as a priority the need to measure the pace of life, immediately introducing two main approaches: a subjective and an objective approach. These two approaches warrant a brief description because of how they inform my foregoing discussion of reading research from a temporal perspective. The subjective approach focuses primarily on the individuals' experience of time and from this focus Rosa points to the increased feelings of time scarcity, hurry, and time pressure, thus "making plausible the argument that the 'digital revolution' and the processes of globalization amount to yet another wave of social acceleration" (2009, 86). Time-use studies are the typical result of scholarly works using an objective approach. These studies identify how we distribute our time in relation to the activities we perform. Their main goal is to detect processes where activities are compressed in less time or resulting practices such as multi-tasking.

In this process of studying and theorizing acceleration and the pace of life, Rosa detects the overuse of the idea of the acceleration cycle to help explain the dynamics related to speed and growth present in Western societies. In contrast to the acceleration cycle, he proposes the exploration of three factors: an economic motor, a cultural motor, and a structural motor. A closer look at the cultural motor is pertinent in

this section since Rosa links it to his explanation of the phenomenon of the scarcity of time.

First, Rosa reminds us of a notable change in Modern Western society, namely that the ideas of happiness and life fulfilment are not connected to a "higher life" anymore; citizens seek self-realization trying to live through "as many options as possible from the vast possibilities the world has to offer" (2009, 91). The problem is that the options offered by the world always outgrow those realizable in a lifetime, thus the acceleration of the pace of life becomes a potential way of addressing this divergence. Basically, the acceleration of the pace of life is our way to try to adapt to the increased possibility accentuated by the cultural motor. Finally, Rosa concludes that "[a]cceleration serves as a strategy to erase the difference between the time of the world and the time of our life" (91). Inspired by the work of Rosa, Carmen Leccardi focuses on the paradoxical situation of having less time even though we are, theoretically, saving more time. In direct connection with the explanation of the cultural motor, Leccardi observes that the saved time that technological acceleration generates has been "swallowed up" by social acceleration (2007, 27). This constant process of "swallowing up" feeds the current feelings of lacking time and being burned out, thus definitely affecting the experience of everyday life. Leccardi then concludes, similarly to Rosa, that "the tension between interior rhythms and social rhythms is the distinctive sign of this form of acceleration" (2007, 27). She defines this tension as an "ever-present area of conflict" and proposes a timely question: how can one keep a social time that is increasingly rapid and fragmented together with the richness and the specific tempo of inner time? (2003, 39). For some scholars, the study of this "ever-present area of conflict" has provoked a call for research that focus on the human experience. Keightley's work is inspired by Leccardi and defends a stronger engagement with the "lines of resistance" human agents produce in their everyday mediated experience (2012, 206). As well, she detects three areas that would benefit from a focus on the human agent (2013, 57):

- The negotiation and interaction with institutional and cultural temporal structures;
- The specific transformations in subjectivity that media technologies have facilitated;
- The ways in which time is lived and situated.

Likewise Lovink examines personal experiences with new media and online life to inform, challenge, and expand the multiple principles that have emerged from abstract examinations of the digital era (2007). These two examples I have very briefly noted focus fundamentally on experiences with ICTs. Even if my research looks at comics reading, I still situate it in the context of this call for research that explores human agency in relation to institutional, cultural, and temporal structures.

I have mapped out some basic understandings about acceleration and time scarcity but I have not touched yet another relevant concept, deceleration. Rosa considers the process of speeding up asynchronous and demands an effort to “understand the status, function, and structure of those phenomena that escape dynamization or even represent forms of slowdown and deceleration” (2009, 93). In his own study, he distinguishes five different forms of deceleration and inertia (92-97). Among the intentional forms of slowing down, there is one that shows how citizens are trying to adapt and cope with the current temporal requirements. Rosa explains them as “limited and temporary forms of deceleration that aim at preserving the capacity to function and further accelerate within acceleratory systems” (95). As examples, he mentions yoga and taking time out in monasteries. Another proponent of the importance of deceleration is John Urry. He explores it in his explication of different temporal regimes: clock time, simultaneous time, and glacial time. Human activities and social organizations are structured around different times, some around speeding up, others around saving time, thus saving money. However, other practices seek the slow speed of time and these are “specially intertwined with the embodied (or sensed) nature of people’s relationships with objects and environments” (Urry 2009, 180).



Reading has been already been linked to practices that help in this process of slowing down (Miedema 2009); the uniqueness of comics reading though is that it can potentially support both acceleration and deceleration.

Ultimately, this brief introduction attempts to highlight the emphasis that scholars are devoting to deeper and richer explanations of time and acceleration in the digital era. For example, the importance of bringing the human experience into the discussion of acceleration; the presence and need of exploring deceleration in connection with acceleration processes; and the friction between an accelerated social time and inner or embodied time. The theoretical context introduced in this section describes the temporal structures that surround the participants of my study. The awareness of these complex conditions helps to reveal and situate the characteristics of comics that I will discuss later on. To wrap up this section, I want to introduce a careful reflection that deserves full citation (Nielsen 2009). Along with some of the previously cited studies, this reflection focuses strongly on the relationship with ICTs, yet it still helps to contextualize the goal of my project in the overall question of time in the digital society: the need to explore the relationship between acceleration and deceleration processes, as well as the importance of how humans experience these processes in their everyday life:

It remains the case that there is much we simply do not know about such unevenness [in the process of speeding], especially if one is interested in issues of acceleration and ways of coping beyond the tech-savvy, gadget-equipped and speed-addicted upper-middle class. In terms of its reality and its distribution, there seems to be a double unevenness of acceleration, one of acceleration itself and one of those who are involved. This double nature of acceleration deserves more inquiry. In particular, working from this notion of double acceleration, we could use more attention to the concrete everyday sociotechnological practices that give us examples of how things are getting faster, which also

account for more complicated scenarios of acceleration accompanied by resistance and transformation (Nielsen 2009, 305).

## 8.2 Previous approaches to the issue of time and reading

When Rosa discusses the topic of the acceleration of the pace of life, he claims we need to measure the pace of life to be able to properly explore the phenomenon of time scarcity. He describes a subjective and an objective approach, the first focused on the individuals' experience of time and the second on time-use studies. Both approaches are also present in the study of time and reading, although the latter is more predominant. Particularly in research about reading habits, the study of time management and distribution is not uncommon; studies address such topics as the influence of reading time on academic achievements, on the improvement of literacy skills, and the distribution of time among competing media practices (e.g., Gallik 1999; Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jönsson 2006; Hughes-Hassell and Rodge 2007; Mokhtari, Reichard, and Gardner 2009). In contrast, the subjective approach is less prevalent and is mainly represented by phenomenological studies of reading (Heap 1977; Hunsberger 1985, 1992).

I briefly review some examples of both approaches to discuss their connections as well as differences with my own research project, beginning with time-use studies. Gallik (1999), Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007), and Gilbert and Fister (2011) are three examples of studies where reading, time, and academic achievement are interconnected. Gallik looked at the predicting potential that time spent reading for pleasure outside of school has in relation to reading comprehension, vocabulary, and speed. He found it was a good predictor, but also other interesting results emerged. Participants stated they to read more for pleasure during breaks and vacations, when more time was available. Magazines were the most popular reading material for 75% of the surveyed students while comic books were the least popular, with 88% of students reporting that they rarely or never read comic books (1999, 485). Eight years later, Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) reported that comics were the second favourite

along with magazines. Their study focused on the leisure reading habits of 584 urban minority middle school students. In their case, the connection between school achievement and time spent in leisure reading was already established and served as a factor to justify the need for a closer examination of the leisure reading practices of urban youth. Gilbert and Fister (2011) examined the idea of reading as being at risk among the college student population. They focused their study on a small liberal arts college and surveyed students, librarians, and English professors. The students that participated in their study claimed that they had little time to engage in reading for pleasure during the school year although they did have positive feelings about reading. The researchers did not include graphic novels as an option in their survey but they indicated that this material often appeared in the write-in choices of the students. As well, librarians reported that graphic novels were among the materials that students sought the most for leisure reading.

Although time is central to these projects the analysis is centered on quantitative issues—how much time is being dedicated—and the consequences of this time allocation. For example, the choice of comics and magazines is often linked to issues of low literacy levels, to their visual component since it is seen to support an easier reading experience; and to the participants' interest in their content. Alternatively, based on my participants' experiences, I propose that actually some characteristics of comics support a reading experience that better adapts to the way young adults organize their lives.

As part of his theoretical examination of one reading act, Heap explored the temporal structure of reading, always understood as a situated and embodied activity. Heap located reading as occurring "within a certain intersection of world time and inner time" (109). This premise connects reading directly with the tension previously described by Leccardi between interior rhythms and social rhythms. According to Heap, reading has an intrinsic temporal structure that he compares to a clock. One of the hands of this clock is controlled by the reader who can step it up, slow it down, or even

halt time (112). However, texts still have an “ideal” reading time that, although modifiable by the reader, is partly responsible for the text’s “unity of sense.” Therefore the reader needs to know and orient her reading to how the text is supposed to be read (112). For Heap, to better understand the relationship between reading and time is crucial in the project of understanding reading as sense making.

Hunsberger (1992) also understands reading as an embodied and individual lived experience but, in contrast to Heap, she explored this experience through interviews with a group of readers. Like Heap, Hunsberger identifies a difference between an “objective, or clock” perception of time and an “experienced, or inner” perception that is part of the many “complexities of thinking about—and living in—time.” Based on these complexities, she asked “what then happens to time during reading? How is it experienced?”(65). She briefly addresses different issues: the use of speed reading; the difference between reading to pass time and reading for meaning; the construction of time in the text; the role of time in the creation of meaning; and the power of reading to potentially stop time. The fact that she offers very little information about her participants beyond the fact that they are “university affiliated” (65-66) is relevant to contextualize some of their comments. For example, reading mystery novels and romances was often described as experiences of mindless reading (70) or as reading strategies qualified as ‘light’ or non-sequential (80-81). A relevant discussion for my analysis is her treatment of “not-time,” a feeling of standing outside time. Based on her participants’ comments, Hunsberger explores two qualities: “stillness and freedom from daily concerns” (90). These two qualities describe how readers escape or feel like the world rests while reading. Finally, she argues that “[r]eading gives an opportunity to experience time in various ways, to start difficult but significant thinking, to glimpse not-time, and to stretch out imaginative limits” (91).

These two studies touch on aspects of the temporal experience in reading that will emerge in the discussion of my participants’ interviews. These studies ground my project in a scholarly tradition that understands reading as situated and embodied and

acknowledge the relevance of temporal experiences and questions. The particularity of my project resides in the importance that I give to the social temporal requirements and experiences that surround my participants. This context is important to look for a more active and reflective re-engagement with time and temporality, especially in relation to mediated experience and in this particular case reading (Keightley 2013, 59).

### 8.3 Comics readers, the experience of time, and the possibilities of comics

I am a reader, but not, I don't know...It's not something I choose to do all the time, it's something that I'd do as I'm going to bed or if I'm on the train or I don't know, if I'm waiting for something...But I, it's something I choose to fill my free time with. This is why I like comics 'cause it's such a lighter read. I feel like I can get through a comic, it's less dense than reading a novel. I find comics much more enjoyable.

Preacher

Up to this point I have talked mainly about time but not much about comics reading. When one thinks about comics reading, it is often presented as *light* reading and for reluctant readers (Krashen 2004). However, the previous quote reveals a complex experience, especially so when the analysis is enriched with a temporal approach that can help to bring up some alternative understandings to this idea of *light*.

First we need to question several presumptions. In the context of Preacher's words, where do we find this quality of being *light*? Is it connected to the form, the content, the experiential context, or a combination of all of them? Does it mean easy, simple, entertaining, or maybe adaptable? For instance, the immediate association of *light* with the content of comics shows a lack of critical engagement with the diversity in comics publishing and an oversimplification of this reader's taste. Preacher's reading preference is defined by works such as *Maus* (1986–1991), *Watchmen* (1987), *Batman:*

*The Killing Joke* (1990), or *Y: The Last Man* (2003–2008). None of these titles can be described as easy to read.

Properly addressing these questions is beyond the scope of this project, but they show an assumed simplicity in relation to the study of the comics reading experience. The introduction of a temporal perspective helps to reveal this understudied complexity. Preacher's description is not exceptional, it can potentially resemble the voice of an average citizen in a Western world urban center. He chooses to read during the fractions of time that become free in his daily life. Consequently, the influence of time availability in his reading experience justifies the inclusion of a temporal lens in the analysis. One might ponder then if there are certain characteristics that make comics simply highly adaptable to readers' time availability. In the case of Preacher, it presents the significant relations between social time and an individual's pace of life, and illustrates comics' adaptability to these different temporal experiences.

This brief analysis richly illustrates the considerable potential that including a temporal perspective brings to the analysis of the reading experience. Considering the temporal conditions explained at the beginning of this chapter, I will explore here how the experience of reading comics can adapt to and resist to the social temporal requirements in the digital era.

### 8.3.1 Efficiency and time scarcity: How comics adapt to one of the temporal demands of our era

It's not necessarily easier than reading text, but it's easier than reading a textbook text or a History text or stuff that I have to. It's definitely a welcomed break.

HunterS

Participants constantly bring up the idea of time scarcity. With the exception of two participants, the rest were still students or had just finished their university degree.

Consequently, they explained time scarcity primarily in connection to the constant work of time management to balance academic and leisure activities, especially describing feelings of stress and pressure.

Daniel describes his days as extremely busy: he is an undergraduate in university, works at a comics bookstore, and has several leisure activities that occupy his free time. Economic pressures play a pivotal role in the way he organizes his time. University is very expensive, hence a priority for his time allocation. However, he also says he tries to “steal time for myself whenever I can.” These two attitudes reveal a tension that manifests even more clearly during his commuting time. When he uses the bus he tends to read comics, but this simple act precipitates a “crisis of conscience” since he feels he should employ his time on school work. Marian points to a similar tension when she describes the opportunity to go to the public library as a “luxury.” The library is her main access point for reading material, especially comics, and this lack of time affects her reading practices. The language used by these two participants denotes feelings of stress and pressure that connect their experiences with the aforementioned ideas about the subjective experience of social acceleration (Rosa 2009, 86).

Participants implement some practices to alleviate these feelings. For example, comics become part of the working routine with a role as markers for recess. For HunterS, Templesmith, and Devi comics reading becomes their preferred activity for breaks from academic work. Devi, an English student, qualifies comics as a “treat” in comparison with the many readings she has to do for class. Preacher describes comics as “sort of therapeutic”; if he is stressed or worried, he says that comics help him to “immerse myself and make that the only thing on my mind.” For these participants, comics reading is a leisure activity that easily fits among academic responsibilities and provides some time for oneself. These readers identify comics as a reading material that can easily integrate itself among work routines.

This struggle for time is not unique to work/study activities. The lives of these young adults are overloaded with activities so time management often expands to leisure time. This struggle connects with Rosa's discussion about the acceleration of the pace of life; this constant competition for time can be understood as a manifestation of the conflict between the modern process of self-realization and the impossibility of experiencing everything that is available to us. Daniel has already given some thought to this struggle for time and what it would be for him. He describes photography as his main calling but it is a demanding activity and it is sometimes difficult for him to keep up with it. He explains that without this interest and some other activities, his reading time would certainly increase. However, the lack of these other activities would make him "feel like something would be missing in my life because I wouldn't be being creative." In the middle of this race for leisure time, comics have one little advantage because "they are a creative piece of art, they're art, they're stories" so for Daniel they manage to reconcile many of his interests. In this case, the visual element of comics is not something that makes them easier or lighter, but something inspiring that can inform some of other Daniel's leisure activities.

Shade justifies the importance of comics based on one particular characteristic. As he explains,

"sometimes when I get home [in the evening] I want to read stuff right away [...] I have a relatively short attention span so I can't really sit and do one thing for a long time so usually I'll watch a tv show and then I'll go and read a couple of comic books and then I'll go do work or something and then I'll go and read a couple more comic books, these [pointing at the comic books he has brought] are good for that, where you can just get a couple even before I go to work or something, if I want to read them I can."

Shade's preference for comic books is based on their publishing format. Monthly comic books can develop long and complex story arcs and the quality of some



titles satisfies Shade's expressed preference for reading material that "brings something new, that can make me think about something." These comic books are also a convenience option; their requirements for time and attention adapt to Shade's evening routine, one clearly populated by many different activities.

Once again the visual element of comics emerges as important to explain these participants' preferences. This element supports a quick immersion in the narrative, thus sustaining an effective and efficient use of the available time for reading. Shalmanaser articulates it clearly and concisely when he says that "[comics are] something that you can just pick up and drop whenever you want to and you can get back into the story very easily." When the participants feel that time is scarce, the capacity of being immediately immersed in the story is invaluable. This characteristic also enables the reader to stop the reading experience without dreading the moment of picking it up again. As Shalmanaser explained, achieving the reading 'momentum' is easier and faster with comics. This idea of the reading 'momentum' can be better explored with the help of the concept of *flow*.

The psychologist Csikszentmihalyi uses the concept of *flow* to explain why some activities are enjoyable and absorbing. This state is defined through four principles: control, challenge, feedback, and focus that he explains as follows:

At the core of the flow experience is enjoyment. For an activity to be truly enjoyable, it must have clear goals, permit immediate feedback, require effortless involvement, and have a clear chance of completion. A truly enjoyable experience leads to an altered sense of time duration, a sense of control over one's own action, and the emergence of a stronger sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 50).

Csikszentmihalyi identified reading for pleasure as one of the most frequently reported flow activities. Although the role of time is only explicitly mentioned in connection to the manipulation of inner time, it is implicit in relation to the other

characteristics: how fast can you achieve the goals of the activity or reach completion? How immediate is “immediate feedback”? In the case of comics reading, one essential factor is that less time is needed to achieve a potentially satisfactory reading experience. Even though the availability and distribution of time is complex and extremely fragmented, comics seem to adapt well to these external conditions because readers can get into a story faster. The combination of achieving a satisfactory reading experience in a relatively short period of time and the ability to smoothly enter and exit from the narrative connects comics with the experience of *flow* and with an enjoyable experience.

I briefly reviewed Ziolkowska and Howard’ study (2010) in section 2.2.1. It is relevant to revisit it because of the central role that the concept of *flow* plays in their analysis. They interviewed nine adult participants who were avid comics readers to address the question of why adult readers choose to read comics. In connection with one of the principle to achieve *flow*, feedback, they determined that the relatively short length of comics supports a quick completion that in turn provides readers with immediate satisfaction and positive and tangible feedback. It is tempting to equate quick with easy but this fast experience was also demanding because it required textual and visual literacy skills and knowledge about the medium itself (164). In the case of my participants, Baa powerfully reinforces these conclusions with one sentence: “[comics] can tell you so much and you can finish them in a day.” This sentence illustrates the importance of the existing balance between providing a satisfactory experience and doing it in a short period of time. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to always keep present the diversity in comics publishing and how different formats and art style can affect the reading experience. For example, Marian explains the difference between reading a mainstream manga and an American trade paperback:

It’s the fact that a manga volume would take an hour to read and then it’s like, ok, I have to find another soon or otherwise I’ll forget what was happening or I’ll just waste an hour. [...] [Pointing at *Unwritten*] This one

has more text in it. A trade is kind of...worthy...not worthy but I just find that there's just more satisfaction, it takes more than one sitting to read.

We can gather from this quote that undemanding comics or reading experiences that are too short can be problematic; comics are not the perfect reading material for the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, but certain qualities make them more gratifying. In the context of the information discussed in this section, the experience of reading comics can be described as rich and complex. Readers consider that comics especially thrive on the time requirements prevalent in the digital era, inserting themselves between work routines and successfully adjusting to the high volume of activities that young people try to fit into their lives. They also seem to provide a high level of satisfaction without requiring a substantial time investment.

In the following section, I will narrow the focus to one concrete aspect of the reading experience that expands this discussion by examining how readers' slow down the reading experience and potentially resist the fast paced rhythms that surround them in daily life.

### 8.3.2 Resistance: Slowing down the reading experience with comics

You can read a comic quickly but you're not necessarily read[ing] it at all. With comics I try not to go too quickly because you're not taking everything in, there's a lot of visual information there, it's almost like reading between the lines of a novel.

Daniel

Reading has often been linked to processes of slowing down, creating time, or taking time for oneself. For example, in her research about female romance readers Radway determined that these women used reading as a way to carve out their own space and time in the midst of demanding roles in domestic life (1991). Comics reading seems to play a similar role for some of my participants. As I have previously

mentioned, Preacher connects comics reading to relaxing and explains his reading routine as a reaction to chaotic residence life. He likes to read when it is quiet, when "everyone is asleep or everyone is chill out a little bit or while they're studying." He also looks for privacy, "away from everybody." The combination of all these reasons situates his reading at night, in bed or on a couch, physically and emotionally comfortable. Reading helps him to find or create a moment for himself. However, as I have said, this is a characteristic that is not unique to reading comics, but supported by many reading experiences. So, what is actually unique about comics?

Certain characteristics of comics fit rather well into fast-paced social time. However, the possibility exists that comics also support the conditions for a contrasted temporal experience, allowing the reader to take time, to stop, and to contemplate. In the previous quote Daniel talks about not reading "too quickly" to be able to take everything in. Devi describes a similar deceleration process when she characterizes comics as treats because she "can take time" with them, especially in contrast with her academic readings. She connects complexity and pleasure in her comics reading; at the same time she looks for intricate plots and actively engages in a poised and deliberate reading experience: "I spend a lot of time on a page, I'll go through the writing while I'm looking at the images but then look at the images on their own and then look at the writing on its own." An obvious characteristic of comics that makes this act of contemplation possible is the dual nature of comics. As a rather experienced reader of comics, Devi knows that text and images need to be read together, but she likes to appreciate the images on their own and also sometimes to revisit the text. She quickly says that the visual part is what helps her to feel like she "can take time with it." When I follow up that idea of taking more time and what provokes this feeling she points to the difficulty of describing it and says:

Maybe I take more time with the comics to figure out the meaning as I go along, but with the movie I feel like...I'm trying to figure out what's going on all at once and it's already past...I'm already thinking about...and I try

to make connections through the movie....Man, this is really hard to describe!

To be able to try to describe this experience I turn to Atkinson (2012) who introduces a temporal explanation to examine this duality afforded by comics. In his study of reading and contemplation in comics, Atkinson briefly brings up Peeters' 'double temporalité' to explore the difference between the viewing experiences of reading comics and visiting a gallery (2012, 69). When a reader is looking at a panel, two reading possibilities are open to her. One is that of looking at the panel as a 'tableau' – as a picture or a painting where the reader remains looking at a single image- and as a 'récit' –as a narrative, where sequentiality and storytelling inevitably push the reader forward. Inspired by Eisner, Atkinson also explains how creators design the stories with a certain rhythm and then readers reconstitute that temporal continuity for the comics to have a meaning (70). However, Atkinson finds that the structure of comics and the practice of comics reading inevitably push readers away from the act of contemplating. He explains that

[t]he ease with which we read comic books is largely dependent on the transparency of the narrative or the legibility of the process of reading but this involves turning away from the 'trace picturale' or the plasticity of the line and not persisting in the contemplation of the visual properties of any one image (72).

Conversely, Schneider (2010) considers a series of comics that challenge Atkinson's premise. Based on comics that focus on everyday life stories, Schneider identifies different strategies proper to the language of comics capable of arousing everyday moods in the reading experience. She is particularly interested in those cases where a sense of slowness is introduced, thus manipulating the temporal dimension. For example, Schneider finds that contemplation is connected to "engagement, curiosity and attention" and the act of contemplating is often explored in comics through the manipulation of the direction of the gaze in the panel, repetition, or the

inclusion of “small and telling differences” (59). According to her, these comics produce this slowdown process; but does this process need to be sought purposefully by the creator? Or can it be achieved independently by the reader?

Schneider and Atkinson focus on text analysis; my interest lies in the reader experience. As described by my participants, this process of temporal re-creation and meaning creation is not closed to possibilities of reader’s agency. For instance, Promethea explains how she intentionally looks at the pages and panels as ‘tableaux’ because she wants to appreciate the art: “I look at the pages first ‘cause I know that if I get to the story I won’t even...I’ll forget about the page, I’ll forget to appreciate the page so I’ll always stare at the art work first for a while before finishing the story.” Kalo says that she was “purposefully waiting and stopping and looking [at] every little thing.” If comics, as Atkinson explains, primarily impose a high speed to be able to re-create the narrative – the ‘récit’—we could wonder if the act of slowing down is an act of rebelling against this imposed rhythm. Schneider brings up Michel de Certeau’s comparison between walking and reading to her discussion of Jirô Taniguchi’s *The Walking Man* (2004). Following de Certeau, Schneider explains that reading can be understood as a way of wandering through an imposed system (62). I would like to expand this idea and say that in this imposed system there is also an imposed speed. This imposed speed can be internal, as part of the text created by the author and/or external, as the high speed that surrounds the reading experience. The uniqueness of comics is that they create the possibility for a double speed during the same reading experience. This duality gives readers the agency to choose. Kalo explains it as follows:

I just think that comics as a medium is so cool, it fascinates me how much you can do with what you have, with the panels, with what you can do between the panels, how you can control the flow of time and also, leave it up to the reader to go through at their pace.

Although the experience of reading comics is often linked to high-speed reading, it should not be essentialized but rather opened to multiplicity and, in some cases, even

resistance. Evidently, there are works that are created with this slowness embedded in them, as Schneider studied; however, the always present possibility of enjoying a panel as a 'tableau' allows readers to individually slow down the experience. Hunsberger concludes her phenomenological study of time and reading saying that "[r]eading is an area of life that provides excellent ground for the imagination to challenge time or any other practical constraints" (1992, 90). The experience of reading comics gives readers a clear possibility not just to challenge time but almost to make it malleable and potentially contributing to the development of 'lines of resistance' to a single fast-paced time experience.

For Selina reading is a powerful force in her life. She describes how much:

There was a period of time when I wasn't reading at all, because I thought I was so busy and didn't have any time but then I decided that reading is important to me, that it makes me happy so I need to make time everyday to do it.

Without time for reading, she sometimes thought she would "go off the deep end." In an age when it is rather difficult to develop structured and solid routines, Selina established a simple but effective strategy: always traveling and moving with reading material; it does not matter how small the time, always use it for reading. Therefore, Selina needs a reading material that can both fulfill her need for reading and adapt to her pace of life. Lately, that reading material has been comics.

This scenario also reveals the importance of reading. Although not all participants shared Selina's intensity, they did identify themselves as comics readers and shared the substantial role that comics reading plays in their lives. For example, if reading is conceptualized as a *focal practice* (Sumara 1996, 9) that rearranges the readers' lives, one might wonder how the current temporal structures can potentially affect my participants' identity as readers. Rosa points to the relevance of this question when he says that "changes in the temporal structures of modern societies transform

the very essence of our culture, social structure, and personal identity" (Rosa 2003, 17-18). Daniel's words about "stealing time for [him]self" or Kalo's description of her lack of time for pleasure reading as "heart breaking " and "a very sad thing for [her]self" already indicate a reality of time scarcity and point to issues of lack and need for control. Having or not having time at their disposal is affecting their present status as readers. For Shalamanaser, lack of time might even affect his future identification with reading; as he explains it,

If I don't have time to read I tend to read less and less and mainly even when I do have time again I might not think of reading because I just got out of practice, but if I do have time to read typically I will, I will use all of it, I have a limit to how long I can read for one stretch of time but otherwise I try to use to its fullest extent. If I don't have very much time I might stop reading as much in the future.

If the lack of time is affecting the practices of readers and can potentially affect their identities as such, time is a variable that clearly should be included more often in discussions about the reading experience. It is especially crucial for comics reading since it helps to defy stereotypes about this experience. My participants construct comics as complex narratives that smoothly adapt to the temporal requirements connected to a current state of time scarcity. Moreover, in this age where time seems to be defined by acceleration, speed, and instantaneity, readers also appreciate the quality of comics to allow for moments of contemplation. This second characteristic could be a potential answer to Leccardi's question about how we can keep together a "social time that is increasingly rapid and fragmented [...] with the richness and the specific tempo of inner time" (Leccardi 2003, 39). I have tried to show how comics adapt and challenge these temporal experiences with hopes of adding a new perspective to current discussions about comics as a reading material in the digital era.



## Chapter 9

### 9 Understandings and possibilities: Readers conceptualize reading as a situated and social practice

I begin this section with three different definitions related to the act of reading. These three explanations emerge from different scholarly traditions but point to an understanding of reading that shares certain common coordinates.

Louise Rosenblatt defines reading as “a transaction, a two way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (Rosenblatt 1982, 268). Scholars have often highlighted the idea of reading as an interactive process where both reader and text play important roles. I was aware of this definition and the reasons why it was considered ground-breaking, but, since I started analyzing my participants’ interviews, I found the second part of Rosenblatt’s definition where she situates the reading act “at a particular time under particular circumstances” more relevant. My stance is that those elements have been understudied, especially as contributors to reader perception, understanding of the text, and in connection to the text form and format.

The second definition comes from Janice Radway. Towards the end of *Reading the Romance*, Radway makes a case for putting the reader at the center of documenting the “human practice of making meaning” and considers this an important shift in the research process:

Commodities like mass-produced literary texts are selected, purchased, constructed, and used by real people with certain previously existing needs, desires, intentions, and interpretative strategies. [Reinstating them], we avoid blinding ourselves to the fact that the essentially human practice of making meaning goes on even in a world increasingly dominated by things and by consumption (1991, 221).

This quote has accompanied me since the beginning of this project because I thought that comics and comics readers received, like with romance novels and romance readers, a certain attitude of contempt from researchers in particular and from society in general. Radway managed to capture the role that these materials played in the late 1980s in the lives of the women from Smithton. She demonstrated that getting at the perspective of “real people” who are living in a world “dominated by things and by consumption” relocates the focus of the research and opens up unexpected and understudied doors to researchers. These “real people” are the ones who should be crucial in the process of exploring and understanding everyday life. At the same time Radway’s understanding did not ignore the circumstances that condition the society we are living in. For her context always matters.

Finally, Dennis Sumara introduces his book, *Private Readings in Public* (1996), with another thought-provoking reflection about the act of reading:

Because all texts are particular forms that are historically, culturally, and politically effected and situated, the experience of engaging with this form rather than that form means participating in one complex set of relations rather than another. Furthermore, the place of reading matters. All texts are read in relation to the contexts of reading. And so, understanding the act of reading cannot be accomplished without an inquiry into the relations among forms, readers and overlapping context of reading (Sumara 1996, 1).

Although a work primarily focused on school environments and the curriculum, Sumara describes texts in a similar way to how I presented them in chapter 7 about materiality. Sumara describes texts as situated and then moves on to explicate the situated nature of reading. He highlights the importance of context and concludes that the inquiry into the act of reading is not possible without looking at the relations among forms, readers, and context. This understanding closely corresponds to the one emerging from the thoughts and reflections of my participants.

These three understandings of reading show the complexity of this act as well as the need to consider simultaneously these different elements to create a portrait that is as close as possible to everyday life experiences. In response to this, my work in this final chapter is to bring together the four dimensions that I have located and described in-depth with the main question of this project: How did my participants, as comics readers, construct and understand their reading experience with comics?

## 9.1 Four dimensions and New Literacies Studies: The inspiration for a renewed approach

Four themes that explicate the reading experience emerged from the interview data: 1) the construction of the reader-self; 2) the significant role of the materiality of comics; 3) the institutional contexts of comics reading; and 4) the unique temporal aspects of comics reading in contemporary society. The main challenge was to find a way to explain how these four dimensions work together at the moment of reading and influence the experience of reading. As I explained in my methodology, I often used boards and visual representations to work with the data and the themes. Therefore it is not unexpected that a visual metaphor became crucial in my own process of understanding how the themes worked together. While working with this visual metaphor, I also found particularly useful the work of New Literacies scholars such as Barton & Hamilton (Barton 1994; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič 2000), Knobel & Lankshear (Lankshear and Knobel 2003, 2005 and 2007; Coiro et al. 2008), Kress (2006), and Street (1984, 2003) who have developed a more inclusive understanding of Literacy that comprises and combines discussions related to social, economic, technological, personal, and affective circumstances. In the following section I examine both the visual metaphor and the influence of New Literacies to explain how the four dimensions should be considered together.

### 9.1.1 A visual metaphor as the first step

In the methodology section I explained my need to work visually with the themes, especially responding to the necessity of creating a thematic structure, a

pattern that connected themes so they can highlight "important commonalities of lived experience from different angles" (Morgan 2011, 33). One of the advantages of complementing the analysis with an illustrative graphic is that it "facilitates an overview of the total pattern, which a sequential written description may not do" (Morgan 2011, 39). The contribution that this "overview of the total pattern" brought to the development of my understanding should not be overlooked. As I have reiterated from the beginning of this project, my main purpose was not to impose a scientific explanation on the participants' descriptions but "to look *with* participants at significant aspects of the experience in order to relate them to one another and to the experience as a whole" (Morgan 2011, 40). Therefore, the intellectual struggle to create a visual representation revealed itself as critical to consider each theme not as an independent factor of the experience but as a contributor to a comprehensive perspective. Each theme becomes one dimension that influences the reading event and thus the reader's experience of comics:

1. The reader: this dimension primarily illustrates the constitution of the reader-self from many different angles. In the case of comics reading, readers expressed doubts and certainties about issues such as the connection between being a fan and being a reader, gendered reading practices, reading as social and/or private, and that which makes reading enjoyable or boring. The diversity that these issues bring to the discussion reinforces the complexity and difficulty of examining the life and experiences of a comics reader.
2. The comics form and format: comics are constituted by a unique mix of image and text and materialize in many and varied formats, both in print and digital media. Readers expressed different intellectual and sensorial affinities for each. They also shared careful reflections about the importance of owning comics and creating collections beyond issues of monetary value. In many cases for these readers their collections became an effort to establish, represent, and remember the reader-self.

3. Institutions: I focused on the comics industry, educational institutions, and libraries although other institutions were mentioned briefly. For instance, I integrated reflections about the family and the comics store in the examination of the first dimension, the reader. Individually participants expressed different levels of familiarity and direct experience with each of the aforementioned institutions but they never lacked a high interest for deepening their knowledge about them since they are aware of how they influence their reading experience.
4. Time requirements: the availability and distribution of time has become a critical issue in current studies of everyday life and media practices. The reflections of my participants support this substantial influence. Most importantly, these readers strategically use comics to cope with these time requirements, reading comics to both adapt to and resist them.

The perspective that emerged from making these four dimensions work together explores the reading experience not just differently but in a way that is actually closer to the way that my participants experienced it. This perspective not only achieves my objective of keeping the reader as the central element of the reading experience, but it also succeeds at bringing together the main factors from the perspective of the reader herself. The visual metaphor that I am presenting consists of the four themes as dimensions. This metaphor was decisive in the process of discerning the connection between this approach and the work that New Literacies scholars have been carrying out in the last 10 years. In this representation I attempt to represent how each dimension is influential in the reading event:

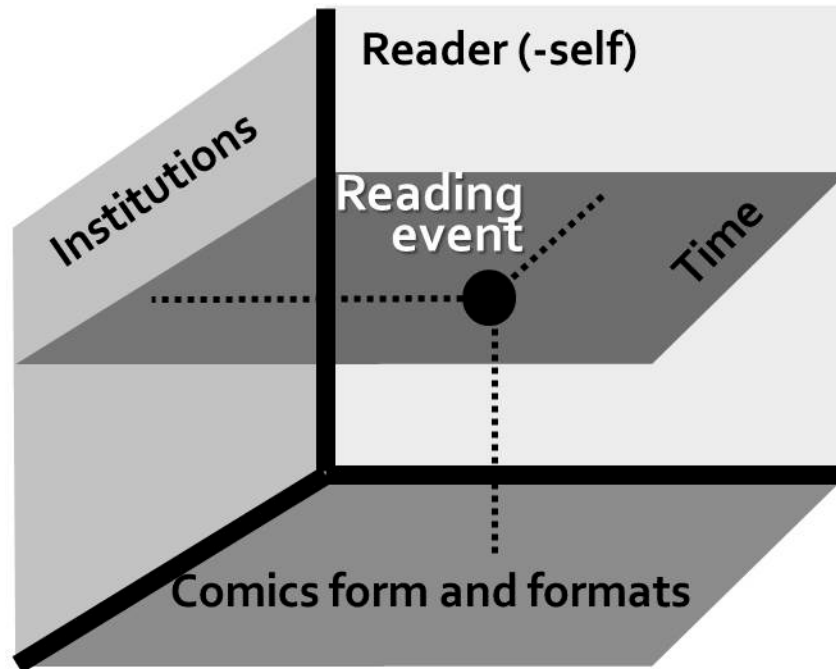


Figure 4: Visual metaphor to explore the reading experience

#### 9.1.2 Reading as a social and situated practice: The influence of New Literacies

In order to further explore the way participants understood and constructed their comics reading experience, I found the terminology and approach advanced by New Literacies scholars inspiring. To summarize what I have come to understand as the New Literacies approach I refer to one of the pioneers, Brian Street, who explains that this term represents:

a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1985). This entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power. NLS, then, takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at

any time and place and asking "whose literacies" are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant (2003, 77).

David Barton and Mary Hamilton have advanced the theorization of the concept of literacy practices (Barton 1994; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič 2000). They established the importance of exploring literacy in relation to the concepts of literacy practices and literacy events, proposing that "literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written texts" (Barton and Hamilton 2000, 9). Their use of the terms "practice" and "event" are not casual (Barton and Hamilton 2000, 7) and in recent years their use, especially practice, has been favoured in other disciplines as well (Reckwitz 2002; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). According to Reckwitz, saying that a practice is social is a "tautology," "as it is a 'type' of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds" (Reckwitz 2002, 250). Following these examples, my participants' understanding of the reading experience is characterized by a series of reading practices that can be explored during the reading event. I privilege the use of the term *reading experience* because it keeps the reader, and the reader-self, at the center of reading. This experiential perspective is not unique and it has been already proposed recently in relation to general media consumption by Wilson (2009) or magazine reading by Ytre-Arne (2011).

Although this understanding of reading might seem rather intuitive, Lankshear and Knobel explain how this is not as straightforward as it may seem. In their review of the different stages undergone by Literacy Studies, they note that "whereas 'reading' has traditionally been conceived in psychological terms, 'literacy' has always been much more a *sociological* concept" (2003, 8). It is true that reading in the context of the study of literacy has mostly focused on increasing the comprehension of the reading process to introduce changes in its pedagogy. However, outside of this field other approaches have been implemented. With the change in approach towards New

Literacies, scholars have expanded the types of texts that they consider and with them the understanding and studying of reading has also expanded. For example, Knobel and Lankshear (2005) use fanfiction and manga and the practices associated with these texts to exemplify their definition of New Literacies. In relation to manga, they highlight "...a notable lack of research that focuses on young people's engagement with manga as readers and writers/artists, and their manga-related practices in relation to their other media engagement and social relations." They then state that "manga is treated as relatively static popular culture artifacts, rather than as integral dynamic aspects of social practice and identity" (2005, 34). Although they are referring just to manga, their reflection could be applied to any text in the comics form or in any of the multiple formats in which they are published. They are not the only New Literacy scholars who are positioning comics, and especially manga, at the center of the stage and, in many cases, as ideal examples of the concept of multimodal literacy (i.e., Black 2008; Jacobs 2013; Hammond 2012). New Literacies scholars still situate many of their studies in the realm of the classroom and educational environments, thus dedicating less attention to the practice of pleasure reading.

Another relevant example of how New Literacies can help contextualize the way my participants understand reading can be found in Kress's last chapter in his widely cited book *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2006). In that chapter, dedicated to future research interests, Kress talks about the importance of revisiting bodies and materiality as an important approach to confront the challenges posed to literacy skills in the new media environment. Kress writes that

forms of imagination are inseparable from the material characteristics of modes, from their shaping in a society's history, and from their consequent interaction with the sensoriness, the sensuousness, of our bodies (Kress 2006, 171).

This reflection is consistent with the explanations that my participants gave about the importance of the material aspect in their reading experience. Furthermore,



when Kress notes that the acknowledgment of the importance of the body and the sensorial “challenges the reification and consequent separation of cognition, affect and emotion” (2006, 171), he is also linking New Literacies to social theory. Reckwitz explains that bodily routines and knowledge are “integral parts and elements of practices. A ‘practice’ thus crosses the distinction between the allegedly inside and outside of mind and body” (2002, 252). Scholars from Media Studies, Social Studies, History, and English are also contributing to this discussion. This might suggest the need to solidify Reading Studies as a distinct discipline, but always as one which keeps a strong connection with other fields of study.

When one considers the four dimensions of reading, the visual metaphor that comprises them, and the influence of New Literacies Studies, comics reading emerges as a sophisticated practice that shares elements with other reading activities but that also has unique characteristics that makes it especially suitable for contemporary society. The engagement and expertise of comics readers reveals them to be conscientious and reflexive readers who, either as beginners or experts, show a serious commitment to the form. Prevalent stereotypes of comics reading as light or easy and of comics readers as readers who lack something are critically queried. My study uncovers and respects my participants’ perspectives, keeping them at the center of a reading experience that is characterized by a series of practices that they adopt, endorse, and challenge during the many reading events in their lives.

## 9.2 Significance of the project

Librarians’ perceptions of readers of “scorned reading materials” (e.g., series books, romance novels, comics) have always been controversial. Wayne Wiegand in his widely cited article “Out of Sight, Out of Mind,” alludes to the tradition in Librarianship of “slighting certain kinds of reading” (1997, 314) and points to the fact that “we have never bothered to investigate seriously why people want to read them” (1997, 314). In the same article, Wiegand called for “an expansion of the boundaries” of the professional discourse in LIS. More importantly for this project, he noted that LIS

scholars needed to "embrace the scholarship that analyzes the multiple values people attach to reading in particular, and the scholarship that analyzes multiple values people attach to the content of information in general" (323-324). The importance of this change for LIS is justified in the crucial role that, according to him, libraries have historically played as an institution where reading happens.

This project extends beyond the walls of the library but I cannot forget that it was within the walls of this institution that my interest for this project started, both as a professional librarian and an LIS scholar. However, as Wiegand points out, LIS scholarship should extend its reach and interest to better understand who is and who could be a patron and reader as well as what the library can be for them. This opening out of LIS scholarship is even more critical in connection to a discipline still in the process of definition such as Reading Studies. The understanding of the reading experience shared by my participants should be invaluable for LIS professionals and scholars. The idea of the reader-self can guide the examination of discourses about what kind of reading and readers the library constructs or perpetuates. Looking at the comics form and formats can raise important questions related to collection development and the acquisition of digital and print materials. Moreover, the library is still dealing with the vital issue of organization for access. My participants have raised many important matters and I anticipate that this research project will support a long-term change in the way comic readers are conceptualized in LIS literature and practice. The knowledge emerging from my participants' experiences and understandings significantly enhances and seriously challenges commonplace understandings of the reading practices of an historically neglected group of readers. In an even broader sense, the thoughts and reflections shared here also advance and extend the knowledge about young adult reading practices and support the appropriate introduction and use of comics in libraries and other cultural and educational institutions. The adopted methodological approach contributes to a growing body of Library and Information Science literature that uses hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology to study readers' and users' experiences. Overall, it contributes to the

multidisciplinary field of Reading Studies and to our understanding of reading as a diverse and complex practice in contemporary society.

### 9.3 Future research

The exploratory nature of this project, and its intended purpose of opening up new ways of looking at comics reading and readers, leaves many different and new venues for future research. First, I think that the theoretical and terminological approach that I advance needs further scrutiny, especially the idea of the reader-self. A growing interest in such a concept can be noted in the release of memoirs that focus on the history of the author as reader and the role of reading in her life (e.g., Hearne 2009; Holloway 2006; McMurtry 2008; Ulin 2010). A question which remains unanswered is how this idea of the reader-self emerges in readers and how it affects (or does not affect) identity formation. Popular Culture researchers have looked at fans as members of communities and investigated how this participation and related practices influence fans' identities. The concept of the reader-self warrants similar attention. Diversity of practices and taste also needs further research especially in relation to its influence in the gendering of comics reading.

In relation to the context of comics reading, I believe that one of the institutions that did not fully emerge during the analysis and one that requires more in-depth investigation is that of the family. Although the positive influence of the family in constructing readers is proven, especially during childhood, the role of the family as an *institution* where the idea of reading is transmitted and transformed is still understudied. The home is a place where reading materials can be provided or denied. Parents can be supporters of a hegemonic understanding of what reading is and what ought to be read, but they can also become guides in a world with many different textual and visual reading possibilities.

An increasingly important aspect in need of further research is the materiality of reading. In my analysis I primarily advocate for a change in perspective that would

benefit approaches seeking more information about the material symbolism of the book and books as objects, both in their digital and print forms. This research direction could overcome the dichotomy of print versus digital and look more closely at where and how each technology is used and how each supports (or does not support) the development of the reader-self.

This is the end of a long and satisfying journey. Comics reading has been with me for some time before starting this project. I now feel like I have visited a familiar place but, at last, I have travelled with those adventurous yet reflexive friends who shed a new light on old places and discover with you the new ones. My participants have shown me, and hopefully you, the complexity and sophistication of the comics reading experience, moving past the commonplace. They have shared with us the personal and heterogeneous path that it is to become and be a comics reader. They have also demonstrated the importance of the material and temporal aspects in this increasingly digital and fast-paced society. This journey of knowledge discovery and construction has transformed me both as a researcher and a reader; and I can say with certainty that in the coming years I will be re-visiting many of the new places I have encountered along the way.

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## Appendix B Interview Schedule

1. What are the last 3 titles you have read for pleasure and why did you choose them?

2. What is the first memory that you have of yourself reading comics? Can you reconstruct the situation for me? Do you remember, more or less, when you started reading comic books or graphic novels?

3. What type of comics are your favourites? Probes from Ross:

- Type of story,
- Characters,
- Genre,
- Style (artistic or script),
- Publisher/Imprint
- Country/comics tradition of origin

4. More or less, how many comics do you read every month? How many of those do you buy or borrow from friends or the library?

5. Tell me about the last time that you chose a comic book to read for pleasure...How did you decide to read that specific title? Probing questions related to:

- Importance of the reading experience wanted (mood)
- How/where do you find out about new comic books?
- Elements of the comic book to consider (genre, story...)
- Clues in the comic book itself (authors, publisher...)
- Relation between time or money and access

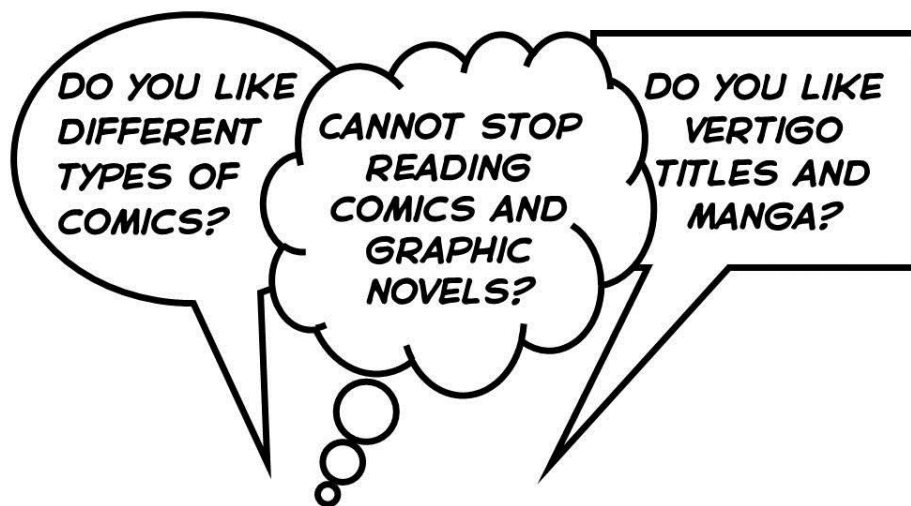
6. What does a comic have to have to be good? And bad?

7. Can you tell me about a reading you enjoyed? What did it make it good? And a bad experience? What did it make it bad?

8. Do you perceive any difference between a comic book and a graphic novel? Do you think other readers do?

9. Where do you usually get the comic books that you read? Probes: friends, comic book store, general bookstore, online bookstore, public library, university library...
10. More or less, how many comics do you read every month? How many of those do you buy or borrow from friends or from the library?
11. Is there any type of comics that you do not enjoy or would not choose for reading why?
12. Ask about reading digital (computer, scans/pdfs, e-readers...); probe about reading in print here.
13. When do you usually read comics?
14. How would you describe differently your experience reading comics as compared to enjoying other cultural products like movies, books, music...) What is the difference between reading comics and a book? And the difference between a comic book and a movie?
15. How would you describe yourself as...(in relation to comics) - (leave it open). Offer possibilities if confused or indecisive:
- A comic book reader
  - A graphic novel reader
  - A comic book fan
  - A graphic novel fan
16. SUMMARY: For you, what is special about comic books? Why do you think you read them?

## Appendix C Recruitment Tools



### **COMICS IN THE LIFE OF THE YOUNG ADULT READER**

If your interest in comics goes beyond capes and crusaders, if you describe yourself as a diverse or eclectic reader of comic books and/or graphic novels and if you are **15-25 years old**, you might consider participating in this study. It does not matter how long you have been reading comics or graphic novels.

#### **How much time is this going to take?**

Not more than two or three hours. You will do an interview that will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. After that, you might participate in a short (30 minutes) activity where you explain to me and show me how you choose the comics or the graphic novels you like.

#### **So, who am I?**

I am a PhD student in Library and Information Science at The University of Western Ontario and this study is part of my doctoral research. I am interested in learning more about why you find comics so appealing. I am a comics reader myself.

**Interested? More information?** Call or email me: Lucia Cedeira at [redacted] or [redacted]

Poster displayed at comics stores and public library branches

# COMICS IN THE LIFE OF THE YOUNG ADULT READER

**Check all that apply:**

- I cannot wait for the next issue of *Fables*
- I started to read comics recently, but now I cannot stop
- Nothing makes me laugh more than *Bone* or *Zits*
- I really enjoyed *Maus*
- Now and then I like to read an European comic or some Manga

If you said yes to ANY of these questions, if you describe yourself as a diverse or eclectic reader of comic books and/or graphic novels and if you are **15-25 years old**, you might consider participating in this study.

It will not take more of a couple of hours of your time. You will be interviewed about your interest in comic books and/or graphic novels and after that you might participate in a activity where you explain to me how you choose the comics or the graphic novels you like.

**So, who am I?**

I am a PhD student in Library and Information Science who is interested in learning more about why you find comic books so appealing. I am also a comic book reader myself. This study is part of my doctoral research at The University of Western Ontario.

**> If you are interested or want more information**, please call or email Lucia Cedeira at \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_

Flyers distributed at classrooms, public library branches, and comics stores

## Appendix D Ethics Forms



### Office of Research Ethics

The University of Western Ontario  
 Room 4180 Support Services Building, London, ON, Canada N6A 5C1  
 Telephone: (519) 661-3036 Fax: (519) 850-2466 Email: ethics@uwo.ca  
 Website: www.uwo.ca/research/ethics

### Use of Human Subjects - Ethics Approval Notice

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. L. McKechnie

**Review Number:** 16741S

**Review Date:** January 08, 2010

**Review Level:** Full Board

**Approved Local # of Participants:** 30

**Protocol Title:** The comic book in the life of the young adult reader: Understanding the experience of reading graphic novels and comic books in contemporary society

**Department and Institution:** Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario

**Sponsor:**

**Ethics Approval Date:** January 29, 2010

**Expiry Date:** August 31, 2011

**Documents Reviewed and Approved:** UWO Protocol, Letter of Information and Consent, Poster, Flyer.

#### Documents Received for Information:

This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the NMREB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information. If you require an updated approval notice prior to that time you must request it using the UWO Updated Approval Request Form.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the study or consent form may be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the subject or when the change(s) involve only logistical or administrative aspects of the study (e.g. change of monitor, telephone number). Expedited review of minor change(s) in ongoing studies will be considered. Subjects must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation.

Investigators must promptly also report to the NMREB:

- changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- all adverse and unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected;
- new information that may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study.

If these changes/adverse events require a change to the information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment advertisement, the newly revised information/consent documentation, and/or advertisement, must be submitted to this office for approval.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussion related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the NMREB.

Chair of NMREB: Dr. Jerry Paquette  
 FDA Ref. #: IRB 0000941

#### Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Grace Kelly (grace.kelly@uwo.ca)	<input type="checkbox"/> Janice Sutherland (jsuther@uwo.ca)	<input type="checkbox"/> Elizabeth Wambolt (ewambolt@uwo.ca)	<input type="checkbox"/> Denise Grafton (dgrafton@uwo.ca)
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*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*

cc: ORE File



## Office of Research Ethics

The University of Western Ontario  
 Room 5150 Support Services Building, London, ON, Canada N6A 3K  
 Telephone: (519) 661-3036 Fax: (519) 850-2466 Email: ethics@uwo.c  
 Website: www.uwo.ca/research/ethics

### Use of Human Subjects - Ethics Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. L. McKechnie

Revision Number:

Review Number: 16741S

Approved Local # of Participants: 30

Review Date: January 25, 2011

Review Level:

Protocol Title: The comic book in the life of the young adult reader: Understanding the experience of reading graphic novels and comic books in contemporary society

Department and Institution: Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario

Sponsor:

Ethics Approval Date: January 25, 2011

Expiry Date: August 31, 2012

Documents Reviewed and Approved: Revised Study End Date

Documents Received for Information:

This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above referenced revision(s) or amendment(s) on the approval date noted above.

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Chair of NMREB: Dr. Riley Hinson  
 FDA Ref. #: IRB 0000941

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Grace Kelly (grace.kelly@uwo.ca)	<input type="checkbox"/> Janice Sutherland (jsutherf@uwo.ca)	<input type="checkbox"/> Elizabeth Wambolt (ewambolt@uwo.ca)

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Chair of NMREB: Dr. Riley Hinson  
 FDA Ref. #: IRB 0000941

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## Curriculum Vitae

<b>Name:</b>	Lucía Cedeira Serantes
<b>Post-secondary Education and Degrees:</b>	MLIS University of Pittsburgh (2003) Research proficiency degree, LIS, University of Salamanca, Spain (2002) Three Year degree and Licentiate in LIS and Documentation, University of Salamanca, Spain (2000)
<b>Honours and Awards:</b>	John A. Lent Scholarship in Comics Studies (2011) Ontario Graduate Scholarship (2010/2011) ALISE/University of Washington iSchool Youth Services Graduate Student Travel Award (2011) Graduate Thesis Research Award (2009/2010)

**Visiting Scholar:** Visiting scholar at the Faculty of Journalism, Library and Information Science at the Oslo University College as a member of the scholarly research group *The Experience of Reading* (March and October 2011)

<b>Related Work Experience</b>	Limited Duties Instructor, The University of Western Ontario Fall 2013; Winter 2013; Fall 2012; Summer 2010 Research assistant, The University of Western Ontario Fall 2010, Summer 2009 Lecturer, Faculty of Translation and Documentation. University of Salamanca, Spain. Spring 2005. Coordinator, <i>Young Adult Library</i> , <i>Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez</i> – Salamanca, Spain. Dec. 2004 –2007. Librarian, <i>Center for Information and Research in Children and Young Adult Literature</i> , <i>Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez</i> – Salamanca, Spain. May 2004 – 2007.
--------------------------------	--

### Selected publications (n=5 of 11):

- Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2013). Misfits, loners, immature students, reluctant readers: Librarianship participates in the construction of teen comics readers. In Anthony Bernier (Ed.), *Transforming young adult services: A reader for our age* (pp.115-135). New York: Neal-Schuman.
- McKechnie, Lynne; Lucía Cedeira Serantes, and Cameron Hoffman. (2012) Dancing around the edges: The use of postmodern approaches in information behaviour research as evident in the published proceedings of the biannual ISIC conferences, 1996 – 2010. *Information Research*, 17(4). <http://informationr.net/ir/17-4/paper548.html#.URFyWGelCS0>.

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2012). Comics in the life of the young adult reader: Understanding the experience of reading graphic novels and comic books in contemporary society. *International Journal of Comics Art*, 14 (1), 407-418.

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2009). "I'm a Marvel girl": exploration of the selection practices of comic book readers. In P. Rothbauer, S. Stevenson, & N. Wathen (Eds.), *Canadian Association for Information Science Conference: Mapping the 21st Century Information Landscape: Borders, Bridges and Byways*. May 28-30. [http://www.caais-acsi.ca/proceedings/2009/Cedeira\\_2009.pdf](http://www.caais-acsi.ca/proceedings/2009/Cedeira_2009.pdf).

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2009). Untangling the relationship between libraries, young adults and web 2.0: The necessity of a critical perspective. *Library Review*, 58 (3), 237-251.

### **Selected conference presentations (refereed abstracts, n=8 of 13):**

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2013). When comics set the pace: The experience of time and the reading of comics. *Researching the Reading Experience International Conference*. Oslo, Norway. June 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>.

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2012). Comic books that feel like literary works: Young adult readers embrace, adapt, and resist the concept of the graphic novel. *Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Book Culture*. Kitchener/Waterloo, ON, May 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>.

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2011). Comics in the life of the young adult reader: Understanding the experience of reading graphic novels and comic books in contemporary society. *International Comics Arts Forum*. White River Junction, VT, September 29<sup>th</sup>-October 1<sup>st</sup>.

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2011). Comics are bridges and their readers reluctant: Overcoming historical discourses about comics readers to support innovation in practice. *ALISE Conference: Competitiveness & Innovation*. San Diego, CA, January 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>.

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2010). From virus to bait: Comic books, graphic novels, and their readers in Library Science professional literature (2000-2004). *Library Research Seminar V: Integrating Research into Practice*. College Park, MD, October 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup>.

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2010). Slighting certain kinds of readers: Searching for comics book and graphic novel readers in Library and Information Science literature. *Connections conference*, London, ON, May 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>.

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2010). From virus to bait: Comic books, graphic novels, and their readers in Library Science Professional literature (2000-2004). *3rd New Narrative Conference: Narrative Arts and Visual Media*, Toronto, ON, May 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>.

Cedeira Serantes, Lucía. (2009). "I am only really looking for a story": Selection practices of four comic book readers. *The New Narrative? Comics in Literature, Film, and Art*. Toronto, ON, May 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>.

### **Service:**

- Project coordinator. Comics collection development for the Graduate Research Center at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies (Summer 2010-)
- Volunteer for the ACRL Committee Instruction for Diverse Populations on the task of revising the Multilingual Glossary (Summer 2011)
- Coordinator of the Doctoral Students Association Speaker Series (2009/2010)