Exploring the Placelessness of Reading among Older Teens in a Rural Municipality

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1 The author acknowledges the support provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
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Abstract

Situated in a review of rural, cultural and youth geographies, this paper reports on a qualitative study of the role of reading and libraries in the lives of older rural teenagers. The primary method of data collection was in-depth, flexibly structured interviews with twenty-seven youth between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years, supplemented with data from unobtrusive observation and environmental scanning in a specific geographic locale. Four themes are discussed: the habitual, quotidian reading of teenagers, the shifting visibility of the public library, the Internet and the World Wide Web as a default reading site, and the temporal constraints on reading for pleasure. Using ideas informed by cultural geography, the space of non-active teen reader and the placelessness of reading are explored.
Introduction

The research presented in this paper begins with an assumption that cultural geography can help us to understand reading practices in a specific geographical locale. It asks questions about the relationships among reading, readers and place – if place matters, how does it matter, and what evidence do we have that it does? This paper begins with a review of how rural library services to youth have been covered in library and information studies literature that is followed by an overview of ideas from cultural, rural and youth geographies that have informed this study. Research methods are presented in detail to give a clear picture of how data was collected and analyzed. This is followed by discussion of four major themes related to place that emerge from data analysis and in the final section these themes are analyzed using ideas of space and place to theorize the habitual reading practices of older teens in a Canadian rural municipality.

*The Library as Place*, a collection of scholarly essays edited by Gloria J. Leckie and John E. Buschman, published in 2007, gives ample evidence of recent interest within Library and Information Science (LIS) in the study of libraries using the lenses of geographical thought. In their introduction, the editors write, “A humanistic approach to the library as place enables us to explore questions related to how libraries function as physical places of embodiment in the everyday, how they are understood and used by their clientele, and what symbolic meaning they hold for their community of users” [1, p. 9]. This paper explores such themes in the context of everyday reading, library and Internet use among young adults in rural southwestern Ontario in Canada.
Literature Review: Rural Libraries and Cultural, Rural and Youth Geographies

Four main themes emerge from a review of the small body of literature on rural library services to young people, published during the past twenty-five years. There is an emphasis on the difficulties in service provision resulting from changes in demographics, the rise of computer technologies, chronic underfunding as well as changing expectations for libraries in light of a growing dependence on computer technologies [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. For many rural young people their school libraries are their primary libraries and, therefore, a dominant feature in the library literature concerns school and public library cooperation in rural areas [8, 9, 10]. Additionally, there are several articles that describe and evaluate specific, local rural library services [11, 12, 13, 14]. In general, LIS offers an account of library services under the effects of various external pressures [15] as well as descriptions of demographic characteristics of adult users [16]; but we learn little about the meaning that libraries have in their rural communities or for their rural constituents.

The work reported here is informed by the cultural turn in geography particularly by what is called the “new cultural geographies” influenced by British cultural studies. According to Denis Cosgrave, new cultural geography is “more concerned with SPACE and SPATIALITY than with environment and material landscape” [17, p. 136, capitalization in the original]. The related emphasis on human subjectivity, identity and territory, communication, social group formation and the uses that social groups make of space marks this approach to space and
spatiality as distinct from conventional themes of cultural geography concerned with “modes of agrarian life and human conduct of all kinds that bears upon human occupancy and geographical diversity apparent in landscapes” [17, p. 135]. In this study I explore the spatial dimensions of reading in a nonurban locale as a way to understand, following cultural geographer Gill Valentine, the ways in which these dimensions are “invested with certain meanings, how these meanings shape the way these spaces are produced and used, and, in turn, how the use of these spaces can feed back into shaping the way in which people categorize and identify themselves” [18, p. 5]. A framework informed by cultural geography helps to ask certain questions in this study: Why do spaces of reading have so little visibility in the daily media environments of young people? Are reading practices “inherently spatial” [18, p.5] in that they depend on particular spaces for their construction?

The rural is typically conceived as a distinct, bounded space that is different from both suburban and urban life. Much research has focused on the extent to which perceptions of the rural idyll compete with the notion of rural life as isolating and remote from urban experiences. There is even debate as to whether the term “rural” has any meaningful significance in today’s world given what some see as rampant urban imperialism and the global reach of mass media [19, p. 6]. Within rural geography questions are also asked about the ways in which the rural environment is transformed by various technologies. For example, Gill Valentine and Sarah L. Holloway examine the extent to which
communication technologies such as the Internet and computers have overcome barriers of distance and isolation among youth in a small British rural area [20].

In this study, the blurred distinctions between rural and urban life lead to questions about the degree to which young people’s engagement with print culture in small town and rural contexts is unique. Consideration must also be given to material aspects of access such as the number and location of sources of books and other kinds of reading materials such as libraries, bookstores and other retail outlets. Other significant factors to be considered in a rural geography of reading include the availability of access to computers and to the Internet, as well as the levels of mobility of young people to be able to travel to and from such sources. Where do reading events and other kinds of evidence of an active reading culture occur in the rural community?

Geographies of young people emerged as a response to the apparent invisibility of children and young adults in research heralded by the humanistic turn in geography. An influential review essay by Chris Philo [21] suggests that rural studies should be renewed with attention to the geographies of rural people as experienced “from within” their own experiences. The result of these research currents is a still ongoing movement to write children into studies of space and place, with a related interest in investigating the exclusion of young people from adult public space as well as close consideration of the ways in which young people produce, appropriate and navigate public and private space.

There have been several recent studies that consider multiple dimensions of the geographies of rural youth. For example, Cheryl Morse Dunkley researched
young rural Vermon ters living along the Canadian border for whom various
spatial factors converged to encourage risky behaviors such as drinking and
driving [22]. Johan Fredrik Rye examines how rural Norwegian teenagers respond
to competing concepts of “rurality” [23]. Sofie Anne Lægran juxtaposed the ways
teenagers used two different “technospaces” – the gas station and the Internet café
[24]. Michael Leyshon provides one of the few methodological papers on
fieldwork with young people in rural areas [25]. Chris Philo and Fiona M. Smith
argue for child-oriented political geographies of children claiming that children
are usually overlooked in such studies because “children do not vote and have
little influence on ‘political phenomena’” [26, pp. 103-104]. Valentine and
Holloway use cultural geography to frame their study of rural young people’s use
of information and communication technologies [20]. Despite these studies and a
handful of others like them, according to Dunkley, “Little is known about the
everyday, lived geographies of youth living in rural America, particularly the
obstacles ‘rural’ teens face in generating social opportunities and the strategies
they face in overcoming such obstacles” [22, p. 560].

An engagement with print culture and the promotion of positive reading
habits support the social and educational opportunities of youth. Geographies of
children and youth help to situate reading practices in a specific time and place for
a specific cohort of young people coming of age in the early years of the twenty-
first century. In this study of rural teens and reading, the framework provided by
cultural geography permits a focus on how youth’s perceptions and experiences
are spatially structured through their engagement with print culture.
The Research Setting

Between November 2006 and March 2007, interviews were conducted with twenty-seven young people who were between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years and who lived in or near a rural municipality in southwestern Ontario, Canada. The municipality contains a single small town that in 2001 had a Canadian Census population count of 4,452, comprising approximately forty-five percent of the total municipal population [27]. The remainder of the population is scattered throughout the surrounding farmland and among several villages. The only secondary school in the municipality is located in the town as is the only full-service public library branch.² In 2001 the municipality had 745 people between fifteen and nineteen years of age: 370 of whom were male; 375 female. Forty percent of young people in this age range live in the town. Seventy-two percent of youth were in school full-time [27].

The nearest urban area has a population of just under 350,000 people and is approximately thirty miles away. There is one small Christian bookstore and for a few months there was one small used bookstore. A sparse selection of magazines is available at most variety and grocery stores. There are several hockey arenas and sporting grounds, one hospital and several churches. There are no shopping centers although there are stores that sell clothes, sporting goods, groceries and sundry items. There are a number of casual food shops and

² There is also a one-room library branch in a village on the western boundary of the municipality. It is telling that not one of the participants, including a young man who lived in the village, knew that it was there.
restaurants. At the time of data collection there were no music stores, no cinemas, no Internet cafes, and no discernible dedicated teen only spaces.

The municipality is predominantly Christian; most people reside in families, and in homes that they own; ninety-one percent of the population has English as their Mother tongue and ten percent of the population were born outside of Canada. Just over one percent of the population declare themselves as visible minorities and most people are of English, Scottish, German or Irish ancestry. Statistics on the larger county population indicate that forty percent of the working population does not have a high school diploma suggesting a large blue-collar workforce. Family incomes are on average about $10,000 less a year than those of families province-wide [27]. The larger county, of which the municipality is a part, is considered to be one of the most agriculturally productive areas in Ontario. It has more farms, more farmland and more gross farm receipts than any other county in the province. Manufacturing, tourism and agriculture make up the three economic pillars of the county [28].

This municipality was selected as the research site as it provides a useful sample of young people with approximately equal numbers of youth living in the single small town and in the surrounding areas as well as an approximately even split of male and female youth between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years. Also, the location of a single full service library branch in the only town allows for a concentration of research activities in one place. The municipality is also geographically near to a large city that allows for an examination of its status in
the periphery of urban structures that effect the distribution of print culture and products.

**Research Methods and Procedures**

This research is an in-depth exploration of reading practices of rural and small-town youth in an effort to understand more fully their everyday engagement with print culture as exhibited through practices associated with voluntary reading habits, public library use patterns, bookstore visits and uses of the Internet. As the research objectives were to look at the lived experience of reading among rural youth and to explore the meanings that emerge from their experiences, this inquiry is guided by qualitative research methods. Access to reading materials through public and school libraries, web-based access through online bookstores and other retailers, online public access library catalogues, news sources, web logs and any other electronic and digital sources of reading material as identified by participants themselves are examined.

**Data Collection**

Data collection occurred in a single rural municipal area using a range of methods. Gaining access to the research field began in the summer of 2006 after an extensive literature review and ethics approval from the institutional review board at the researcher’s university. The primary method of data collection was conversational, in-depth interviews with youth between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years. As the sample of participants is diverse including youth who like to read a lot, who like to read a little, and who do not enjoy reading at all,
interviews enabled responsive questioning tailored to the unique context of each face-to-face interaction. The interviews ranged in duration from twenty to sixty minutes. In keeping with guidelines for this kind of interviewing, a uniform schedule of interview questions was not used, but as the interviews progressed a series of salient “hermeneutic prompts” was developed [29] taken from other accounts of reading, an interviewing strategy used successfully in other research [30]. The author conducted all interviews in face-to-face encounters at mutually convenient times. Informed consent was required for all interviews and interviews with minors occurred only with the additional written consent of parents or guardians. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

*Unobtrusive Participant Observation and Environmental Scans*

Data about reading practices was collected using unobtrusive participant observation at the school and public libraries and retail stores that sell reading materials. Specific interviewees were not observed, but observation sessions were conducted to monitor the activities that occur within relevant sites located in this municipality. The observation sessions were limited to those sites where the researcher’s presence as an adult “outsider” was publicly credible. Another source of data for this project came from several environmental scans of the municipality to gain an understanding of the kinds of cultural products and cultural events that were available and accessible during the period of data collection. Between May 2006 and August 2008, the researcher made thirty visits to the municipality to conduct interviews, as well as to scan the shelves at libraries and at various retailers that sold reading materials and media products. Furthermore, ten
observation sessions were conducted at the public library along with eight sessions at the high school library.

The Sample of Participants

Purposive sampling was used as it allows for emergent sampling design, the serial selection of sample units with continuous adjustment, and the selection of sampling to redundancy of categories [31, pp. 201-2]. Snowball sampling was rejected as it reduces the degree of confidentiality that could be ensured for participants. Multiple sites were used to gain access to young people including the high school and public library, recreational centers, post offices and retail stores. Access to youth participants was negotiated through adult gatekeepers including the regional school board administration, teachers, the high school principal and teacher-librarian. Letters of information for youth participants, adult gatekeepers and parents or guardians were distributed through classroom visits and via the school and public library. Fourteen participants were female; thirteen were male with the median age of seventeen years. Approximately eighteen percent of the participants resided in the single small town. When asked, approximately fifty-six percent of participants saw themselves as readers and forty-four percent saw themselves either as non-readers or light readers. To recognize the value of their time, participants were given twenty dollar gift certificates from stores located in the nearest city. Demographic data related to income and education levels of participants’ parents were not collected: the purpose of this study is to learn about the nature of reading and libraries and their meaning in the lives of rural young
people rather than to make generalizations about rural youth. All participants were white and most had lived in or near the municipality for all or much of their lives.

Data analysis was guided by open-coding techniques [32] and involved the qualitative procedures of active listening, immersion in the date, data reduction and transformation and, thematic analysis [33, pp. 76-82]. These procedures correspond to the “constant comparative method” of grounded theory techniques by which close attention is paid to the data to see which themes emerge [32]. Strategies of peer de-briefing (with other LIS and youth researchers) and member-checking (with participants) were used to test the salience of the ongoing thematic analysis.³

Thematic Findings: Spatial Dimensions of Reading

Four main themes that correspond to spatial dimensions were developed through the coding exercises: the role of physical proximity and everyday access to reading materials; the shifting valence of visibility of the public library in the daily landscape of these youth; the role of the Internet as a taken-for-granted place for reading; and the consistently articulated lack of space in time for reading.

Theme 1: Physical Proximity and Everyday Access to Reading Materials

Very few of the participants invested time in searching for reading materials, even those who identified themselves as people who read a lot and who “love” to read. The single most common way that printed reading materials such as books, magazines and newspapers made it into the hands of the young people in this

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³ To aid with qualitative coding of the transcribed digital texts in an Apple computing environment the researcher used TAMS Analyzer Software, version 3.4 created by Matthew Weinstein.
study was by physical proximity – they quite literally came across the materials in the course of their day. For example, even though he claimed he was not a “big fan” of reading books, sixteen-year-old Tim\(^4\) said, “Wherever I see it, I’ll grab a copy and look at it and just look at it for a bit.” Several other participants echoed this sentiment when asked to describe how they chose materials to read. Although eighteen-year-old Brent declared that he was “not much” of reader, he gave repeated evidence of varied reading interests, but perhaps he was simply reflecting his brother’s reading preferences as raiding his brother’s closet was the primary way that Brent found something to read: “I was just looking in my brother’s books and I picked it out.” William, also fifteen-years-old and a light reader, simply made choices from the selections in his home: “We have a lot [of books] already so I just pick one that I like.” However, even for participants who described searching for “something good to read” the most active kind of searching can only be described as browsing. While serendipitous encounters with reading materials along with casual browsing and borrowing are certainly common methods for finding reading materials, questions are raised about what happens when such methods do not yield any satisfying results.

Other reading research has found that other people are frequently seen as trusted sources for reading recommendations [34]. This is borne out by the research reported here: when asked how they found reading materials participants also frequently mentioned family members, teachers and less often, librarians –

\(^4\) Transcription conventions used in this paper are as follows: […] indicates the omission of conversational utterances not relevant to the cited excerpt. All names of participants are pseudonyms.
people they encountered and interacted with on a near daily basis. Factors of everyday proximity and personal recommendation interact to produce a positive outcome (i.e., “something good to read”) but the method of finding a book to read remains a passive activity.

Furthermore, in this sample, friends were not viewed as a source of reading recommendations. Many of the readers in this study saw themselves as being somewhat unique and alone among peers in terms of their identity as readers. When asked if they shared reading preferences with their friends most participants responded indirectly by saying things like, “they’re not really big readers” (Lisa, fifteen years old), “not really as much as me, not even close” (Allison, sixteen years old), “the odd friend, but not really […] Not really. Like I know my friends don’t [read] as much. I don’t really recommend [books] – maybe to my brother or something” (Katherine, seventeen years old). Many young people simply responded with an emphatic “no!” when asked if their friends were readers. The following exchange between the interviewer and Lena who was an eighteen-year-old voracious reader of historical fiction, gives evidence of the negotiated meaning of reading among friends.

Interviewer: Are your friends readers too?

Lena: A few of my friends are very much religious so I read The Da Vinci Code. I’ll put out my views and they basically kind of shunned me when I talked about my views because [my views] don’t agree with most of theirs. Usually, if we get onto that topic we finally kind of just said, “alright this is my opinion, that’s your opinion.”
Interviewer: Are there other books that aren’t like that, that are safe?

Lena: There are no safe ones when you talk about books. You’re gonna get your opinions out and some of them are gonna be a little more radical than others.

Daily interaction with friends was clearly the norm with these young people but friends were not identified, implicitly or explicitly, as sources of reading material or as partners in reading activities.

On one hand it may seem to be a positive phenomenon that young people are finding reading materials everywhere with little effort as it may suggest a rich reading culture where reading materials are plentiful. On the other hand, the aspect of “little effort” itself can be troubling as there is scant evidence in this data to show that young people are exerting any effort to find reading materials, even when they see themselves as readers. This renders a readership that is dependent on whatever the field can provide, whatever reading materials surface as these young people move through their everyday environments, thus raising important questions about how and what materials are distributed.

Theme 2: Shifting Visibility of the Library

The young people in this study conceive of libraries in three main ways: as places to use computers, as places of childhood and as negative spaces defined by what they do not offer. Libraries take on a shadowy presence made visible in their potential to provide access to information through World-Wide-Web enabled computers, in memory and in negative definition of what they offer to young people living in the municipality.
Many participants visited both the school and public library to gain access to computers to aid them with school assignments. When asked about their usage of libraries, answers were consistent with those of eighteen-year-old Leah, a light reader, who said when she uses the school library “I’m mostly on the computer” and of fifteen-year-old Jennifer, a heavy reader, who uses the library “to do research and stuff.” Many students would find themselves on the computers during breaks in their classes, taking advantage of unstructured time to use the computers in the school library. For example, Tim told me that he only uses the school library “for the computers. When I have my spare I’ll come in, maybe do some homework stuff like that.” Eighteen-year-old Ryan, a young farmer who did not read for pleasure or entertainment both because he had no time in his busy schedule and he felt it was waste of his time. It is no surprise that he would capitalize on a spare in his class schedule to use the computers to help with his homework: “I come here every day. I have a spare right now so I come here and do homework [...] Usually when I want to find information on something it’s easier just to go [to a computer] and type it in instead of finding a book through here [points to shelves].” Similarly, Michael, a seventeen-year-old, skilled computer programmer, took advantage of the proximity of the school library for access to both computers and books: “[I use the school library] fairly often, yeah. Mostly for research and for access to the computers [...] I can’t say that I use [the public library] very much [...] for books that I can’t get here.” It is, perhaps, 16-year-old Joe’s comments that underline the role of the library as a default avenue for access to computers. He was an avid reader who made most of his reading
selections from his mother’s personal library of novels and rarely used either the school or public library, but when asked about the last time he used the library, he replied, “I do recall the last time I was there. I think my computer broke, so I had to use computer there.” These excerpts give evidence that the library does take up a place in the everyday information and reading environments of youth, but its significance is tempered in their accounts, rendered invisible perhaps by an instrumental perception of it as a place to get access to computers.

A number of participants spoke about the public library as a place that had more relevance for them when they were younger. They were eager to share happy recollections of their visits to public libraries, usually with family members. For example, Joe recalled that he used the public library “more so when I was younger than now. My mom used to bring us there once in a while just to get little books.” Ryan told me that he was a regular public library user when he was “like six, seven, years old” and that it was “a long time ago” since he last used it, which would have been at least eleven years ago. Darren, who thought that Harry Potter was the last book he read that he enjoyed, elides library usage and reading in his succinct response when he replies that he “used to [use the public library], but not anymore. [I was] younger – I used to read books.” Darren read almost exclusively online at the time of our interview. Throughout the interviews there is a persistent theme that the library was a place of childhood. These recollections give evidence of the dynamic role that the public library played in their lives but it is challenged by their competing commentary on what the library offers to them as they come of age.
The library was also defined by what it does not provide whether books, technology, access or space. Joe might have considered using the public library computers for homework, but he told me that he used it “rarely: they don’t allow [you] to download things, to put it on remote media.” He rejected the school library because from his perspective, “they don’t have a big selection of books.” Similarly, William discounted the libraries in the municipality because they were not seen to carry materials to support his interest in computer programming: “I’m generally looking for – well – I look for programming languages and Windows hacks, like where you can change it. I always look for linux books but they don’t have those much in the library.” Ruth, a fifteen-year-old, young woman who lived outside of town and who was heavily involved with her church, held the same view of the public library in her search for Christian fiction. After describing how she sometimes purchased books at the local Christian bookstore, she went on to say, “They’re just hard to find, the certain [titles] that you want. You can’t just go to the public library and get them.” A final example from the interviews clearly illustrates how the lack of access trumps all other avenues of service. When asked about his public library usage, Ryan earnestly responded: “I try to [use the public library] but they’re closed all the time. They have weird hours. They’re the least accessible hours for anyone who’s a student […] I used to go to school in [the City], and by the time I got home the Town library was closed. I never really used it.” The tension in this response related to what seems to be an authentic desire to use the library, but one that is confounded by hours of opening, is echoed throughout this study. His response throws into sharp relief the spatial dimensions
of library use (and non-use). His daily removal from the municipality to attend a school in a neighboring city, the requirement of being transported between his home and school eats into the time available to him to visit the library, and the library’s hours of opening foreclose on any fruitful interaction with the library. The limited collection and hours of the school library do not make it a viable alternative and the sheer lack of any other alternatives, makes the Internet-enabled home computer the only source of information for homework and for reading materials beyond the bestsellers and magazines available at the local stores.

However, overall, based on evidence from the interview data, this young man is like the others in the study, in not exercising an a priori rejection of the library as unsuitable or inappropriate, but there is, rather, a subtle yet strong articulation of its failure to take account of their needs. Furthermore, regardless of perceptions of school and public libraries, the institutions take up a central place in their stories of reading and media use whether they see themselves as avid readers or not.

**Theme 3: The Internet as a Default Place for Reading**

For many of the participants the Internet is conceived of as both a place and a tool for finding information. It is also a medium that allows them to communicate with friends, although there was pointed criticism of popular social networking sites such as Facebook.com and Myspace.com. The Internet is, itself, conceived of as a place to go to do something, to hang out, to locate reading materials. Given the importance of quotidian encounters with reading material, it is no surprise that the sheer physical proximity of the Internet-enabled computer positions it as a default source of reading materials and place for reading practices. Reading can be
located in the context of Internet use along two dimensions: these young people are already there in the front of the screen, in the household, in a family computer room or in a bedroom; but, participants are also already online, in “cyberspace.” When asked about online reading, most participants spoke about it as a fairly random process of coming across information that prompted them to read further, much like seeing a magazine in the school library that prompts them to pick it up and read it. Shelley, an eighteen-year-old high school senior with plans to become a teacher, was interested in reading about stem cell research. She gave an example of how she reads online, “I have a popup that comes up and says “Recent News and Developments” and […] if it interests me I’ll click on it […]. Even if you just like Google like some pictures, what you’re interested in, it usually leads to a nice article.” Harvey, seventeen years old and an avid reader, uses the same strategy for online reading telling me, “I’m on my computer mostly, mainly just because it’s there: it’s hooked up to the Internet” and “I have an MSN page where I get news, so if I see something interesting on the news, then I’ll go and read.” Darren illustrates the taken-for-granted dimension of online reading habits after telling me that reading plays a “pretty big” role in his life: “I go on the Internet like every night to read […] Kind of like a habit: every night, I go home, go to the computer, read stuff. Any time I find the time. Just whenever I walk in.” Reading using computers and the Internet is revealed as a daily practice, hardly counted as reading, and yet, nearly all participants reported spending a significant amount of time with online texts.
Most participants were not avid users of social networking sites. Inconsistent and unreliable access to the Internet may explain some of their disenchantment as powerful computers and fast Internet connections make using such tools much more enjoyable and efficient. Lack of time for use of the Internet for entertainment activities may also play a role in their expressed low interest in these kinds of websites. For example, when I asked Brent about Facebook, he replied, “I don’t agree with those; like, I’m not against them, I just wouldn’t do that […] It just seems like a waste of time to me. I don’t know. And it’s kind of weird I think, putting all your information out there, what if people spy on you?” Discussion of media use is outside of the scope of this paper but this comment reminds us to question the pervasive representation of young people as enthusiastic and uncritical adopters of online media tools.

Theme 4: Lack of Space in Time for Reading

One of the most dominant themes in this set of data has to do with repeated articulations regarding the temporal constraints on reading: almost all participants indicated that they do not have enough time to read. This was not a surprising finding as previous studies of teens and reading have yielded similar results [35, 36]. The simple accounting of time indicates that there is little space in the time routines of most teenagers for reading activities. The connection between liking to read and finding time to read complicated by time pressures is illustrated by the following excerpts: “I wouldn’t say hate to read, but I find I don’t have a lot of time to actually read. A lot of time I read like newspapers and stuff like that […] I also have a hard time finding books that I like […] I do a lot of extracurricular
activities, lot of volunteering. I play two sports – I play hockey and curling, I do that basically every night. [By the time I get home] I basically just do my homework (Leah, 18 years old).” “I’d definitely be one of those people who don’t like to read a lot. Like, I’d probably like to read more […] I’ll start books but I won’t finish them. And I just don’t know what it is, but […] I just kind of forget about it. Like it’s – like you want to read it but you don’t find the time (Daniel, 17 years old).”

Both Leah and Daniel identified as people who would read more if they had more time. They could speak easily of books that they had read and enjoyed in the past, and each expressed a desire to read more for their own pleasure. Like others in this study, they recounted the activities of their non-school hours – paid employment, required volunteer work, extracurricular commitments related to sports, music, church, along with family responsibilities, homework and spending time with friends – that made reading for pleasure a near impossibility except for the most motivated of readers.

The young people in this study perceive the lack of time as a serious barrier to enacting reading practices outside of school-based needs. However, the data also shows that reading practices, including searching for reading materials, constitute a major portion of the daily activities of these young people.

Discussion: The Placelessness of Reading

The young people in this study are spatially isolated from a rich print culture due to their geographical location in a rural area that supports very few sites of access to reading materials. Their reading choices are constrained by a lack of formal or
informal sites from which to make selections. The actual physical places that support voluntary reading are few. This apparent placelessness of reading is deepened by the failure to locate places of reading that are produced through social interactions such as communities of readers or reading events. The concept of the library as place emerges in this research as an abject place, defined by perceptions of what it does not offer or does not provide to the young people in the study.

My participants exercised reading choices simply by moving through their everyday environments encountering a wide, though shallow, array of reading materials in both printed and digital formats. There are few signposts by which to navigate in this everyday environment and reading choices are formulated based on availability, cost and convenience. The everyday nature of these encounters with texts cloaks their significance making them difficult to articulate or recount. Furthermore the heavy demands on time in the out-of-school lives of my participants push almost all reading practices even further into the shadows of mundane experience. The library’s perceived inadequacy is fixed in place by memories of earlier experiences whether as a place for childish reading or as a place that offers little to support the active interests and needs of youth today. The youth in this study are further denied access to rich print culture because their reading experiences, especially those in an extra-curricular context, occur largely in isolation from either other reading experiences or other readers. The lone teen reader is the norm in this sample: there were almost no shared experiences of reading offered by participants. This is not to say that there were no opportunities
for communal book discussion; there were some, but these were limited to an occasional lunch time book group in the school-library and to a faith-based reading group sponsored by a local church.  

There is also little evidence that reading or reading materials are a source of everyday conversations inside or outside of the home. Following Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley [37] who have studied the ways in which information and communication technologies get domesticated in everyday life, neither reading itself, nor various texts that are read, are providing links between households, between home and school or work spheres or between individuals. Reading in this study is a solitary pursuit where there are few opportunities for articulating reading interests and reading experiences beyond the encounter that an individual has with a text itself. If the idea of the teen reader depends on particular spaces for its construction, what spaces exist in this community to produce teen readers? One consequence of a contracted reading ground is the production of the non-active teen reader: the limited reading choices found throughout the municipality, combined with few opportunities to enact a reading identity makes the concept of the teen reading subject unviable. Just as the concept of reading is not embedded in the wider sphere of the community, neither is the youth reader. Despite evidence of a reasonably robust selection of reading materials for young people in both the physical and online realms, this municipality suffers from an impoverished print culture which, in turn, gives rise to a concept of the “non-

5 While it is outside of the scope of this paper, there are tentative findings that suggest youth with strong religious affiliations exhibit a deeper engagement with a print culture that emerges from faith-based reading and from access to church libraries.
reading youth”, an embodied space made visible at the geographical scale of the body [18, pp.15-60].

The static embodied space of the non-reading youth is potentially undermined by the evidence in this study of habitual and daily enactment of reading practices – for example, visiting libraries for access to computers and reading materials; texting a best friend; browsing the magazine section at the variety store; reading the headlines in a web browser and so on. However, this is not to say that reading experienced in this way is insignificant or trivial. The concept of “place choreography,” first put forward by phenomenologist geographer, Derek Seamon [38, pp. 54-59], and resurrected in recent years by media scholar Shaun Moores [39, 40], provides a framework for bringing meaning to these daily exercises related to reading and information seeking.

Senses of place are fostered by what Seamon originally called “place-ballets” in his study of the everyday movements of the members of his environmental experience group [38, p. 163]. Place-ballets are conceived of as interaction of what Seamon terms “time-space routines” and “body routines” in a supportive physical environment [41, pp. 3-4]. A body-routine is “a set of integrated gestures, behaviors, and actions that sustain a particular task or aim, for example, preparing a meal, driving a car...” and a time-space routine is a set of habitual actions that “extends through a considerable portion of time” [41, p. 3]. By recreating and recalling daily movements through time, Seamon suggests a threefold structure composed of “movement,” “rest,” and “encounter” as a conceptual means to understand a specific environmental experience [41, p. 11].
“Movement” is the habitual nature of everyday experience examined at the level of routine bodily movements such as driving to work, or morning rituals – movements that we pay little attention to in our conscious states, and yet, we perform them consistently throughout our days. “Rest” refers to people’s affective relationships with environments that allow us to feel “at-home,” and the concept of “encounter” encompasses the ways in which people make what Seamon calls “attentive contact” with their surroundings [41, pp. 2-3]. This conceptual framework provides a means for making sense of the daily, habitual reading practices of the young people who participated in this study, and further, it gives a way to privilege these reading practices rather than discounting them as insignificant. In this framework, then, the time-space and body routines of young people as described in their accounts of happening upon reading materials in a variety of daily contexts, of logging on to the Internet to read, of giving the library a space of significance even through a basic rejection of its usefulness, and finally, of managing reading practices in a competitive schedule of other commitments, give a weight to the idea that reading practices occur at the level of “movement” constituting the habitual nature of everyday reading. But, importantly, the placelessness of reading discussed earlier, suggests that this kind of reading still needs to find a supportive physical environment in this municipality and that in order for it to be a supportive environment young people need sites that also support the notions of “rest” and “encounter” in the context of reading behaviour. In other words, the reading is in place, but there are few means for place-ballets to flourish and this is where the public library could play the
strongest role. The library is already awarded a place of significance in the lives of the rural young people in this study; all kinds of reading activities are already a significant part of their lives. The library holds the potential of becoming an important place of “interpersonal and communal exchanges, actions, and meanings” [41, p. 4] in support of an active reading culture for youth.

**Conclusion**

The research reported here makes a contribution to LIS studies of rural libraries and librarianship by providing a sustained theoretical analysis of the place of the public library among youth coming of age in a specific rural municipality. This study responds to a recent trend in LIS research as it shares a concern to understand the physical place of the library in the everyday environments of its clientele, seeking not only to understand how it is used by people but also the symbolic meaning that it holds for them [1]. Rural, cultural and youth geographies directed the analysis of interview data to a serious consideration of the spatial dimensions of both reading and library practices and how they interact not only with an understanding of the teen reader, but also with how young people make use of and understand such spaces. In this paper, I have identified four spatial factors – the role of physical proximity of reading selections in the everyday lives of young people, the default place of the Internet as a site to make and enact reading choices, the public library as a place of childhood reading and as a place evaluated by what it does not offer, and the lack of time in space for reading. These spatial factors converge to render both what I have theorized as the non-active teen reader and the placelessness of reading as a way to reconcile the scant
visibility of an active reading culture in this municipality with the evidence of pervasive daily reading practices in the everyday lives of the young people. The multidimensional isolation of the teen reader produces the space of the non-active teen reader which in turn defeats any projects to anchor a vital reading culture, this despite evidence that youth are reading and making reading selections throughout their days as they move through their local environments. This contributes to the placelessness of reading, a phenomenon that emerges through an examination of several factors: the geographical dislocation of young people from active and easily accessible fields of print culture; the invisibility of physical places that support readers and reading events; and little evidence of the production of communities of readers through the reading of shared texts. However, an examination of the place the library, both in the reading lives of rural youth and as a central source of reading material in this municipality, shows it to be much more than a static storehouse of materials or channel for the Internet. Capitalizing on its place of significance, the library carries the capacity to function as a local site that can foster a lively and engaged reading culture for youth.
References


37. Silverstone, Roger, Eric Hirsch and David Morley. “Information and


