A reading life

An exploration of reading as a condition for creativity, and how texts can seep into our lives, our work, and our dreams.

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As told to Tiana Reid, 2761 words.

Tags: Writing.

On unraveling

To be caught in the mood of reading is to be unraveled. Think of a thin chain necklace, one of your favorites, knotted almost to the point of no return. Both a tangled chain and a text must be loved, loosened, and delicately gripped. With reading, however, you are lucky if you find yourself caught, because it means you have something to hold on to, something to puzzle over, something to work through.

People often speak of the pleasures of reading—imagination, memory, knowledge—but sometimes pleasures hurt, too. What I mean to say is that I read when I'm happy, sad, and everything in between. I read alone, with others, and with others in mind. Of course, there are times when I can't read, more times than I would like, but I always have reading in my back pocket as something that will not only nourish my creative life, whatever that is, but generally keep me alive.

Even with the reasonable knowledge of the resources at my disposal, I find it hard to sustain life (mine, the lives of others), let alone a creative life. Even when I don't feel like it (and I often don't feel like it), survival is a fight. But in this sense, my life *is* creative: I have to *create* it. We all experiment in order to survive. Life does not just happen; even if we don't notice, and especially when we don't, we are making it happen. Some feminists have called this theory of everyday life "social reproduction," a concept that acknowledges that society creates and recreates itself through the work of others, and often women.

In no particular order, then, here is a small library of reading materials that have, in recent times, kept me going. My point here is not that you take each selection as a kind of what-to-read guide, but rather as a case study, or an invitation to move through and around these particular texts (or other texts altogether) in your own way. Each opens up to a whole new reading list—and a whole new way to relate to yourself, and to your creative life—if you let it.

On getting close to the text

Reading: *The Limits of Critique* by Rita Felski

Writers are often stereotyped as anti-social people who are hard to get close to. Most days, I want intimacy so badly I could die. Maybe this is why, after 10 years of publishing my writing, I still don't consider myself a writer. I can't relate.

In the 2013 book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten write that "critique endangers the sociality it is supposed to defend." This is a line I have memorized for its ability to capture how language can form us while simultaneously creating boundaries that make us more isolated.

In 2015, Rita Felski's book *The Limits of Critique* came out and galvanized part of a larger discussion on what it means to read. Western literary critics in the post-war period, she argues, tend to favor what Paul Ricoeur calls a "hermeneutics of suspicion," or, a mode of interpretation akin to a detective trying to solve a crime. What is the difference between reading and critique? If, for Felski, critique has some kind of end goal, perhaps reading takes the long road.

For a living (or, for a modest stipend), I am a literary critic in training, which is a fancy way of saying that I am a graduate student in English and Comparative Literature at an institution that provides funding in exchange for labor. I am also a writer and editor, which means my relationship to reading is often transactional. I am looking for an argument, a quote, a line to tweet. But I came to Felski again by way of David Scott's 2017 book, *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity*, which emphasizes how learning is really about opening yourself up. Scott's language is a reminder that you don't always have to get something out of a text to become close with what it has to offer.

(You see what I am doing here, I hope—that one book unfolds to another, and yet another. We begin, then, in flight. We begin with the interlaced making of belonging.)

On consuming

Reading: "You and me are not friends, OK?" by Simone White

Can I tell you how this poem makes me feel without writing out the whole thing? It's just 15 lines, so I could, but I won't—if only because there is something in it for me (if not for you) in simply recounting what this poem does for me.

Let's start from the beginning, with the title. "You and me are not friends, OK?" Simone White asks this in her 2016 book of poetry, *Of Being Dispersed*, but it's really not a question. This is going to sound self-obsessed and perhaps even unproductive, however: I have this problem where people too often think I like them when I don't. Or is it that they think I have time for them, but in actuality I don't want to make time for them, even if sometimes I do anyway. This drains me, truly, and offers me little time for my life and for my work, which are often too close to detach. *You and me are not friends. Ok?*

Sex and food are two things I'm afraid to attach, which is strange because I love them both. White is not afraid. This is how she opens her poem: "With 'barbecue' in one ear and 'chips' in the other, that is how a goddess comes / with one calf cramped and a finger up her ass; a goddess comes for twenty minutes." These 32 words cut. Men write about sex all the time, even when they're not trying to, but women cannot come across as subtle. They can't afford to. (Recall Sylvia Plath in "Burning the Letters:" "I am not subtle / Love, love, and well, I was tired.")

Later in White's poem, she writes, "The probity of her pussy satisfies all curiosities. 'Whatever, baby—let's try it.'" Once you hear, "the probity of her pussy," you cannot dare unhear it. Probity, like: integrity and truthfulness. Pussy, like: well, you know.

Toward the end, a line for all lines: "Doritos might be a distraction but don't be confused about how they work: you gotta eat." And I eat White's poems like no one is watching: viciously and with unadulterated satisfaction. This is something I reread and reread, like a favorite dish.

On restlessness

Reading: *No Telephone to Heaven* by Michelle Cliff

During the first days of winter, eating leftover pasta in the morning, I spot Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) in a pile on my living room floor. It's a book about diasporic yearnings; about moving amidst the feeling of suffocation. I am restless, so it calls out to me.

The first line: “It was a hot afternoon after a day of solid heavy rain.” And later: “The sun—hanging somewhere behind the sky, somewhere they could not find it—was unable to dry the roadbed or the thick foliage along the mountainside, so the surface stayed slick-wet, making driving a trial.” Inside my living room, standing in underwear beside the window, it’s not yet light out and I remember the turmoil I felt first reading this book more than 10 years earlier.

Cliff’s novel was one of my first favorite books, after Charlotte Brontë’s 1847 classic, *Jane Eyre*. When I was young, too young, a lover kind enough to take note of my favorite things gave me a paragraph from Cliff’s book blown up on a canvas. Some of it went:

“You knew her also as the girl left behind in the Brooklyn apartment. …Make ashtrays of her hands, and a trophy of her head. She cowers in the bush fearing capture. Waiting for someone to come. Crouching. Not speaking for years. Not feeling much of anything, except a vague dread that she belongs nowhere. She fills her time. In schools, playgrounds, other people’s beds. In pursuit of knowledge, grubs, and, she thinks, life.”

I felt like this was a brilliant description of my life as I knew it. The gift itself was beautiful; too beautiful for me to notice at the time. I liked the woman who gave it to me but I was a girl, and I didn’t know how to love. I was too busy trying to shore myself up to care even remotely for someone else’s feelings. After too much to drink, I felt betrayed by my own feelings, which were like mountains I could not climb. In an erratic response, the only way I could imagine at the time, I pierced a knife through Cliff’s words, through the stretched canvas, and threw the remains in an industrial-sized recycling bin outside of my mother’s house. It took me years to regret it, but I finally did.

On othering

Reading: *The Animal That Therefore I Am* by Jacques Derrida

What academics call “high theory” takes some getting used to, and it takes even more time to question the highness of it all. While reading the white men who enjoy the divine gift of being classified as Philosophy, an attention to who gets sorted and how, what fits into what category, and how things are ordered and arranged will help us imagine those matters of excess, i.e., that which cannot fit.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida asks: What constitutes an “other?” Notice, I did not say who. One of the most compelling parts of Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, translated by David Wills from the original French, is the importance of naming. In English, “name calling” retains a sense of violence in the way that logocentrism—the West’s obsession with words and language—assumes the sanctity of the reality that it names. You must name that which you need to sort, categorize, classify, or order, and yet all attempts at sealing things with language will eventually fail.

This passage resonated with me: “there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely… a multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead.” Postcolonial studies, black studies, the study of slavery, women and gender studies, disability studies, etc. can also be said to be the study of those who have been, could be, or are considered animals. Is this a naming, a consideration, a recognition, a regard, or a refusal? Derrida writes on “the Animal” as “all living things that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors or his brothers.”

Read this book pages at a time, in the earliest morning you can find.

On resisting the entanglement of life and work

Reading: W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Damnation of Women”

Recently as a guest in a seminar run by a well-known professor who was visiting from another school, I said that I did not want to police my own students through surveillance and enforcement. Instead, I had tried to foster a

communitarian environment, albeit in a corporate university that could never accept it. She agreed with my approach to an extent, but snapped back by saying I did not have the luxury not to be just a little authoritarian (my words, not hers). She told me that "as a black woman" (she was not black but *of color*), students would undermine me from the get-go. Her caution was, in some sense, spurred by the imperative of professionalization.

As I approach the end of my doctoral program (and thus my debut on the job market), I find myself increasingly refusing "professionalization" just for the sake of job security. At the same time, I can't deny the fact that as much as I am against the university's approaches, I am simultaneously beholden to it, and to all of its structures of power. In this way, the American university chips away at you until you forget you had friends, family, or a life. You become self-regulating. You forget how to imagine, and you become small.

While Du Bois's "The Damnation of Women" begins with intertwined moments of intimacy, memory, and childhood, we are quickly thrown into the more important category of "work." What is referred to colloquially as "work" is ever broadening, and is said to encompass infinity: social, cultural, and creative practices, emotions, forms of care, gigs, et cetera. Du Bois writes, "The future woman must have a life work and economic independence." This sentence, to me, seems awkwardly constructed. My first impulse is to edit it to read that "the future woman must have a life, work, and economic independence." But that is an entirely different sentence, which speaks more to the contemporary "work-life balance" language we all know well.

Whether for Du Bois life work (or lifework?) is defined as the main work we carry out over a lifetime, or perhaps is closer to a sense of purpose, a strengthening of character, and a spiritual awakening, the significance of work remains. This holds true whether it alludes to church women amassing millions of dollars in property to support their communities, or anti-slavery leaders like Mary Ann Shadd, Harriet Tubman, or Sojourner Truth pursuing activism. "Not being expected to be merely ornamental, [women] have girded themselves for work, instead of adoring their bodies only for play," Du Bois writes.

I try to think of "life work" whenever I come across a new email from Columbia University's Office of Work/Life. Like many of us in this age leftists call "neoliberalism" or "late capitalism," I live my work and work my life. Even as the separation of the two grows thinner and thinner, and as my frustrations with the university's structures wear on me, I can't afford to forget the bursts of life-giving energy—what Rosa Luxemburg called "unobstructed, effervescing life fall[ing] into a thousand new forms and improvisations, bring[ing] to light creative new force." This kind of imaginative wildness found in "life work," I hope, has nothing to do with being a professional.

On endings

Recently in *Vulture*, art critic Jerry Saltz opened a hard-headedly titled guide "How to be an artist: 33 rules to take you from clueless amateur to generational talent (or at least help you live life a little more creatively)" by writing, "Art is for anyone. It's just not for everyone." I won't say anything about art (not now, at least), but I do believe, however naively, that reading is for anyone and everyone. "High" and "low" are racist and classist terms—I tend to try to forget about it. Black queer culture has taught us that it's not only texts that get read, it's you and me, and your mama.

In 2018, I read little for pleasure. I read for work. I worked at home. I worked in different countries, different beds. The less I read, the less together I was emotionally and thus creatively. My relationship to working, and the conditions that I work and read through, are both what sustain me and condemn me. After a breakup, I dated more than ever this year, which was still not much, but with these new people who had been in my life barely a minute, I would give them everything: time, dreams, dinners, desire. After all, everything is not much when you feel like you have nothing. I couldn't stop comparing their exterior with my interior. The terror would stop, however momentarily, when I devoured the insides of a text.

In other words, when there is nothing left to be done, I read. Words are just dictionary entries until you decide they're worth another chance at life.

Extreme

Elliott Smith’s “I Figured You Out”

Manhattan’s West Side, Toronto’s West End, my queen bed

Deeper than I've ever dreamed of

Name

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Vocation

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