

The “Paradigm of the Gift”: A Framework for Assessing Collective Reading Practices in the Digital Era¹

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how concepts from the sociological and anthropological “paradigm of the gift” can be brought together with literary and cognitive theories, so as to provide a fruitful framework for assessing reading communities. By focusing on the rather under-researched interrelation between collective reading practices, genre, and gender, the article presents the key findings of a case study on a mixed-gender crime fiction book club in Athens. It provides a detailed account of the reading practices developed within the book club and outlines the basic dimensions of its context-specific “agonistic gift economy.” The study offers new insights on book clubs and extends the extant literature, which tends to overlook potential differences between diverse reading modalities within the same reading community, by subsuming collective reading practices under the univocal notion of “shared reading.” In this respect, by introducing concepts from the “paradigm of the gift” into the analytical repertoire of reading studies, the analysis aims at providing the beginnings of a new methodological approach to underpin research on reading communities in terms of the following dimensions: 1) the degree of entanglement of “givables” with identity and their inalienability; 2) the creation of debt relations, depending on the capacity of participants to reciprocate; 3) the formation of *value standards* for the valorization of reading practices and reader responses.

Keywords: collective reading practices, reading communities, “paradigm of the gift,” gift economy, genre, gender

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¹ Two earlier versions of this article appeared in: Tselenti, Danai, “Making texts mean: reading practices and gender in the context of a crime fiction book club in Athens,” in *Du genre dans la critique d’art / Gender in Art Criticism*, ed. by Marie Buscatto, Mary Leontsini and Delphine Naudier (éditions des archives contemporaines, 2017) and Tselenti, Danai, “Economies of Learning & Paying Attention: A Case Study,” *Humana. Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies* 33 (2017): 103–120.

Book Clubs as a Site for Investigating Collective Reading Practices

Reading is historically and socially situated. As Marianne Wolf notes, “we were never born to read. Human beings invented reading only a few thousand years ago.”² Among the many approaches to reading, many are strongly biased towards one particular model that associates the act of reading with privacy and solitude. In this context, two main gendered representations of reading can be discerned. The first is built around an idealized male figure, withdrawn from all worldly activities and deeply immersed in a scholastic mode of reading. The second represents a self-absorbed female figure reading (mostly fiction/letters) in total solitude.³

However, a growing body of historical research has consistently shown that practices of reading organized on a communal rather than a solitary basis have a long history. Historical evidence suggests that by the end of the 18th century, reading societies had already established their presence within the evolving European literary landscape. They were largely built upon the ideals of the Enlightenment and can thus be regarded as “carriers of the modernization process,”⁴ closely connected to what Jürgen Habermas defined as the “bourgeois public sphere.”⁵

In this respect, reading communities constitute important long-standing communication fora, which are useful sites for considering the diverse ways reading operates as a verbalized participatory activity rather than as a mental silent act. As a research field, book clubs challenge the notion of the solitary reader and approach reader response on more empirical terms.

A review of the extant literature shows that research on book clubs follows six main streams. A significant body of work is ethnographic,⁶ focusing exclusively on white women’s

² Wolf, Marianne, *Proust and the Squid. The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 3.

³ Long, Elisabeth, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2-11.

⁴ Eberle, Thomas S., “Reading societies, political culture and public discourse,” *Culture and Communication*, no. 3 (2009): 3.

⁵ Habermas, Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

⁶ Long, *Book Clubs*; Howie, Linsey, “Ritualising in Book Clubs: Implications for Evolving Occupational Identities.” *Journal of Occupational Science* 10, no. 3 (December 2003): 130-139; Reberg Sedo, DeNel,

face-to-face reading groups of general fiction. Scholars have thoroughly investigated the ways in which book selections and textual interpretations are mediated through a constant negotiation of cultural authorities' evaluations. In this context, book clubs are regarded as sites of "shared reading,"⁷ which function as central venues for identity work on an individual and communal level, as well as cultural scenes for the formation of interpretive communities based on "middlebrow" reading practices, which are mostly centered on character identification and connections to personal experience.

Secondly, several studies have been undertaken in relation to the educative functions of book clubs. In particular, collaborative patterns of discussion in (non-) classroom book clubs are approached by a share of scholars⁸ as inherently bound up with processes of collective identity construction and are positively correlated with the enhancement of children's and adolescents' literacy practices. In a similar vein, certain studies⁹ compare the structures of discourse between formal adult educational settings (mainly college literature classes and seminars) and book clubs, emphasizing the pedagogical benefits of the latter or approach them as tools for teachers' professional development.¹⁰ Further, a number of studies,¹¹ largely coming from the research project *The Discourse of Reading Groups*, are linguistically oriented and focus on the discursive construction of literary interpretation and reader identities in book clubs. It should be noted that book clubs' online counterparts have equally generated a certain amount of academic interest. Most studies¹² on online reading groups are descriptive and provide data on the social characteristics of their members, their

"Badges of Wisdom, Spaces for Being: A Study of Contemporary Women's Book Clubs" (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2004).

⁷ Reberg Sedo, DeNel, "An Introduction to Reading Communities: Processes and Formations," in *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*, ed. DeNel Rehberg Sedo (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

⁸ Polleck, Jody N., "Using Book Clubs to Enhance Social-Emotional and Academic Learning With Urban Adolescent Females of Color," *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 27, no.1-2 (December 2010): 101-128; Daniels, Harvey, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, (Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002).

⁹ Addington, Ann H., "Talking about literature in university book club and seminar settings," *Research in the Teaching of English* 36, no. 2, (November 2001): 212-248; Barstow, Jane Missner, "Reading in Groups: Women's Clubs and College Literature Classes," *Publishing Research Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (December 2003): 3-17; Smith, Michael W., "Conversations about literature outside classrooms: how adults talk about books in their book clubs," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 40, no. 3 (November 1996): 180-186.

¹⁰ Kooy, Mary, *Telling Stories in Book Clubs: Women Teachers and Professional Development* (Toronto: Springer, 2006).

¹¹ I cite indicatively: Allington, Daniel, "It actually painted a picture of the village and the sea and the bottom of the sea": Reading groups, cultural legitimacy, and description in narrative (with particular reference to John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*)," *Language and Literature* 20, no. 4, (December 2011): 317-333.

¹² Rehberg Sedo, DeNel, "Readers in Reading Groups: An Online Survey of Face-to-Face and Virtual Book Clubs," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research Into New Media Technologies* 9, no. 1 (March 2003): 69-90; Long, *Book Clubs*, 206-216; Reberg Sedo, *Badges of Wisdom*.

reading habits, as well as their motives for participation. An important finding indicates that online book clubs tend to be more “specialized” and focused on the books under discussion than face-to-face groups.¹³

Another body of work centers on televised book clubs. Most scholars¹⁴ pay special attention to Oprah’s Book Club, which contributed to the popularization of book clubs on the basis of a self-improvement and self-help rhetoric. A last research stream shares a focus on mass reading events, which concern “models of shared reading that take place in public or semi-public places and which operate on a scale that is larger than book clubs.”¹⁵ “Mass Reading Events” was introduced as a term within the context of the interdisciplinary transnational research project “Beyond the Book.”¹⁶ The project investigates social practices of reading mostly based on the influential model of “One Book, One Community,” which evolve around books as physical and symbolic objects and connect to the re-mediation of reading experiences through a set of different platforms (physical, broadcasted, or digital), thereby fostering social cohesion and community building on a regional and national basis.

Although contemporary book clubs exhibit a variety of forms, the extant literature operates under the assumption that the notion of “shared reading” fully captures the character of the collective reading practices developed within their contexts, which are additionally assumed to differ profoundly from professional reading practices. Moreover, the largest body of scholarship depicts book clubs as homogeneous interpretative communities, overlooking potential differences between diverse reading modalities within the same reading community, while it tends to focus exclusively on discussion practices and often ignores important contextual considerations on participation practices. Likewise, little empirical work has looked closely at mixed-gender groups or special interest face-to-face book clubs. I am only aware of Barbara Fister’s study,¹⁷ which focuses on an online generic book club by providing mostly a descriptive account of participants’ experiences.

This study aims at filling the above-described gaps by investigating the intersection of reading practices with gender and genre within the context of a mixed-gender crime fiction

¹³ Rehberg Sedo, DeNel, “Readers in Reading Groups,” 83.

¹⁴ I cite indicatively: Hall, Mark R., “The “Oprahfication” of Literacy: Reading “Oprah’s Book Club,” *College English* 65, no. 6 (July 2003): 646-667.

¹⁵ Fuller, Danielle, “Citizen Reader: Canadian Literature, Mass Reading Events and the Promise of Belonging,” *The Eccles Centre for American Studies; British Association for Canadian Studies Annual Conference 2010 Proceedings*, (2010): 4.

¹⁶ *Beyond the Book: Mass Reading Events and Contemporary Cultures of Reading in the UK, USA and Canada* was a three-year interdisciplinary research project funded primarily by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2005-8.

¹⁷ Fister, Barbara, “Reading as a Contact Sport”. *Online Book Groups and the Social Dimensions of Reading*, *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 303-309.

book club in order to offer new insights on book clubs and extend the extant literature on reading communities.

Methodology

I conducted qualitative research from March 2013 to April 2015. The main corpus of data was generated through the observation of 22 meetings of a book club and the conduction of 25 semi-structured interviews with its members. All of the observed meetings and the conducted interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Regarding the group meetings, I adopted a non-participatory stance for minimizing the “observational bias,” likely to occur when participants alter their behavior in response to the study conditions. The decision to abstain from group discussions was further enforced due to the insistence of some group members to express a “scientific” opinion on the books under discussion.

My research is based on a grounded theory methodology. It does not rely upon a pre-existing set of theoretical assumptions that guide the analysis of data. On the contrary, it seeks to generate a new theory by grounding its analysis in the participants’ perspectives, practices, and interactions. Grounded theory is a methodological strategy that attempts to deal with researchers’ established tendency to enter a research field with a set of predetermined theoretical assumptions. In this sense, data must “fit” into theoretical concepts and not vice versa, so that preconceived concepts may function as “starting points” for approaching data but not as “automatic codes” for analyzing it. As stated by Charmaz, “a fine line exists between interpreting the data and imposing a preexisting frame on it.”¹⁸

Despite the diverse versions of grounded theory, a “common ground” of features can be detected in the following tenets: a) **Theoretical sampling** functions as a methodological tool for identifying variations in the data by expounding different properties and dimensions within the evolving categories. b) **Coding** functions as a linkage between raw data and the developing theory. c) **Constant comparison** of incoming data with relevant literature sources, meaning that as the research proceeds, the literature search expands outside the primary area of study to other substantive areas made relevant through the emerging data, thereby committing the researcher to a multidisciplinary review process.

¹⁸ Charmaz, Kathy, *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 68.

Book Club Profile

The crime fiction book club is one of the four reading groups¹⁹ organized in the bookstore of a well-known publishing house in Athens. Meetings take place on a monthly basis and run for two hours. Members are comprised of a stable core of regular participants (around 20-22) and a peripheral group of more or less infrequent participants. The group is mixed-gender, but women are over-represented (70% vs. 30%). The group has a male coordinator responsible for organizing the conversations. Book selection is organized strictly around the genre of crime fiction, but choices are not limited to the books published by the book chain.²⁰ Most members have a middle-class educational and professional background. At the time of the study, the majority of the interviewed members were retirees over 60 years old (76%), with a decreased share of adults of working age (24%).

The Private Act of Reading

I will first focus on the private act of reading that takes place before members enter the collective context of the book club. Analysis of the collected data has shown that most female book club members approach reading fiction as an essential part of their identity, inextricably linked to their daily routine. In addition, women see reading as a source of pleasure, opposed to any sense of compulsion. Reading as traveling was a common thread that ran through all the interviews with the female members. Immersion and imagery turned out to be an essential component of the reading experience for them. Ruth²¹ explains: “Reading books is like traveling for me. From the very first line, my mind starts picturing the setting.” As Susan²² puts it: “Reading is something that immerses you [...] I am interested in reading a book so that it takes me away, so that it flows and makes me travel.”

In this respect, reading can be portrayed as a process of transportation that resembles the optimal experience of flow as conceptualized by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi²³ By investigating an individual’s subjective experiences and incentives in a wide range of

¹⁹ All reading groups read printed books written in or translated into the Greek language. The other three reading groups focused on general fiction.

²⁰ According to the analytical list held by the coordinator, only 21% of the selected texts are publications of the hosting publishing house.

²¹ Ruth is a 26-year-old French teacher. All participants’ names are pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

²² 36-year-old secretary

²³ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, (London: Harper Perennial, 1990).

activities, Csikszentmihalyi identified the phenomenon of flow, which is grounded in effortlessness and is more likely to be achieved when attention is entirely focused and voluntary, in activities that a person values as intrinsically worthwhile. That flow is more likely to occur when readers maintain an interest in the text is clearly supported by cognitive literature.²⁴

Following Csikszentmihalyi's reasoning, the way these women read ideally in private is autotelic, based on an endogenous use value of the very act of reading and grounded in "effortless attention." Although the reading is experienced as effortless, that does not mean that it happens without the "application of skilled performance."²⁵ In this regard, the kind of reading most women engage in is not "effluent" in orientation, that is to say, attention is not focused on what is to be extracted out of the reading experience for future use. In this sense, Sonia emphasizes: "What I mostly want out of a book is to enjoy it while reading, rather than remembering every single detail. I don't mind forgetting [...]. I remember the stuff that I liked [...] and captured my interest." Drawing on Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, it could be suggested that the majority of female members adopt an "aesthetic reading stance," whereby "their selective attention is focused primarily on what is being personally lived through, cognitively and affectively, during the reading event."²⁶ The experience of reading per se becomes rewarding in its own right.

On the other hand, male respondents differed in how willing or comfortable they were in accounting for their reading practices, as they persistently shifted the discursive terrain away from the question "what reading means to you." The majority of male participants did not align themselves with the prevailing female approach of fiction reading as an authentic personal expression. Instead, they tended to connect the act of reading either with their reading competence since an early age or with the quantity of books they have read.

The Crime Fiction Book Club as a Gift Economy

The core category that emerged from this data analysis identified the crime fiction book club as a public platform for reading and writing exchanges, which can be approached

²⁴ Mcquillan, Jeff and Conde Gisela, "The conditions of flow in reading: Two studies of optimal experience," *Reading Psychology: An International Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1996): 109.

²⁵ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 54.

²⁶ Rosenblatt, Louise Michelle, "Viewpoints: Transaction versus Interaction: A Terminological Rescue Operation," *Research in the Teaching of English* 19, no. 1 (1985): 101-102.

within the framework of the sociological and anthropological “paradigm of the gift.”²⁷

In his most discussed work,²⁸ Marcel Mauss conceptualized gift exchanges as a “system of total prestations,”²⁹ to the extent that they are closely connected to all aspects of social life and operate simultaneously as a framework for social cohesion and organization. In this sense, archaic societies reproduce themselves socially through circles of reciprocal gift exchanges that are grounded in three mandatory principles: giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Thus, gift exchanges constitute a system of mutual obligations that engages people in cycles of permanent commitments of reciprocation.

A gift economy seems to be generated within the book club, based on the exchanges of oral and written opinions among its members. In line with Mauss’s theory, we can approach these opinions as intangible gifts that are given, received, and reciprocated. Exchanges should not be conceptualized as one-to-one transactions between singular donors and recipients but as exchanges that circulate within the reading community as a whole. As Mauss states: “For it is groups, and not individuals, which carry on exchange, make contracts, and are bound by obligations.”³⁰ In this sense, the logic of the gift calls for a context that is different from that of market exchanges. In contrast to commodity relations, where the objects exchanged are alienated from the transactors, in gift exchanges, what is given “continues to be identified with the giver and in fact continues to be identified with the transaction itself.”³¹ In what follows, I am going to present the basic dimensions of the context-specific gift economy of the club.

1) Opinions as inalienable valuables

The oral and written exchanges among members construct the gift-giving practices as “presentations of self,”³² which become the vehicle for the revelation of the identity of donors. As Frank Adloff puts it, “gifts stay closely connected to the personality of the giver” and

²⁷ As argued by Alain Caillé in “Anti-utilitarianism and the gift paradigm,” in *Handbook of Economics of Reciprocity and Social Enterprise*, ed. Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013), 44-48, the term “paradigm of the gift” was introduced by a group of French intellectuals under the rubric MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales), in order to challenge the economic model of utilitarian thought in the social sciences. I consider the gift concept within a wider spectrum, not only connected to the logic of non-instrumentalism but also including aspects of self-interest, duty, reciprocity, and exchange.

²⁸ Mauss, Marcel, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (Illinois: The Free Press Glencoe, 1954).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰ Mauss, *The Gift*, 3.

³¹ Carrier, James. G, *Gifts and Commodities. Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 21.

³² Goffman, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburg: University of Edinburgh), 1956.

“serve as vehicles for identities as these remain attached to the gift.”³³

According to Mauss, gift practices are grounded in a relationship between alienability and inalienability. On the one hand, gifts are alienable to the extent that a part of what is given is transferred to the receiver. On the other hand, they are inalienable since something of the giver goes along with what is given and remains inextricably connected to it. It somehow follows the given. As he famously puts it: “to give something is to give a part of oneself.”³⁴

In other words, personal identities become entangled in the oral or written “givables.” This connects to Annette Weiner’s notion of “keeping while giving,” namely, of the inalienability of certain valuables. As Weiner argues: “Inalienable possessions attain absolute value that is subjectively constituted and distinct from the exchange value of commodities or the abstract value of money.”³⁵ The inalienability of opinions is exemplified in the perception of many participants who consider opinions as “valuables” which should be kept intact.

Maria³⁶ claims: “It has never happened to me to change my opinion on a book [...]. I may accept another perspective [...]. But to suddenly change my point of view for a book I didn’t like to a positive view or the opposite, no.” In the same vein, John reports: “I won’t change my opinion on a book I have received negatively, not even for being liked by everyone [...] because there are people who do that. This shows a lack of personal opinion for me.” The individuality and the stability of personal opinion must be retained as a valuable; otherwise it loses its exchangeable potential, which rests on its unique quality.

2) Exchanges between different modes of response

The study of the book club discussions showed that exchanges between members are based on four central modes of response:

- a) The primary mode is the *affective* one. It centers on sharing and reviving the feelings experienced during the private act of reading.
- b) The second mode is *story-driven*, centered on plot and characters.
- c) The third one is *author-based* and focuses on attributing intentions to the authors.

The reconstruction of the possible writing strategies is depicted as the *ideal* way to put oneself in the shoes of the author.

³³ Adloff, Frank, “Beyond Interests and Norms: Toward a Theory of Gift-Giving and Reciprocity in Modern Societies,” *Constellations*, 13, no. 3, (September 2006): 413.

³⁴ Mauss, *The Gift*, 10.

³⁵ Weiner, Annette, *Inalienable Possessions. The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 191.

³⁶ 66-year-old retired civil servant

d) The fourth mode is *generic*, organized around a “symptomatic reading” that evaluates the *genre*ness of every text by detecting relevant shortcomings and discrepancies. Responses are focused on the negotiation of different “horizons of generic expectations,” which relate to a constant examination of the boundaries of generic conventions. The use of coincidences for resolving a mystery and the lack of character verisimilitude are regarded as the most serious symptoms. Moreover, crime fiction is grounded in an *ideal of realism*. The plot of crime stories functions for the majority of members as a vehicle for the revelation of the multivalent aspects of reality as well as for the exposure of social injustices and their causes. In this respect, crime fiction is regarded as a form of social criticism. Michael³⁷ reports: “crime fiction is a mode, a tool for seeing many more things [...] from the world and from different societies.”

The process of reading crime fiction is represented as challenging and demanding intensive attention. Michael emphasizes: “There are many ways to read a book. Crime fiction calls for an intensive reading.”

This sophisticated reading strategy constructs as its ideal reading mode a deep re-reading of texts. The following conversation exemplifies this perception:

Maria: “I read the book twice and the second time it was different.”

Jim:³⁸ “Yes, there is no guarantee that with the first reading – no matter how diligent – one is able to drag out all of this book’s essence.”

It is interesting to note here that the genre of crime fiction has been associated with “transitoriness,” meaning thereby that it does not generate a wish for re-reading.³⁹ Moreover, crime fiction has been included within “a paradigm of effortless readability,”⁴⁰ “relying on codes and conventions that make detective stories easy to read.”⁴¹

In this sense, although several members associated the reading of crime fiction with relaxation and ease during the interviews, the genre has been reevaluated within the club’s economy on a different basis. In connection with Dove’s argument, many members depict

³⁷ 64-year-old retired multinational marketer

³⁸ 70-year-old retired banker

³⁹ Dove, George N., *The Reader and the Detective Story* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 2.

⁴⁰ Pyrhönen, Heta, “Criticism and Theory,” in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Oxford: Wiley- Blackwell, 2010), 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

crime fiction as a genre characterized by a distinctive sense of “differentness,”⁴² to the extent that it requires “a special reading mode,”⁴³ grounded in effortfulness.

3) Oral and written exchanges bound up in debt relations

3a) M-oral Exchanges

A group of female book club participants articulated during the interviews feelings of ‘insufficiency’ in respect to their reading, writing, and oral skills, as well as regarding the acquisition of competencies in the genre of crime fiction. Barbara⁴⁴ reports: “I think that some people have a certain level. I cannot keep up with them.” In the same vein, Ruth says: “I am too shy to speak. I think that the rest of the members have a lot of knowledge [...] they have read ten times more than me.”

By receiving the “gifts” of other members, without perceiving themselves as capable of reciprocating to the community, these women seem to build their identity as book club participants upon lack and shame. As Mauss explains:

Giving is equivalent to demonstrating one’s own superiority, to being worth more, to being raised up (magister); accepting without reciprocation or without excessive reciprocation is equivalent to self- subordination, to becoming client or servant, to making oneself smaller, to lowering (minister).⁴⁵

Feelings of subordination are particularly pronounced with regard to the perceived generic competencies of the most influential members.

Barbara illustrates this point: “If you have observed, I don’t speak a lot in the crime fiction book club, I don’t feel very confident. I haven’t read anything else except for the books we discuss in the group.” And later on, she adds: “John and Alex are very well-informed because they have engaged specifically with the object (of crime fiction). They are not the kind of reader that I am.”

The primary equal footing of all opinions is transmuted into the construal of some views as distinguished and more valuable. In this sense, some members obtain a prominent standing in the group, and others become invariably indebted to them.

3b) Written exchanges as tokens of wealth

From its early days, the book club has established a practice of book reviewing. On a monthly basis, a member volunteers to write a review of the selected book and to distribute it

⁴² Dove, *The Reader and the Detective Story*, 5.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ 66-year-old retired secondary school philology teacher

⁴⁵ Mauss, *The Gift*, 72.

via email to all group participants a few days before the regular meeting. Many members perceive this ritualized practice as a *generous and useful offer* to the whole group, which can facilitate the conversations or even substitute the reading of the book for some members. It is regarded as requiring a high degree of commitment, as it is based on the expenditure of additional cognitive effort.

Alex⁴⁶ reports: “If one engages deeply with the text and with the content and the messages intended by the author, one can deliver something extra, an incremental value.” And later on he adds: “This something extra demands an engagement, research, labor, a commitment so to say [...] It takes me at least two weeks to write a review.”

In this sense, the practice of reviewing represents an increment in value as it incorporates the “congealed labor” of the reviewer. It is based on research and several re-readings of the selected book, whereby the internet is used for gathering information about authors, generic conventions, historical periods, etc. The marginal cost of re-reading the book and of writing a review represents variable amounts of additional concrete labor and construes a set of reading practices that can be approached as ‘*expanded.*’ Value is measured by sacrifice, meaning thereby the expenditure of time given for reading and writing. Maria’s position illustrates this point: “There are people who make deep analyses, they are searching endlessly in the web. I insist I am just a mom who has not the time for such things.”

In this sense, the practice of written reviews is extrinsically rewarded by an added status and results in the creation of *generic capital*. It leads to a ranking hierarchy between *expert readers* capable of capitalizing on their own reading by controlling the means of textual production and *average readers* unable to exercise control over the production process. As Pam⁴⁷ argues: “Jim writes excellent reviews. How can you compete with that?” In the same vein, Barbara explains: “I have clarified from the start that I can’t write reviews, as I see that they are so well informed. I don’t know if you have seen the reviews, they are constantly being improved. They are writing dissertations.”

Within this framework, the inability to return to the community oral or written resources of equal or additional value to those received constructs a subgroup of female participants as marginalized recipients in permanent ‘cognitive debt’ and results in asymmetrical reciprocity. The construction of regimes of worth centered upon personality highlights the agonistic version of gift exchanges since “those who cannot keep up with the

⁴⁶ 70-year-old retired financial advisor

⁴⁷ 46-year-old housekeeper

level of exchange lose status.”⁴⁸

However, the aforementioned construction cannot be reduced only to socio-economic differences among members, as most members of the marginalized female subgroup possess adequate levels of cultural capital, are not educationally underprivileged, and have been exposed to literary socialization activities from their formative years.

4) Valid vs. invalid practices of participation

4a) The order of discourse

Interaction in the book club is organized around four main participatory modes: 1) turns of longer length, 2) turns of shorter length, 3) silence, and 4) parallel turns. Both male and female members take longer turns equally, whereas men, even though proportionally fewer than women, monopolize a larger share of turns. Shorter turn taking is comprised of instances of cooperative turns, whereby several speakers co-construct a point. It is mostly female participants belonging to the marginalized subgroup who take up turns of shorter length or stay silent. A fourth way to participate highlights the book club’s central *communication problem of cacophony*: it takes the form of extended parallel turns, with many members speaking simultaneously, without pausing to allow another speaker to continue. It is worth noting that the marginalized subgroup fully participates in these moments of undisciplined discourse. The participation of the marginalized female group in the parallel turns seems to fully align with the agonistic gift economy of the club, to the extent that it can be regarded as an attempt to take the floor without publicly losing face. At the same time, it can be seen as a rejection of the gifts of the more ‘privileged’ members, to the extent that gift practices are based on a time interval mediating between the offer and its reciprocation.

5) Genre and gender as the standards of exchange equivalence

The analysis has shown that not all modes of participation are equally validated. Members devalue responses based on unjustified aesthetic judgments of gratification or discomfort, attributing this kind of ‘invalid’ participatory stance mainly to women. Therefore, both male and female participants discursively construct an ideal ‘masculine’ mode of response, grounded in the rationalization of participation. In this sense, men are regarded as participants who develop “point-driven”⁴⁹ arguments based on rational premises. Lee⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Adloff, “Beyond Interests and Norms,” 413.

⁴⁹ Vipond, Douglas, and Hunt, Russel. A., “Point-driven Understanding: Pragmatic and Cognitive Dimensions of Literary Reading,” *Poetics* 13, no. 3 (June 1984): 266-268.

stresses this point: “Men see things in a different light. I think that sometimes they attend to things more than women do. They focus on what is necessary and everything they say is to the point. Men have more proper criteria than us.” The account of the coordinator⁵¹ best manifests the established gender hierarchy within the book club: “We can identify a degree of impulsiveness in the average female participant, a degree of spontaneity, something that you can’t detect in the average sample of male participants. This sample is more rational [...] And more difficult to counter-argue.”

The flow experience of reading mobilizes mostly affective or “story-driven”⁵² responses, which have no exchangeable potential to the extent that they cannot be refuted by counter-gifts. Examined in this context, the ‘ideal’ reading mode of a deep attentive re-reading can be approached as a way of reciprocating the “inalienable” gift of the author with a *surplus value* counter-gift. Furthermore, the reconstruction of the writing strategy can be seen as the ‘supreme honor’ that can be accomplished within the author-reader transaction.

Integrating the exchanged responses within the paradigm of the “gift economy,” it can be claimed that the need for their rationalization seems to align with a *masculine participation economy*, which necessitates the elicitation of a return. In this respect, we can observe a high degree of overlap between generic expectations and collective expectations regarding ideal participation modes. Reading modes that generate more “point-driven” responses are in line with participatory modes demanding argumentation validity, as they connect with the ideal of realism, which grounds the expectations on the genre of crime fiction.

The female marginalized subgroup cannot measure up to the *objective standards* formed within the community, to the extent that a ‘valid’ opinion stems from a ‘valuable’ way of reading. In this respect, genre, in its intersection with gender, establishes the standard of equivalence by connecting valuable with valid readings. In this way, it regulates the exchange value of reader responses.

Conclusions

The findings of the present study conflict with the common scholarly depiction of reading groups as collective contexts of “shared reading,” organized around shared interpretive and reading strategies, where all members feel safe to express responses. The

⁵⁰ 64-year-old concierge

⁵¹ 70-year-old retired banker

⁵² Ibid, 269.

analysis reveals that a reading community may not be associated with only one type of sharing interaction, so that different reading practices may be generated in the same reading community, from which we can infer that collective reading practices are not adequately covered under the notion of “shared reading.” As evidenced by the research findings, even within a long-established collective reading environment, there might be a shared perception of what counts as a valuable and valid reading, but it is not built upon a common ground of shared reading modalities. Only where a common ground is established “can a transfer regularly take the shape of sharing.”⁵³

The data collected in this study further contrasts with the common depiction of reading practices developed within book clubs as distinct from professional reading practices. The reading mode that gains the widest currency amongst participants bears important similarities to professional and scholarly reading practices.⁵⁴ It highlights the existence of effort-intensive reading practices requiring large amounts of time and resources and pointing to processes of unalienated labor, whereby workers control their own working processes and products.

I do not imply that the results derived from this research lend themselves to generalizability across all forms of book clubs, as the study focuses on understanding the dynamics present within a single setting. It seems possible that some features of the club’s agonistic gift economy can be ascribed to the particularities of the Greek cultural context. New research should be undertaken that incorporates more examples of online and offline generic book clubs, in order to integrate and generalize this study’s results. However, by introducing the paradigm of the gift into the analytic repertoire of reading research, this study refines and extends previous theories on book clubs by arguing that it is necessary to take different dimensions into consideration in order to account for the range of *possible* and *acceptable* reading modes and participation practices within the context of a reading community.

⁵³ Widlock, Thomas, “Sharing. Allowing others to take what is valued,” *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2013), 22.

⁵⁴ An exemplary investigation on scholarly reading practices has been conducted by Hillesund, Terje, “Digital reading spaces: How expert readers handle books, the Web and electronic paper,” *First Monday* 15, no. 4-5 (April 2010): <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2762/2504>.

Implications

As online reading communities⁵⁵ become increasingly ubiquitous, resulting in new forms of reading, writing, and interaction practices, the “paradigm of the gift” provides useful theoretical resources for assessing the diverse ways according to which reading practices become operative within collective reading milieus, both at a face-to-face and digital level. The “paradigm of the gift” can be used for conceptualizing online and offline reading communities as *communities of reading practices*, embedded in sharing and exchange practices, whose different qualities should be studied according to the ways in which reciprocity is articulated. It draws attention to how value is created within collective reading contexts: that is to say, on how reading practices are tied in with practices of self-(re)presentation and according to which codes of reciprocal associations these function in different contexts.

In this respect, “the paradigm of the gift” introduces reciprocity as a new concept into the scene of reading. Reciprocity is a sociologically meaningful concept that offers the analytical tools to grasp what constitutes interaction and participation within the contexts of reading communities, and at the same time, it is understood on the basis of the subjects’ own experiences, so that the researcher does not attach his or her conceptualizations, irrespective of whether they are adopted by the participants. Given the varieties of collective reading platforms that exist, as well as the vast array of gift-giving and receiving practices that connect with them, it is not possible to develop a universal typology. Much more empirical work is needed in order to study how the embodied presence on an analogue face-to face level is reconfigured within digital networks and what forms gift exchanges take within the context of online reading communities.

Nevertheless, the “paradigm of the gift” provides the beginnings of a new methodological approach to underpin future research on reading communities in terms of the following dimensions: 1) the degree of entanglement of “givables” with identity and their inalienability; 2) the formation of *value standards* for the valorization of reading practices and reader responses; 3) the creation of debt relations, depending on the capacity of participants to reciprocate.

⁵⁵ Some basic examples are social platforms as *LibraryThing* and *Goodreads*, book blog communities and even *BookTube*.

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