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Mapping a Rhizomatic Ecology of Reading

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Readers, texts, and readings can take unpredictable and seemingly tangential detours that educators might find undesirable and difficult to control. Readers can stray far from the text to seek out desired meanings. In the same way, media outlets can reappropriate favorite literary fictions in ways that can perturb educators and readers alike. Using the theories of an ecology of reading and the rhizome, together with evidence from an adult book club comprised of graduate students studying literacy education, this conceptual piece argues that undisciplined relations among readers, texts, and readings are admittedly tangential but nonetheless vital to the process of meaning-making.

In 2005, I participated in a book club with five other women as part of a course in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia entitled Literate Communities. The purpose of the course was to experience a literate community reading event first hand so that we might learn to create similar communities within our schools. Although we felt obligated to use our literary criticism training to have a scholarly and academic discussion of our novels of choice, our book club discussions were often about anything but the books.

This was especially true of the discussions around Sue Monk Kidd‟s (2004) *The Mermaid Chair*. Putting overtly academic discourse aside, we spent the majority of our time telling loosely tied personal narratives, tweaking the story in ways that better suited us, and hypothesizing alternative motivations for the characters. One member admitted to skipping to the end, refusing to read one more word until she found out if the ending would please her. According to the New Criticism approach to academic literary engagement, we might have been viewed as a most undisciplined group reading in most undisciplined ways.

I did not help the situation. Privately, I had a very strong emotional reaction to one part of *The Mermaid Chair*, but because the reaction was *so* private, so unsuitable for public disclosure, I withheld it. I was content to talk *around* the book.

When our instructor asked us to gauge the success of the experience at the end of the term, I was torn. My private experience with *The Mermaid Chair* was not pleasurable, and our public engagement with the text was not something I would be comfortable calling academically productive. Believing that we were ultimately accountable to the text, I was inclined to call our book club a failed experiment. However, I couldn‟t help but feel that this label was a disservice

to our experiences. I knew that the private and public engagements we had with *The Mermaid Chair* were admittedly undisciplined but nonetheless potent, affective, and capable of influencing the lives of those outside of our book club. Furthermore, I had a suspicion that our reaction to Sue Monk Kidd‟s novel was somehow not unique and could perhaps help to explain why *The Mermaid Chair* became so popular. Using poststructural reader response theory together with examples from my experiences with *The Mermaid Chair*, I hope to show how texts and readers co-evolve through tangential but nevertheless important processes of negotiating meanings.

Theory

Although few would call Rosenblatt, a staunch believer in the benefits of disciplined self-ordering reading practices, a poststructural thinker, I believe this groundbreaking theorist was on the verge of deconstructing the reading event when she spoke of the reader and the text in what she calls "ecological terms" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 18). She writes:

> The text becomes the element of the environment to which the individual responds. Or more accurately, each forms an environment for the other during the reading event. Sharp demarcation between objective and subjective becomes irrelevant, since they are, rather, aspects of the same transaction—the reader looks to the text, and the text is activated by the reader. (p. 18)

By using the term *ecology*, Rosenblatt seems to be troubling the notion of the „reader‟ and the „text‟ as separate distinguishable entities. It would be years before this notion of an ecology of reading would be more fully elaborated.

A theoretical descendent of Rosenblatt, Sumara (1996), has been particularly successful in deconstructing conventional reader response theory. Sumara does not just recognize the reader‟s contribution to a reading event; he declares that humans interact with texts to live and to thrive. He asserts that texts are enlivened through readers as well: "Literary fictions…always co-exist and co-evolve with and through readers, reading environments, and histories of interactions among these" (pp. 112-113). For Sumara, there is a certain ecology to reading. The reader cannot be dissociated from the text, and vice versa. The two together are part of an ecosystem of meaning negotiations. Sumara describes reading as "embodied action" in which an "ongoing structural coupling" must take place between readers and texts for the reader "to remain viable" (p. 111). Although the limitations of language force us to speak of readers and texts as if they were separate entities, in the ecology of reading, "we are always already…part of the environment. Our bodies exist in the integrity of the world‟s ecology" (pp. 111-112).

The figure of a closed ecosystem, however, does not fully take into account the field of literary possibilities. For this purpose, I would like to appropriate Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari‟s (2004) figuration, the rhizome. Biologically speaking, rhizomes are tubers like crabgrass with highly resistant root clusters that are always capable of producing off-shooting roots. The rhizome can be extended to describe any uncontrollable colonization or infestation, such as that of ants or rats. It might seem strange that next to such pestilence, literature functions as one of Deleuze and Guattari‟s favorite rhizomatic systems. This suggests that literature has a colonizing capability, a way of taking over, of infesting. But the relationship is not merely impositional. There is a co-evolution that takes place. In a rhizomatic system, this evolution happens as a result of parallel and aparallel relations.

Because of their close proximity, parallel strata of networks sometimes imitate one another. Take Deleuze and Guattari‟s (2004) example of the orchid and the wasp. The orchid has a shape within its petals that resembles a wasp, which entices male wasps to mate with the flower and therefore pollinate it. The orchid is a wasp, and the wasp in turn becomes part of the reproductive apparatus of the orchid. Theirs is not merely an ecological symbiotic relationship, but one in which the lines between the two become inseparable. Likewise, there may be unmistakable parallels between a reader and a text. The reader may identify fully with the material read. The reader may reify the book, repeat it, talk it up, and encourage others to read it. Because the book successfully imitates the reader, the reader then becomes a part of the reproductive apparatus of the book.

Aparallel evolution differs. It might be said to be less passive, or perhaps an instance of resistance or subversion. Unlike parallel evolution where there is an almost symbiotic cooperation in action, aparallel evolution involves a temporally limited coupling in which one or both of the entities change the other. Can we not all name one book that has changed the world? Are we not all part of a world of ideas constituted in a history of words? Aparallel evolution suggests a violence, a reinscription, a shift, or what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) call a *reterritorialization* between the book and the world:

> The book is not the image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world (if it is capable, if it can). (p. 11)

Not unlike Rosenblatt, Deleuze and Guattari (2004) emphasize the environmental conditions that make a reading event possible. The reader and the text overwrite and iterate one another until the two become inseparable, indiscrete entities. They are caught up with one another, converge with one another, and function interdependently. The two do not merely provide an environment for one another, they *are* the environment for one another. As a result, Deleuze and Guattari assert:

> We will never ask what a book means….We will ask what it functions with, in connections with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and in with what other bodies without organs it makes its own converge. (p. 4)

Rhizomatic systems are undisciplined and borderless. They invade, subsume, mask, and imitate. In rhizomatic relations, the subject/object are invested in an ecological coupling so intimate that it becomes difficult to speak of them as separate entities. So it is with the reader and the text, the book and the world.

Anytime one appropriates the figuration of the rhizome (or any sort of poststructural analysis), the problem of representation presents itself. The rhizome is not just a concept, but also a practice. I would be hypocritical to try to write about the rhizome in a traditional linear fashion. I must therefore also consider Deleuze and Guattari‟s (2004) comments on rhizomatic cartography. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the best way to tell a story would be to map it out, to "lay everything out on a plane of exteriority…, on a single page, the same sheet: lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations" (p. 9). How does one spatially or conceptually map a field like reading, especially within the confines of the linear academic essay? It is "at once necessary and apparently impossible" (Derrida, 2001, p. 59) to do as others have, and try. Since the premiere of Deleuze and Guattari‟s experimental text, Patti Lather and others (Alvermann, 2000; Lather, 1991; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Morgan,

2000) also played with map-texts that take academic publishing one step closer to what Lather calls "post-book thinking" (2000, p. 17). Scholars who have played with rhizomatic representation have created pseudo maps from linear texts in primarily two ways.

One strategy modeled by Deleuze and Guattari (2004) is to create a text that, like a map, offers "multiple entryways" which can be accessed in no particular succession and are "open and connectable in all dimensions" (p. 12). In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari presented their musings as a series of, plateaus, or "chapters" (although they reject this term), that can be read in any order. Brian Massumi (2004) likens reading *A Thousand Plateaus* to playing a record, suggesting that readers might drop the needle wherever they like.

The second strategy is to compare fixed, static tracings to the always becoming map. A tracing is predictable, fixed, and rehearsed. According to an interview with Giles Deleuze (1980), a map on the other hand is an "open system," an always unfinished narrative that never pretends to give the final word on the topic at hand. Mapped chapters therefore lack the dramatic build up and climactic conclusion to which readers have grown so accustomed. In a rhizomatic text, sections are nodes, plateaus of analysis, nonlinear entryways into a discussion in progress. In these ways, the following analysis of my book club experience with *The Mermaid Chair* is informed by the rhizome.

Under the guidance of the rhizomatic mentor map-texts provided by Deleuze and Guattari (2004), I will create a map-text of my own with multiple entryway narratives. The first entryway I will provide is the public entryway, which describes an experience reading *The Mermaid Chair* with a book club. Through the second entryway, I will discuss my personal, private interactions with the text. The third entryway includes a discussion of how a dialogical reading event manifested itself in "real life," while the fourth entryway describes how *The Mermaid Chair* has been taken up in the realm of popular culture.

Each of these narratives could be read alone or against the others. None is intended to give the final word on reading or on *The Mermaid Chair*. Rather, each serves as a foil to one or more predictable static tracings of what we know about readers and texts. The narratives that follow provide anecdotal examples of the unpredictable, undisciplined, tentative, always-becoming, ecological, rhizomatic relations among readers and texts. Although one might progress through these titled and sectioned entryways in the order in which they appear, one might also find that since the public, private, dialogic, and popular intersect within each narrative, it is just as useful to follow Massumi"s (2004) advice for reading *A Thousand Plateaus* and skip around.

Entryway: Public Reading

The Mermaid Chair is, at least according to my interpretation, the story of Jesse, a dissatisfied 42-year-old wife and mother who hears disturbing news that her mother, in an act of self-mutilation, has chopped off one of her fingers. Jesse travels back to her childhood home on an island off the coast of South Carolina to see about her mother while taking time to distance herself from her husband Hugh and the marriage she feels she has outgrown. During her stay, she becomes reacquainted with her mother"s circle of friends who offer Jesse advice on how to deal with her mother"s strange behavior and her dissatisfaction with married life. She also meets Whit, a neighboring widower turned Benedictine monk with whom she engages in the most forbidden of affairs. Whit not only helps Jesse "discover herself" but also the tragic truth behind

the death of her father. Although both Jesse and Whit are tempted to refashion a life around their newfound love, the climactic revelation of her father"s assisted suicide breaks the spell of their summer romance. Whit ultimately recommits his life to God and takes his holy vows. Jesse confesses her adultery and returns to her husband.

As a school librarian, and one who enjoys the lightheartedness of children"s young adult novels, I doubt that I would have taken the time to indulge in a serious adult romance like *The Mermaid Chair* had it not been for my participation in a book club. Individual readers make reading selections according to their individual moods (Rosenblatt, 1978). Groups of course cannot work this way. Our group included six women who lived in separate cities, were of different ages, and held very different views on politics and religion. Although we shared a common interest in literacy, we shared little else in common. There was a feeling among us that we might need to select a book that would strike a common chord across us. Featuring a mostly female cast of middle class white Southern characters, as white Southern women *The Mermaid Chair* did promise us "certain naïve moments of identification" (Derrida, 1992, p. 39).

We did not merely share a naïve identification with the text, but a naïve and very schooled notion of what our book club should look like. We felt our first book should have a certain literary "quality." One member, Amy, [1] had already read *The Mermaid Chair*, enjoyed it, and could attest to its viability as a "book club book." There were even book club discussion questions available for the book posted on the internet. *The Mermaid Chair* certainly offered enough symbolism and other literary devices to sustain a somewhat academic book discussion for the duration of our allotted time, and as such it would fulfill our presumed notion of what we were interested in doing in a book club. *The Mermaid Chair* seemed the perfect book club book for us. It met our group"s shared expectations for a university-sponsored book club discussion, and it seemed a match for our generalized identities as white southern women. It was a text written for readers like us, or so we thought.

Since the "literary quality" of the text served as one of the requisites for our selection, I fully expected that when our group met to talk about *The Mermaid Chair,* we might spend our time marveling at the artistry of the author and any number of literary features in the piece such as the setting, the characters, and the heavy-handed use of symbolism. As part of the parameters of the Literate Communities course, we were given privacy for our book club discussions. There was no outside force policing us to stay focused on the text, yet it seemed like we all felt the "gaze" (Foucault, 1977) of our academic training pressuring us to have an academic literary discussion. In spite of our self-policing drives, we engaged in what I, at the time, believed to be an un-academic discussion. There we were, educated women studying language and literacy, gathered around a book full of the stuff that quality literature and meaningful book discussions are made of [2], and yet, when it came time for our modes of literary criticism training to kick in, we just couldn"t do it.

Although *The Mermaid Chair* did not inspire the literary interpretations I anticipated, it did open up a space where we could get to know the issues that mattered the most to one another through our "dialogical" reading of the text (Faust, 1992). In the space and time of our book club, we could have talked about any number of those safe, personally distant, almost antiseptically academic "third things" (Sumara, 1996, p. 114) that we intended to discuss.

[1] All names of book club participants are pseudonyms.

[2] The New Criticism approach to literature does not acknowledge how individual readers are affected by texts, instead encouraging them to train their eyes on literary devices and techniques. This approach informed much of the pedagogy I experienced in secondary education.

However, we chose to spend our time sharing very provocative personal stories. In this way, our novel opened up a place of dialogue, of fellowship, what Sumara calls a commonplace "interpretive location" (p. 132). It is important to note that an interpretive location is not really a place per se. Sumara explains that it "cannot be pinned down or located *in* something" (p. 132). Our meeting room was not the commonplace location, nor was the interpretive location in *The Mermaid Chair*. Our interpretive location was a live interaction between us readers, the text, and the contexts of our shared and private readings.

I can only speculate how our interpretive location made it possible for our discussion to take the wild "lines of flight" that it did (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). Perhaps Jesse was not a satisfying character for us. For Amy, the member who recommended the book, Jesse was a close fit, a character who "aroused no qualifications, questions, doubts, but on the contrary fits our preconceptions, our needs, our own conscious or unconscious potentialities" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 67). We as a group held a blind faith that Amy's identification with Jesse would easily transpose on us. Our naïve identification with this character seemed a guarantee, but our safe choice led to a disappointing literary experience. Just as Jesse was predictable and disappointing character, so too was the story of the disenchanted housewife who goes on an existential quest to find herself. This narrative is so engrained, so rehearsed in our culture that it is easily identified. As such, Deleuze and Guattari might call *The Mermaid Chair* a "cultural" book, one that is

> necessarily…already a tracing of itself, a tracing of the previous book by the same author, a tracing of other books however different they may be, an endless tracing of established concepts and words, a tracing of the world present, past and future. (p. 24)

Perhaps the well-traced lines of Kidd's narrative begged a new mapping. If so, we certainly did not disappoint. Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) example of how the wasp is attracted to its likeness on the orchid petals comes to mind. Certainly we as women on some level resembled Jesse. We were attracted to her by that resemblance. However, unlike the wasp that unquestioningly mates with and thereby pollinates the orchid, we as readers resisted becoming the reproductive apparatus of the character and the narrative presented to us. We would not couple with it, we would not ensure its reification. Although we all read *The Mermaid Chair* as agreed, we did so resistantly.

"Resistant reading" is a term rooted in feminism (Fetterly, 1978; Kolodney, 1980). Resistant reading describes a way of reading in which one assumes that within every text there are voices that are repressed or silenced. To counter the subtly damaging effects of these omissions, resistant readers ask questions like: "Who's talking? Why should I care about this situation? What values and/or beliefs am I being asked to confirm?" (Faust, 1992, p. 45). However, Jenkins (2006a) uses the term resistant reading to describe a reappropriation or rewriting of the text as well.

We resisted/rewrote Jesse in a few different ways. Some of us doubted Jesse's quest for herself was somehow nobly fulfilled in her affair with the monk. As I recall, one of the more outspoken of the women in our group commented, "Why does it have to be about something noble like finding herself. Can't she just be a horny woman?" We all laughed. Several of us agreed that Jesse was in all likelihood "really" just driven by lust, not some sort of transcendental self-exploration through union with another. We took Sue Monk Kidd's image of the dignified fallen woman and recast her as a tramp.

We also picked out the most provocative theme featured in the novel, cheating, and reappropriated it to tell more interesting cheating stories featuring the pliable enough trope of "dissatisfied woman." *The Mermaid Chair* did not give us what we as critical consumers of

literature for women needed, and so we played with it. We toyed with scenarios of cheating wives that turned out differently, rewriting the dissatisfied wife narrative in a number of ways. The cheating woman narrative had to "be rewritten to make it more responsive to [our] needs, to make it a better producer of personal meanings and pleasures" (Jenkins, 2004a, p. 40). We rescued Jesse from an affair driven by a noble search for self and let her have the raunchy fling we felt a woman in her shoes might want—text be damned. We weren't just resistant readers, we became what DeCerteau (1984) might call "rogue readers" who "refuse to read by the rules imposed upon them by the school masters" (p. 39).

At the same time, one of our members made almost the opposite move with Jesse. Instead of giving the character the permission to be promiscuous denied by the author, she disciplined Jesse even more than Sue Monk Kidd did. Heather confessed that she skipped to the end of the book to make sure that Jesse did not stay with Whit. She further confessed that she violated the text in this way anytime she sensed the onset of marital infidelity.

Almost every member of the group let out an audible gasp at this confession. We were collectively appalled. The hypocrisy of our moral repugnance escaped me at the moment. Ironically, we were more offended at Heather's infidelity to the text than to the protagonist's infidelity. Although we rewrote Jesse, superimposing hedonistic motivations that were not consistent with the text, we felt that to skip to the end of the story was the ultimate violation. It ruined the story, insulted the author, and disciplined the character in a particularly paternal way. Heather was unshaken in her belief that what she did was right for her. Being married and a devout Christian, she found the notion of a cheating wife so odious that she couldn't bear to read it.

Although we were surprised, it is not terribly uncommon for women to read the end in advance to assure themselves of a happy ending. In her study of White middle class suburban housewives who frequently read gothic romances, Radway (1991) found that the women in her study who consumed romances did so because it reaffirmed the promise of patriarchy. It reassured women that the choice to marry a man and have children was the right one that would lead to fulfillment. The women in Radway's study insisted that a good romance had to have a happy ending. Radway reasoned that without it, "the romance could not hold out the utopian promise that male-female relations can be managed successfully" (p.73). When it looked as though the happy ending would not be possible, one of Radway's participants revealed that she had to see how it turned out, so she would skim as quickly as possible to get to the end. Sometimes she admitted that she would skip right to it. When a novel did not end happily, she complained that the ending left "a bad taste in my mouth forever" (p.71). Of course *The Mermaid Chair* did not announce itself as a romance, but rather adult realistic fiction. There was no expected guarantee of a happy ending. Perhaps this is why Heather was so quick to abort the narrative and investigate the resolution.

One might, as members of our book club did, scoff and say, "But it is fiction. It is not reality!" I have now come to appreciate how reading can open up a perilously real place where "the boundary between inner and outer world breaks down" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 21). Reading a literary fiction produces for the reader a very real event situated in everyday life. Sumara (1996) warns that "readers cannot imagine what it is like to be in another situation unless they can somehow blur the presence of their existing situation" (p.85). As such, the reading event functions a sort of "embodied action" (p. 83). For Heather, reading about adultery was to live though it, to experience it. Heather had a happy marriage situation, and she did not want to blur the lines between her life and that of an unhappy wife, not even for an aesthetic moment, for as

Sumara further cautions, "once we have had an experience with another person or with a literary fiction, we cannot leave the experience unchanged" (p. 86).

Similarly, Gadamer (1975) likens reading to playing a literary game in which the reader and the text reciprocally inscribe one another. Fictional literature only works if one is willing to play, and be played by the game. The reader must relinquish control of the self to the text: "Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play. Someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport" (p. 102). Certainly, Heather did not want to play or be played by the game, and we called foul. We teasingly chastised her for ruining the experience for herself and disciplined Heather according to the notions of how to properly and fairly engage a literary piece. We were defending the text. Heather, on the other hand, was defending her very subjectivity.

Derrida (1992) speaks of how literature can shape our subjectivity using the concept of the "re-mark" (p. 9). For Derrida, a piece of fictional literature doesn't just add to the experience of the reader, it re-marks, or transforms the reader and the text is re-marked for having been read. Like Gadamer, Derrida believes that this co-inscription does not happen without the reader's permission. The reader is incited to play and must be "willing to countersign" (p. 74). Heather fulfilled her contractual obligation to the reading group and to the text by reading through to the end, but she only did so on terms with which she was comfortable.

I cannot assume that Heather had Radway, Gadamer, or Derrida in mind when she skipped to the end to check on the outcome. However, being an important theorist of her own reading practices (Jenkins, 2006a) and a student of Christian texts, Heather did indicate that she was informed by the Bible when she started this reading practice. In our discussion she talked about how the sacred text warns the faithful in Proverbs 4:23 to, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Also in Matthew 5:28, the Bible explains the importance of keeping one's thoughts pure: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Regardless of the texts that informed Heather's reading, she did not want to have the lived-through experience of a cheating wife, for she suspected it could irreversibly change her. Forsaking the text, she proved that her fidelity lay with her husband and with the institution of marriage. She was not necessarily disciplining Jesse or Sue Monk Kidd, she was reassuring herself that it was possible to manage marriage successfully.

The rest of the group did not subscribe to this ethic of reading. Rather, we self-governed by an ethic that Jenkins (2006a) terms a "moral economy" (p. 55) of poaching texts. In this moral economy, it is permissible to "rescue" a character like Jesse from an overly conservative author. Our seizing and rewriting of the text was permissible in our eyes because we not only allowed her to have the affair, we let her do it for the hedonistic pleasure of the act itself. According to our moral economy, we preserved "a certain degree of fidelity to program materials" while Heather committed a "violation of the special reader-text relationship" (p. 56).

Intuitively appreciating how texts have the power to reterritorialize us, to re-mark, to re-write us, we resisted *The Mermaid Chair* in different ways. Five of us granted Jesse a fair amount of freedom as a character, but one of us disciplined Jesse before she ever knew her. Our interpretive location proved an environment in which we the readers had to resist the hostile tracing of the text. We had to guard ourselves from being annexed and overwritten, from becoming an extension of the text's reproductive apparatus. In the rhizomatic ecology of reading,

identification with a text is not always desirable. Symbiosis is not always the name of the game. When up against certain texts, survival is. With the tendrils of an undesirable womanhood snaking ever closer to our carefully constituted selves, we struck back at the text simultaneously mapping violent liberation and stern discipline upon a too often traced, over coded character.

Entryway: Dialogical Readings and the Real World

At the time of our reading of *The Mermaid Chair*, I was frustrated at how our discussion concentrated on the one topic of adultery because it was personally irrelevant and even laughable to me *at the time*. Recently though, our seemingly tangential dialogue about the morality of adultery gained new relevance for me. Two years after the summer of *The Mermaid Chair*, a married man began to approach me in a way that was undoubtedly other than platonic. At first, I was shocked. He was visibly married, and spoke well of his faithful but absent wife. Frustrated at the cowardice of many eligible bachelors I knew, it was admittedly refreshing to have a little attention thrown my way. Although I am sad to say I was tempted by this man, I am happy to report that I vehemently and publicly denied his advances. Undeniably taking the side of the absent wife, I did my best to shame him so that he would never even think of attempting such an act of treachery against his wife again.

Considering the levity with which I resisted the need for any redeeming moral quality to *Jesse and Whit's* adulterous affair, one might be surprised that *I* had any respect for the sanctity of marriage at all. Although at the time Heather and I had opposite resistant reactions to the adultery as portrayed in *The Mermaid Chair,* over time the stance she took against infidelity made a mark on me. This was a good example of "what new possibilities for learning arise when readers are able to temper their resistance long enough to move beyond self assertion into the activities of imagining and of accounting for meaning-making that appears different from their own" (Faust, 1992, p. 46). In spite of all my big resistant talk about guiltless lust, Heather"s rush to defend a fictional marriage touched me; it re-marked me (Derrida, 1992, p. 15). Any hot fantasy involving my married suitor was quickly extinguished by the chilling memory of Heather demonstrating for the group how she turned to the back of the book, making sure the marriage survived before reading another page.

It wasn"t just Heather"s reactions to the novel that informed my moment of truth decision. The text had also made an indelible mark on me. Sumara (1996) asserts that it should come as no surprise that "readers derive pragmatic information from their reading of literary texts" (p. 21). The fact that the text announced itself as fiction and was predictably cliché made no difference. It traced "truths" about life and love that have been born out through years of human relations: Adultery rarely turns out well. People find out, they get hurt, and there are always regrets. I remembered Whit browbeating himself for the audacity of stealing Jessie from Hugh: "*The man is her husband,* he told himself. *For the love of God, he's her husband*" (Kidd, 2005, p. 270). To say yes to the married man who approached me would have been to ignore everything ugly and absurd the text reaffirmed about adultery. Although *The Mermaid Chair* was clearly announced as a literary fiction, it was a "useful fiction" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 20), a cautionary tale. Our dialogical reading of the adultery narrative helped me make the pivotal "connection between reading books and reading life-situations" (Faust, 1992, p. 47) and helped me say to my married suitor: "For the love of God, she is your wife."

Dialogical reading "gives us pause to consider the multivoicedness of situations with a degree of care uncommon in everyday life" (Faust, 1992, p. 47). *The Mermaid Chair* made me

sensitive to concerns that may not have occurred to me in any other way reading any other book. Had we chosen to read Yann Martel‟s (2001) *The Life of Pi* that summer, I may have never had the multivocal input and the information I needed to thwart the advances of this married man. Let there never be any doubt, what we choose to read makes a difference--“*the book matters*” (Sumara, 1996, p. 87, emphasis in original).

Two years later, *The Mermaid Chair* was a somewhat distant memory. However, it would seem that my life‟s trajectory was impacted at the point where it intersected the interpretations created the summer we six women read *The Mermaid Chair*. Our dialogic reading still functioned as a node around which very practical information about infidelity circulated in the present. The text‟s tracing still worked as a “material extension” of my real world (Sumara, p. 21). Likewise, in ways that are diffuse and impossible to comprehensively trace, *the world* is a different place for *The Mermaid Chair* having been in it. And it is not just different for those who have read the book. As Sumara (1996) notes, “it is not true that non-readers are not influenced by literary fictions. Like everything that is part of our culture, literary fictions are involved in the ecology of relations in which all human subjects participate” (p. 113). I know at least one man who, although he never even heard of *The Mermaid Chair*, was certainly affected by it.

Entryway: Private Reading

> *We have since become a singularly confessing society. One confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles, one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses--or is forced to confess. ...Western man has become a confessing animal.* (Foucault, 1995, p. 59)

In a reading club, it is understood that one will recount her or his individual reading experience with the book. However, this is not always a safe or easy thing to do. My private reading of *The Mermaid Chair* was particularly disturbing, so sharing wasn‟t simple. To share would have been to confess.

To understand what evoked such an intimately private reaction from me, one would have to know a little bit more about the story. The steamy love affair that attracted so much of our attention was only a part of a larger tale, one that involved a mystery surrounding the tragic death of Jesse‟s father. In the end, Jesse discovers that her father, whom she believed died in a freak boating accident when she was nine years old, actually had an incurable disease that would result in him losing his sanity. With full consent and collaboration from his wife and a circle of friends, he arranged to drink a poisonous solution brewed by his wife. His lifeless body was placed on a boat which was set to explode so that his suicide would be viewed an accident. Following this revelation, memories of the last night Jesse saw her father alive flooded her memories:

> I tried to imagine him sitting in the mermaid chair, staring into Mother‟s face, slowly slipping into a coma. Had I been asleep in my bed while all of this happened? Had he come to my room to say good-bye? A fragment of memory hung in my head….
> “Daddy?” My voice was woozy with sleep. “Shhhh,” he said. “It‟s okay.” He knelt on the floor and sliding his arm under my shoulders, held me against his chest, my cheek

> crushed against the rough nap of his rough corduroy shirt…. "Jesse," he said. "My Little Whirly Girl." (Kidd, 2005, p. 300)

In my private reading, this passage summoned particularly sorrowful memories from my own childhood, particularly the last night I saw my dad before he became ill. He tucked me in, patted my leg, and told me I was a good kid. I was 12—too old to be tucked in. I knew something was wrong. Within a few hours the world as I knew it would change. Although publicly I critiqued Kidd's "Whirly Girl" passage as a contrived "tear-jerker," during my unguarded private reading of this passage my eyes boiled over with tears and my throat caught, and eventually I broke down with great chocking sobs. My personal connection added realness to the contrived, making it seem more authentic.

Although as a book club participant I took my "responsibility to fulfill the contractual obligations of membership" (Sumara, 1991, p. 140) seriously, I did not talk to anyone about this painful private experience with the book. I even hesitated to broach the subject of the sick father storyline at all for fear that I might be tempted to talk about my personal evocation. I completely held out on my group. I was ashamed. This sort of reading wasn't pretty. It was uncontrolled and undisciplined and made me feel as though I had done something wrong. Everything I had been taught told me that if I read the correct way, I would make myself available to the good intentions of the author and I would be protected from any personal contexts that might taint the experience.

Rosenblatt (1978) says that it is impossible to "predict" what texts will summon which meanings (p. 14), but she never really warns about *unpleasant* evocations. She suggests that the reading event should be a *pleasurable* one. Rosenblatt assures the reader that if they engage in an "active, self-corrective process" (p. 11) which entails "sorting the relevant from the irrelevant in a continuing process of selection, revision, and expansion" (p. 53), that reading will be a "pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself" (p. 39). Csikszentmihalyi (1991) likewise asserts that to achieve an optimally pleasurable "flow" reading experience in which one's worries and cares disappear, one must maintain a state of ordered, disciplined consciousness. Csikszentmihalyi further cautions that if one's mind "wanders away from the plot" it will follow dangerously random patterns, "usually stopping to consider something painful or disturbing" or perhaps "some real or imaginary pain, on recent grudges or long-term frustrations" which makes reading "neither useful nor enjoyable" (p. 119).

At the time I felt that perhaps I was not disciplined enough in my reading and that is why it turned out to be so disturbing. However, the connection with the text was quite clear: Jesse and I were two little girls remembering being tucked in by our dad the last night we were able to think of our lives as normal. Rosenblatt (1978) would likely call this an appropriate aesthetic evocation clearly within the parameters and the "arc" of possible meanings (p. 76).

Unlike Rosenblatt and Csikszentmihalyi, Sumara (1996) never makes any guarantees that reading will be comfortable or pleasurable. He asserts, "The meanings that are derived from reader-text interactions…must never be thought of as optimizations regardless of how well-written the text or how earnest the reader" (pp. 112-113). Instead of shunning those unexpected, uncontrolled emotional outbursts, Sumara welcomes them as important "signs of life" (p. 4), of proof that we have not neutralized the literary experience by focusing on trivial "third things" like plot and setting, that we have not diverted our attention from important evocations in an effort to "subtract ourselves from our own lives" (p. 5).

One member of our reading group, Janie, apparently had no such trouble subtracting herself from her life. She freely and comfortably shared the fact that that she could relate to this

tragic story because a very close relative had committed suicide when she was a child. In one way, by divulging this to the group, she diffused the mounting pressure I was experiencing to speak up and share. But at the same time this bombshell disclosure almost upped the ante. Janie gave up a piece of her privacy for the group. She took one for the team. She provided the "disclosure that is required in the move from the personal to the communal" (Sumara, 1996, p. 139).

However, the pressure did not just come from Janie. The drive to confess came from me, from the secret itself, from so many places I could not name them all. I am once again reminded of Foucault:

> The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that the truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. (Foucault, 1995, p. 60)

Although on some level it might have been cathartic to share, my personal brand of ethics informed my decision to resist the paying the price of this certain kind of liberation. I had been raised in the tradition of Christian stoicism and guided by the vernacular wisdom of the perils of "airing one‟s dirty laundry." Although I cared about my fellow book clubbers, and I could sense that "we felt a certain commitment, a certain obligation to one another" (Sumara, 1996, p. 141), I would not divulge my secrets, especially not for the sake of a book club discussion.

The shift in my demeanor during this part of the book discussion must have been marked. I was sassy and loud while talking about Jesse and the monk‟s torrid affair. However, during the discussion of the father‟s illness, I withdrew and resigned myself to demurely listening, head cocked, nodding politely for the brave girl pouring her heart out. My silence gave more time for Janie‟s confession. It was her life splayed out for all to see, proving that "even if the meaning evoked between private reader and text is never disclosed ... because it becomes an inextricable part of the reader‟s sense of self, the „secret meaning‟ does, in fact, become part of the world" (Sumara, 1996, p. 139). I can now only wonder: did my discretion become another‟s confession?

Self-discipline and confession stand as well established traditions in private and public reading. Had I been self-corrective, on guard, and ready to pull myself out of the reading, perhaps I would not have had such an uncomfortable encounter with *The Mermaid Chair*. Once I had the uncomfortable experience, I might have at least taken comfort in publicly sharing this experience with the group. However, I mapped out a different plan. I withheld my confession and presented to the group a suspiciously and fictitiously well-composed quiet demeanor, and to my knowledge no one was the wiser.

Entryway: Popular Culture

It had been two years since our book club disbanded and as long since I had spoken to Amy. She had bad news for me. *The Mermaid Chair,* the book she loved and recommended, had been turned into a Lifetime TV movie! I was sad for Amy, but not surprised. According to Deleuze and Guattari (2004), books are like "little machines" working within a larger machinery of literature which is then caught up in still other systems. We must therefore ask with what "other machine(s) the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to

work" (p. 4). Much to the chagrin of literary purists, in the age of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006b), the literary machine is often plugged into the motion picture machine, with sometimes limited success.

After my conversation with Amy, I did a little research on the web. Within one year of its first printing, *The Mermaid Chair* had been turned into program fare for the Lifetime cable channel. Not long after its TV movie debut, *The Mermaid Chair Lifetime Original Movie* could be downloaded on iTunes for $3.99. Considering the long standing tradition of romance novels turned TV-movies and the rapid release of the Lifetime reappropriation, it is likely that Sue Monk anticipated a movie deal.

It was interesting to see how the motion picture machine has reappropriated *The Mermaid Chair* for its own purposes. First, there is an emphasis on the enticing mermaid motif that can truly be played up in the visual medium. The movie preview featured on iTunes features women in mermaid suits swimming in sync with eerie mermaid voices accenting the movie score. The mermaid motif is clearly a selling point.

Judging from the synopsis of the screen adaptation posted on Lifetime"s website (http://www.mylifetime.com/on-tv/movies/mermaid-chair/about), another main selling point that can be better exploited in the visual medium is sex, and the recognizable famous actress who plays Jessie. The websites invites its audience to

> Take a journey of mystery, passion and self-discovery with Academy Award® winning actress Kim Basinger in a powerful story based on the best-seller *The Mermaid Chair.* The movie follows married mom Jessie, who just sent her daughter off to school and now feels alone and listless in her 20-year marriage. When this restless wife gets a disturbing phone call, she must return to her childhood home on a beautiful Southern island to deal with the shocking behavior of her mentally unstable mother. During this visit, she finds herself undeniably attracted to a Benedictine monk. While struggling with this temptation and delving into her family"s secretive past, Jessie undergoes a spiritual, artistic and erotic awakening. Her experiences on the island lead Jessie to discover her true self and what she really wants from her life.

Compare this to the inside flap of the printed text, available on Amazon"s website at :http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0143036696/ref=sib_dp_pt/103-0273694-9707044#reader-link. The TV movie blurb is remarkably different in how it sells the story to the "reader." The text is supplemented with the notoriety of the actress Kim Basinger as with the trademark endorsement of her acting skills from the Motion Picture Academy. The book flap describes Jessie"s temptation to have an affair with Whit as a struggle between "the tension of desire" that "feels overwhelmingly right" and the pull from "the immutable force of home and marriage." The TV movie blurb deemphasizes the force of the marriage relationship and simplifies the fall into temptation as an "erotic awakening." Clearly, the Lifetime network hopes to capitalize on the text"s most marketable feature, sex, and supplement it with their trademark brand of programming and a vaguely recognizable B-list cast.

The movie machine is not the only one in which *The Mermaid Chair* has converged. Since *The Mermaid Chair* first came on the scene of literature, various knowledge communities (Levy, 1997), motivated by epistemaphelia or the pleasure of exchanging knowledge (Jenkins, 2006a, p.139), have sprung up in support of one another"s readings. One can easily access a wealth of resources designed to for would-be *Mermaid Chair* fans. There are the ever present proper discussion questions available online like the ones at http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/mermaid_chair1.asp One can also share reactions

through blogs and chat spaces such as this one: http://blogospherebookclub.blogspot.com/2007/06/mermaid-chair-discussion-questions.html. *The Mermaid Chair* was always already a cultural tracing, a popular culture phenomena in the making. It paralleled the lines of the book club book genre, and made for TV romance movies. There never was just the book. It was always already a cultural tracing ready to be mapped out across the landscape of media convergence.

Implications

I came to *The Mermaid Chair* hoping to learn about how to create successful "book club" reading groups. Since our reading group was so undisciplined, I was tempted to call the experience an unfortunate waste of time. It has taken two years for me to realize how much our little untamed book club accomplished. We didn"t just celebrate or rehash the text, we created relevant connections among ourselves that would later play out not just in our future readings, but also our future lives.

In trying to make sense of the multiplicity that was this reading experience, I used a rhizomatic ecological analysis. This form of analysis allowed me to look at my reading experience as more than a failed attempt to deploy New Criticism tactics to our book club discussion. I was able to trace a number of tangential lines that for me make up what I think of when I think of *The Mermaid Chair***.** These tangential lines were made possible by the text, but they were in no way written into the text by the author. Our public reading, my private reading, the reading we negotiated in group discussion, and my contemplation of popular culture"s interpretation of the „original" text, are all vital lines along which multiple meaning-making events happened. Without rhizoanalysis, those tangential lines might have been ignored, regarded as unimportant, or simply considered too embarrassing to follow.

My private, shared, and now extensively reflected upon engagement with *The Mermaid Chair* (and its recent reiteration into the field of visual media) has considerable implications for me as a reader, and as an educator who had the occasion to facilitate book groups. Now that I am more aware of the affective potential of literary fictions, I cannot dismiss them as simply enjoyable diversions featuring characters with whom I might identify. I now believe that literary fictions have the power to change our mood, to change our minds, and to inform our future behavior in very real ways.

In future book clubs, I hope to give students permission to reappropriate texts, to read them resistantly, to imprint them as they are imprinted by them. I plan to give my book discussion groups wide parameters. It will be my task to make sure they do not feel obligated to stick closely to the text but instead encourage them to discuss openly their discomfort and disagreements. At the same time, as the facilitator I should remain vigilant against pressuring students to bare all for the sake of the group discussion. Participants should be encouraged to be cognizant of how important it is to respect the privacy of their peers. This is not to say that students should be encouraged to discipline their private and public engagements with literature. Undisciplined readings, whether private or public, make the reading more alive. We can quickly kill thriving ecological reading relations by asking students to focus exclusively on literary features of the text.

Lastly, much to the chagrin of many of my fellow educators, I must resign there are very few texts that have not been adapted and disseminated in other media forms. I cannot take students out of the world of media convergence. They will always be able to find supplemental

texts that they hope might substitute for the "original." I can teach students to think about those reappropriations critically, and I can even ask them to model such media convergence. Students could start their own blogs, make adaptations for screen, stage, and digital mediums. Their reappropriations can only enhance those less tangible reading experiences.

I have come to the provisional conclusion that within the ecology of reading there is no limit to the text, no controlling readers, and boundless opportunities for the making of meaning. I can make the futile attempt to discipline literary experience or, forsaking discipline, take rest in the wisdom of the rhizome.

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