(Pod)casting a Bridge: *Lolita Podcast* and Its Reading Practices

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ABSTRACT: Taking Jamie Loftus's *Lolita Podcast* (2020-21) as an example, this article investigates negotiations of reading in the podcast as a digital medium—a topic that has not received a lot of scholarly attention so far. Expanding on the theoretical concept of the podcast as a bridging medium, the article examines the reading practices *Lolita Podcast* uses and reproduces in its discussion of Vladimir Nabokov's famous and controversial novel *Lolita* (1955). The article studies how the podcast negotiates boundaries and builds bridges between reading practices traditionally seen as separate, such as critical and uncritical reading.

KEYWORDS: Critical Reading; Uncritical Reading; Social Reading; Podcasting; Digital Media; Postcritique; Lolita Podcast; Jamie Loftus

Introduction

"I'm going to try and show you every perspective on this story that I can" ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:08:05), vows US-American comedian, writer, and podcaster Jamie Loftus in the first episode of *Lolita Podcast*. Written and hosted by Loftus and released by iHeartPodcasts between November 2020 and February 2021, *Lolita Podcast* sets out to explore "the confused cultural legacy of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*" (0:05:35). Nabokov's novel has been considered a controversial classic ever since its release in 1955, as its middle-aged protagonist and narrator Humbert Humbert forces the twelve-year-old girl Dolores Haze into a sexual relationship. What Loftus addresses as "every perspective on this story" in the podcast corresponds to different readings of the novel. These readings result from different reading practices and continue to shape *Lolita*'s socio-cultural impact and status in current Western cultures.

While an increasing number of scholars have attended to phenomena such as booktube, bookstagram, and most recently booktok to investigate reading in digital environments, podcasts have received little scholarly attention in the context of reading, despite the medium's continuously growing popularity (Llinares et al. 6) and the release of numerous literary podcasts over the past few years.[1] Attending to the topic of reading in and of podcasts, this article turns to the example of *Lolita Podcast*, because in contrast to many other literary

[1] Various publishers, bookstores, and organizations awarding literary prizes have launched podcasts to push the books and authors they represent, for example *The Penguin Podcast* (2015-), *The Waterstones Podcast* (2019-) and *The Booker Prizes* (2011-). Podcasts such as *NPR's Book of the Day* (2021-) or *Literary Friction* (2015-) consist of book recommendations, discussions, and author interviews. Moreover, there are podcasts dedicated to certain genres, such as *The H.P. Lovecraft Literary Podcast* (2009-) focusing on weird fiction, or to certain authors, such as *The Loser's Club: A Stephen King Podcast* (2017-). A further category of literary podcasts features fiction or poetry readings, such as *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* (2018-).

podcasts, which usually consider one author or book per episode, *Lolita Podcast* devotes an entire season to Nabokov's *Lolita*. This enables the podcast to present and reflect on various reading practices.

Reading is commonly understood as an act in which human beings decipher and interpret written words. Because the ways in which humans read varies, scholars distinguish between different reading practices. These practices are often contrasted with each other and categorized depending on who the reading subject is, how these reading subjects approach texts, and which types of texts and media they engage with.[2] Readers and different media are therefore important elements of reading practices considered in my analysis. A distinction which will be critically examined in this article is the binary opposition between what Michael Warner labels critical and uncritical reading. According to Warner, critical reading practices are usually associated with academic readers and described as rationally detached, reflective, and analytic while uncritical ones appear emotionally attached, naïve, and unexamined (15).[3] Investigating what reading practices *Lolita Podcast* encompasses, I claim that the podcast negotiates and challenges the dichotomies between different reading practices—such as close reading, hermeneutic reading, identificatory reading, or not reading. Even though I refer to common distinctions—especially the binary opposition between critical and uncritical reading—to identify different reading practices in the podcast, my analysis aims to highlight how these practices do not only exist side-by-side in the podcast but also begin to converge.

This convergence, I argue, is tied to and made possible by features and affordances of the podcast, which is why I consider it a bridging medium. So far, the notion of the podcast as a bridging medium has only been introduced and established as a possibility to connect individual parties such as podcasters and listeners (Swiatek). Because this conception limits and neglects further ways in which podcasts can build bridges, I apply a definition which adds medial and formal bridges in this article. Combining my modified understanding of the podcast as a bridging medium with the domain of reading, I contend that podcasts' potential to build bridges enables *Lolita Podcast* to negotiate between different reading practices which are shaped by social, medial, and formal aspects. In addition to the examination of reading practices appearing in the podcast, this potential negotiation makes it possible to discuss the role of the podcast itself within the dynamic field of reading and its definitions, which are slowly beginning to shift.

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[2] The definitions of many reading practices favor written texts—usually assuming the form of the print book—as objects of reading in opposition to other media. Especially critics of electronic and digital media promote the discourse that reading print books is the most valid form of reading (Carr 100; Birkerts 164). They argue that this is because print books secure focused attention and immersion: "E-readers can link to music, art, and video in ways that books can't. But books ask for our full attention, so that such electronic extras usually just get in the way" (Mikics 22).

[3] Even though Rita Felski uses different terminology to describe the distinction between critical and uncritical reading, she makes a similar observation in her essay on postcritical reading: "[L]iterary critics define their own *modus operandi against* the enthusiasms and effusions of non-expert readers" (135).

Conceptualizing the Podcast as a Bridging Medium

Reacting to the increasing popularity of podcasts in the early 2000s, the growing field of podcast scholarship sets out to challenge the categorization of the podcast as an iteration or extension of other media, especially radio (Berry 16). Scholars now argue that the podcast constitutes a medium of its own (Spinelli and Dann 2; Berry 16-17), defined as "a pre-produced digital audio show, released to online subscribers in an episodic format" (Bee 180). Aurality is the podcast's defining feature, with audio files as the medium's centerpiece. Another key characteristic of the podcast is its embeddedness in online environments and accessibility through RSS-feeds.[4] Further reflections on the podcast's status as an independent medium in recent scholarship suggest that it can function as a bridging medium. My understanding of the podcast as a bridging medium is based on, but also departs from, Lukasz Swiatek's introduction of the phrase in his essay "The Podcast as an Intimate Bridging Medium." Whereas Swiatek mainly refers to social dimensions of the podcast, the medium's features and affordances make it possible to build bridges on a number of discernable levels beyond the social.[5] To account for these other levels, I adopt the notion of the podcast as a bridging medium in a more general sense, adding aspects more specifically related to the mediality of the podcast to Swiatek's use of the term. In this article, I analyze the potential of the podcast as a bridging medium on three levels—social, medial, and formal.

Describing the podcast as a bridging medium on a social level, Swiatek states that it can build two types of bridges for people engaging with podcasts. On the one hand, podcasts can help to overcome knowledge boundaries when "individuals and groups access new insights, from both inside and outside their areas of expertise and interest" (173-74). Podcasts' seriality supports this knowledge bridge. The continuous, serial release of podcast episodes affords lengthy, and potentially even open-ended, engagements with a topic (Hancock and McMurtry 87). *Lolita Podcast*, for instance, consists of ten episodes varying in length from 61 to 118 minutes to cover "a thesis's worth of stuff" ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:07:08). Seriality can also create complexity which listeners can unravel with the help of user-control options such as

[4] RSS-feeds make it possible for listeners to subscribe to and track individual websites containing podcasts. When new podcast episodes are uploaded to a website, the RSS-feed extracts them and notifies the listener (Sterne et al.).

[5] While a medium's features refer to characteristics of its materialities and signifying strategies (Hayles 72), the term *affordance* adds "the potential uses and actions latent in materials and designs" (Levine 6) in a very general sense. Whereas some scholars only recognize an object's physical properties as a source of their affordances, others have highlighted the limits of this approach, especially in digital contexts (Scarlett and Zeilinger 6) where, for example, the podcast as an audio file can only be studied in terms of materiality by referring to the device on which it is played. In this context, Levine promotes an understanding of affordance which depends on the inextricable links between materiality and form (9). In a similar way, communication and media studies have adopted the concept of affordance "as a means of making sense of the operational potential of devices and platforms" (13). Informed by these developments, I refer to affordances as action possibilities (Scarlett and Zeilinger 21) or potentialities (Levine 6) offered by material and conceptual formal features of the podcast.

flexible listening experiences on the device the podcast is downloaded to (Hancock and McMurtry 86): "[P]odcasts may be paused and replayed, allowing listeners to follow more complex plots" (90). Seriality also enables the podcast to illustrate different aspects of a given topic with a shifting focus, so that podcasts can include and connect various perspectives and types of knowledge. This, in turn, is enhanced by podcasts' aurality, which enables the demarcation of different perspectives through different voices and sounds (Cardell). *Lolita Podcast* features interviews, sound bites from different speakers, and quotes read out by voice actors, including "fans, detractors, literary scholars, experts on and survivors of abuse, directors, authors, and a lot of women who have played the titular character in [...] adaptations" ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:09:12).[6]

On the other hand, according to Swiatek's social understanding, the podcast can serve as a bridging medium in the sense of connecting "individuals and groups from different contexts; these contexts include diverse locations and socio-cultural backgrounds" (174). This bridge strongly relies on the podcast's online release as well as a rhetoric of participation (Bonini 25) frequently occurring in the context of digital media (Eriksson et al. 5). RSS-feeds and the resulting multiplicity of online platforms on which podcasts can be released have profound implications for the access and creation of podcasts. Apart from possible fees for internet connection, podcasts are free of charge and constantly available (Spinelli and Dann 8).[7] Combining these features with the individualized, mobile and flexible listening experiences granted by the podcast's user-control options, podcasts appear easily accessible to a broad audience. Additionally, the decentralized quality of RSS-feeds and their apparent "lack of overarching gatekeeper or censorship system/s" (Hancock and McMurtry 86) offer the possibility to create podcasts to a broad range of producers who can record and upload their podcasts independently (Spinelli and Dann 8).[8] Next to the medium's openness to independent producers, websites and social media presences—important factors that should be considered as components of podcasts—can also invite interactivity and listener engagement (Spinelli and Dann 8; Hancock and McMurtry 93). In the case of *Lolita Podcast*, Loftus uses her social media profiles on Twitter and Instagram to promote the podcast. Emphasizing that "I want this dialogue to not just be with people who are experts on the topic, I want it to be with you, too" ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:13:38), she also created a discussion

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[6] A sound bite can be defined as "a brief extract from a recorded interview, statement, etc., usually edited into a news report on account of its aphoristic or provocative quality" ("Sound").

[7] A recent development that is important to take note of in this context, however, is that audio streaming platforms such as Spotify have begun to acquire and produce podcasts which are exclusively available on their platforms and therefore undermine the notion of easy access inherent in earlier definitions of the podcast.

[8] When it comes to the different actors involved in podcasting, some scholars suggest that the boundaries between producers and listeners (users) begin to blur—a development that is captured by the portmanteau "produser" (Bruns 2; Berry 28). While the role of the independent producer or produser is central to the emergence and conceptual understanding of the podcast as a medium, it should be noted that radio stations participating in podcast production nevertheless influenced these producers (Berry 28).

group on the instant-messaging platform Discord where listeners could discuss the topics covered in the podcast in the period of the podcast's initial release.[9]

Even though all these features and affordances support Swiatek's claim that the podcast is building social bridges, there are also some limits to this perspective. A connecting quality between different individuals is common among all media as channels of information, not only digital media such as the podcast. Media scholars stress that digital media's association with a "fantasy of the participatory citizen" and "high hopes of creating more diverse, democratic and engaged public spheres" (Eriksson et al. 5) should be considered cautiously. Swiatek himself points out:

> [A]lthough the medium is generally equalising, the digital public sphere in which it exists is unequal, and this prevents podcasting's bridging function from being as successful as it could be. Many of the existing media hierarchies are replicated in the realm of podcasting. (174)

It is thus important to note that social bridges built through podcasts not only maintain pre-existing hierarchies, they can also create exclusionary communities or spread misinformation.[10]

Expanding on Swiatek's approach and its social dimension, I propose that podcasts can build bridges between different media as well. Numerous scholars acknowledge the dynamic exchanges and overlaps between podcasts and other media, enabled by features such as its online release. Viewed as an instance of media convergence (Jenkins 2-3; Llinares 127), the podcast is placed in an intermediary position where it can incorporate, connect, and move between different media:

> Podcasting [...] draws also from literature (the art of writing scripted podcast is inspired both by high-brow, classical and popular literature); theatre (the art of giving voice to a text is rooted in theatrical skills); performing arts (the art of translating a podcast into a live event or vice versa) […]. (Bonini 25)

Additionally, websites and social media profiles add a visual aspect to podcasts' audio files: "Visibility plays an important role within podcasting, with website imagery, logos and show/episode 'posters' comprising integral aspects of a podcast's reception" (Hancock and McMurtry 91). Many podcasts also include show notes on their websites which link to sources or include materials that can otherwise not be presented in full length or detail. The show notes' materials can be drawn from various media, which, to some extent, is also true for podcasts' audio files because they can contain sound bites of different origins, such as music or film. *Lolita Podcast* not only directs the audience to texts, music, and videos in its show notes, but also contains sound bites from adaptations of *Lolita* in different media. Because of

[9] Listeners were also able to contact Loftus via a telephone line (0:12:15) or via e-mail.

[10] The Spotify podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience* (2020-), for example, has been heavily criticized as a "mass-misinformation event" containing conspiracy theories and misinformation ("Open Letter to Spotify").

this, I claim that podcasts such as *Lolita Podcast* afford intermediality, extending the understanding that the podcast is primarily an aural medium.

Further, on a formal level, the podcast can be considered a bridge between different formats and genres of representation. In his introduction to podcasting, Arran Bee enumerates different podcast formats. His categorization (186-92) includes, on the one hand, the solo format, "a monologue, rant, lecture or even a piece of performance art […] built on the old principle of a broadcaster talking directly to one listener" (190). On the other hand, it is common for podcasts to be conversational. Discussion-based or interview-based podcasts as main examples are often spontaneous and variable in length. Usually, they do not require a lot of editing. A further feature of interview-based podcasts is that they mostly rely on journalistic techniques. This also holds true for the format of non-fiction storytelling, which, in contrast to interview-based podcasts, is scripted and elaborately produced. In addition to these rather factual podcast formats, there is fiction storytelling which develops a scripted story across several episodes (191-92), frequently featuring voice actors, sound effects and music. Explicating different formats of podcasts, Bee emphasizes that "[i]t is not unusual for a podcast to be a hybrid of formats, taking advantage of the greater creative freedom offered by the medium" (185). Podcasts can thus blend host-centered formats with conversational ones, or fiction and non-fiction storytelling. In similar ways, podcasts can connect different genres such as "journalism, performance art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism and education" (Llinares et al. 5). The episodes of *Lolita Podcast* are scripted and thus structured to follow a coherent narrative. They take up elements from different podcast formats: In some parts of the podcast, Loftus guides listeners through different readings of *Lolita* as a solo speaker; in others, she includes sound bites from other media, quotes from written texts read out by voice actors, sections of pre-recorded interviews, and listeners' reactions. Moreover, the podcast approaches readings of *Lolita* through a combination of journalism, research, conversation, narrativization, and humor. This mix distinguishes *Lolita Podcast* from other literary podcasts which often consist solely of author interviews or book discussions.

In my definition of the podcast as a bridging medium, I propose that podcasts can establish bridges between different media, formats, genres, persons, and (their) perspectives. Some of these parameters also appear in definitions of reading practices, raising the question as to who reads, which media they use to read, and in which ways they read. Combining reading and the podcast also creates an opportunity to consider reading practices *in* as well as *of* the podcast. Reading practices *in* the podcast are carried out by readers appearing on it whereas reading practices *of* the podcast are carried out by the audience listening to it. Transferring the concept of the podcast as a bridging medium to reading practices in and of *Lolita Podcast* makes it possible to analyze which bridges the podcast develops between different reading practices, including readers with their personal contexts, as well as readable media. The social, medial, and formal bridges of the podcast can be directly related to the bridges it builds in terms of reading.

Reading Practices Bridged in *Lolita Podcast*

Often considered one of the most important and most commented-on novels of the twentieth century (Connolly 141; Alter 33), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* has cemented its status as a literary classic. When it was first published in 1955, the novel quickly gained attention as its subject matter caused controversy. *Lolita*'s middle-aged protagonist and first-person narrator Humbert Humbert—who, as a frame story explains, is a convicted criminal—recounts abducting and abusing the twelve-year-old girl Dolores Haze, or Lolita, as he calls her, whom he has made the object of his sexual desire. Reacting to the novel's themes, early conservative critics took issue with its depiction of sexuality, which they viewed as a potential source of moral corruption (Alter 33). The novel has also been criticized as a sexist work inviting readers to sympathize with a rapist (Connolly 144) and silencing the underage female victim (Alter 33-34).

Engaging with the controversy surrounding *Lolita* is a central premise repeated throughout the podcast. Loftus claims that *Lolita* is a story of abuse that has falsely been read and promoted as a love story on a large scale: "And there's no shying away from the reality here. In spite of how it's been romanticized over the years, *Lolita* tells the story of a pedophile who abuses a 12-year-old that he is supposed to be the caretaker of" ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:03:15). For Loftus, the controversial and problematic nature of *Lolita* does not necessarily lie in the novel itself, but in the prevailing ways it has been read. Nevertheless, *Lolita Podcast* is more than a reading project that simply negates previous perspectives on *Lolita*. The podcast discusses various reading practices conflicting with this premise and acknowledges their undeniable impact on readings of Nabokov's novel. This provides a basis for criticizing established reading practices in the context of *Lolita*, as well as dichotomies between them.

Critical Reading and "Nabokov Superfans with Credentials"

"Started off interesting, but steadily got worse as it leaned more and more on ideology and the worst elements of critical theory" (Benoch), complains a reviewer of *Lolita Podcast* on Apple Podcasts. Their impression that the podcast heavily relies on theory most likely results from *Lolita Podcast*'s broad selection of critical approaches to *Lolita*. As Warner points out in his discussion of critical and uncritical reading, these approaches rely on scholars' perspectives on the text and often employ literary theory (13-15).

In the podcast's first episode, Loftus summarizes the plot of Nabokov's *Lolita* and combines this summary with a close reading of the novel. As a central analytical method in literary studies (Kestemont and Herman 3), close reading "usually indicates an intricate parsing of linguistic and stylistic choices and an attempt to relate these features to textual meaning" (Quinn 98). Accordingly, Loftus draws the listeners' attention to details of structure, narrative perspective, stylistic choices such as the use of certain words, or references to other works of literature. For example, Loftus highlights the novel's fictional preface that introduces the protagonist Humbert Humbert as a criminal and as an unreliable narrator: "The first ten

percent or so of *Lolita* isn't remembered at all by anyone who hasn't read the book" ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:18:35). Loftus continues to explain how the representation of Humbert Humbert in this narrative frame, which is often neglected in adaptations and discussions of the novel, differs from his representation in the main part of the novel which assumes Humbert's own narrative perspective. In a further instance of close reading, Loftus unpacks references to Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" (1849) and Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland* (1865): "Edgar Allan Poe married his cousin when she was 13 years old and he was 26 years old. There are a total of 20 references to Poe by Humbert in the book. There's also a few references to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* made intentionally for very similar reasons" (0:22:40).

Claiming that the references to these two authors are an intentional choice made by Nabokov while writing *Lolita*, Loftus moves from the mainly text-based approach of close reading to hermeneutic reading in which the author plays a key role ("Hermeneutics"). This reading practice features most explicitly in the second episode of *Lolita Podcast* which is dedicated to Vladimir Nabokov in its entirety. Closely engaging with Nabokov's biography in this episode, Loftus links some of Nabokov's experiences to *Lolita*, most prominently the fact that "his uncle [...] molested him as a child. One of his experiences seems to be replicated in pretty close detail later in *Lolita*, in a scene where Humbert Humbert bounces Dolores on his lap in order to pleasure himself" ("Volodya Takes America" 0:12:32). Apart from providing Nabokov's biographical experiences and inferences about authorial intentions as central elements of hermeneutic reading, Loftus explains how public perceptions of Nabokov have influenced readings of *Lolita*, for example the conflation of Nabokov and Humbert Humbert (0:47:00). Investigating and quoting notes Nabokov took while writing *Lolita*, she also presents the abduction of Sally Horner by Frank La Salle in 1948 as an influence on Nabokov's writing which is even referenced directly in the novel ("Dolores, Psychology, and Survivors" 0:12:05). Loftus also contextualizes *Lolita* with Nabokov's earlier novella *The Enchanter* (1986) which covers similar themes ("Volodya Takes America" 0:01:55, 0:37:18). She includes some of Nabokov's comments on his work such as quotes from his essay "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" (0:34:25) or his assertion that Humbert Humbert is a "vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear 'touching'" ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:53:15), which are usually read out by a male voice actor illustrating Nabokov's perspective.

After reading *Lolita* in the context of Nabokov and his socio-cultural surroundings, *Lolita Podcast* uses the podcast's serial format to establish a chronology of how the novel has been read, perceived, and embedded in larger socio-cultural contexts from the decades following its publication to the present, such as in actual cases of abuse:

> I think discussing comparable real-life cases to *Lolita* is critical to understanding the text itself. And so is understanding how the conversations around this topic have changed over the years. As a starting point, abduction cases as they were covered in Sally Horner and Dolores Haze's time center abused girls and women who are white almost exclusively, an instance of cultural and media-driven racism that's still with us now. ("Dolores, Psychology, and Survivors" 0:27:55)

This approach to *Lolita* follows the critical practice of New Historicist reading which focuses on the dialectical "relationship between texts and the cultural system" and thereby assumes that "texts are both socially produced and socially productive" ("New Historicism"). New Historicist reading examines how interconnected texts reflect on, consolidate, or challenge dominant socio-cultural discourses. In addition to the podcast's comparison of the novel to real-life cases, a collage of voices reading out quotes from early reviews of *Lolita* delineates readings of the novel and public attitudes towards its themes ("Volodya Takes America" 0:20:30). In other sections of the podcast, Loftus traces the relationship between *Lolita*, the writings of Sigmund Freud and popular psychology ("Lolita, Psychology, and Survivors" 0:29:20). Through its diversity of critical reading practices, *Lolita Podcast* makes clear that even within the academic field, readings of *Lolita* may vary, questioning whether critical reading can be defined as one unified practice.

Presenting and performing these critical reading practices, *Lolita Podcast* incorporates elements that might also be found in an academic paper. The podcast features discussions of theory, references to research and secondary sources, extensive show notes documenting these references, and interviews with various experts on *Lolita* such as Dana Dragunoiu, Brian Boyd, Sarah Weinman, and Lucia Williams. In contrast to an academic paper, however, *Lolita Podcast* selects some sources which would not typically appear in such a paper, for instance a bachelor thesis on postfeminist fascination with *Lolita* on the micro-blogging platform Tumblr ("Dolores Logs In" 0:38:38) and many journalistic articles. The podcast widens the scope of materials and sources deemed adequate for discussion and lets a broader variety of readers enter previously less accessible critical readings of *Lolita.* It also joins critical features with journalistic, entertaining and humorous modes of presentation and approaches to the novel. Introducing some of the experts on Nabokov as "Nabokovians," Loftus highlights their fascination and passion for Nabokov's work: "They're like [...] the BTS Army, but they're adults and probably ones who would resent that comparison. They're Nabokov superfans with credentials" ("Volodya Takes America" 0:24:55). Instead of depicting the scholars' perspectives in terms of critical distance, *Lolita Podcast* presents their relationship to Nabokov's work as personal and emotional. Nabokov scholar Brian Boyd, according to the podcast, "first found *Lolita* at a bookstand his parents owned in New Zealand as a young teen, and sort of snuck it out as the literary contraband it was then. Then later on he discovered Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* and really fell in love with all of Nabokov's work" ("Volodya Takes America" 0:39:10). Framing literary scholars this way challenges the strict opposition between critical and uncritical reading practices and builds a bridge between them. The assumption that critical reading as a form of rational reflection and analysis carried out by academics is detached from uncritical reading determined by emotional investment and attachment (Warner 15) is challenged by the Nabokovians, participating in both critical and uncritical reading practices.

Similar observations can be made about Loftus's own status as a reader within the podcast as she participates in different reading practices by adopting different reading positions. Loftus

begins the podcast with her own personal approach to *Lolita*. She describes learning about the novel at a young age in interviews featuring Lemony Snicket, her favorite author at that time ("Dolores, Not Lolita", 0:01:05), and continuously returning to it at different points in her life: "As a survivor of abuse myself that has been haunted by this book since it was recommended to me by my favorite children's author, I want to understand that" (0:08:32). Loftus stresses that she is not an academic reader when she speaks of her "extremely scholarly findings" ("Dolores Logs In" 0:42:35) in an ironic tone, and showcases her profession as a comedian when she juxtaposes academic and pop cultural sources:

> The way I'm using the word aesthetic here is as defined by *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* which says aesthetic is to designate among other things a kind of object, a kind of judgement, a kind of attitude, a kind of experience, and a kind of value. Or, as concisely summarized by American philosopher Ariana Grande: "It's a mood, it's a vibe, it's a look, it's a match." ("Lolita the Cover Girl, Lolita the Pop Star" 0:13:12)

Nevertheless, Loftus acts like a researcher—whether in the academic or in the journalistic sense remains open to discussion—while creating the podcast with its heavily researched discussion of *Lolita*. In her role as the podcast's host, Loftus can reflect on and negotiate different reading practices and roles as a reader.

Personal Reading and Uncritical Expertise

While welcoming Nabokov scholars on *Lolita Podcast*, Loftus also underlines the significance of online communities engaging with *Lolita* as one of her podcast's examples of readers typically characterized as uncritical (Warner): "Am I suggesting that some of the most pertinent and transformative criticism surrounding *Lolita* is taking place on TikTok and Tumblr and not in academic journals? Yes, I am, I absolutely am" ("Dolores Logs In" 0:53:35). Similar to her introduction of the Nabokovians, Loftus's investigation of readers in *Lolita* online communities questions the strict separation of critical and uncritical readers, for example when they participate in close reading, usually categorized as a critical practice:

> Other posts comb the text of Nabokov's book more carefully than scholars. There's an excited post finding a mention of Dolores having freckles that says: "Further description of Dolores: She has freckles!" Other posts cite particularly manipulative sections of text from Humbert with this commentary: [read by voice actor] "This shows that, despite having convinced himself of this whole devious nymphet thing, he is aware deep down that Dolores is just a regular kid." ("Dolores Logs In" 0:46:15)

Creating a bridge between the usually mostly distinguished critical or uncritical reading practices, *Lolita Podcast* argues for the enormous impact and relevance of uncritical reading practices on the novel's socio-cultural perceptions. This aspect is broached in the podcast's first episode when an approximately two-minute-long collage of sound bites at the beginning of the episode collects a broad range of readers' impressions of *Lolita* ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:12:35). It presents fans of the novel who love Nabokov's use of language, readers who do not want to read the novel because they are repulsed by what they have heard about its themes, readers who have engaged with the novel through its adaptations, and readers who

view it in terms of their own experiences with sexual abuse. The ways in which these readers engage with *Lolita* coincide with a range of reading practices Warner uses as examples of uncritical reading such as "identification, self-forgetfulness, reverie, sentimentality, enthusiasm, literalism, aversion, distraction" (15).

Stating that "reclaiming *Lolita* as a text […] is useful for those who have been sexually abused and those who are looking for insights into what abuse at the hands of someone who is supposed to be caring for you can be like, as well as a case for the opposite" ("Dolores, Psychology, and Survivors" 0:15:02), Loftus invites the voices of a number of readers whose reading practices are informed by their identification with *Lolita*'s character Dolores Haze. One listener reads the novel in relation to early experiences with sexuality: "[Y]ou see this man completely misunderstand [...] the girl navigating her [...] burgeoning sexuality [...], we've all been there when we were young" ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:14:08). Other readers report on how they identify with Dolores Haze in the context of sexual abuse they have experienced. For instance, Loftus interviews Bindu Bansinath, who describes the character as a role model to gain power in her *New York Times* column "How *Lolita* Freed Me from My Own Humbert" ("Dolores, Psychology, and Survivors" 1:13:40), and Alisson Wood, who recounts how an abusive teacher presented the novel to her:

> He told me it was a beautiful story about love, and by then our after-school mentoring had already begun escalating into something far more nefarious and complicated and not appropriate. By the time he gave me *Lolita*, we were already meeting secretly at night in a diner in the next town over, and the book *Lolita* was part of that. He told me that it was a story about our love. (1:02:20)

Wood, who is the author of the memoir *Being Lolita*, teaches creative writing and includes *Lolita* in her courses to make students aware of narrative perspective (1:08:04). Lucia Williams, a psychologist who has used the novel to teach students about child sexual abuse in preparation for cases they might encounter in their future work (0:47:00), similarly blends practices of critical reading and uncritical reading that emphasizes identification.

Furthermore, *Lolita Podcast* displays several instances of what Lisa Gitelman labels "not reading." Under the rubric of not reading, Gitelman collects different ways of engaging with texts and participating in "the culture of books" (374) which are usually excluded from established reading practices.[11] In the case of *Lolita Podcast*, these (not) readers do not engage with Nabokov's *Lolita* in a linear, focused way—and in some cases, they even directly refuse to do so:

> Somebody picked *Lolita* for our book club book. I've never seen the movie, never read the book, had a vague idea what it was about. I tried to read that damn book and I read

[11] Gitelman's selection of examples includes distant reading as a type of computational analysis in which algorithms replace human readers (372), hyper reading as a distracted "process that might at any moment combine skimming, filtering or searching, linking, excerpting, and juxtaposing" (377), guides helping readers to talk about books they have not read (373-374), or the refusal to read problematic texts and authors in order not to contribute to their canonization and celebrity status (375-376).

> five pages of it and I gave up. I think I threw the book away. I didn't want anything to do with it. It's the nastiest, grossest thing I've ever even tried to read ("Dolores, Not Lolita" 0:13:00).

Even though this reader distances herself from the novel, her act of not reading is a considerable contribution to the different readings of *Lolita*. Her objections raise questions of canonicity and allude to the issues that culturally sanctifying *Lolita* can bring with it. They also problematize dominant reading practices (Gitelman 374-375), for example, resulting in the representation of Humbert Humbert as a romantic hero. In other cases of not reading which appear on the podcast, participants have come into contact with *Lolita* through an aesthetic popular in online communities, specifically communities on Tumblr:

> I spent most of my time after school on Tumblr aesthetic blogs, which created a very rose-colored idea of *Lolita*. I had no context for the actual novel and felt uncomfortable and intrigued by a lot of the media. [...] It's a strange thing for me since at school I was known as the smart girl. Listening to the music and engaging with the culture surrounding *Lolita* felt like a way to escape from how I was perceived by others. ("Lolita Logs In" 0:10:30)

This statement reveals an online community based on a *Lolita* aesthetic which is influenced by the novel without having read it. Not reading is, paradoxically, in some sense also a form of reading, engaging with a text, experiencing its impact, and in some cases even criticizing it. The practice has the potential to influence readings of *Lolita* because online communities consist of numerous people participating in the act of not reading, forming part of the larger cultural network surrounding the novel.

Reading Adaptation and Reading Media

A further perspective which is added to the mix of critical and uncritical reading practices in *Lolita Podcast* in many of its episodes is adaptation, "the transfer of content from one media format to another" (Murray 126). Throughout the podcast, Loftus presents and analyzes several adaptations of *Lolita*: theatre and musical adaptations, movies, as well as pop music referencing the novel.

Based on but departing from Nabokov's novel, adaptations are the results and representatives of adaptors' reading practices: "Adaptors are 'revising readers' who enact their interpretations, not through criticism, but by altering the material text itself" (Bryant 50). While I agree with the understanding of adaptors as readers, I see the status of criticism in this description critically. In my reading, the exchanges between critical and uncritical reading practices the podcast facilitates make it possible to combine criticism and adaptation. The voices of various authors adapting *Lolita*, quoted in sound bites of recorded statements and written material read out by voice actors, illustrate the different reading practices involved in creating adaptations of the novel. Many adaptors such as Allan Jay Lerner of the musical *Lolita, My Love* (1971) ("Dolores Onstage" 0:00:10), Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin of the opera *Lolita* (1992) (1:09:30) or director Adrian Lyne of the 1997 movie adaptation *Lolita* have read Nabokov's novel as a love story and promoted this reading through their adaptations. They

frequently empathize with Humbert Humbert, an approach to the text which resembles previously discussed notions of uncritical reading such as identification and enthusiasm. Commenting on his movie adaptation, Lyne, for example, describes Humbert Humbert as a struggling man "with a conscience. What he does is awful, obviously. But you sense that he's struggling with […] being a parent, but being a lover" ("Lolita in the 90s" 0:45:38). Lyne's reading of *Lolita* is, according to Loftus, striking because it ignores the unreliability of Humbert Humbert's narrative perspective despite being attentive to the novel's details in the sense of close reading:

> Lyne's movie plays an extraordinary amount of attention to the details of the book. There are these little moments, color choices, characters who only appear for a line or two in the text that make it very clear that all of the critical players in this movie have read Nabokov's book many, many times. […] There is one critical thing missing, however, and that is any reminder or indication that Humbert Humbert, who is a child sex abuser, is an unreliable narrator. (0:56:48)

To counter this quite common reading of *Lolita*, Loftus interviews the director Emily Maltby ("Dolores Onstage" 1:16:10). In the process of re-adapting the 1971 musical *Lolita, My Love*, Maltby's reading practice was specifically concerned with critically examining cases of unreliable narration on Humbert Humbert's side.

Female pop stars such as Katy Perry and Lana Del Rey provide further cases of adaptation as reading by invoking *Lolita* in their work. They include, for example, intertextual references to Nabokov's novel in song lyrics as well as references to Lyne's film adaptation in music videos. As Loftus points out, they read and identify with Dolores Haze as a sexually mature character who is in love with Humbert Humbert. A sound bite from an interview with Perry reveals that in her reading, Dolores Haze is "both innocent and knows she's a little bit of a sex kitten as well, and she walks that line" ("Lolita the Cover Girl, Lolita the Pop Star" 0:53:40). Del Rey's reading also entails the possibility to exercise power, which Loftus deduces from the song "Off to the Races" (2011): "The gold coins that Lana is referencing is Dolores Haze hiding her allowance from Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's book, so that she can afford to escape his abuse, not so that she can exert this maximalist capitalism control over him like Lana describes" (0:58:15).

In addition to highlighting the variety of adaptors' reading practices, *Lolita Podcast* establishes bridges between the novel and other media as it dedicates extended attention to adaptations. I claim that these media are integrated into reading practices which usually favor print texts. This is because some readers, such as the participants of Tumblr online communities focusing on *Lolita*, engage with adaptations of *Lolita* such as Lana Del Rey's music or Adrian Lyne's movie adaptation before, instead of, or in addition to the novel itself. As a result, the adaptations shape expectations, perceptions, and readings of Nabokov's *Lolita*. Adaptations do not only represent ways in which *Lolita* has been read; they also influence further reading practices and readings.

More than Reading *in*—Postcritical, Digested, Aural?

As I have aimed to show in my analysis up to this point, *Lolita Podcast* incorporates various reading practices, using the medium of the podcast to build bridges and negotiate boundaries between them. *Lolita Podcast* joins different reading practices through its online release and aurality; it highlights complex relationships between different reading practices through seriality; it discusses the role of mediality and adaptation through intermediality; and it mirrors reading practices' different ways of accessing a text through its combination of journalism, research, and humor. While *Lolita Podcast* utilizes its potential to function as a bridging medium to a high extent, it is important to acknowledge that this may not be the case for every podcast. The number of voices appearing on a podcast depends on the choices made by its hosts and producers. Further voices could be added to *Lolita Podcast*, addressing, for example, the field of publishing (then and now) in more detail.[12] Not all podcasts use online platforms to encourage interactivity, and even in the case of *Lolita Podcast*, the podcast's Discord group was only available during the podcast's initial release.

After having zoomed in on individual episodes and reading practices, taking a final look at the podcast as a whole promises to shed light on overarching reading practices. Taking this step back also makes it possible to deliberate on ways in which the audience practices acts of reading while listening to the podcast. As it offers a broad range of reading practices for *Lolita* and builds bridges between traditionally separated concepts of reading, I argue that in its totality, *Lolita Podcast* lets its listeners participate in a postcritical reading of Nabokov's novel. Conceptualized by Rita Felski, postcritical reading criticizes the opposition between academic readers and lay readers, and their approaches to texts (137), echoing Warner's distinction between critical and uncritical readers and reading practices. All types of readers, according to Felski, form relationships to texts which can be grasped in various degrees of attachment and which enable texts to affect the socio-cultural surroundings they are embedded in. Postcritical reading "pivots on the idea of attachment as much as detachment, grapples with the intricacies of feeling as well as thought, and acknowledges the lively agency of artworks rather than treating them as objects to be deciphered, diagnosed, and dispatched to their proper context" (136).

From a more pessimistic perspective, the podcast's comprehensive collection of reading practices can also be categorized as an act of digested reading (Griem 69-70). This means that Loftus brings *Lolita* to the podcast's audience in a digested form resulting from her own and other readers' receptions. The listeners, mostly conceived as passive in this form of reading, do not necessarily have to engage with Nabokov's novel itself as this act can ostensibly be replaced by listening to the podcast. This opens up the discussion as to which extent listeners can form a critical opinion on *Lolita* through the multiple reading practices and readings the

[12] Interestingly, according to Robert Alter, some current editors claim that they would not publish the novel if they received it (34).

podcast offers without a first-hand experience of the novel and with the podcast as a substitute.

The notion of replacement raises the question of how listening to the podcast can be understood in terms of reading, returning once more to the aspect of mediality. Attending to the audiobook, Iben Have and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen have made a case for an aural reading practice, "reading-as-listening" ("Sonic" 124). This practice pleads to exceed the combination of sight and cognition, on which most established reading practices are based, to include more senses ("Reading" 199). Linking it to Felski's concept of postcritical reading, scholars of aural reading use the term to present reading as an embodied act, and stress the relationship between reading and being in the world (Stougaard Pedersen et al. 287). In contrast to print reading, aural reading can be combined with other chores and activities. This makes it possible to read in settings and situations that do not lend themselves to print reading (208) and allows aural reading to potentially reach new groups of readers.

The audience of *Lolita Podcast* can engage with Nabokov's novel in depth without reading printed words as the podcast offers its audience an exhaustive account of the various ways in which *Lolita* can be, and has been, read. The fact that the podcast does not convey the text of the novel in the way of an audiobook raises the question to what extent listeners—or readers—of *Lolita Podcast* are readers of *Lolita*, demanding further research into the relationships of audiobooks and podcasts as media of aural reading. For now, I suggest that *Lolita Podcast* uses aural reading to create new ways in which *Lolita* can enter the world and be read. As the example of Loftus's podcast has made clear, the medium offers possibilities to reflect on the variety of reading practices in the current age. It adds framing opportunities for existing readings, in this case of Nabokov's novel, or for readings that are yet to come. *Lolita Podcast* acknowledges the impact of different reading practices on a work's reception and negotiates between them. It challenges a dichotomous understanding of reading, critically examines how some reading practices are more respected than others, and eventually urges literary audiences to expand their understanding of what is meant by reading.

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