Exploring The Imaginary Domain: An Investigation Of The Interplay Of Alterity, Literature, And The Process Of Self-Definition

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EXPLORING THE IMAGINARY DOMAIN: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE INTERPLAY OF ALTERITY, LITERATURE, AND THE PROCESS OF SELF-DEFINITION

by

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DISSERTATION

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MAJOR: CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Approved by:

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Advisor                  Date

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DEDICATION

For my father James, my mother Janet, my wife Carol, and children Dylan and William. Nothing would have been possible without your love and patience.
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The writing of this dissertation would not have been possible without the support of my wife Carol, who spent many hours proofing everything I’ve written as a graduate student, and my children Dylan and William.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

Much recent work has been devoted to the interactions among literature approached within the context of semiotic theory, difference, and the formation of identity (Albers & Harste, 2007). The New London Group (1996), for example, has noted that these forces can contribute to ways students define their identities. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) explained that such transformations are possible because identity becomes fluid within the situated social contexts in which one encounters texts. Gee (2005) noted that one’s fluid sense of identity could change or take on new definitions when a text is presented within different social contexts or different discourse communities.

The present research study extends this work by exploring how students imagine definitions and redefinitions of themselves through encounters with self and other people within the context of semiotic engagements with literature. By centering on the processes, conditions, and challenges involved in self-definition, this investigation explored how high school students use representational resources to create imaginary spaces for self-definition.
Exploration of these spaces required a theoretical framework capable of both creating imaginary spaces and for providing a ground for adolescents to navigate and respond to texts within these spaces. This conceptual lens was fashioned by the braiding together of the philosophic concept of alterity with complementing ideas from critical theory, feminist theory, literary theory, and semiotic theory. The metaphor of the braid was central to this study because, like strands of a rope, each of these strands of theory acts to reinforce each other. The sustaining force of the braid provided the ground for this study while strengthening opportunities for students to define and redefine themselves.

The subjects of this hybrid conceptual lens are the stories of six high school students who were taught by the researcher. Their stories show how the interplay of alterity and literature study within the context of semiotic theory can open up imaginary spaces where students are free to define and redefine their sense of self (Cornell, 1995; Grosz, 2005). The findings of this investigation contribute to Hull and Katz’s (2006) call “to create learning spaces where individuals and groups can define and redefine themselves” (p. 71).

Hull and Katz (2006) described self-definition and redefinition as a process arising out of ways in which one’s identity or identities interact with other people, multiple
discourses, and the ways these relationships are mediated by “semiotic means” (p. 46). They attributed this process for identity definition and redefinition to the work of Bruner (1994) who suggested that identity is ever shifting and continuously remaking itself within a world of shifting social contexts. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) called this concept the fluidity of identity within a situated social practice.

**Overview of Literature Review**

As mentioned above, the braiding of theories for this study is not unlike the braiding of a rope. In making a rope, strands are woven together into a right-hand twist. Separate strands are then woven together to form a left-hand twist. The final step in this process is to braid the left and right twists together. The metaphorical braid utilized in this study was composed in a similar way.

The metaphorical right and left twists of this braid provided different theoretical strengths. The right twist defined how students might create an imaginary domain through encounters with alterity, a theoretical concept that describes one’s encounters with otherness. These strands illustrate alterity’s infinite potential to generate thought, how it may help students access the imaginary domain, and how interactions with others can generate definitions and redefinitions of self. The left twist of the rope is more descriptive in nature. These
strands provided a way of describing the thought processes through which students engage with and reflect on their encounters with alterity, their imaginings, and with literature.

The first strand of this metaphorical right twist came from the work of Emanuel Levinas (1969, 1998) and his concepts of alterity and infinity. I have chosen to use this term throughout the study for two reasons. The first of these reasons is that the concept of alterity is integral to understanding Levinas’s (1969) correlative concept of infinity, concepts important to the imaginary spaces explored in this study. A second reason for the use of alterity comes from a desire to distinguish this research from studies that appropriate the term “difference” to address connotations that lie outside of this study. The term difference, which is sometimes used to mean the same thing as alterity (see Grosz, 2005) has been used by some in educational theory to represent racial, ethnic, or gender differences (Clegg, 2006; Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Luke, 2003; The New London Group, 1996).

Alterity can be defined as one’s sense of otherness --- the feeling that one is unique or separate from others. Levinas (1969) suggested this condition of otherness can be felt in the presence of others or in the absence of others. The solitary individual feels it because the self is unstable, always in flux, an entity that can never be fixed, always other. This
concept allowed for a definition of self as an entity in a constant process of definition and redefinition. Related to this concept is Levinas’s (1969) notion of infinity. This concept suggested that there is infinite space between the self and other (or the self and self) and insists one’s basic condition is in a state of otherness. This infinite space is where self and other interact, influence, and define each other. These two concepts represent the core fiber of this metaphorical right twist.

The second strand of this twist comes from work in critical literacy, in particular the concept of fluidity of identity within the context of situated social practice. The work of Knobel and Lankshear (2007), Lalik and Oliver (2007), and Luke (2003) were important to exploring the ways identity takes on a definition or undertakes a redefinition within a situated social context. Important to this discussion were the ways scholars sought to extend the concept of fluidity by examining how difference --- the interaction of differing cultural identities --- could help students to consider definitions of identity that would have been impossible without such encounters (Luke, 2003; New London Group, 1996 Ryan, 2006).

Though some suggestions of extending the concept of fluidity and difference have come from critical literacy, Clegg (2006) noted that some of the most thorough arguments have come
from feminism, the third strand of the right twist. Grosz (2005), for example, suggested that critical approaches could be extended by an exploration of difference as defined by the interaction between self and other, rather than through identity tags like female, homosexual, African American, etc. Grosz (2005) and Cornell (1995) explained that recasting difference in this way could open up the “space of virtual” and the “imaginary domain,” spaces where alterity and infinity could collide to generate “new” or “unforeseen” conceptions of self (p. 77).

The metaphorical left braid of the theory begins with a strand from work from the literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1938) and a strand from theories related to semiotic engagements with literature (Siegel, 1995; Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen, 1998; Suhor, 1984; Whitin, 2005). These theories provided a way for describing how the students made meaning from literature and for how their use of interpretative strategies allowed them to develop definitions of self through their engagements with texts and others. The New London Group’s (1996) pedagogy of multiliteracies was a particularly useful tool for understanding how the students used representational resources and the experiences with others to define and redefine self through semiotic engagements.
Value of the Study

Although some educational theorists have argued for research that examines the role of alterity in the classroom (Li, 2002; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995), few studies have sought to braid alterity together with a variety of theoretical perspectives. The value of this study lies in its use of these theories to examine how the interplay of alterity and literature study within the context of semiotic theory can open up "imaginary domains" or spaces where students are free to explore the fluid nature of self.

A further significance lies in this study’s examination of the conditions and challenges related to self-definition. Through an examination of these challenges and conditions --- the students’ imaginary spaces, emotional connections to texts, collaborative efforts --- this study extends the work of Hull and Katz (2006) by showing how these elements allowed for the creation of spaces for self-definition.

Finally, this study contributes to the methodology of poetic representation. By allowing the students to negotiate and collaborate on the ways the poems were constructed, the findings of this study suggest new opportunities for granting agency to research participants.
Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this investigation is to inquire into how the interplay of alterity and literature study within the context of semiotic theory can open “imaginary domains” where students are free to offer impressions of self definition and redefinition:

1. In what ways do high school English students describe the fluidity of self-definition within the context of semiotic engagements with literature?

2. What aspects of literature study within the context of semiotic theory allow for the creation of imaginary spaces for self-definition and redefinition?

3. What kinds of conditions do high school English students perceive as challenges to the exploration of self within the context of a semiotic literature study?

Overview of the Study

Six eleventh grade students were selected for this study using purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). These students were selected from part of a larger English class of approximately fifteen students. Students were selected based on the demonstration of a past openness to discussing literature.

The study took place over twelve weeks (one trimester). Central to this study were the creation of opportunities for students to engage with literature within the context of
semiotic theory. To this end, students were exposed to several multimodal response strategies. Some of these included visual strategies like painting, drawing, bricolage (the combining together of common materials to create art), Sketch-to-Stretch (Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988; Whitin, 1996, 2005); technological strategies like website development and movie making; and kinesthetic approaches like dance, tableaux, and acting.

Students were invited to share and revise their semiotic responses in class. Discussion groups provided opportunities for students to interact with each other and to make visible the ways their imaginary domains were fueled by the interplay of alterity and literature study.

Each student was interviewed five times: once before the study; a second time after they engaged and responded to a filmic text, a third time after the students had a chance to interact with each other and experience two semiotic engagements with literature; a fourth time after they have completed the course work, and a fifth time to check the validity of my narrative analysis of poetics that were created from interview data. Interviews were semi-structured and approximately sixty-minutes in length. Centering on inquiring into students’ experiences with literature, the questions focused on their impressions of how literature or other forms of media
contributed to the ways they define or redefine themselves. Interview data was triangulated with field notes, my researcher journal, and student artifacts to ground the interview data to the instructional practices.

All interviews were transcribed and copies were provided to the students for member checks. The students used interview data to create their poetic representations. Poetic representation is a methodology for presenting findings taken from interview data (Mears, 2006). For this study, students worked with the researcher and each other to create their own poetics from the interview data by following two restrictions: (1) words or phrases had to come from the interviewee; and (2) the words or phrases used to create a poetic rhythm must be selected and arranged by the participant. Their poetics serve as the primary report of findings.

After the students finished their poetics I conducted a narrative analysis of the student poetics that began by interviewing each student (Riessman, 1993). The questions focused on students’ structural and linguistic choices. These questions aided the exploration of the conditions and the challenges the students’ encountered as they explored self.

Narrative analysis grounded the poetics in the research questions by tying the students’ poetic images, metaphors, and references to their experiences with the novels and each other.
These images, metaphors, and experiences were discussed within the context of the interview data, field notes, my researcher journal, and student artifacts. A post-analysis interview was conducted to check my analytic assumptions against the intentions of the students. In this way, the students had an active role in the analysis of the poetics. Narrative analysis was selected as an interpretive tool because of its emphasis on “seeing how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of the events and actions in their lives” (Riessman, 1993, p. 2). The goal was particularly well suited to this study of students’ impressions, imaginations, and experiences with self and other people within the context of semiotic engagements with literature.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the theories that framed this study and described how this study may potentially contribute to critical literacy, semiotic theory, and an understanding of the ways in which literature can open up spaces for adolescent students to explore definitions and redefinitions of self. Chapter II of this study provides a more in-depth defense of how these theories may operate in concert to potentially create an imaginary domain. Chapter III describes the research design connected to this study and poetic representation methodology. Chapter IV offers the student composed poetic representations.
Chapter V offers narrative analyses of these poems. Chapter VI concludes the study with a discussion of the study’s implications and associated directions for further research.
CHAPTER 2
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Reissman (1993) noted that foremost among the reasons for conducting a qualitative inquiry is “to give prominence to human imagination and agency” (p. 5). To this end, the review of literature presents a theoretical braid that describes and defends the construction of an imaginary domain where students can develop these impressions. As mentioned in Chapter One, this braid, composed of metaphorical right and left twists, serves to define and describe self-definition as a process arising out of the self’s relationships with other people, multiple discourses, and the ways these relationships are mediated by “semiotic means” (Hull & Katz, 2006, p. 46). Working from this understanding of self-definition, this study seeks to explore and describe how the interplay of these forces can create an imaginary domain where students can define and redefine themselves.

This review braids concepts and research from philosophy, critical literacy, feminist theory, literary theory, and semiotics to isolate places in the theoretical and empirical literature that unify the concepts of alterity, imagination, and semiotics. Designing the conceptual framework in this way,
allows for an exploratory–empirical approach to the research questions guiding this study.

The research guiding this framework will be presented in two sections. Research reviewed under heading “A” composes the right twist of the conceptual braid, defining the imaginary domain where students can examine their concepts of self. Concepts discussed under heading “B” describe how literature studied within the context of semiotic theory may help students describe the ways they define and redefine themselves. Research will be reviewed in the following order:

A. Alterity

• Emanuel Levinas, alterity, and infinity
• Critical literacy, alterity, and the fluidity of identity within situated social contexts
• Elizabeth Grosz and the generative potential of difference and imagination

B. Literature study within the context of semiotic theory

• Louise Rosenblatt and the transactional theory of reading
• Semiotic theory
• Semiotics, the self, and literature.
Levinas and Alterity

The philosophic concept of alterity can be traced to the ancient Greeks, but much of the contemporary discussion about difference stems from the work of Emanuel Levinas, particularly *Totality and Infinity* (1969) and *Otherwise Than Being* (1998). Although these works cover varied philosophical topics, the concepts of alterity and infinity are essential to understanding how encounters with others generate spaces for the crafting and re-crafting of the self.

Levinas (1969) described alterity as an individual’s sense of “the radical heterogeneity of the other” (p. 36). Radical heterogeneity” is simply radical difference. The word “other” stands for everyone and everything independent of the self. This is the substance of alterity: the sense that the self is radically different or other to whomever (or whatever) it encounters.

This definition, however, is only a partial view. Levinas (1969) pointed out the self or “I” also exists in a state of radical heterogeneity. “The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it” (p. 36). The self is an entity in constant negotiation with itself, an entity that exists in a state of otherness. This insight into the nature of the self allows for a
more complete yet simpler definition of alterity: alterity is the self’s sense of otherness.

Alterity is related to Levinas’s concept of infinity. He defined infinity very simply. “The idea of infinity is the mind before it lends itself to the distinction between what it discovers by itself and what it receives from opinion” (p. 25). Infinity, in short, is Being: the world one is born into and presented with. Infinity cannot be stated “in terms of experience” because “[i]t is the condition for every opinion” (p. 25). As the precursor to thought and opinion, as something that guides experience, infinity is not describable by the tools of experience, language, etc. Despite the impossibility of describing infinity, it can be understood as something “produced in the relationship of the same with the other” (p. 26). More simply, infinity is produced by alterity.

Otherness, as an infinite entity, exceeds all limits: including the signs an individual creates to represent experience. Attempting to describe and/or account for the experience of otherness is the infinitely distant goal of the individual because otherness and infinity are the sources of human activity and theorizing:

The idea of infinity sustains activity itself. Theoretical thought, knowledge, and critique, to which activity has been opposed, have the same foundation. The idea of infinity, which is not in turn a
That otherness is the infinite source of theory and activity is a large claim. But Badiou (2001) succinctly made clear why this is so: “[i]nfinite alterity is quite simply what there is. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of differences” (p. 25-26).

Infinite difference provides, as will be discussed in a later section on the thought of Elizabeth Grosz (2005), a way to explain how alterity can create infinite space for the definition and redefinition of self.

Critical Theory, Alterity, and Fluidity

This section illustrates and explores the ways alterity can be connected to and extend concepts within critical literacy. In doing so, the literature reviewed has three purposes. First, the section defines and describes the critical concepts of the fluidity of identity within the context of situated social practice, particularly the impact of difference on identity formation (Albright & Luke, 2007; Edelsky, 1999; Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1996, 2004, 2005; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Luke, 2003; Luke, 2004; Moore, 2009). A discussion of the connections among alterity, fluidity, and difference follows, along with the suggestion that the concept of alterity...
may allow theorists to extend the concepts of fluidity and difference (Li, 2002; Luke, 2003; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995).

Knobel and Lankshear (2007) described the fluidity of identity as something that allows “Humans to ‘do life’ as individuals and as members of social and cultural groups” (p. 6). This description is quite similar to the concept of alterity in two ways. Both concepts stress the instability of the self and ascribe the construction of the self to the social or the other. A slight but significant difference arises in the fact that Levinas’s (1969) constructed his concept through the other while critical theorists construct their concept of fluidity through situated social practices like literacy or school. Despite these subtle differences both conceptions of self conform to Bruner’s (1986) belief that the self is an ever-shifting entity that is constantly being shaped and re-shaped by social interaction.

Lalik and Oliver’s (2007) study provides a context for a fuller discussion of fluidity within a social context. The researchers sought to examine how the introduction of critical questions could help adolescent girls situate themselves within and critique “oppressive representations” of the female body (p. 49). These critical questions included: “how language works in whose and what interests, on what cultural sites, and why” (Kelly, 1997, p. 19, quoted in Lalik & Oliver, 2007, p. 49). By
situating the girls in classroom where critical questions were foregrounded against literacies forwarding “oppressive representations” of the female body, they noticed that the girls were able to “use or reject various identities made available to them through texts” (p. 50). In this example, identity becomes fluid, creating spaces where the self can be defined or redefined within a situated social context.

Luke’s (2003) description of the Queensland state school system provides an example similar to that of Lalik and Oliver (2007). But in addition to noting how identity takes on a fluid dimension within a situated social context, Luke (2003) made clear that the differences between people within a social context contributes to the fluid nature of identity.

He argued that policymakers regarding the multilingual students within the Queensland state school system needed to consider the ways those students were situated within the classrooms. He noted that literacies valued in the homes and communities of these multilingual students are often marginalized within the classroom. The denial of these home and communal literacies adversely affected the ways multilingual students define their identities when situated within the classroom.

Experiences like these have two negative consequences. First, these experiences can situate the multilingual students
as Other within the classroom: someone to be regarded as an “afterthought, exception, anomaly, and ‘lack’” (p. 135). This condition can lead the multilingual student to define his or her identity as something anomalous within the social context of school. Second, the redefinition of multilingual student’s identity as anomalous limits the potential for non-multilingual students to be impacted by the cultural differences multilingual students bring to the classroom. This denial of difference limits the potential for these students to situate themselves within different cultural forms, a limitation that shuts down spaces for these students to define or redefine their identities.

Though the concepts of fluidity and difference have much to do with the ways in which one constructs his or her identity, they also share many commonalities with the concept of alterity. Li (2002) connected alterity to the belief in critical literacy that one’s encounters with difference are related to how one comes to define or redefine his or her identity. The concept of alterity, Li (2002) explained, allows encounters with others to push self to become fluid among the influence of infinite difference. This fluid self is quite similar to the ever-shifting identity we find in Luke (2003), an identity that draws potential for definition and redefinition from the influence of other people.
This connection is important because it suggests that alterity, like the concepts of difference and identity within the context of situated social practice may carry the generative potential to open up spaces for self definition and redefinition within the context of a situated social practice, like a classroom. Li (2002), for example, suggested that attention to alterity might open up an added dimension for critical literacy: the exploration of difference as defined by the interactions between self and other.

**Feminism, Alterity, and Imagination**

The work of the feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz has taken up the question of identity and described how difference provides theoretical ground for pushing discussions of the self and self definition beyond the concept of identity. Though Grosz’s immediate concern has been with futurity, and a great number of her books have centered on this theme (1994, 1995, 2004, 2005, 2008), these writings also address the question of difference.

Grosz’s conception of difference is unlike what Luke (2003) described. Her use of the word is closer to Levinas’s alterity. This distinction is important to Grosz’s thought as well as this study; this distinction will aid in the creation of an imaginary domain where students can define and redefine themselves. Her departure from critical theory is outlined
through her critique of the approaches feminists have historically taken with respect to difference and futurity. She called these approaches the extrapolative approach and the imaginative approach (Grosz, 2005).

The extrapolative approach centers on movements within the social and political arenas and “involves drawing out the implications and effects on current trends, predictions, [and] the projected movements of present impulses” (p. 73). This approach is closely aligned with the work social scientists like Gilligan (1982) and critical literacy theorists like Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986); Bruce (2003); Davies (2003, 2008); and Ryan (2006). By critiquing cultural institutions in an effort to promote “equal rights” and “economic development” for those who claim female identity, this approach in many ways mirrors the critical concept of fluidity of identity within situated social contexts (Grosz, 2005, p. 73). In this case, the female is recognized as Other, and her marginalized condition is exposed in hopes of not only arguing for equal rights or equal economic opportunity but for helping females redefine and empower themselves as social actors.

The second approach described in Grosz (2005) is termed the imaginative approach. Unlike the extrapolative approach, which is rooted in the social and the political, this approach is tied to literature and the arts. The approach builds off the
imaginative production of other worlds, “fictional, cinematic, or cybernetic, which dramatically change certain elements of our experience and our understanding of the world” (p. 73). Harraway’s (1990) work on cyborgs could be pointed to as an example of this approach. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1990) represented Harraway’s attempt to explore the image of the cyborg as a figure that could resolve essentialists and anti-essentialists notions about the female body.

Grosz (2005) noted that both of these approaches are ultimately limiting to thought. Each, she argued, is defined by identity, a concept that limits the “space of virtual” --- that is what is new or has not yet been actualized (p. 73-74). By this, she means that when we attach an identity to the other, we lose sight of the potential to theorize something beyond the “pre-given identity” (p. 74). This claim contributes to this study because it suggests that the concept of a “pregiven” identity closes down spaces for difference to generate definitions and redefinitions of self.

Grosz (2005) argued against the concept of pregiven identities by invoking Cornell (1991) and her concept of the “imaginary domain” (Grosz, 2005, p.73). The imaginary domain is defined by two concepts: imagination and “the space of virtuality” (p. 73). The space of virtuality can be thought of
as what is essentially “not yet actualized” (p. 73). In this space, the gender identity is rejected for difference, a turn that allows theorizing of the space to extend beyond “established systems and pre-given identities” (p. 74). This turn to difference, she explained, is a turn to otherness, one that compels us “to think differently, in terms that will accommodate not just otherness, but the kind of otherness that is beyond limits, outside the definition and control of the self-same and the self-identical” (p. 74). Parallels can noted between Levinas’s (1969, 1998) concepts of alterity and infinity. This appeal to difference is a way to pushing past limited concepts like identity. “Subjects can be conceived as modes of action and passion, a surface catalytic of events, events which subjects don’t control but participate in, which produce history and thus whatever identity subjects may have” (Grosz, 2005, p. 88). This view of the subject suggests the generative potential of difference creates, in the words of Hull and Katz (2006), space “to create learning spaces where individuals and groups can define and redefine themselves” (p. 71).

Summary of Research on Alterity, Fluidity, and Imagination

connections between the concepts of alterity and fluidity and the generative potential of difference. Li (2002) suggested that an appeal to alterity might open up space for understanding fluidity of identity situated within the context of social practice. Grosz (2005) and Cornell (1991) expanded the theoretical space for exploring difference for the definition and re-definition of the self.

In reviewing these various perspectives, this chapter created a theoretical right twist for a larger conceptual braid. This right twist described a potential for students to create space for exploration of self through concepts gleaned from philosophy, critical theory, and feminist theory. The section that follows presents theories suited for describing how students may engage the imaginary domain in literature studied within the context of semiotic theory. This metaphorical left twist of theoretical strands frames the literary engagements in this study.

The metaphorical left twist begins with the work of Rosenblatt (1938). Her work is foundational to this metaphorical twist because it opens spaces where the experiences of students are privileged and partner to the creation of meaning from literature. Following Rosenblatt (1938), the semiotic theory and its utility as an approach to literary study will be discussed. This discussion provides a ground for describing how engagements
with alterity and literature studied within the context of semiotic theory can create an imaginary domain for self-definition and redefinition.

Rosenblatt

Rosenblatt’s (1938), work can be seen as a rebellion. Her rebellion centered on the external authority of text (Probst, 2006). A particular point of contention for Rosenblatt (1938) was the school of literary criticism called New Criticism. New Criticism “tended to diminish the concern with the human meaningfulness of the literary work” (p. 29). New Critics devoted their attentions to “impersonal” readings achieved through strategies like “close reading” (p. 29). Their analyses centered on the text’s structural and literary devices, tone, metaphor, symbol etc. Wimsatt (1954) wrote about the importance of impersonal approaches to literature that eschewed both “affective” and “intentional” responses to literature.

Rosenblatt (1938) noted that such approaches “lead the student to ignore the social elements of his experience” and cut the student off from “a fruitful understanding of what literature offers” (p. 30). In this, she rebelled against New Criticism’s sense that authority resides in a place external to the individual. Her emphasis on the individual within the context of the social is similar to the critical literacy theorists’ emphasis on the fluidity of identity within situated
social contexts, a connection that becomes more concrete in Rosenblatt’s invocation of C.S. Peirce.

C.S. Peirce, in stressing the value of ‘ideal experimentation,’ was referring to the same thing. In imagination we rehearse various possibilities of action in a given situation. We go through a process of imaginative trial and error, trying out different modes of behavior and working out their probable effects. When the situation arises in actual life, we are better prepared to act successfully.

Literature permits something resembling ‘ideal experimentation’ because it offers such a wide range of vicarious experiences. We can live different kinds of lives; we can anticipate future periods in our own life; we can participate in different social settings; we can try out solutions to personal problems (p. 199).

This is a clear description of what literature offers students. As was shown in Levinas (1969), Lalik and Oliver (2007) and Luke (2003), and in Grosz (2005), there is a clear emphasis on “possibility,” “trial and error,” and participation “in different social settings” “to try out solutions to personal problems.” This way of reading also emphasizes Levinas’s (1969) sense of alterity. The attempt to account for the other comes through clearly as a way to generate possible new definitions of self. In emphasizing the possible, Rosenblatt (1938) seems to anticipate Grosz’s (2005) description of the imaginary domain --- a space where one is free to imagine and explore the self. The discussion of different social settings also brings to mind the work of the critical theorists, especially their insistence
on the fluidity of the identity within a situated social context.

Rosenblatt (1938) called this approach to exploring literature the transactional theory. According to the theory, the “reader brings to the work personality traits, memories or past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition” (pp. 30-31). The reader theorizes, gains knowledge, and critiques through the negotiation of self and the text within a social context. In a fashion similar to Lalik and Oliver (2007) and Luke (2003), Rosenblatt (1938) suggested that the reader of a text must pit her beliefs against doubts that may be raised by the text. And like Luke (2003), the reader may find herself forced into constructive thinking by encountering some ideas within the text that creates discomfort by challenging some behavior the reader may have regarded as habitual. She emphasizes the point when she cites John Dewey. “John Dewey reminded us that in actual life constructive thinking usually starts as a result of some conflict or discomfort, or when habitual behavior is impeded and a choice of new paths of behavior must be made” (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 226).

The study of literature can be understood as a social context in which the self is free to imagine new ways of being. This imaginative exploration is rooted in the discomfort, which
arises from difference: the different world of the text and the different experiences of people within a situated social context. Difference’s capacity to disrupt the beliefs of a reader by introducing discomfort is very close to Grosz (2005) and Luke’s (2003) beliefs that encounters with difference can inspire the imagination. Probst (2006) emphasized this point when he noted that the transactional theory offers a way of reading that allows students to access “another’s vision” (p. 47).

These connections among the concepts of alterity, critical literacy, imaginative exploration, and literature suggest that the experience of literature, like the experience of other people, may open up imaginary domains within which a student may define and redefine herself through both her interactions with other people and literature.

**Semiotics**

Discussion to this point has centered on the theme of imaginary domains for the definition and redefinition of the self. Levinas (1969) described the self as unstable to the point that it is always other, even unto itself. This instability, combined with the infinite distance that separates the self from other, creates space upon which to define and redefine the self. Rosenblatt (1938) suggested that the doubts of others, the self,
and/or literature could lead to definitions or redefinitions of self.

Although this theme of definition and redefinition of self has not been overtly taken up by many educational researchers operating within the field of semiotics, some have promoted semiotic approaches to literacy as ways to open up spaces for the exploration of imagination (Albers, 2007; Albers & Harste, 2007; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2004; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1988; Hull & Katz, 2006; Kress, 2003; Siegel, 1995; Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen, 1998; Smagorinsky, 2001; Suhor, 1984, The New London Group, 1996; Whitin, 2005). It may be argued that semiotic theory adds a dimension to the above-mentioned theme, because the application of this theory lends itself to classroom practice and may help students work within the theories described above to create a context in which they can explore, define and redefine themselves.

However, before a discussion of semiotic theory and its relationship among these themes can take place, it will be necessary to define and discuss semiotic theory. The origins of semiotic theory are most often connected to the works of Peirce (1839-1914) and Saussure (1857-1913). Although both Peirce and Saussure made significant contributions to the field of semiotics, this study centers on the work of Peirce and his
followers, as their work, unlike the language-based theories of Saussure, took non-linguistic sign systems into account.

Semiotics, from a Peircean perspective, can be defined as a theoretical lens for exploring signs or "meanings and messages in all their forms and all their contexts" (Innis, 1985, p. vii). Though this definition is a broad one, it is a fitting one, as the application of semiotic theory is equal to the broadness of its definition. A sign, according to Peirce, is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respects [sic] or capacity" (cited in Eco, 1979, p. 15). Signs take on meaning through a process called semiosis. Semiosis is a simultaneous process in which meaning is generated through what is often describe as a "tri-relative system of influence" or the semiotic triangle (p. 15). The subjects of this tri-relative system for generating meaning are the object, the representamen, and the interpretant. In this system the object is some existent -- though not necessarily corporeal -- concept, the representamen is a symbolic representation of the object, and the interpretant is a further sign that allows a person to create meaning for the object. The object, then, begins with an immediate or perceived meaning but comes to take on a dynamic or potential meaning once it has passed through the tri-relative systems of semiosis. Siegel (1984) called the distance between the immediate object and the dynamic object the ground.
The dynamic, ever-shifting potential of a sign, not surprisingly, is in accord with Levinas’s (1969, 1998) descriptions of self and Knobel and Lankshear’s (2007) description of the fluidity of identity within a situated social context. And, just as one’s sense of alterity plays a role in belief and discomfort --- as is evident in Rosenblatt’s (1938) transactional theory --- alterity is seen at work in the apprehension of signs. In considering the process of semiosis, we find instances where the influence of discomfort through alterity may disrupt the beliefs one invests in a particular sign. Consider again Rosenblatt’s (1938) description of reading.

C.S. Peirce, in stressing the value of ‘ideal experimentation,’ was referring to the same thing. In imagination we rehearse various possibilities of action in a given situation. We go through a process of imaginative trial and error, trying out different modes of behavior and working out their probable effects. (p. 199)

In the imaginative experimentation one undertakes by reading, one can almost picture how the representamen, and the interpretant, stretch not only the imagined object from the immediate sense to the dynamic sense but one’s sense of self as well. Rosenblatt (1938) shows how the process of semiosis participates in the definition and redefinition of the self through the disruption or re-situating of one’s place within a social context. This disruption, which arises, from the redefinition of self illustrates how the process of semiosis
helps reinforce the importance of the concept of alterity in making meaning for signs. Second, it forwards the idea that all meaning-making is mediated by signs (Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen, 1998). These two concepts will be further explored in the following section, which describes how semiotic theory explains: (1) how students mediate their responses to literature through a variety of sign systems; and (2) how semiotic engagements with literature may open spaces and generate representational resources for students to define and redefine themselves (The New London Group, 1996).

Semiotics, the Self, and Literature

The previous sections showed how alterity operates in society, school, and in the exploration of literature. This section will focus on semiotic tools for mediating interaction among students. As was discussed in relation to Grosz (2005), encounters with difference and finding entry into an imaginary domain may help one generate new definitions or redefinitions of self. To this end, this section will discuss semiotics as an approach to encouraging students to explore their imaginary domains, through their encounters with classmates, their fluid senses of self, and text (difference), within the context of semiotic theory.

As discussed above, Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading (1938) suggested that readers bring their experiences to
bear when reading a text. Smith (1989, 1991, 1992, and 2005), Smith and Wilhelm (2004), and Wilhelm (1992, 1994, 1996, and 1997) have noted that students, particularly adolescents, sometimes lack the reading strategies necessary to connect their experiences to those described in the text.

Rosenblatt, like so many literary theorists, seems to assume an Ideal situation versus the Real situation of the classroom. Despite free reading and reading workshops, journals, literary letter exchanges, and a variety of response activities, many of my students continued to resist reading. [...] What special knowledge and specific strategies did they lack for achieving literary experience and understanding? And what perspectives on their lives, what experiences did they possess that they could be helped to bring to their reading (Wilhelm 1997, pp. 22-23)?

Wilhelm’s (1997) suggestion that adolescent readers may require a means for appealing to their “experiences” in order to develop reading strategies has been echoed by theorists and researchers working within the field of semiotics (Albers, 2007; Albers & Harste, 2007; Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Siegel, 1995; Suhor, 1984; Whitin, 2005).

Semiotic appeals to multiple sign systems can create experiences that may help students connect their beliefs to the text (Wilhelm, 1997). However, before entering into a discussion of how literature study within the context of semiotic theory may help students connect their experiences to ideas in a text, it will be necessary to discuss additional dimensions of semiotic theory.
Peirce’s semiotic theory, as noted in the last section, suggests meaning-making activities are mediated through signs; that the signs one uses to construct meaning do not necessarily have to be verbal (Siegel, 1995; Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen, 1998; Suhor, 1984; 1998; Whitin, 2005). This insight is significant for two reasons. First, it should give teachers pause to consider that their mostly verbocentric practices may run in opposition to the ways their students’ beliefs are constructed (Kress, 2003). For if meaning is generated, as Peirce assumes, from the sewing together of swatches from diverse sign systems, then should we not “re-examine our bias toward language in teaching-learning and consider curricular possibilities that do not marginalize other ways of knowing” (Siegel, 1995, p. 456)?

With regard to this point, the work of the New London Group (1996) is particularly important. They have noted that students operating in today’s multilayered, multimodal world must be able to use representational resources to design meaning. To respond to this need, The New London Group (1996) proposed a pedagogy of Multiliteracies that emphasized that various “modes of meaning are dynamic and representational resources, constantly being remade by users” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). This process of designing meaning from available modes or designs does not privilege one modality over another, and encourages students
to define and redefine their understanding of not only the texts they encounter but themselves as well.

Second, it should be remembered that alterity, according to Levinas (1969), exceeds the limits of experience, including the tools of experience, signs. This is an important consideration because although no sign system can adequately capture alterity, each individual’s limited sense of alterity has likely been fashioned from a variety of sign systems. Albers and Harste (2007), echoing closely an idea similar to Grosz’s (2005) notion of the imaginary domain, noted that opening students up to semiotic engagements might free the imagination and allow students to construct meanings freed from categories:

Imagination can enable us to explore new possibilities, free us from the literal and mundane, and allow us to experience life vicariously. Imagination can also release us from seeing the world only as a set of categorizations and naming of parts, allowing us to particularize, to see, hear and experience things in their concreteness and within our own contexts (p. 10).

In other words, engagements with multiple sign systems, may promote the possibility that students will be better able to access their imaginations and create space outside the limits of categories: spaces similar to those described by The New London Group (1996): spaces where students can design and redesign themselves.
This section will next examine empirical studies centered on students’ semiotic engagements with literature. These examples illustrate how students can orchestrate literacy events by becoming conscious of the ways they mediate their approaches to literature through signs (Siegel, 1995, p. 456). These studies also demonstrate how mediation can create spaces for students to define and redefine themselves within the situated social practice of literature study within the context of semiotic theory (Hull & Katz, 2006).

Suhor (1984) was among the first to note how an appeal to these spaces --- the non-verbal and the imaginative --- might help students generate responses they may not have arrived at through verbal responses alone. He called this ability to generate linguistic meaning from non-linguistic signs transmediation. In his study, Suhor illustrated the concept of transmediation through a discussion of the non-verbal ways in which his students responded to *Of Mice and Men* (1937). In his analysis of these responses, Suhor noted that the students were forced to “translate” the experiences of the non-verbal responses into language in order to explain the ways their non-verbal responses addressed the novel. In this way, the students became aware of how their minds moved across multiple sign systems in order to create meaning. Siegel (1995) argued that this process of transmediation allows “students' opportunities
to engage in generative and reflective thinking because learners must invent a connection between the two sign systems, as the connection does not exist \textit{a priori}” (p. 470).

Whitin (2005) further explored how transmediation creates reflective learners by incorporating Eisner’s (1985) concept of the non-redundant potential to discuss the “the relationship between visual response and classroom discourse” (p. 366). Whitin (2005) described the concept of nonredundant potential as the notion that “sign systems do not operate in isolation” and “that each carries its own unique potential” (p. 367). The concept of the nonredundant potential helps make clear the generative nature of transmediation because as students transmediate between sign systems they find themselves adopting a position “that lies at the heart of problem-solving and literary analysis” (p. 393). Though she is quite correct in noting that these semiotic concepts cut to the heart of problem-solving and literary analysis, they also seem to cut to the heart of something else: the imaginary domain. As Rosenblatt (1938) pointed out, students use imagination to generate and rehearse various possibilities. Whitin provides examples of her students’ imaginings through generativity, transmediation, and nonredundant potential when she discussed the role of talk and metaphorical representation in a fourth grade classroom. In one example from her study, Whitin described the semiotic ground of
average male readers’ responses to the short story *Ferret in the Bedroom* (1988). Initially, the boys had trouble justifying their conclusions about the story. In attempting to develop strategies that would allow them to justify their conclusions about the story, the boys sketched a bell-shaped curve and labeled the curve from left to right, “‘nice,’ ‘ok,’ ‘problems’ ‘getting better,’ and ‘solved’” (p. 374). As the boys talked they revised the curve of the bump and added a smaller “problem bump”, which represented the story’s climax. After revising, they placed post-it notes along the curve of this “problem bump” that illustrated examples of Liz’s, the story’s main character, feelings as she moved through the story from “nice to solved” (p. 375). As the students sketched and discussed Liz’s problems, Whitin noticed that “[b]oth talk and visual representations make thinking visible and socially accessible, yet each sign system involved has a nonredundant potential. Making both sign systems active simultaneously appeared to enrich the potential for the boys to generate new meanings” (p. 376). Whitin’s observation echoed Smagorinsky and O’Donnell-Allen’s (1998) findings that the potential to connect “new meanings” to the text may spring from the fact that “[T]hought is not solely dependent on language, nor can language alone fully express thought” (p. 366). This sentiment on the incompleteness of language comes close to Levinas’s (1969) sense of the incompleteness of
language in the face of alterity. It also demonstrate how making students aware of the ways multiple sign systems mediate thinking can help them generate new meanings for literature. However, absent from these studies, are attempts to explore how engagements with multiple sign systems opens spaces for students to generate new meanings of self.

In addition to mediating new understanding for literature, reflective semiotic approaches to literacy can also, as noted earlier in Albers and Harste (2007), create a sense of the possible, a concept that can be linked to Grosz’s (2004) imaginary domain. Hull and Katz’s (2006) study, for example, addresses how reflective semiotic engagements with “the processes of authoring multimedia, multimodal autobiographical narratives about self, family, community, and society” may aid in helping students define and redefine their lives (p. 43). Just as the students in Hull and Katz (2006) defined their lives through a situated social practice --- authoring through multimedia, multimodal autobiographical narratives --- the students in my study were situated in the social practice of studying literature within the context of semiotic theory.

In examining the impact of authoring these narratives, Hull and Katz (2006) “used the powerful multiple-media, multiple-modality literacy of digital storytelling to articulate pivotal moments in their lives and to reflect on life trajectories” (p.
They noted that these multimodal approaches allowed the participants to evoke their beliefs, the beliefs of other students, and engage with the doubts that arose in opposition to those belief structures. Following Bruner (1994), Hull and Katz (2006) theorized that the articulation of these beliefs through cultural modes could help the participants identify potential “turning points” in terms of their thinking (Bruner, 1994, quoted in Hull & Katz, 2006, p. 45). Bruner’s (1994) theory, they explained, centered on understanding cultural modes of expression as turning point narratives could have broad implications. “These turning-point narratives may thus serve as emblems or tropes for how one thinks of one’s life as a whole” (p. 45).

This sentiment is strikingly similar to two concepts reviewed earlier in this chapter: Rosenblatt’s (1938) description of the experience of reading and Grosz’s (2004) description of the imaginary domain. Recall how Rosenblatt suggested that reading allowed the imagination to rehearse various possibilities. The work of Hull and Katz (2006) is similar because the multimodal, multimedia autobiographical narratives seem to be constructed for the same effect. The emphasis in both Rosenblatt (1938) and Hull and Katz (2006) is to inspire one to rehearse potentialities within one’s imagination, a goal similar to Grosz’s (2004) belief that the
collision of difference could create space for the imaginary domain.

An example of the turning-point narrative as an emblem of thought was made visible in Hull and Katz’s (2006) description of a participant called Randy. Randy’s example helps make the connections to Rosenblatt (1938) and Grosz (2005) firmer. Randy was a poor twenty-year-old man who lived in an impoverished and dangerous area of Oakland, California. Randy described the lure of street life but expressed an understanding of the uncertainty of danger of such an existence. He understood that he had come to a point in his life where he needed to “change something somehow” (p. 53). Randy created a digital storytelling project entitled “Lyfe-N-Rhyme”, a project that reflected his desire to “change something somehow” (p. 53). Hull and Katz (2006) noted the project featured images, text, and sound bytes of himself and prominent African American leaders. Through this process Randy was able to not only effect changes in his life --- he began taking community college courses and searching for jobs --- he also fashioned new artistic identities for himself: those of a “writer, a poet, videographer, and musician” (p. 54).

They concluded by making an appeal for further empirical studies on the ways in which identities can be defined and redefined through situated social practices, like encounters with literacy and multimedia. Their research is important to
this study in several ways. First, as mentioned earlier, it seems to agree with Rosenblatt’s (1938) description of reading and Grosz’s (2004) observations about difference and the imaginary domain. Second, it provides empirical evidence that multimodal engagements can help transform belief through collisions with alterity in its many forms: self, text, and other people. This connection can be made through Randy’s resistance to definition. His is a story of a young man who is bent on reshaping himself through his positive and negative encounters with the other: his neighborhood, Hull and Katz, the multimedia program, the multimodal, and semiotic spaces for composition, etc. Finally, the study opens a space for further studies that offers participants the opportunity “to create learning spaces where individuals and groups can define and redefine themselves”, a call that this study will explore (p. 71).

**Summary of Semiotics**

Semiotic theory can be connected to the three themes that arise from the research questions. First, like alterity, semiotic theory embraces the notion that language is incomplete. Second, applications of semiotic theory to classroom practice aids in the mediation of experiences helps students generate not only new connections to literature but imaginary domains. Third, the creation of these imaginary domains can open spaces where
students can create new definitions and redefinitions of self within the situated social context of an English classroom.

Summary

The literature reviewed above suggests that one’s sense of self is fluid and can come to be defined by one’s interactions with other people, imagination, and literature studied within the context of semiotic theory. This study explored the interplay of these forces within an English language arts classroom in an effort to understand how these forces converge and open up spaces where students can fashion and refashion definitions of themselves. In exploring this, students were invited to voice their impressions of the interplay of other people, imagination, and literature studied within the context of semiotic theory through poetics constructed from interview data.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

This study investigated the ways in which six high school students represented their definitions and redefinitions of self through their engagements with self and literature study. By focusing on the interplay of these varied actors and theoretical forces, this study explored how the students created their definitions and redefinitions of self as well as reflected upon the impacts and implications of their meaning-making processes (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

A qualitative design was utilized because experiences of the students were not encounters that could be easily operationalized, controlled, or predicted (Spradley, 1980). The data derived from qualitative designs created the potential for “understanding the meanings people have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Interview data was central to this study and aided in making the students’ sense of meaning the focus of the research narrative. In addition to interview data, other qualitative data such as a reflective research journal, field notes, audiotaped class discussions, and artifacts were collected. These additional data sources allowed me to trace elements expressed in the poetics to classroom incidents. The use of these data aided in raising issues that required clarification or extension in further interviews. In short,
these data sources allowed me to “become acquainted with the participants; understand how they related to the physical and material environment; and elicit the meanings, goals, and objectives that are important to the participants” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 85).

Of the qualitative approaches centered on interview data, one particular methodology was a natural fit for this study: poetic representation. Poetic representation allowed for both the presentation of students’ experiences and a way of reporting findings (Mears, 2005; Tonso & Prosperi, 2008).

**Setting and Participants**

This study took place in an eleventh grade language arts classroom at an alternative high school serving 170 ninth through twelfth grade students in a suburb of a large midwestern city. Ethnically the school’s population was: 92% Euro-American, 2% Hispanic, 2% American Indian, 1% African American, 1% Asian American, and 2% multiracial. The course in which the students enrolled was designed to align with the research questions guiding this study, as well as the standards and benchmarks suggested by the state in which this study took place. The students came from mostly upper-middle and working class families.

The classroom was located on the first floor of a two-story building that doubled as an alternative high school and
community center. The room was quiet. The quietness of the room combined with good acoustics made conversations easy to hear, a beneficial factor to my research. A wall that could be folded like an accordion to create a larger space divided the room. Twelve tables were pushed together to provide seating for twenty-four. Additional space was available at two bays, which were inset in the southern wall, parallel with the classroom door. Windows that began at about waist level and rose up near the ceiling lined the northern wall. The east wall was movable and had four small white marker boards attached. On these boards were lists of what students were expected to do for the day. The western wall was nearly taken up with a large marker board and several small bulletin boards. Mounted in the northwestern corner of the room was a television that hung from the ceiling. Beneath the television was the teacher’s desk where a computer was mounted. Various hand drawn images lined the walls and cabinet spaces. Many of these were drawn by students and could be understood to be abstract and representational images related to works of literature.

The school year was divided into trimesters. Each trimester was twelve weeks in length. This study was conducted during the second trimester. Daily, the students’ schedule consisted of four block classes that were eighty minutes in length and a fifth modified block class that was forty minutes long. The
students in this study were enrolled in an eighty-minute block and attended for the full twelve weeks. Following Patton (1990) students were selected as a subset of the class through purposive sampling. Six students were selected because I felt that number would allow for individuality and variability with regard to the ways the students approached the research questions, a consideration directly tied to my theoretical framework.

The Researcher

The researcher, a thirty-four year old Caucasian male, was from a middle class background. I first became interested in the generative potential of alterity as a graduate student in the English department at Wayne State University. In our theoretical readings, we discussed the self/other aporia in the works of Badiou (2001, 2007), Derrida (1978, 1995), Levinas (1969, 1998), and Zizek (1999, 2004). Additionally, we discussed Grosz’s (2005) presentation of the concept of the imaginary domain and how this concept might generate space for creative thought.

When I enrolled as a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at Wayne State University, I realized that the ideas I had been exposed to in the English department carried a potential application for classroom research. In my English education studies, I was exposed to Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1938) and literature studied within the context of
I began to utilize these theories in my classroom. I noticed that the generative potential of these strategies opened students up to “greater freedom in observations and ideas” (Dewey, 1916, p. 294). As I reflected back on the work of Grosz (2005) and Levinas (1969, 1998) I began to wonder if an interplay between the concepts of alterity and semiotic engagements with literature might open spaces for students to define and redefine themselves through the interactions with each other and literature.

**Rationale: Poetic Representation**

According to Richardson (2002), the process of self-construction and reconstruction is one in which narratives that may contradict one another simultaneously inform how one comes to know oneself. Poetic representation can “echo this complexity --- the artful openness of the process of shifting subjectivities not to know ourselves, and then to know ourselves again, differently” (p. 881). Because this study explored the different ways the interplay of alterity, imagination, and literature study, affected the ways the students defined themselves, poetic representation became germane to the research aims.

Poetic representation is a qualitative method of inquiry created from interview data (Tonso & Prosperi, 2008). These
poetic creations can be described as “poem-like compositions from the words of the interviewees” (Glesne, 1997, p. 202). Watson-Gegeo (2005) used the method of poetic representation to discuss the creation and recreation of her sense of self as she negotiated with her experiences with chemical sensitivity across the contexts of her workplace, various clinics, and with other sufferers of chemical sensitivity. The methodology of poetic representation, she noted, “offers the possibility of transformation of perception through the expression of altered perception, and the opening out of awareness through unexpected encounters with an unexpected world” (p. 403). This observation about poetic representation touched on the hopes that structured this study: by utilizing poetic representation as a methodology, the students were able to describe in their own words their impressions of self definition and redefinition, and their engagements with self, other, and literature study. This strategy was central to my research questions and was particularly useful for examining the challenges the students faced in exploring themselves through literature study and their imaginative domains.

Additionally, because poetic representation is a creative activity, research participants were given the opportunity to imaginatively explore and reflect upon their own words. This provided participants a further avenue to examine and revise
their intentions, which led to further attempts at self-definition or redefinition. As Richardson (2002) pointed out, “[a] writer of poetic representation can have different, often overlapping intentions; he or she may start with one goal and find that another takes over” (p. 882). This element of poetic representation offered students a further opportunity to explore and reflect on their experiences, a generative potential aligns that well with the tenets of semiotic theory as well as Grosz’s (2005) description of the imaginary domain.

A final way poetic representation fits well with this study was that the poetics placed the voices of the students at the center of the study. Mears (2005), for example, used poetic representation to place the voices of Columbine parents at the center of her study on the effects of the rampage shooting on parents of Columbine students. Tonso and Prosperi (2008) used poetic transcription to place the voices of recent-immigrant Mexican parents’ notions of parental involvement at the center of their study. Tonso and Prosperi (2008) reported that by positioning the parents at the center of the study they were able to avoid “the sense that participants’ words had been torn or made to dance to the researcher’s piper” (p. 15). By placing the voices of the research subject at the center, Mears (2005) and Tonso and Prosperi (2008) allowed their research participants to determine what was included or excluded from the
data. Allowing the students in this study a voice was central to understanding the subjective ways the interplay of alterity and semiotic engagements with literature created space for self-definition.

**Poetic Representation and Validity**

Mears (2005) was among the first to use poetic representation as the primary means for reporting findings. Since Mears’ (2005) dissertation, others have used poetic representation as a way of presenting findings, as well as contributed to the methodological principles for maintaining rigor and trustworthiness (Tonso & Prosperi, 2008). Tonso and Prosperi (2008) offer two methodological points that they deem central when utilizing poetic representation. First, the poetics must be understood to be analytic products that “possess rigor consistent with trustworthiness criteria, especially meeting triangulation for method (multiple interviews) and sources (multiple participants), as well as having explicit member check opportunities built into the research process” (pp. 17-18).

Their second criterion insisted, “that poetics make ‘voice’ hearable in ways that a conventional prose account does not” (p. 18). What they meant here was that poetics must “contain a more compact, and powerful presentation of findings” then typical of prose. Prose accounts, they explained, often fail to capture “the full range of emotional import expressed during interviews
about topics that evoke a wide range of responses from participants” (p. 23). An example of how poetic representation may present the “emotional import expressed during interviews” is presented below:

La Vida en Mejico (Life in Mexico)

Sin...
...de origenes humildes...
un pueblito...un ranchito chiquitito
sin luz, sin agua, sin nada
Yo nada mas hasta al grado seis
y fue mucho...los mayors
sin escuela...


The emotional import of the memory presented here, a Latino parent’s remembrance of life and schooling in Mexico, is highlighted by the poetic device of repetition as well as an effort to remain true to the speaker’s natural speech cadence. The repeated use of the word sin [without], which came from repeated uses found in the interview transcript, emphasizes the idea of living without. In remarkably few words, Tonso and Prosperi (2008) presented the sense of growing up in Mexico and living without.

In the present study, allowing the students the opportunity to preserve the emotional import as well as their own speech cadences was essential to understanding the contextual circumstances that contributed to the ways they engaged with their processes of self definition and redefinition. Additionally, this emphasis on emotion united the methodology with the theoretical ground for this study. Grosz (2005),
Rosenblatt (1938) as well as Siegel (1995) and Whitin (2005) described the importance of emotion in evoking student responses to literature and other students.

**Subjectivity**

Because I worked with students from my own school and with whom I am familiar, I quickly developed relationships with the students. Though my relationships with the students were advantageous, in that I had a somewhat acute sense of their capabilities and interests, these relationships also introduced an element of bias. LeCompte & Schensul (1999) noted that although research is not value free, a researcher could take steps to minimize the impact of bias on the study. In designing this study, I considered how my prior knowledge of the students might impact the way interviews were conducted, data was reported, and conclusions were drawn. With these considerations in mind, I employed the following strategies to minimize bias:

1. Making use of open-ended questions during semi-structured interviews
2. Keeping a reflective journal to monitor places where my own subjective views may bias the research;
3. Reporting data through poetic representations created by the students from their own words
4. Utilizing member checks on all interview transcripts.
The first strategy, the use of open-ended questions during semi-structured interviews, helped control bias by allowing the students to forward the issues they felt deserved exploration (Schensul, LeCompte, Nastasi, & Borgatti, 1999). In preparing my semi-structured interviews (see Appendix), I prepared several core open-ended questions, which allowed me to explore my areas of interest and permitted the students to answer the questions in their own ways. The open-ended questions took forms like: “Tell me about your experiences with literature” or “Could you tell me more about . . . ?” Such questions allowed the students to choose and describe which issues they felt central to the discussion. This technique also aided in creating opportunities for the students to talk about and reflect on what was important to them (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999).

The second strategy came from a recommendation in Spradley (1980) that a researcher should keep a detailed record of his or her subjective feelings. Spradley (1980) noted that keeping such a record serves a dual purpose: (1) it allows the researcher to make explicit what he or she may be taking for granted; and (2) it allows the researcher to become aware of how the researcher’s subjective experiences may differ from those of the participants. Adopting this strategy helped encourage sensitivity towards new directions or emerging themes that arose
during the course of the research, sensitivity that is essential to qualitative research.

Allowing the students to share in the composition of the poetics was a third strategy I utilized to minimize bias. Past researchers (Glesne, 1997; Mears, 2005; Tonso & Prosperi, 2008) utilizing poetic representation created their poetics from the interview transcripts and then allowed the participants to member check them. Although these constructions do make the voices of the participants central, they place the selection of the words at the discretion of the researcher. By giving the students the opportunity to share in the construction of their own poetics, I allowed them the freedom to not only aid in the selection of their own words, metaphors, and phrases, but also to select which poetic forms best expressed their experiences. This helped minimize bias by allowing the students the freedom to choose the means and manner through which they wanted their stories told.

A final strategy for minimizing bias was through the use of member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Students were given the opportunity to listen to the audio recordings while examining the interview transcripts. This step helped ensure the source data for poetic representations reflected the intentions the students meant to express during the interviews.
Research Design

The following chart provides an overview of the twelve-week study. Outlined are the major components of the study, purposes, and data collected.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Timeline</th>
<th>Data</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time Frame</strong></td>
<td><strong>Stage</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior to the study</td>
<td>Baseline</td>
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<td>Weeks One and Two</td>
<td>Orientation and Overview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weeks three and four</td>
<td>Novel study within the context of semiotic theory (The Lover)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeks five, six, and seven</td>
<td>Introduction to other multimodal forms of response to literature. Examples (technological, kinesthetic, tactile, etc.) were offered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
through the presentation of previous students’ work. Students explored a variety of strategies. Novel study within the context of semiotic theory (*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*)
Discussion of the students’ impressions of the novel and responses to the literature. Students examined the poetic techniques utilized in *Billy the Kid* and gained additional practice for creating a poem from an interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weeks eight, nine, ten.</th>
<th>Novel study within the context of semiotic theory: <em>The Virgin Suicides</em>. Students responded to the novel using multimodal strategies. Discussion centered on Students’ impressions of the novel and their responses to the literature.</th>
<th>Field notes, reflective research journal, audiotaped class discussions, artifacts, semi-structured interview (approximately sixty minutes).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week Eleven</td>
<td>Students composed their poetic representations from interview data.</td>
<td>Field notes, reflective research journal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week Twelve</td>
<td>Students presented their poetics and discussed how their poetics tied into the theme of the course.</td>
<td>Field notes, reflective research journal, artifacts, semi-structured interview (approximately sixty minutes).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown above in the research timeline, this study took place over the course of twelve weeks (one trimester) in an English class that was designed to align with both research questions guiding this study and the standards and benchmarks of the state in which this study took place. The theme of this
eleventh grade course centered on asking students to interrogate the ways they created imaginative spaces for self-definition.

**The Texts**

The literature and the film selected for this course were chosen because their themes centered on self-exploration and fit well into a study designed to open up imaginary spaces for self-definition. The theme of self that was introduced first through an exploration of Borges’ short story “Borges and I” (1960) and the short film *Life Lessons* (1989). These introductory pieces were selected for their deftness, as the presentation and discussion of these texts fit comfortably into a course period.

The selected novels: *The Lover* (1985), *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), and *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) had complicated, reflexive structures, often telling and re-telling the same stories from multiple or collective perspectives. For each of these novels, I read the first ten pages of the novel aloud. The students found this useful, and it helped them make sense of the novels’ narrative structure.

**Semiotic Response Strategies**

Following *Life Lessons* (1989), the students were introduced to the Sketch-to-Stretch strategy (Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988; Whitin, 1996, 2005). I described Sketch-to-Stretch as “the process of reacting to theme, characters and their relationships to conflict and feelings through sketching symbols, colors,
shapes, lines, and textures” (Whitin, 1996, p. 6). Two Francis Bacon paintings were used to introduce these techniques: “Head Surrounded by Sides of Beef” (1954) and “Self Portrait” (1971). The expressive nature of the paintings allowed for the concept of imagination to come into play.

Students shared and revised their drawings after they had an opportunity to explore the drawings of the other students. In sharing the drawings, the students explained the personal experiences that led them to make various artistic choices. After the students revised their drawings, they represented and explained how the comments or the drawings of others influenced any changes they made to their originals. Sharing these experiences was essential for understanding the subjective stances and imaginative processes of the students as well as how interactions of differences impacted their revisions and the ways the students defined themselves.

By week four, students were eager to engage with some of the other response strategies I had alluded to at the beginning of the course. Zeke, for example, asked for permission to design a video project. Desiree wanted to compose a sonnet cycle.

I exposed students to various semiotic approaches to literature. These samples were taken from work completed by other students over the past two years and from examples taken from youtube.com. These examples served as potential
representational resources for the students (New London Group, 1996). Some of these approaches included technological approaches (website development, movie making, etc.), kinesthetic approaches (dance, tableaux, acting), or visual approaches (painting, drawing, bricolage [the combining together of common materials to create art]).

These examples allowed students to gain exposure to varied approaches to text. Additionally, these multimodal experiences helped to convey the sense that creating and sharing meaning through multiple forms of expression could open up spaces for imagination and different conceptions of self.

Students utilized these strategies in their approaches to each of the novels covered in the course. In some cases, as discussed below these assignments were paired with complementary activities, such as double entry notebooks.

**Assignments**

Assignments for the course had two objectives. First, as in the case of the semiotic response strategies, double entry notebooks, and written reflections were utilized to help students understand their substantive stances toward the materials and how others and the act of responding and revising helped create space for self-definition. The second type of assignment was designed to help students become comfortable with poetic representation. The first of these assignments centered
on constructing a poetic representation from an extended interview taken from a magazine or newspaper. The second assignment asked students to write a poetic representation from Billy’s jailhouse interview in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (1970). For both assignments students were asked to create a poem using only words from the interview that illuminated how the subject’s personal experiences, experiences with others, text, and imagination contributed to his or her definition of self.

**Data**

Data collected from students took the form of student artifacts and interviews. Artifacts included written reflections, semiotic responses, and audiotaped class discussion. These proved valuable and helped provide a context for understanding the representational resources that informed the students’ poetics. Students were interviewed five times. Before the course began, a five to ten minute semi-structured interview was conducted with each student. The purpose of these interviews was to develop a baseline understanding of how each student defined him or herself. The final interview, conducted during the last week of the study, centered on the students’ poems and was designed to help clarify what the students’ intentions had been. The other three interviews were sixty-minutes in length. These interviews, placed near the beginning,
middle, and end of the study, allowed me to examine and assess themes as they emerged. Each interview was transcribed and submitted to the students for member check within in a week. Between interviews, previous interview data, field notes, researcher journal entries, and student artifacts were reviewed for concepts that required clarification or extension.

**Poetic Representation**

During week twelve students reflected on their experiences during the course by collaborating with me on the creation of poetics from their interview transcripts, a process known as poetic representation (Glesne, 2002; Krojer & Bibi, 2008; Mears, 2005; Richardson, 2002; Riessman, 1993; Tonso & Prosperi, 2008).

Prior to undertaking their poetic representations, I reviewed examples from Reismman (1993), the two transcriptions the students previously undertook, and the poetry some had written in response to the texts. Students were free to write in any poetic form they chose, but they were required to restrict themselves to using only their words from the four interview transcripts.

No length requirement for the poem was set, but the students were asked to produce poems long enough to give a reader a sense of how their impressions of self arose out of their personal experiences, their experiences with their classmates, imagination, and literature study. Form was left
ultimately up to the students, as I did not want to shape the ways in which the students initially approached the poems. These strategic decisions were made to maximize the potential of their poems as metaphorically rich representations of the ways the students had come to define or redefine themselves through the interplay of imagination, self, other, and literature.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Following (Mears, 2008) the primary findings for this study were developed through the methodology of poetic representation. Each of the six participants in the study created poetic representations derived from semi-structured interviews (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Following Riessman (1993) the poetic representations of the students were analyzed through narrative analysis. Riessman (1993) defines narrative analysis as follows:

> The methodological approach examines the informant’s story and analyzes how it is put together, the linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades a listener of authenticity. Analysis in narrative studies opens up the forms of telling about experience, not simply the content in which language refers. We ask, why was the story told that way? (p. 2)

In approaching the analysis of the poetic representations, I was guided by three principles taking from Riessman’s (1993) definition. First, in analyzing the poetics, I examined the poem from a structural point of view. In looking at structure of the
students’ poetics, I examined the ways in which the stanzas were arranged, the line breaks, and the verse style assumed. This analysis was essential for not only approaching how the students describe the fluidity of self but also for discovering what challenges the students faced in exploring the self. Second, I attempted to describe the linguistic and cultural resources I saw at work in the poetics. I examined these cultural and linguistic antecedents by tracing elements in the poetics to class discussions, student artifacts, and interview data. By using these data sources I was able to place the poetics within the context of classroom discourse. In doing this, I explored how the fluidity of self, semiotic encounters with literature, imagination, or encounters with others impacted the linguistic choices made in the poetics. Third, I attempted to ground the poetics within the research question and sub-questions of this study by examining the conditions and challenges that engendered or hindered the students’ ability to create space for self-definition.

To accomplish this third goal, data collected throughout the study were used to triangulate various engagements in order to contextualize and make sense of the students’ referents in their poetics. This process allowed me to connect poetic references to specific experiences --- artifacts they made, discussions, ideas of other people, other peoples’ multimodal
representations --- etc. Tracing poetic references back to these data sources provided for an examination of the history behind their comments and opportunity to re-examine the instructional events for evidence to address the research questions about the ways that imaginative spaces were opened, challenges that were encountered, and selves made fluid and redefined. The analysis of the data was subjected to a member check to ensure the accuracy of the narrative analysis. The member check was conducted during a final semi-structured interview, approximately sixty-minutes in length. During this interview, I reviewed my analysis of the poems and asked the students to comment or amend any erroneous suppositions. This interview helped ensure, as much as possible, that the intentions of the students were preserved.

**Trustworthiness**

As mentioned earlier there are two criteria offered in Tonso and Prosperi (2008) for meeting the requirements of trustworthiness for poetics. The first of these criteria is that the poetics be described as analytic. As described in this study, poetics are indeed analytic and meet the criteria for trustworthiness as outlined in Lincoln & Guba (1985): prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation of data. This study required twelve weeks in which the researcher built trust with his research subjects and checked his persistent
observations against the subjective stances taken in his researcher’s journal to identify elements of bias. As a further check on bias, I sought to triangulate suppositions made in the narrative analysis with data taken from field notes and student artifacts. These two design features met the first two criteria of trustworthiness. In terms of meeting the requirements for triangulation, Tonso and Prosperi (2008) noted triangulation for method could be met through the conducting of multiple interviews and the requirement for sources could be met by including multiple participants. However, as noted above this study triangulated the interview data with data taken from the reflective journal, field notes, and student artifacts. Further, member checks were conducted to check the accuracy of all interview transcripts as well as the narrative analysis of the students’ poetics.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study lay in the fact the use of poetics restricted the presentation of findings to verbal representations. As Kress (2003) pointed out, verbocentric practices can only partially describe experience. Though, this study does include the students’ visual artifacts in the discussion of the findings, these artifacts were discussed as a means for understanding their written products. As a result, the myriad ways in which the students found to define and redefine
themselves through non-linguistic approaches are marginalized in this study.

A second limitation lies in the location in which the study took place. The definitions the students created arose out of their encounters within the walls of a classroom. Although it is true that some of the experiences that contributed to their self-definitions were products of outside influences, this study was set in a classroom, and not among the influences of their wider social words.

A third limitation for this study can be found in Krojer and Hazelton (2008) who noted that while poetic representation may place the students’ voices at the center of the study, research is always “our own version of them” (Krojer and Hazelton, 2008, p. 28).

**Ethical Considerations**

Spradley (1980) notes that research should be in “service to humankind” (p. 16). Following this advice, I sought the approval of and rigorously follow all the requirements determined by Wayne State University’s Human Investigation Committee (HIC). I also made every attempt to put my research participants’ needs ahead of my research goals. These provisions included: guarding their anonymity, rights, and sensitivities (Spradley, 1980). Further, I shared my research objectives with my participants and make them privy to any reports. It is my
hope that my choice of this research problem will benefit my students over any benefit this study may provide me.

**Summary**

This chapter provided descriptions of the setting, the researcher, the participants, limitations, ethical considerations, and a qualitative design for an investigation of how students imagine definitions and redefinitions of themselves through encounters with self and other people in the context of semiotic engagements with literature. Additionally, poetic representation was defined, defended, and argued for as a methodology for this study. It was argued that poetic representation is particularly well suited to the research aims of this study because it allows for the preservation of the students’ voices. The chapter that follows allows for the presentation of those voices.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter allows the reader to encounter the six students who participated in this study. They offer a glimpse into the ways in which imagination, encounters with others, self, and the study of texts within the context of semiotic theory opened up spaces for self-definition. The poems, sometimes in literal terms, sometimes in metaphorical terms, explore the influences that shaped the way the students approached texts, generated interpretations, and the ways their interpretations informed the students’ ideas of self.

The poems in this chapter make central the voices that fueled and formed their imaginations. The significance lies in the ways the students negotiated the challenges of engaging with others, self, imagination, and text to craft a sense of self-definition.

The Process of Creating the Poetics

Though interview data served as the raw material for these poetic representations, the processes for making sense of the data and composing the poems developed out of conversations between the students and me. The genesis of these conversations was the struggles encountered as the students worked on their poems.
The first of these obstacles centered on how to make the interview data less overwhelming. Sinead suggested the simplest approach to the transcripts would be to use different colors to represent the different themes. The students agreed and developed the following color-coded system: blue for discussions of self, yellow for text, responses to texts were colored green, orange for the influence of others, and pink indicated imagination.

After completing the coding, students began, but struggled with how to arrange the poetics. Desiree, citing Sinead’s earlier suggestion, felt that the easiest way to structure the poems would be to devote a section to the different themes and the different texts. She explained that this would make the process fairly smooth, as they had already “marked up” the transcripts along those lines.

Although the coding and structural decisions were reached by consensus, these were the only points in the composition process that were uniform. Laura, Desiree, and Jordan felt very strongly about including large sections of poetry or stories they had written in their poetics. I was initially hesitant to allow them this avenue, as it was outside of the examples of Mears (2005) and Tonso and Prosperi (2008). However, the students reminded me that my rules restricted them only to words or phrases appearing in the transcripts. As they had, in fact,
read from these pieces during semi-structured interviews, I allowed them to use existent poetry (See the opening sections in Laura, Desiree, and Jordan’s poems for examples of how these students used existent poems and creative pieces). This was an unanticipated aspect of negotiation provided for by the research design.

The inclusion of the existent creative pieces had much to do with the identity of the students. Laura, Desiree, and Jordan thought of themselves as writers, and each wrote creatively in their free time. In contrast to Laura, Desiree, and Jordan, Sinead, Zeke, and Leon were less comfortable with creative writing and favored the use of lengthy personal stories to structure the poems. I found this split interesting, particularly as Sinead, Zeke, and Leon’s work seems as poetically sound and coherent as the students who favored work they understood to be poetic. This split contributed to the strength of poetic representation as a methodology, in that two diverse approaches produced similarly striking results.

When the students finished their compositions, they read them to each other and to me. In some places, I, or one of the students, suggested the inclusion or exclusion of lines or stanzas. The last act in the composition process was the addition of the headings. I added these for the students in order to make the divisions between their poems clear. In some cases they were
simple. In the case of Jordan, several of the headings were drawn from the original titles of the poems. In other situations, the headings were drawn from the students’ interpretation of the poems. The first heading of Laura’s poem, “A Girl from a Different World” came from a chapter heading in Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* (1958), a chapter in which the character Laura is described. I felt the heading characterized the uniqueness of Laura’s work in the class. Laura enjoyed the reference. After adding the headings, I met with each of the students and explained my rationale for the headings. I agreed to change the headings they disagreed with; however, in all cases the students agreed to the adoption of the headings.

The final step in editing the poems was to protect the confidentiality of the participants and the people mentioned in the poems by changing names or any other identifying details.

Following Mears (2005), I have chosen to offer “brief sketches” of the students who participated in the study (Mears, 2005, p. 74). Adapted from impressions that arose during the interviews, these sketches provide surface portraits of the students. The depth and shade of their characters have been left to the poetic representations that follow.
Sinead

Sinead is remarkably cheerful. Having just returned from distant state, where she buried her grandmother, she smiles and settles into her chair. She is dressed as she always is, in loose fitting clothes shaded with earth tones. Today, she has brought with her a photograph, a black and white photograph, which is incredibly detailed.

She tells me that she has settled on this photograph, though she is not sure why. The decision was difficult. How does someone settle on one thing that defines some part of you? She goes on to describe the photograph. Framed by black, only a pair of wrinkled hands is visible. They are her grandfather’s hands. “They represent wisdom,” she says.

Sinead is a senior, though she is two credits behind and working hard to finish two correspondence school courses in order to graduate with her class. The fact that she is only two credits behind is quite remarkable considering she missed over a month of school during her junior year. Sinead suffers from a rare congenital brain disorder, which required a risky, invasive procedure to relive the pressure her brain stem placed on her brain.

As we conclude our first interview, she complains that she’s uneasy about the interview. She says she is a “very
I swear to God I’m like an Alien.
My words will just get lost on all these people.
Because I’m completely unsure of almost everything in my life.
And then I couldn’t help but cry.
I have no idea who I am.
I swear to God I’m like an Alien.

Social life (among the normals)
Because I don’t really care
I have a really hard time making friends
Everyone’s just so normal
They hate this person and this and that.
Drama stuff, you know.
And all their boyfriends are cheating on them.
And I don’t really know what to say
Because I don’t really care.
People will talk about their favorite music
I don’t have the same taste in music
And I don’t really know what to say
Because I don’t really care.

Ingenuine connections (false connections with a word that’s not a word)
I hate the color orange.
I take that back.
I like it when it’s in nature,
I don’t like it when it’s not in nature.
I chose that color to represent ingenuine people
Ingenuine people are a weird loose shape
Oh, it’s difficult
To know when someone’s being ingenuine
Or not
Ingenuine people are a weird loose shape.
It’s hard to tell if the media and their friends
Sculpted them to be that way
It’s difficult to tell.
I had a lot of friends       2/175-176
I was surrounded by tons of people  2/176-177
I was constantly doing things       2/177
Going out.                         2/178
When you have that many friends    2/192-193
You can’t really be genuine.       2/193
Orange.                            2/42
I felt alone.                       2/179
I started being more conscious     2/221-222
And thinking “What and the hell am I doing”  2/222-223
With all these people I don’t really like”  2/223
I decided to be an introvert       2/282
This path of loneliness           2/83
Is silver                         2/92
It’s shiny                         2/92
I hate the color orange           2/42

Alien from an Alien Family. Here My Troubles Begin

A photograph of my grandpa’s hands  1/7
A dark room,                        1/8
A candle.                           1/8
Wrinkles in his hands               1/9
Wisdom,                             1/15
I think.                            1/15
It’s not his hands that make him wise,  1/13-14
But his years.                      1/14
I hope one day I could be as wise   1/30
And live as long                    1/30
As my grandpa                      1/30
My Nonnie (grandma) was the matriarch of our family  3/62-63
My family would fight,              3/85
She would keep the peace           3/86
She was funny                      3/58
A Massachusetts accent              3/83
Rawger or Lawra or pahk the cahr   3/86
She was funny                      3/86
Nonnie used to sing to me          3/73
    is a pretty girl                3/76
    and Nonnie loves her very      3/76
much- chuch chuch chuch            3/76
She was the stitching that held us all together  3/62-63
She left her body on November 19th  3/168
She was the stitching that held us all together  3/62-63
My family is just very hot         3/264
And cold                           3/264
Up and
Down
Dramatic pasts,
Hard for them to function
Like
Human
Beings
My mom is very
Up
And
Down,
Like everyone else in my family.
I live with my older two brothers
A fuck you fest
“Fuck you guys”
“How dare you say anything fucking like that”
There’s a lot of problems in my house
Problems that never get resolved.
My oldest brother is married
His wife’s family’s up on this pedestal
They’re the most amazing family ever
But
We’re superfucked up.
He’s right
I feel like an incomplete person.
It’s hard to
Focus
Or
Discover
Who you are as a person
When you have all these weird emotions about
What is it like to have a
Normal
Family.

The Suppression of the alien, a life of Anxiety

“Mom I think I’m going to get dreads”
“If you get dreads, you’re out of my house.”
Really.
A hairstyle
You’re going to kick me out of my house
For
A hairstyle.
Suppressed
Control
She just wants control
I’m a pretty good kid
I’ve never been drunk
Never been to a party
Still
When I hang out with my friends
Which I never really do
I never really hang out with anyone
“When are you going to be home?”
“Seven…seven-thirty”
“If you’re any later you’re going to be in trouble”
I haven’t hung out with anyone in a really long time
I do want to hang out
But when I actually make plans
And it’s almost about to happen
I get really anxious
Like I can’t
I feel like
Life’s
A mandate

Reading: a Guide for Fellow Aliens

I wish I was the character in that book
It makes a lot of sense
Lock me down like Lux
Suppressed by your parents
Life’s
Mandate
Over time
Freedom
Gain
With life there will be
Ups
And
Downs
Sometimes
The downs
Will last for a long time
It’s just the balance of nature
When
Something
Bad happens for that long
Something good will happen
Balance
Lionel tell this girl
To
Stay
Torment
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Emotions</th>
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<tr>
<td>To</td>
<td>2/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paint.</td>
<td>2/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The girl was ingenuine</td>
<td>2/52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paint</td>
<td>2/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The girl</td>
<td>2/52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>2/42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy the Kid</td>
<td>3/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3/24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prose memory</td>
<td>3/24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different styles</td>
<td>3/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different points of view</td>
<td>3/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paralyzed for quite some time</td>
<td>3/36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Nonnie to keep the peace</td>
<td>3/85-86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fighter like my family</td>
<td>3/336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumbled</td>
<td>3/315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All over the place</td>
<td>3/314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s a true story</td>
<td>3/316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fuck you fest</td>
<td>3/337</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What the Alien Saw and How She Responded

Life Lessons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The silver loner creates</th>
<th>2/71, 74</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A spiral</td>
<td>2/70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lionel</td>
<td>2/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paints</td>
<td>2/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The path of loneliness</td>
<td>2/83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A pure kind</td>
<td>2/76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She is rather ingenuine</td>
<td>2/50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torment the emotional universe</td>
<td>2/11, 118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple, pink, blue mauve, yellow, and green</td>
<td>2/113-114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>2/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like a</td>
<td>2/27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starry night</td>
<td>2/21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

| Billy the Kid             | 3/23    |
| Made me start to realize  | 3/41    |
| Life is never really what you want | 3/320 |
| When words are lost on people | 3/175 |
| When words are lost on people | 3/175 |
| Life is never really what you want | 3/320 |
| Made me start to realize this | 3/41 |
Billy the Kid

The Virgin Suicides

The colors
They’re all
Random
Like parents are
People gain freedom
Like branches on
The Tree of Life
The pink
And
The blue
Caught up
Opposing waves
Impaled
On the death fence
Of
A
Starry Night

The Alien and The Classmates

I swear to God I’m like an Alien
And then I couldn’t help but cry.
She left her body on November 19th
My words will just get lost on all these people,
I get really anxious
Everyone’s just so normal
But after I pulled my
Self
Back together
It was really good
To feel everyone
Everyone’s listening
To what I’m saying
And thinking about.
Comfortable.
It was really good
To realize
I’m not this little island
In the middle of the ocean
To realize
What other people have gone through,
Actually hear someone else tell you something
That I can really relate to
That was pretty profound to me.

Desiree rolls the sleeve of her right arm past her elbow. The scars are hard to ignore, extending, as they do, in jagged patterns that criss-cross her forearm. They are strange shade of white against the whiteness of an arm that has not encountered strong sun in some months.

They are hard to ignore, so I make a conscious effort to shift my gaze away from her arm to the papers she has brought with her. “I found these just a few minutes ago,” she says. “I was going to bring *Alice in Wonderland* . . . but this seemed better.” The pages are a series of quotes from a novel, *The Dairy of an Anorexic Girl* by Morgan Menzie (1993).

She tells me this is the book that taught her to be anorexic when she started reading it, and the book that taught her to feel better about overcoming anorexia when she finished. It was the basis for her “sick diary” a diary she kept to count calories, rail against her mother, and vent her anger of things she’s never completely understood.

A good student, Desiree is bright and funny and social. She does not present the outward appearance of a girl who has spent time in a “girls home” and struggled to gain control over issues with anorexia, substance abuse, and self-injury.
As we conclude our interview, she tells me she’s in a good place now. She lives with her best friend in a one-bedroom apartment they share. She is happy to no longer be keeping a sick diary.

**Desiree**

**Diary of a Pathway Girl**  
**June 12, 2008**

---

Today was pretty good.  
I went to school,  
Not much happened there.  
After school we came back to  
The house  
And had group.  
Mr. Scott was really late,  
So it was short,  
And boring  
And unhelpful  
Like usual.  
Then we went to the nursing home  
For a little bit,  
Mrs. Johnson died last week  
After we visited them  
I guess.  
She was really nice,  
That’s one reason  
Why I hate going to the nursing home.  
It’s so depressing,  
And it smells like old people  
And hospital.  
Ew.  
After that we went home,  
worked on homework and had dinner,  
Then cleaned up, took showers,  
And went to bed.  
A usual day  
In the life of a Pathway Girl.  
I hate this place so much.  
I hope I leave soon.  
Today I realized something,  
I have completely forgiven my dad.  
It didn’t all happen today,  
It happened very slowly over time,
But it’s done
With. I am not angry at him,
I don’t hate him,
I miss him
and I always will.
I don’t blame him
And I forgive him
For all the things he did,
Even if he meant to do them.
Well, I’m tired
And it’s hard to see
With this stupid light in here.
Goodnight.

Talking to Myself

Talking to myself
Two people having a war,
Me and my mind
Like mental slavery.
When I was anorexic
Calling myself ugly
Stupid.
Cutting myself,
Express myself,
Talking to myself.
Because I can usually work things out
Go through the event
Throughout the day.
I didn’t want to tell my friends,
About the things I was thinking
They would think
I’m crazy
Or tell my mom
I like talking to myself
That’s why I started writing.

Reading and Writing: My Mom, my Dad, and Betrayal

My mom’s the mom and the Dad
My dad killed himself
He was bipolar
And had problems with spending
He bought yachts and houses and nice cars
When he died we didn’t get any of it
It was sold because he had really big debts
We didn’t have any money 3/45
He betrayed us 3/46

My mom didn’t have any schooling 3/41
So she didn’t have any way to pay for us 3/41
We were going on vacation 3/100
My mom told us: 3/100
We moved to Michigan 3/100
A lie, 3/100-101
Betrayal, a recurring theme. 3/98, 106

The Diary of an Anorexic girl 1/6
I started writing a diary 3/1776-177
I wanted to lose weight. 3/177
So I followed certain things 3/178
Wrote my weird, sick diary: 3/178
How many calories that day 3/179
How much I weighed. 3/179-180
Cutting, sometimes that didn’t 3/182
Help 3/182

My mom read all my journals, 3/145
Verbal abuse. 3/138
My mom wasn’t trying to help 1/74-75
Making fun of me, 1/75
Attacking me. 1/75
In my room 1/86
Cutting myself. 1/86
My mom went through my music 4/104
Got rid of it. 4/105
My room 4/109
The door off its hinges 4/108-109
Prison 4/158

I guess everyone gets infected, 4/30
Infected by youth. 4/30
Caught up in the culture of the time 4/31
Rebel 4/165
Losing virginity 4/7
Ditched afterwards 4/114
Started sneaking out 4/148
Going crazy 4/162
Fighting with her all the time 4/152-153
Vent 4/161
Through writing 4/161
And 4/161
Drawing 4/161
Poems helped me look at things in a different light. I’m pretty happy with everything. I daydream a lot. Recovery is a slow process.

Reading

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

True stuff
I’ve been betrayed,
Like Garrett betrays Billy.
Funny,
Like the whorehouse:
Pretty funny
Like Historical
Betrayal

The Virgin Suicides

Virgins to life
Suicide is cowardly.
Running away,
Caught up in the culture of the time.
Maybe they were infected
Infected by youth,
Infected by prison,
infected by
Running away.

Responding

Life Lessons

A human sacrifice
Using
The flower,
Youth.
He caught her
Devouring her
Essence
Passionate towards her
Orange emotions
Broken.
The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

So there are gaps. 3/21
It’s helpful to have gaps 3/21–22
Because I know what to fill them with 3/22
Poems. 2/11

I remember 3/11
Like Billy the Kid 3/13
Everyone gets betrayed: 3/99
Garrett, 3/98
a move to Michigan. 3/99–100

The Virgin Suicides

They were locked in the house 4/14
Prison 4/158
Their dreams and aspirations 4/26–27
Infected 4/27
Like the 4/28
Tree 4/28
Infected 4/27
Cut down 4/27

Full of emotions 4/43
Drawing 4/38
A good outlet 4/39
When you were in 4/157
Lock down 4/157
With 4/157
No door 4/157

Classmates

I’m a lot louder than I thought I was 2/247
I’m usually shy. 2/249
Because sometimes, 2/228
It’s hard 2/228
To come up 2/228
With symbols 2/229

Virgins to life 4/239–240
I like that 4/242
Laura said it 4/242
It’s really good 4/243
Sometimes 2/228
It’s hard 2/228
To come up 2/228
With symbols 2/228

Sometimes 2/228
It’s hard 2/228
To come up 2/228
With symbols 2/228
When other people contradict me 4/136
Sometimes I like it. 4/136
I can see where they’re coming from. 4/137
Everyone sees it 4/137
In a different 4/138
Light 4/138

Zeke

Zeke approaches me in the hall. “I want to be in your class. I think I . . . I think it would be good.” I tell him we’re a week into the new trimester, and he’ll have some work to make up but that I’d be happy to have him. “Thanks. I can’t do any more Fu --- sorry I almost said . . . I can’t do anymore Civics worksheets.”

Zeke and I have gotten along well in the past. Partially, this relationship has developed by virtue of the media appreciation courses I teach. Zeke, who wants to work in our state’s growing film industry, enjoys film, and, above all, he enjoys “decoding” or “looking past” the surface images in films to find the “hidden meanings.” He and I have spent some time, after class or in spare moments during passing time discussing directors and films. Recently, he’s shown an interest in Oliver Stone and Natural Born Killers (1994), in particular.
This budding interest in film has added a refreshing and welcome dimension to a boy who is probably better known to most of the students and faculty as the boy who fights with his girlfriend in the hall, who regularly appears with scratches on his checks and neck from fights with her or from fights with other students.

Zeke

Bang the Drum slowly

I like technology 1/6
On a computer I feel really calm, 1/9-10
Focused. 1/10
You have to look past 2/10
The flat screen 2/21
To decode 2/21
Things. 2/21
It’s a place I’m okay with. 1/22

Kick the Drum: Girls and Emotions

I usually go for the girls who are 4/116
Openly different 4/117
It’s not like the average 4/120
I guess. 4/120-121
They’ll listen to the same music 4/117
Dress somewhat like me. 4/117-118

When my ex-girlfriends would hurt me 2/38-39
I would almost get enjoyment out of 2/39
Being around that person. 2/40
They hurt me, and knowing 2/40
They could hurt me again. 2/40
Give me energy, 2/43
Make me mad 2/42-43
Pushed me. 2/49
Made me feel better 2/49
Physically 2/49
And 2/49
Emotionally. 2/50
I keep surrounding myself with these women 2/162
Who make my emotions 2/162-163
Go 2/163
Crazy. 2/163
Why do I put myself 2/164
Around them? 2/164
Why do I want to bring myself pain? 2/165

When you’re with somebody 3/168
And everything’s going good 3/168
You always want to be around that person 3/169
But then, 3/169
Slowly, 3/169
If you have no trust 3/169-170
You start to go crazy 3/170
You can never climb out 3/174
It takes too long to climb out 3/174
So, you just stay in there 3/174-175
And that’s what seems to stabilize you 3/175
Which 3/175
I don’t think it’s 3/175
Very healthy 3/175
At all 3/175
But 3/169
You can never climb out. 3/169

Stomp the Drum: The Bully

When I was a little kid 3/99
And all my friends used to go 3/99
Shooting their beebee guns 3/99-100
I shot an animal 3/100
A bird 3/100
And I just kind of looked at it 3/102
I buried it 3/103
I felt so bad 3/103
I never killed an animal again 3/102-103

My first year here 3/127
I got bullied and picked on 3/127
It wouldn’t just be one person, 3/129
The whole class. 3/130
I didn’t know how to react. 3/132
The end of my second year 3/133
I met this kid 3/134
He showed me how to stick up for myself. 3/135
Fighting was amazing. 3/136-137
The tables had turned.
And then,
It turned me to a bully.

The principal told me we were popular
But it wasn’t because people liked us
Because they loved to hate us.
We would fight kids for no reason.
My girlfriend broke up with me
I looked at myself as written off.
I’ve been a lot nicer,
And it seems that it’s a lot better
To have people who like you
Than to fear you.

Looking at the Drum: Visual Imagination

I’d like to think I could make some
Good music videos
Or even
Short films.
Maybe make a career out of it

Growing up my dad was always in bands
And my brother and sister have always
Have been in music
That was a really big coping method,
Music’s kind of my escape.
Whenever I’m in my car or listening to my I-pod
I’m creating a music video of my own.

Imagination
Come up with images
Without
Closing your eyes
Piece them together.

Reading

You already know what you read.
The knowledge that you gain
From a book
You really have
Deep down inside you.
You just need a little help to unlock it,
And to understand it a little
Better.
Responding to Movies and Books

Life Lessons

Lionel
His paintings
Reminds me
Of my ex-girlfriend
The swirls
She used to draw
Sometimes it’s hard
To look past
Color and shape.

A music note
He would turn on music:
His emotions
Got them from the girl.
Painting
Would explode
Out of him.

Reminds me
Of my ex-girlfriend
These girls
Make
My emotions
Go crazy
After I watched it,
It got me thinking:
Why do I want
To bring myself
Pain?

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

Billy the Kid,
The fastest gun
In the West,
Too fast to be caught.
Maybe he didn’t want to live like that
He got into trouble,
And he was known as a killer
Famous
He can never stop
I would not want to be in that position:
Known as a killer

The Virgin Suicides

Replay that
And rewind it
In my mind
With music
Song popped
In my head
Def Tones
Rx Girl
Blue in the beginning,
give
The video clip
Some darker tint,
Some new life,
A darker feel.

I put that
Song
To that film clip
Because
The girl’s so young
And she’s the first to die
Changes everything
In their
World

I’m creating a music video
Of my own
That’s what I do
Every time I listen to music

Classmates

I’m usually just listening to everybody
Feed off each other.
They
Play off each other.
It helps you to understand a bit more
Today, Leon is happy or as happy as Leon ever really appears. His algebra teacher has agreed to let him come talk to me because, in her words, he has no shot of passing her class. This situation is not entirely unique for Leon. A bright student, Leon’s standardized test scores are extraordinarily high. Although, these test scores indicate a bright student, his ability to apply his brilliance in a classroom setting rarely shines through.

As he sits down, he thanks me for getting him out of algebra. When I ask him why he hates it so much, he brushes back the hair, which at times must completely obscure his vision, and calmly explains that he’s failing because he’s lost. “She shows you four different ways to do every problem. I only need one way, and by the time I start doing the work, she makes me stop and try it another way. Stupid. I can do it. Why should I stop and do it a different way? So, I’m done with that class.”

This is my first conversation with Leon. From the staff, I’ve heard Leon’s story before. A brilliant and polite student, my fellow teachers have told me is difficult to motivate him unless he is taking a test. On those, he does well, very well. Everything else, he’s less than enthusiastic about.
After our interview, I catch Leon in the hall. He tells me he thinks it will be interesting to take part in my study. But, he tells me, don’t expect too much. He doesn’t like to talk, and he’s sure nothing that he has to say could be all that interesting because he’s not interested in very much and is hoping to get through the class without talking . . . at all.

Leon

The Nomad

My dad’s moving back 1/71
He’s been on a break 1/71
I’m looking forward to that. 1/71

I’ve been moved several times 4/195
Been taken out of what I was used to 4/195
And thrown into something else. 4/196
This is my first house that we’ve 4/198
Lived in for more than two years. 4/198
Don’t get me wrong, 4/199
I like to move, 4/199
I like things changing. 4/199

Through sarcasm 4/307
I understand things better. 4/308
I’m a loner, to some, 4/346
A pissed off person. 4/346
I don’t really want to get 4/351
Emotionally attached. 4/351

Life is short: 4/312
I don’t really want to ruin it 4/312
By being serious. 4/312
There’s no point in going through 3/67
Life being depressed and serious, 3/67-68
Not enjoying life. 3/68
So, 4/355
With my sarcasm, even though it’s 3/340
Still funny, it’s mean. 3/341
It’s a cover. 3/71
So, if they get hurt 3/355
Or if they try to hurt me
It won’t affect me.

School

I’m a loner and a pissed off person,
Just a real angry person.
I guess you could say I used to be depressed
But not really.
Just like: I wanna leave.
Not like in a major way,
Just like exit.

I guess it was just a phase kids go through.
I mean I was failing school
But that was laziness.
I was too busy talking and playing around.
Ninth grade,
I didn’t do a thing.
I was in the office,
In-school suspension every other day
That didn’t help.
I skipped fourth hour for about a week
Then, I finally went back.
High will power
I guess you could say.

The School Day: First Hour Through Fifth

First hour I don’t know what’s going on
[the teacher’s] different everyday.
We’ll spend twenty minutes on one thing
Even though were supposed to being doing
Something else.
She says she’ll give us extra time
But then she’ll get mad about that
I should be passing, but
I’m probably not
[In second hour] I’ve been doing my computer work, And today I finished the flyer, but I had to do Some stupid backgrounds or something. So she said she said I was going to be marked down She blocked me from all my little game websites I think I did more work when I had the games.

Gym. I’ve already had that So I’m not going to worry about it

Z’s class Laid back He’s a good teacher And I’ve learned a lot I had Zarek in there So it was easy I had someone to talk to. We both thought the same about the class A competition between the two of us. He did all the work. I only did the tests I did better. It was a pretty easy class, A lot of elements going for me.

I heard a lot of bad things about your class A lot of writing. I’m not much for papers. It’s easier to get an understanding through poetry And well I’ve been trying to push myself. And you’re pushing me, So I push myself.

Reading

You’ll imagine certain scenes, Imagine yourself as a main character The story folds on, Tied together. A curious aspect of life When I’m alone at home And there’s not much Going on. It settles over me And I realize What’s going on, Memories, I guess Things lost
To the imaginative effect of the book 4/364

Life Lessons

The heart 2/25
Of a loner. 2/4
Insanity and sanity 2/26
That thin blue line, 2/26
Colors 2/29
What he thinks is their love 2/25
Drips into nothing 2/26

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

It’s harder than it looks 3/17
When they leave towns, 3/126
Good friends. 3/156
I’m not going to put up a fight, 3/171
Live life to the fullest, 3/222-223
Do what you can 3/227
Enjoy it until your time comes. 3/227
It all ties together: 3/310
Standing like 3/256
One weird picture 3/269
Full 3/269
Of nothing. 3/266

The Virgin Suicides

Watching them from the window 4/151
They’re part of their lives 4/157
Imagine 4/157
A little bit of meanness 4/158
The youngest started it 4/158
Not yet old enough to know pain 4/159
All the sisters 4/159
The same and different 4/159
Locked away 4/160
Away from the life they had 4/160
They talked to four boys of a similar age 4/160-161
Signaling them to come over one night 4/161
They came to take the girls 4/161-162
But they were taken by them 4/162

Classmates

Somebody else’s life could be different 1/153
Deep and important. 3/29-30

Like an idiot 3/39
Quiet, little to say. 3/27
Just kind of dead, you know, 3/397
Depressing. 4/29

I didn’t much care about it anyways 4/156
I’m too young, 4/321
And pissed off 4/357
To get emotionally attached. 4/362
If they get hurt 4/366
Or 4/366
Try to hurt me 4/366
It won’t affect me much 4/366

Somebody else’s life could be different 1/153
Deep and important. 3/29-30

Laura

Laura entered the class a week and a half late. She and her boyfriend had decided to take the first week off. When she approaches me in the hall, and asks if I’m ready for our first interview, I’m nearly blown over.

She opens her sketchbook, “her baby”, and begins talking about her sketches. She is in love with art, with writing, and basically anything that involves creativity. She parses out these phrases in deliberate bursts followed by equally deliberate pauses. During our conversations, nothing comes off her tongue quickly. Everything is measured.

Most of the renderings in her book are of figures. Some are realistic; others are stylized and resemble the figures one sees in *manga* graphic novels. As she talks, she flips disapprovingly
through the pages, pausing every now and again to correct a line or apply some shading to a drawing.

Laura, like Leon, has high test scores. Unlike Leon, Laura likes school and talks fondly about her classes. Her vocabulary is varied and elevated, and though the delivery of her words is slow, I never get the impression that she is searching for words but rather what the possible intention may be behind the questions I ask. More than a few times, she asks me to “extrapolate” questions from questions. Perhaps this is to be expected from a student who claims to be everything she’s not.

Interview Number/Line Number

The Girl from Different World

Softness touched me, 3/30
Brushed me, 3/30
Held me for a brief moment, 3/30
Then, 3/30
Nothing. 3/30
I opened my eyes and there was no one, 3/3-31
There was nothing, and yet I knew something, 3/31
Sweet and soft, had graced me. 3/31-32
So I reached out into nothing, 3/32
Searching for what had to have been there. 3/32
I felt something, 3/33
But it was cold and hard. 3/33
Not at all what I had remembered. 3/33
I tried to grasp it, 3/33
To bring it close, 3/33-34
So I would have something in all this nothing. 3/34
But when I did it pulled away and 3/34
My fingers slipped. 3/35
And so there was only nothing. 3/35
Time passed and still there was nothing, 3/39
I thought I might have felt that 3/39
What was soft and sweet again. 3/39-40
And when I did there was still nothing. 3/40
I feel alone in all of this nothing. The only company I have to console in
Is the haunting softness
That would touch me
And the coldness
That would always slip from my grasp.
I don’t know how long I have been in this nothing
There are no clocks here, no watches
To tell you the time.
For this is all nothing.
I’ve grown to love the nothing
And the softness that is altogether sweet
And the coldness that is hard.
Those feelings
So opposite and different,
Yet so much the same
And together,
Have become the only thing I look forward to.
The only thing I can feel.

I’m Everything I’m Not

I have an artistic passion,
Anything having to do with creativity.
I’m everything
But I’m still what I’m not
Everything I am
I’m also the opposite
So I can demonstrate
A whole array
Of different emotions and pictures.
In drawing
Each color represents
An emotion
Or part of me.
The beginning of a ripple
Life
Well-defined
And
Clean

To Feel Everything at Once

A new sensation held me today,
It was altogether sweetness and horror,
So cold and so warm, I heard it whisper to me,
In a dream,
In a voice so low it was if it wasn’t speaking, it said it was going to take me away from the nothing soon. I’m scared, I don’t want to leave the nothingness, for it does not hurt me. And yet, I can’t feel happiness either, I told it I was scared. So it held me, held me until all the nothingness started to wash away. I am very sleepy.

Nothingness is like insanity because you feel everything as once which makes it nothing when all of something is gone: you will always have nothing because everything that is a something can deteriorate or fade in time. Nothing is always there. Art

I tend to lean toward the pessimistic side in my writing and art. I think that dark things are the most beautiful because you can see every flaw in everything that has light on it. But when it turns to dark it can be beautiful because you don’t see any flaws. My rules

I think for my rules for life and death.
No one
Wins.
No one
Wins
Life.

Reading: Explore Another World

I read
To explore another world,
A world of my choosing
I pretend I’m the main character
It makes the book more intimate
I often get lost
I stop seeing words and start seeing pictures
I consider reading as seeing

Responding to Another World

Life Lessons

The girl’s usually blank
When she’s around Lionel.
Lionel,
Underneath is music
I can’t really describe.
His blankness,
A period of nothingness
Hiding underneath all that emotion.

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

When you see a rose
And it is beautiful
You are going to pick it
You don’t look for the thorns
You pick it
And as the red leaks down you fingers
You know that you are bleeding
You know it hurts
You drop the rose
The rose you wanted so badly
And as you tend toward your wound
You step on a rose
The beautiful rose you wanted
You see you stepped on it
And you know it is ruined
You see another rose
And it is beautiful...

I would describe it as perfect
The dark
And yet sometimes
Beautiful side of humanity:
The repetitive nature
Of humans.
Take life
When it hurts you
You get rid of it.

The Virgin Suicides

The centerpiece,
Life.
Well-defined and clean,
Gets contorted and spaced out
Until it’s gone.
Black.
Flat and smooth
Again.

Life can start out beautiful
In the very beginning.
But as soon as something
Affects it
We gain knowledge
That ruins
It.
And it will again be beautiful
When it’s gone,
Dead.
And it will
Stay
Beautiful.

Classmates

If the conversation doesn’t pique
My interest, I won’t say anything
But if it does I usually end up
Making someone mad.
So they knew to look at it
From a different view.
You can’t learn unless you have an open mind
Jordan sets his PS2 down and pulls the earpiece from his ear. This is a rare courtesy, as the gaming system is ever-present and always engaged in the spare moments after the completion of an assignment. He is new to the school and the only student involved in the study with whom I have no previous experience.

He enjoys talking, and when we begin our interview, he is happy to discuss all things that he is passionate about in life: writing, listening to music, movies, talking to friends and talking, talking, talking. Today, he wants to discuss a novel he is working on. The novel, he tells me, began in his geometry class, which has just concluded. The story came to him when he saw the breeze catch the hair of a girl in class. "It’s about her", he tells me. But it is also about his struggles with relationships.

He reads a little of the story to me. It is in the first person, and from the perspective of the girl. Jordan recently ended a bad relationship with his boyfriend. He’s only eight pages in, but he feels confident in this story. He tells me that
he hopes to finish it in time to submit it to PUSH, a publishing house that accepts manuscripts from authors under eighteen.

Jordan

My Step-Dad

My dad left when I was eleven             3/98
He was in an apartment                    3/99
Above where he works                      3/99-100
I told him                                 3/100
I hate him                                3/100
And                                       3/100
He scares                                 3/100
Me                                        3/100
And I don’t want anything from Him        3/100-101
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CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The students’ poetics demonstrate the unique ways in which they defined themselves within the context of a course centered on literature study. These representations address the first research question. In composing, examining, and discussing the poems with the students, I also attempted to uncover the conditions and challenges that allowed for or hindered the creation of space for self-definition, the second and third research questions.

A narrative analysis of the poems led me to trace these conditions and challenges through the cultural and linguistic resources the students utilized in the classroom. Interview data, observations, audiotaped class discussions and student artifacts allowed me to uncover the representational resources behind the students’ poems. Exploration of these classroom contexts revealed that the conditions and challenges the students and I had identified in their poems were anything but clear-cut. I also found that the category of condition and the category of challenge tended to become fluid and merge into one another. In short, the challenges to self-definition became the very conditions that allowed for self-definition.
In describing the ways in which the challenges the students faced became conditions for self-definition, I will present a series of stories that arose out of the data. I will begin with Laura’s story, a long touchstone story, represents one student’s journey through the literature and how she came to define herself through her responses to the literature. Although an extended account of any of the six students presented in this study could have yielded a similar narrative, Laura’s story captures the struggle of the self in conflict with itself and provides a clear example of the conditions and challenges underlying the exploration of self.

Directly following Laura’s story are five shorter stories that take up and tightly focus on themes explored in Laura’s story. Zeke’s story, for example, explores Grosz’s (2005) notion that passions, events, and others challenge and re-shape the way we understand the self. Desiree’s story and Jordan’s story describe classroom conditions that can open up spaces for self-exploration. Their stories illustrate how semiotic engagements with literature and interactions with alterity within the classroom can lead to self-definition.

Sinead’s story makes clear how anxieties arising out of encounters with fluidity challenge stable definitions of self, leading to struggles with self-definition. Finally, Leon’s story examines the impossibility of resisting the pull of
alterity, particularly the attempt to avoid its influence by devaluing the impact of the other.

The Impossibility of Definition: Laura’s Story

Laura’s work illuminates the conditions that helped create spaces for self-definition and the challenges encountered in attempting to fashion these definitions. I became aware of these conditions and challenges when we discussed her claim “I’m everything I’m not”, a sentiment that grew out of her response to the first text. In this claim, I saw an immediate concern with alterity.

As I mentioned in Chapter Four, Laura began the class a week late, and though she missed our discussion on using visual techniques to respond to texts, Laura took time to carefully respond to the course’s first text, the film Life Lessons (1989). When I checked with each of the students as they drew their responses to the film, Laura had no questions and worked diligently over the course of a class period to finish her sketch (Figure 5.1).
What I saw was a whole canvas of emotions. Just the reds, and the oranges, and the browns, which were more prominent when he was experiencing a lot of anger. That came through in his painting. I understood where he was coming from . . . I think because I like opposites. I’m everything I’m not but I’m still what I am, if that makes any sense. I mean that everything that I am, I’m also the opposite, so I can demonstrate a whole array of emotions. My emotions fight for control of my thoughts, my blank spaces . . . where divots of emotion --- you know --- sometimes collide. (Audiotape, 12/9/09).

I was curious about what exactly Laura meant by her comment “I’m everything I’m not but I’m still what I am.” In an interview, we discussed this concept and how it arose out of her viewing of and response to *Life Lessons* (1989).

MI: Do you think that Lionel or Paulette demonstrate any of the ideas you developed in your drawing? Laura: Well, for the girl, she’s usually blank when she’s around Lionel, but you can tell she’s still her because she has her paintings. And when she’s out with friends --- you know she’s happy for the most part. Then Lionel comes in and does something to (pause) she gets upset. And then after that --- you know --- there’s a period of nothingness.
MI: And Lionel?
Laura: I don’t think he has as much blank space as Paulette --- you know --- because . . . I don’t know . . . Lionel seems more emotional but at the same time he’s kind of blank. I can’t really describe his blankness. He’s really hiding underneath all that emotion (Interview, 12/9/09).

In the exchange above, Laura describes Paulette as either happy with friends or as a blank entity. Her blankness lasts only until Lionel upsets her. Laura’s understanding of Paulette’s sense of self operates according to the key components of blankness, interaction, and emotion. Laura’s concept of “blankness” is simply a blank area, where the self has the potential to activate based on its interaction and emotional response to others. In discussing her sketch, Laura described this activated sense of self as the “is”, a state of being defined by an emotional divot in the blankness. “The is. . . is (long pause) it’s that’s little divot of anger or something --- strong emotions --- the opposite of blank (Interview, 12/9/09). She defined the “not” as the self’s defiance of an emotional divot, a state in opposition to the “is.” “The not is kinda like calm. Blank space, you know, not real emotion, the other side of the is, I would say (Interview, 12/9/09). Though the self may become an “is”, the self is also in a state of “not.” For Laura, self is always in opposition with itself (Interview, 12/9/09).

In responding to The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (1970), through a multigenre project, Laura further explored the
role of the blankness in her multigenre response to the novel. She explored this idea first in a prose poem that opened her multigenre response.

Softness touched me, brushed me, held me for a brief moment, then, nothing. I opened my eyes and there was no one, there was nothing, and yet I knew something, sweet and soft, had graced me. So I reached out into nothing, searching for what had to have been there. I felt something, but it was cold and hard. Not at all what I had remembered. I tried to grasp it, to bring it close, so I would have something in all this nothing. But when I did it pulled away and my fingers slipped. And so there was only nothing. Time passed and still there was nothing, I thought I might have felt that what was soft and sweet again. And when I did there was still nothing. I feel alone in all of this nothing. The only company I have to console in this the haunting softness that would touch me and the coldness that would always slip from my grasp. I don’t know how long I have been in this nothing there are no clocks here, no watches to tell you the time. For this is all nothing. I’ve grown to love the nothing. And the softness that is altogether sweet and the coldness that is hard. Those feelings so opposite and different, yet so much the same and together, have become the only thing I look forward to the only thing I can feel.

After reading Laura’s prose poem, I wondered whether her sense of the nothing might be connected to her use and description of blank spaces: spaces that prominently figured into her response to *Life Lessons* (1989). “Laura’s first drawing was about blankness and divots. Her responses to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* are about nothingness. Is there something to this (RJ, 2/5/10)?

MI: Tell me about this piece.
Laura: Well . . . nothingness is like insanity because I feel that when you’re insane you feel everything at once, which makes you nothing.
MI: Are we back to the white spaces from your earlier drawing?
Laura: Yeah, I guess you could tie that together. I specifically paused at certain parts because there were spaces between the words.
MI: Like the way the words were arranged in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*?
Laura: Yes (Interview, 2/9/10).

In this expanded sense of blank space or nothingness, Laura moved away from her initial formulation of blank space as something existent and waiting to be acted upon. This poetic presentation of blankness described a space that is defined by the chaotic interaction of emotions, an interaction so overwhelming that “you feel everything at once, which makes you nothing” (2/9/10). Her new sense of self can be defined as an entity that is constantly being acted upon, a place where the interaction of emotional impulses are constantly turning and shaping the self.

That her development of this idea should come as a result of imitating the poetic style of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) is interesting. The poetry of the novel is often free against the page. Words are spread out and set in opposition against the fixed deadness of frontier photography, which in contrast to the lively poetic seems lifeless. This point becomes all the more interesting when I considered how
Laura’s visual representation of the space of nothingness extends the ideas she laid down in her prose poem (Figure 5.2). The drawing, which follows directly after Laura’s prose poem, provides visual grounding for her developing sense of the nothing. The girls in the corner, she later explained in an interview, represented the emotional interactions that define the space of nothingness (2/9/10). The correlative insanity is expressed by a clock that keeps fractured time. In this insane time, the hands of the clock navigate over the numbers 13, 3½, 6½, and 9¾. She would later explain that these “insane spaces” marked where “things became something”, existed, and then became
nothing (Interview 2/9/10). She connected this idea to her use of wavy-black lines, lines similar to the ones she used in her response to Life Lessons (1989) (Interview, 2/9/10). These lines are notable for their soft, almost permeable quality. When we discussed the picture, I asked her about why she seemed to favor soft lines.

Laura: Everything (long pause) and everyone, actually . . . is involved in the process of drawing or writing or (long pause) anything we feel or do. Hmm . . . the lines are a reflection of that. Things move and cross and touch each other.

MI: Like nothingness?
Laura: Um . . . some things always coming and going. Either way you’ll have (pause) be left with nothing.

MI: Why do you think that is?
Laura: Because everything that is a something can deteriorate or fade in time, but nothing is always there.

MI: Any of those ideas come out in the novel?
Laura: Yes. Well . . . I think my rules for life and death. My main rule actually does come from the book. That no one wins. No one wins life. I think that’s what lines have to say . . . the lines and the poem (Interview, 3/3/10).

In these examples, Laura retains the notion of the self as something in constant negotiation but refines the mechanism that mediates the negotiations. By moving from “divots” of emotion within a blank field of emotion to a space of nothingness defined by contrasting emotions, she has removed the possibility of stability within nothingness. Her concept of self suggests an unstable entity, an entity in which one’s sense of self rises while another sense of self falls. Like the soft black lines of
Laura’s drawings, an emotion is described as something that mars and permeates the others so that one moment is never purely divorced from the next.

This theme continued into Laura’s exploration of The Virgin Suicides (1993). In responding to the novel, Laura added a further idea to her understanding of the self as an unstable entity. Laura’s sense of self, to this point, had centered on the ways in which emotion, generated by interactions with others, contributed to the negotiation of self. Her sketches in response to the Virgin Suicides (1993) included a further consideration: events.

Laura’s first response to The Virgin Suicides (1993) continued the artistic motifs that began with her response to Life Lessons (1989). This drawing, like the previous ones, emphasizes white spaces adrift among soft black lines (Figure 5.3).
Laura explained to her classmates that this sketch was an effort to explore the impact of events on the development of a person (Interview, 3/3/10).

Laura: We all start out as beautiful in the very beginning, but something affects it like money, power --- even the fact that we gain knowledge ruins it. And from then on we are flawed. And we can only be beautiful again when we’re gone, or you know, dead. Then we’ll stay beautiful.

MI: How do you think you captured that?
Laura: Hmm . . . the centerpiece of the drawing is meant to represent life, and you can see how it’s well defined and clean. But, as you go out, it gets contorted and spaced out until it’s gone. The picture goes black. And that would be like after the ripples are gone the water becomes flat and smooth again. Beautiful, insane, beautiful again.

MI: The ripples are?
Laura: What happens to us (long pause) sorry I’m fuzzy this morning. The things we’re part of (long pause) Ever since mankind gained the ability to think thoughts and learn we were already on the way to being destroyed. Because everything we do or everything that happens hurts someone somehow (Interview, 3/3/10).

In this response, the lines shift away from representing something that is internal to something that is external, experience defined by events. This new conception of the lines arose out of her encounter with the novel. Laura’s connected the rippled lines of her drawing to the experiences of the girls. “I drew what I drew because the book was about love and death (long pause) like the ripples those are pretty much the oldest things I can imagine” (Interview, 3/3/10). Laura’s placement of the events of life (her ripples) along the concepts of love and death suggests the inescapable effect events have on the conditioning of the self, an idea Laura captured in her second drawing (Figure 5.4) (Interview, 3/3/10).
Laura’s second sketch is a portrait of Lux, one of the five Lisbon sisters, who commits suicide at the end of the book. This is the first of Laura’s sketches to present a figure rather than abstractions. Despite the switch to a figure, the character of the lines remains the same, soft, almost permeable. The left half of the face holds the peach color of Lux’s face, the blue of her eye, the redness of her lips, and the brownish hue of her
hair. The right side of her face is bereft of color and the lines of her face are less well defined. Laura explained her drawing arose out of a discussion she had had with Desiree (Interview, 3/3/10). Of all Laura’s drawings, this one best captures her evolving conception of the self, a point she would make clear in an interview.

I think the drawing says everything I’ve said before. The color fades as it changes to something else. This one . . . I drew it after talking to Desiree. She said in class that we’re all infected (long pause) infected by youth. I think it’s life we’re infected with. (Long pause) something we do or something that happens to us. . . moves over us --- you know --- changes us (Interview, 3/3/10).

For the first time, Laura took another student’s suggestion into account when discussing a response. I was quite surprised by this turn, which came near the end of the study. Through our discussions both in class and interview, Laura talked about her fierce independence, that she listened to others but rarely considered their opinions unless their readings of the stories seemed better than her own. It was interesting to me that Laura’s idea of the self, at the conclusion of our final interview, incorporated the opinion of a classmate. In her final view of the self, Laura described how she understood the mechanism behind the destabilization of the self, as such. Through representational resources and in interviews Laura described nothingness as the interaction of contrasting
emotions, the roll of events (her ripples), and the impact of others (her appropriation of Desiree’s concept of infection) on the destabilization of self (Interview, 3/3/10).

Laura’s story is remarkable in the ways that it agrees with Levinas (1969, 1998) and Grosz’s (2005) understanding of the self as something generated out of encounters with self and with other. Laura’s sense of self was generated by collisions between passions, events, and others. Her development is fascinatingly similar to Grosz’s conception of the subject as a process generated by drive to be other. “Life is precisely an incessant teaming, an ongoing movement to be more, to be other, to be beyond what is” (p. 82).

The multiple opportunities that Laura had to explore the self over time and through alterity created a definition of self that was overflowing and ongoing, conditions essential to her process of self-definition. Though she exhibited a sense of alterity at play early in the study with her concepts of “blankness” and “the nothing”, it was her experiences with texts and her imaginative responses that challenged her to revise and enlarge her understanding of the self in opposition with itself: “I’m everything I’m not.” While these semiotic engagements challenged her emerging definitions of self, the evolution of these challenges paralleled her efforts towards self-definition. In essence, the challenge of accounting for the self in conflict
with itself (alterity) pushed Laura to evolve in terms of how she approached both her responses to literature and her perception of the self.

Laura’s story is the story of passions, events, and others rising and falling only to blend together into new conceptions which rise and fall again. In her work, there are no clear lines or paths towards self-definitions: there are only blurry overlapping interactions.

The blended, blurry ways that passions, events, and others influenced the search for self-definition within the classroom are also visible in the work of the other students. In the next section, I will explore how these elements proved to be conditions necessary for engagement with the imaginary domain and a means for discovering self-definition, while also becoming challenges to this pursuit. Using examples from the other students’ work (which mirror the elements discussed in Laura’s story), I will discuss how these factors operated in the classroom to open up imaginary spaces for self-exploration.

**Events and the Other**

Laura’s story illustrated how the self develops out of the blending and blurring of passions, events, and others. Evidence of these forces also appears in the stories of the other students. A major theme of Zeke’s poem, for example, was his passionate responses to interactions with ex-girlfriends. Zeke
initially connected his emotional interactions with his ex-girlfriends to Lionel, the painter from *Life Lessons* (1989), a character who used the emotions of his female assistant as inspiration for his paintings. Like the painter, conversations with ex-girlfriends became a way for Zeke to access the aggressive impulses that allowed him move from one mode of being to another. He described candidly how emotional interactions with an ex-girlfriend distracted him from feeling “lazy” allowed him to “feel healthier” or “get something done” (Interview, 12/15/09).

“Well I had really, really wanted to go to this gym — a boxing gym — cuz I haven’t gone there in a long time, and I like to workout and stuff like that. I don’t know. I was planning on going but then I felt kind of lazy and didn’t want one to. Then, my ex-girlfriends called and started making me mad I just hung up with her and went. I’m glad I did because that gave me a push to go and made me feel a lot better: healthier, psychologically and emotionally” (Interview, 12/15/09).

Like Laura, Zeke made this connection between the experiences of the painter Lionel and himself through his visual response to the film, a drawing of a slice of key-lime pie (Figure 5.5).
Zeke’s choice of a slice of pie to represent the connection he felt between himself and the film’s main character might seem strange, and my initial reaction was to regard this sketch as an attempt to mock the assignment. Zeke had had a bad couple of days leading up to this sketch. He had recently broken up with his girlfriend, and had been very reticent in class. On the day the students presented their drawings, he refused to present. It was not until I interviewed Zeke that I was able ascertain why he had chosen to draw the slice of pie.

MI: Tell me about your drawing.
Zeke: Well I was just in a really bad mood. I was in a rush to draw something and the first thing that came to my mind was the key lime pie from *Natural Born Killers* (Interview, 12/15/09).

Zeke, who had a passion for movies, had discussed with me earlier in the term the film *Natural Born Killers* (1994). The changeovers from color to black and white had confused him, and
he asked me for an explanation. These changeovers often communicated a shift in point-of-view and allowed the audience to see from the character’s perspective. We discussed the film’s opening diner scene, and I mentioned to him that the color green, displayed prominently in that scene, was a symbol for the coming of violence. This discussion, Zeke explained, helped him “look past” the surface elements of a text to find symbolic and personal connections, a skill he applied to Life Lessons (1989) (Interview, 12/15/09).

The movie did kind of help me think about life in a different way because I took his perspective. What would I have done? Was that like me trying to get a nudge to go out and do something? Have I ever done that? I started thinking there’s been many instances where I just wanted to ride my bike but I was too lazy . . . someone made me mad, most likely a girl, so I just got on my bike and started riding. I just always want to be doing something when I’m in a bad mood (Interview, 12/15/09).

Zeke’s story, on one level, is about the self. Emotion and interactions with others push and pull and allow for the shifting of self. In this case, Zeke’s interactions with an ex-girlfriend allow him to move from a lazy state to a state of aggression or potential. Interestingly, Zeke’s state of laziness, like Laura’s sense of the nothing, is a space that requires interaction and emotion to engender action. Both Zeke and Laura discovered their understandings of self as something unstable and contingent upon emotion. Each uncovered their sense
of self through mediation. Laura reached her understanding of self by using art and poetry to reflect on texts. Similarly, Zeke’s key lime pie, a symbol of aggression from a film he admired, helped him to connect elements of his own emotional history to *Life Lessons* (1989). Zeke’s understanding of the key lime pie as a symbol for aggression helped him to identify with the character of Lionel, a character who, like Zeke, had used emotional interactions with women for the inspiration to do something (Interview, 12/15/09).

The ability to generate an imaginary domain for self-definition arose as a condition of approaching literature within the context of semiotic theory. This finding expands on the work of Smagorinsky and O’Donnell-Allen (1998), Whitin, (2005), and Wilhelm (1997) in exploring how mediation may help students connect imaginary spaces for self-definition. This finding also extends the work of Hull and Katz (2006). Their work suggested that mediation might help students discover new definitions of self; whereas, Zeke and Laura’s stories suggest that mediation opens up spaces for students to reflect on the mechanisms behind self-definition.

**Revision and Accessing the Other**

In Zeke and Laura’s work passion, events, and other blur and blend and find articulation through mediated responses to literature. The responses helped them to think about the ways
the self may shift across imaginative spaces shaped by alterity: interactions with passions, events, and others. Desiree’s work allows for a continued discussion of the influence of alterity as well as the ways in which literature study can create imaginary spaces. The intersection of these forces was evident in her poem, particularly in her theme of infection, a poetic idea that emerged out of her work with *The Virgin Suicides* (1993). Desiree responded to the novel by composing a rough draft sketch of the house in which the Lisbon girls, heroines of the novel, lived (Figure 5.6). Next, she completed an impressionistic painting of the house (Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.6. Desiree’s First Response to *The Virgin Suicides*
The rough drawing was done in a class period. Composed with colored pencils and crayons, Desiree was unhappy with her first effort (Interview, 3/3/10). She was especially frustrated with herself for forgetting to include a fence in the front yard of the home, the fence upon which the youngest of the five girls was impaled (3/9/09). However, one feature of her drawing sparked much commentary and controversy during class discussion (FN, 2/19/10). A tree stood in the foreground of her picture. The tree, she explained, stood for the elm tree that Cecelia, the youngest of the Lisbon girls, loved (FN, 2/19/10). In the novel, the tree became infected with Dutch elm disease and had to be removed. During the reading of the novel, the class made a connection between the demise of the trees and the demise of the neighborhood (Audiotape, 2/2/10). Desiree explained that her drawing centered on the idea of infection. She said the tree, for her, was symbol of infection, the infection of youth, the infection of suicide: a cowardly act (FN, 2/19/10).

This statement caused quite a stir in the classroom: a heated discussion, in which many students candidly narrated stories about friends they had lost to suicide (FN, 2/19/10). Desiree refused to reverse her position on suicide and defended it by identifying with the girls and sharing her own experience with suicide. Like the Lisbon girls, she had been “infected by youth,” and “rebel[led].” She had taken to writing in a journal,
her mom had gotten “rid of” her music, and she had experienced, like the Lisbon girls, the sense of feeling like a prisoner in her own home. “My mom read all my journals,/verbal abuse./My mom wasn’t trying to help/Making fun of me./In my room/Cutting myself./My mom went through my music/Got rid of it./My room,/the door off its hinges/Prison.”

In addition to the connection she made to the girls’ sense of imprisonment, Desiree also connected to the theme of suicide. “My mom’s the mom and the dad./My dad killed himself./He was bi-polar/And he had problems with spending/he bought yachts and houses and nice cars/When he died we didn’t get any of it/It was sold because he had really big debts/We didn’t have any money/He betrayed us.”

Desiree saw four themes from her life in the story of the Lisbon girls. These included: the theme of imprisonment, having a domineering parent, being infected by youth, and suicide (3/9/10). In her descriptive response to the novel themes cross over, as they did in Laura and Sinead’s work. “Virgins to life/Suicide is cowardly./Running away,/Caught up in the culture of the time./Maybe they were infected/Infected by youth,/Infected by prison,/Infected by running away.” In a second mention of The Virgin Suicides (1993), Desiree repeated the themes: “They were locked in the house/Prison/Their dreams and aspirations/Infected/Like the/Tree/Infected/Cut down.”
In both cases, Desiree’s words came back to the themes of imprisonment, of having a domineering parent (or the effects of having a domineering parent), of youth as infection, and of suicide. As was the case with Laura and Sinead, the genesis and later development of these themes sprang from her experience with others (her mom, her father, her classmates). This development agrees with Grosz (2005) who understood the creation of imaginary spaces as an entity arising out of one’s interaction with others. On another level, Desiree transacted with the literature through the “conflict or discomfort” that arose in the classroom as a result of her impassioned reading (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 226). The “conflict and discomfort” created in the classroom effected the revision of her rough drawing.

A week after the strum and drang that erupted over the rough drawing, Desiree finished her revision of the drawing (Figure 5.7).
This second effort, an impressionist painting, communicated the same images as her first composition but in a softer style, a style with no definite lines, the suggestion of soft brush strokes. She began explaining the softness of the painting by saying was “pretty happy with everything” (3/9/10). She realized that she had “completely forgiven” her dad some time ago and that she was “louder” in class than she thought she was (3/9/10). The softness, she said, seemed to come from a place where she wanted to soften the loudness with “a different
light," where those experiences were now “like a daydream” (3/9/10).

Desiree’s revision evokes her experiences with the other. Her father and her classmates played a determining factor in the choice of style. But the style itself is also of interest here. The choice of impressionism communicates a new layer of meaning that helps demonstrate how students can open up imaginative spaces through representing ideas through a variety of media, in this case drawing and painting.

Clear lines and sharp colors defined the first draft of the Lisbon house and front yard, and Desiree’s discussion of this picture was marked by an emotion that was immediate and loud. Her second draft communicated the softness of a memory that while still present and painful had given away to the sensation of being “pretty happy with everything.” This second draft is made all the more striking by the fact that it retains the same images, the same symbols of imprisonment, of having a domineering parent, of youth as infection, and of suicide.

The movement from an initial draft to a thoughtfully revised piece demonstrates how the semiotic concepts of transmediation and non-redundant potential play a role in imagination and self-definition. In her first draft, Desiree engaged with the process of transmediation and developed an image defined by distinct harsh lines, an image that allowed her
generate ideas about the novel and reflect upon the harsh realities of her life, realities she connected to the novel (Siegel, 1995). The impressionistic revision demonstrates the generative quality of the non-redundant nature of sign systems (Whitin, 2005). Her use of impressionistic techniques rendered the symbols as less immediate, less painful. Desiree’s story extends the work of previous studies by suggesting that, in addition to aiding students in generating responses to text, these semiotic principles may also help open imaginative spaces where students can explore the mechanisms of self-definition.

**Class Discussion: Creating Spaces for Investigation**

On one level Jordan’s poem is the story of a young man who is very damaged and very angry. The damage stems with experiences with an abusive father, self-injury, and sour relationships (Interview, 2/9/10). His anger emerges and takes its voice from these experiences. Like many students who endure such experiences, Jordan struggled to open up during large classroom discussions (Interview, 2/9/10). His hesitancy to share his story became a clear challenge to his attempts at self-exploration. Though class discussion began as an introductory opportunity for students to interact with each other, it presented a significant challenge for Jordan (Interview, 2/9/10). The evolution of this challenge paralleled his search for self-definition and became a crucial condition
for it. This story also suggests that the classroom teacher plays a role in guiding and supporting the student’s use of meditation as a tool for self-exploration.

The first several weeks of the course were sparked by lively fits of discussion but there was little sustained discussion. As I noted in my researcher journal, “It’s curious that the students have little to say in class discussion. Their conversations while they work are interesting and centered on their work. Is it this that’s making class discussion tired” (RJ, 1/27/10)?

I decided to shift my attention to smaller group discussions in order to see if they might work better. The shift was successful in creating spaces for the students to openly discuss responses to the texts. In an interview, Jordan described his experience with his small class discussion group. He explained how the comfort he felt within the group allowed him to read and discuss his intensely personal poetry. These poems were part of his multigenre response to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970).

MI: Talk about your discussion yesterday.
Jordan: It was weird. How about that?
MI: Weird?
Jordan: Cuz there is a part in here when it goes back to when I used to cut myself. Like this was just a couple months ago. And like I just like forgot about it. Cuz I don’t like to look on the past too much. Cuz it’s not exactly a happy past. But it’s just like so . . . so . . . like people would think that it would be like really hard
to talk about, which sometimes it is, but it wasn’t hard for me. Cuz I just kind of --- new people around me --- aside from Leon (long pause) so it made me feel comfortable.
MI: Comfortable?
Jordan: It was pretty emotional stuff. Yeah. Each word I wrote was emotional. It has a lot of powerful, emotional words.
MI: Did you talk about the book?
Jordan: Yeah. We talked about who affected us in our own lives (Interview, 2/9/10).

The extremely emotional nature of Jordan’s response, required a classroom environment that provided a sense of comfort, a safe place for Jordan to share and explore the emotional impact relayed in his response (Interview, 2/9/10). The response Jordan described centered on a multigenre narrative Jordan composed in response to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970). The response combined pictures, poetry, and short narratives to tell the story of the abuse he suffered at the hands of his father. The impetus of the response grew out of Jordan’s reading of the violence in the novel. In the figure of Billy the Kid, he saw a merciless bully who took delight in hurting people, a connection he made in his poetic titled “Revealing Bullets. ”From the point of no return my tears/Of fear/Burn through my sheers./I try to find the bullets scorn/Yet the tears of my everlasting door./Sheers hide beneath thy forefathers./Even when I say goodbye/It’s only how you take it in your eyes.”
In the poetic Jordan paralleled his image of his father with his image of Billy the Kid (Interview, 2/9/10). The connection between the two allowed him to connect his life with the theme of violence (Interview, 2/9/10). The safety he felt while talking about his response with the small group allowed him to explore an aspect of himself he had not considered prior to the discussion of his response (Audiotape, 2/8/10).

Jordan: After I heard Laura’s thingamajigger, I started thinking that her story or whatever it was and my poems are just basically saying I’m never going to have a certain kind of friend because of how my dad impacted me. Like I’ve had friends where I had to stop being friends for multiple reasons. So it was just one of them.

MI: Why do you think that is?

Jordan: Because of my emotional background. I can’t --- you know keep a relationship going. I’m always going to break down, move on (pause) because I’m going to think about my dad (Interview, 2/9/10).

Jordan’s realization about the “breakdowns” he experienced as a result of the emotional abuse he suffered while living with his father were occasioned by his interactions with his classmates (Interview, 2/9/10). Further, the “thingamajigger” referred to by Jordan was Laura’s prose poem about “nothingness” (Audiotape, 2/8/10). It is interesting that a story about the necessary insanity of emotions --- an insanity Laura understood to be the engine behind one’s shifting sense of self --- should be the piece that inspired Jordan to identify the ways his own emotional responses to others allow him “to break down, move
on”, to deploy some new understanding of self (Interview, 2/9/10).

Classroom talk, as Jordan experienced it, provided another important condition for students to uncover how emotional affect and the influence of the other can “break down” and create space for the self to become reflexive before “moving on.” It also provides further evidence of how the development of a challenge paralleling the exploration of self can become an engine for the creation of imaginary spaces for self-definition. By shrinking the size of the discussion the group, the teacher took a role in helping Jordan mediate between his response and the text, a move that helped to facilitate talk among the students and allow Jordan to become self-reflexive.

**Challenges: The Longing for Definition**

Sinead’s story offers insight into one of the major challenges the students faced in attempting to explore the imaginary domain: the desire for a stable definition. This longing appears time and time again her poem, where she describes her self as an alien, as cut off from normal people.

Of all her work, Sinead’s response to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) defines not only her longing for a stable definition of self but also the ways a challenge to exploration can become a condition for it. Sinead composed a multigenre piece as a way of responding to the theme of death
she saw in reading *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) (Interview, 2/9/10). Through the photographs, prose, and poetry she composed or selected for the piece, she attempted to approach death in the novel by approaching the death of her grandmother (Interview, 2/9/10). The multigenre piece, entitled *The Matriarch*, detailed the ways in which her grandmother held together her family. The holding together of the family was not an easy task. Each family member was “very hot/And cold.” They struggled to “function/like/Human Beings”, and their verbal dealings with each other often descended into “a fuck you fest.”

From Sinead’s discussion of death and her family, the concept of alienation emerged. “I swear to God I’m an Alien/And then I couldn’t help but cry./My words will just get lost on all these people,/Because I’m completely unsure of almost everything/In my life/I have no idea who I am./I swear to God I’m like an Alien.” Sinead connected her sense of alienness, her inability to communicate, and her instable sense of self to her encounters with others, her family (Interview, 2/9/10).

I live with my older two brothers/A fuck you fest/“Fuck you guys”/“How dare you saying anything fucking like that”/ There’s a lot of problems in my house/Problems that never get resolved . . . /I feel like an incomplete person/It’s hard to focus/Or/Discover who you are as a person/When you have all these weird emotions about/What it is like to have/A normal/Family.
Although Sinead traced the origin of her alienness, her inability to communicate, and her lacking sense of self to her emotional interactions with her family, she explained that these qualities extended beyond her family. “I have a hard time making friends/Everyone’s just so normal/They hate this person and this and that./Drama stuff, you know./And all their boyfriends are cheating on them/And I don’t really know what to say.” Her alienness, anxiousness, and inability to communicate, are derived from her emotional interactions and destabilized sense of self (Interview, 2/9/10).

Sinead connected these ideas to the figure of Billy the Kid. “Billy the Kid/Made me start to realize/Life is never really what you want/When words are lost on people/When Words are lost on people/Life is never really what you want/Made me start to realize this/Billy the Kid.” Sinead’s themes of alienness, loss of communication, and anxiety come through quite clearly. And these themes, indeed, echoed the character of Billy the Kid who is dedicated to telling a story that is impossible to tell (Interview, 2/9/10). “Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in” (Ondaatje, 1970, p. 20). Both Sinead and Billy are figures trapped in a maze, a maze whose solution holds an understanding of self.
The painful realization that emotional affect --- affect stemming, largely from her encounters with her family --- was a challenge for Sinead in that it did not allow her to see these factors as mechanisms driving self-definition as such. Rather, she saw these elements as impediments to a stable definition of self.

I’m unsure of almost everything in my life, so then I just don’t really know. I don’t know. I just like find myself thinking like today I feel pretty confident in who I am and then it’s like wait: I have no idea who I am. Like I get . . . like I still know what I stand for, but I don’t know who I am as a person (Interview, 2/9/10).

Sinead further expressed this idea in her poem. The use of the word alien throughout the poem emphasizes the theme of separation, from others and self. The alien also clearly communicates her displeasure with being tied to a sense of self that is elusive (Interview, 3/8/10). Although Sinead would not find comfort in the notion of an instable self, she would eventually find meaning in it.

When Sinead began her response to the Virgin Suicides (1993), she returned again to the themes of family and alienation. She particularly connected to the “suppression” of the girls by their mother. “The whole theme of suppression from your parents and stuff, so that in that aspect like I could relate to that . . . seeing how they reacted to that suppression was sort of shocking” (Interview, 3/2/10). She was speaking here
about the Lisbon sisters, who, in the novel, were taken out of school and shut up in the house after missing curfew. The sisters’ reaction to this “suppression” was to commit suicide.

Sinead responded to the “suppression” of the sisters by drawing a picture of The Tree of Life (Figure 5.8).

Figure 5.8. Sinead’s Response to The Virgin Suicides.

Sinead chose to privilege the Celtic image of the tree life in response to the suicides of the girls. In choosing this image, Sinead wanted to communicate her sense of life (Interview, 3/2/10). With the branches as symbols for the people we encounter Sinead explained, “I think that sometimes people really get caught up in relationships, and it sort of invests like everything they are into them, and they, perhaps, even lose
their being. You know” (Interview, 3/2/10). Though this seems a continuation of the theme Sinead stated with her response to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), she explained the Tree of Life could be a symbol for the loss of being.

The Tree of Life is --- it’s really important to me at least because I always remember --- I always try to remember, when things get really bad --- I always remember: it will (pause) I mean it’s a cycle, things happen and people do things but eventually everything will get better. So that’s one thing I try to keep in my head. That I find helpful. And then . . . just the different things that happen as well. They’re all just part of life (Interview, 3/2/10).

In the image of The Tree of Life, Sinead found meaning in the instability of the self by embracing the “cycle” of events, people, and the emotions which follow, she found meaning in the cycle, understanding it to be part of life that must be negotiated with.

In Sinead’s story, the fluidity of self in the face of alterity presented a discomforting challenge that arose and developed parallel to her exploration of self. This challenge, however, later became a useful condition, later, for self-definition. Mediation, while it did not unlock the maze and provide a smooth path to self-definition, it did aid in allowing Sinead a starting point, a symbol, to create imaginary spaces for self-definition.
The Challenge of Exchanging Private Worlds In Public Space

Earlier in the chapter, I mentioned the difficulty the students encountered in sharing their responses in a large group setting. Jordan explained that part of his apprehension stemmed from feeling less “safe” to share in a large classroom setting. Sinead felt that “her voice was lost” in large group discussions (Interview, 2/9/10). Though these were certainly challenges to sharing private worlds in a public space, shrinking the size of the group was only a partial fix. Leon, the most reticent of the six students, had little to say in both large and small group settings (FN, 2/8/10). His reticence lay not with safety, as it did with Jordan, nor did it lie with fearing his words would be lost, as with Sinead; rather, Leon feared the emotional give and take of classroom interaction, a theme emerges throughout his poem.

MI: What defines you in general?
Leon: I’m a loner to some a pissed off person.
MI: Loner?
Leon: I am and I’m not. I don’t really want to get emotionally attached.
MI: Why?
Leon: So if they get hurt or try to hurt me, it really won’t affect me as much.
MI: Why?
Leon: So things don’t affect me, so I can get through life and live day by day, so things don’t really affect me (Interview, 3/2/10).

Such a stance does make difficult the proposition of accessing the emotional interactions that allowed the other students to
create and explore the ways in which their encounters with others and their emotions created their instable senses of self. Leon’s challenge, however, like Sinead’s difficulty with the concept of the instable self, was rooted in discovering and investing in a meaning for his actions and for literature (3/2/10).

Throughout the study, Leon elided discussions of emotional meaning by offering only passing comments. He might, for example, cite some element of the text as interesting, but he would never admit that some element of the text impacted him emotionally. Although this distancing surfaced in discussions with other students, Leon’s insistence on avoiding discussions of emotional connections in favor of what he found interesting were more pervasive through our discussions as well.

MI: Is there some part of it that is particularly meaningful to you?
Leon: Pretty much the whole book is interesting to me. (Interview, 11/23/09)

MI: What meaning do you find in the book?
Leon: Ah . . . I’m interested in that kind of thing. More of an interesting hobby (Interview, 11/23/09).

MI: Was there anything that was meaningful to you in the film?
Leon: I mean there’s interesting things but nothing that connects to me (Interview, 12/3/09).

MI: Was there anything you found meaningful in the novel?
Leon: I thought it was an interesting book. And the genres in the book tied together. (2/10/10)
MI: "You’ve talked about plot connections. Why do you think those are meaningful?"
Leon: It’s interesting how everything connects at some point. (2/10/10).

MI: Did you take any meaning out of the novel?
Leon: It was interesting. (3/3/10).

In all cases, when the question involved talking about something meaningful, Leon responded by discussing what he thought was interesting rather than what was meaningful. This conversational strategy allowed him to avoid dealing with the texts on an emotional or personal level (RJ, 2/22/10).

When the students were preparing their final responses, I decided to let Sinead and Leon work in the school’s media center. I decided on this after noting the earlier success that the students had had with small group discussions. I wondered if minimizing Leon’s social interactions would help him to move beyond his avoidance strategies and make an effort at connecting to the text on an emotional or personal level.

After escorting Sinead and Leon down to the media center, I told Sinead and Leon that I wanted them to spend the first part of the hour talking, talking in particular about any memories or people they knew that helped them to understand the novel. To my surprise, Leon volunteered a story about a girl he dated who had issues with self-injury.

I kind of understand/But if you look into their lives/they’re really not that bad./I dated this girl/She was a cutter./She lived in a nice place,/She
loved her little sister,/Her step-dad was a little strict,/But what parent isn’t?/I don’t know,/One of those things,/A phase, I suppose.

While I was pleased that Leon volunteered the story, I noticed too that he immediately rendered the story meaningless by rationalizing, “one of those things.” I asked Leon to consider whether there might be any connection between the girl in his story and one of the characters in the novel. He said he would try.

The following day he shared a poem he had written. The poem centered on the climatic scene of novel. The scene, one that is pregnant with emotional intensity, details the attempt of the boys to free the girls from their home, where they have been locked up for several months. Sadly, the boys arrive too late to free the girls, and images of horror ensue as the boys discover that each of the girls has taken a turn at suicide. “Watching them from the window/They’re part of their/lives/Imagine/A little bit of meanness/The youngest started it/Not yet old enough to know pain/All the sisters.”

There is little here in terms of real engagement with the literature. I wondered if this might have something to do with Leon’s penchant for undercutting the meaning of a story. I asked him if he thought that his poem captured the scene. He admitted that he thought the poem was not very good, but that he was having trouble “understanding why they killed themselves” (FN,
2/22/10). I asked him if he would be comfortable working with Sinead on the revision.

Sinead saw potential in the poem as a statement about meanness, and she circled the word meanness (FN, 2/22/10). Leon, begrudgingly, accepted this suggestion (FN, 2/22/10). He reworked the poem.

Watching them from the window/They’re part of their lives/Imagine/A little bit of meanness/The youngest started it/Not yet old enough to know pain/All the sisters/The same and different/Locked away/Away from the life they had./They talked to four boys of a similar age./Signaling them to come over one night,/ They came to take the girls/ But they were taken by them.

This second, longer draft follows the descriptive pattern of the first but adds an emotional edge. In the poem, emotional attachment becomes a cruel trap. The boys, thinking they are about to liberate the girls, are “taken” by a mean trick perpetrated by the girls. I discussed this change with Leon, and asked him to talk about how he came up with the idea of the final line. He explained that what happened the boys was “bound to happen” because they had become emotionally attached to the girls (FN, 2/24/10). Leon’s desire to be emotionally distant, a barrier that had interfered with his ability to connect to literature, helped him to connect to the literature (Interview, 3/3/10). Again, this stands as another case where a challenge that evolved parallel to his self-definition merged and became a
condition for it. Leon’s story also demonstrates the impossibility of avoiding the other. Throughout the study, he attempted to avoid describing the ways interactions with other impacted him emotionally. Alterity, however, is not something that can be ignored, a point that comes through in his final, mediated response to a text.

The stories of Zeke, Desiree, Jordan, Sinead, and Leon, suggest that the challenges the students confronted never really receded from view but developed parallel with their unstable conceptions of self. Like the lines of Laura’s art, emotions, interactions with others, revision, and the fear of instability, and the fear of connection melt into and merge to form conditions for self-definitions only to re-emerge, destroy, and complicate one’s briefly held sense of self.

**Summary**

This chapter has traced the conditions and challenges that evolved parallel to the students’ efforts towards self-definition. These stories allow for multiple opportunities to engage with and represent interpretations to literature (and alterity), generative talk in a small group, opportunities for revision, and guidance in mediation as well as distancing/reflection. Some of these conditions provide for the evolution of challenges into conditions (multiple experiences over time and their role in adjusting the processes of self-
exploration for individuals). These stories arose out of data that revealed that the conditions the students embraced cannot be understood as something apart from the challenges they faced, that the challenges themselves are conditions necessary for self-definition.
CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This study arose out of a call in Hull & Katz (2006) “to create learning spaces where individuals and groups can define and redefine themselves” (p. 71). The findings of this study answered this call by showing how the interplay between the concept of alterity and literature studied within the context of semiotic theory could open up an imaginary domain for self-definition. Through the students’ poetic descriptions of self-exploration, they captured the fluidity of self-definitions as well as described the conditions and challenges of engaging with alterity and with mediated responses to literature. They discovered that the lines defining self were anything but clear and that the development of their greatest struggles paralleled and contributed to the discovery of uncomfortable and seemingly necessary conditions for self-definition.

This chapter endeavors to follow the blurry lines of experience that fashioned the students’ poems. By navigating these lines, I will seek to pull together the ideas expressed by the students, show how they relate to the braid of theories that served as a conceptual framework, and demonstrate how the interaction between the braid and the students create issues requiring further investigation.
The Braid Revisited: Alterity and Self-Definition

The conceptual frame of this study was fashioned through the braiding together of theories from several disciplines. Beginning with the metaphorical thread of alterity, the braid took on threads from critical theory and feminist theory. The invocation of critical theory, particularly the concept of fluidity within a situated social context, helped establish the principle that the self could become fluid or shift in the face of difference (Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Luke, 2003). Li (2002) connected the concept of fluidity to alterity and its conception of the self as ever shifting, an entity made fluid through its interaction with the other. The connection by Li (2002) is supported by the findings of this study.

The braided concepts were reflected in the students’ engagements as they attempted to explain the effects of the other on their own senses of self. For one participant it was her family’s proclivities toward violent argumentation that left her with the feeling that she was an alien, a feeling that translated to and was enlarged by her social life at school. For other participants, the act of sharing with others helped to shape their responses and readings of texts. These interactions led to the destabilization of self, movements towards uncertainty. This movement towards uncertainty supports the assertions of Li (2002) by demonstrating the fluid nature of the
self in the face of the pressures of others within situated social contexts.

Though it is clear others and social contexts have an impact on the fluid nature of the self, threads from feminist theory add a dimension to the concept of fluidity. Grosz (2005) admitted the impact of these forces, though she used the category of events in place of social context. Despite this similarity, two threads from her thought extend the concept of fluidity. The first of these threads is the dimension of difference. For her, difference did not mean identity, as it did for Luke (2003). Rather, difference was defined by the infinite subjective differences separating one person from the next. The interactions erupting out of the collisions of difference defined her second thread, the imaginary domain. This domain, of collision and difference, allowed for the imagining or re-imagining of self.

The impact of infinite difference on the creation of imaginary spaces of self-definition is pointed to in the findings of this study. The participants explored the impact of these forces on self-definition. Some of the students discovered the influence of these forces through their mediated responses to texts. Others connected central characters in the texts, and still others responded to situations and themes within the texts themselves. The students understood these connections and
subsequent responses to be the products of past, highly emotional interactions with others. The identification of these highly emotional experiences helped the students to choose modes of response and symbols that represented and explained how their interactions with others served as imaginative ways to create space and to describe the impact of difference on their senses of self.

The students’ imaginative explorations of the impact of difference (others) on their senses of self suggests Grosz’s (2005) conceptions of difference and the imaginary domain can create generate spaces for self-definition. Additionally, their stories allow for a discussion of the ways the threads taken from the transactional theory of reading (Rosenblatt, 1938) and semiotics can open up imaginative spaces for self-definition.

The students’ transactions with texts arose out of discomfort, an all too familiar connection with a text’s character or theme. In making these connections they brought their “personality traits, memories or past events, present needs and preoccupations” to their understandings of a text (Rosenblatt, 1938, pp. 30-31). These connections became verbal through mediation. The students’ used these representational resources --- their sketches, poetry, multigenre pieces, etc. --- to define and redefine the ways they understood literature and themselves. These findings, similar to the New London Group’s
(1996) concepts of Design and Redesign, also correspond with findings in Albers (2007), Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen (1997), and Whitin (2005). The findings also extend the work of Hull and Katz (2006) by suggesting that mediation can open up imaginary spaces for self-definition through encounters with difference while at the same time making students aware of difference and imagination as mechanisms for self-definition. Taken together these findings support the metaphorical braid that served as a conceptual frame for this study by suggesting that it provides a way to describe how the interplay of alterity and literature study can create imaginative spaces for self-definition.

**Conditions and Challenges to Self-Definition**

Earlier, the image of blurry lines was invoked. The image is suggestive of the experiences of the students and the ways they described the conditions and challenges they faced in attempting to define themselves. Some of these conditions and challenges were environmental, while others were personal, but, regardless of origin, these conditions and challenges tended to overlap, blend, and run parallel to their self-explorations. Because of this blending effect, the sections that follow will discuss both the conditions and challenges that emerged.

To this end, the discussion centers on two areas that the students understood to be conditions and challenges to the
exploration of self. The first section discusses the role of imaginary space and emotion, and the ways these concepts opened up avenues for understanding even as they presented challenges to some of the students. The second section centers on collaboration and negotiation with the other to craft meaning. The challenge in this case was not the other as such but gaining the requisite trust necessary to emotionally interact.

**Imaginary Space and Emotion**

Though mediation provided the students with a framework for responding and connecting to texts, it was the blurry imaginative spaces operating within the framework of mediation that allowed for exploration of self. Entry into this space was a grave challenge for some, Leon, for example. For others, like Laura, existence within this space was their *raisons d’être*.

These imaginary spaces, as the students’ defined them, were of a liminal quality, spaces always on the verge of the possible. Zeke described his spaces as “laziness” while Laura described hers as “blankness” or “nothingness.” Regardless of how the students described them, a common feature to all was emotional struggle. In these spaces, the students confronted, wrestled with, and reflected upon their emotional encounters with others and implications of those encounters. The resulting reflection on the experiences within these spaces was the
production of the possible, a finding that agrees with Grosz (2005).

For Jordan, these spaces opened the possibility “breaking down” and rebuilding his sense of self. Desiree discovered the mutability of the past and the possibility of happiness within the “day-dream” nature of once immediate emotional traumas. Leon, for whom entry into these imaginary spaces was a challenge, discovered he feared hurting or being hurt by others.

Regardless of whether a student struggled or found entry into his or her imaginary domain with ease, patience with the process was of primary importance. For students, like Leon, patience in finding or accepting the possibility of an emotional connection with a text was key. The adoption of an emotionally distant posture may challenge entry into the imaginary domain, but, as Leon discovered, strong identification with a character of a theme paired with patient and persistent interactions with classmates can lead to an emotional response and the discovery of an aspect of self --- in Leon’s case, a discovery of his fear of emotions.

In each of these cases the evolution of the challenges and conditions the students encountered paralleled their movements toward self-definition. The evolution of Laura and Zeke’s liminal spaces, Leon’s emotional fears, and Sinead’s alienness all evolved along lines parallel to the students’ explorations
of self. This finding suggests that acknowledgement and reflection upon the development of these conditions and challenges creates spaces for self-definition.

Collaboration: Alterity and Negotiating Meaning

A necessary condition and deliberate challenge to the creation of imaginary spaces is collaboration within the classroom. Throughout the study the students were enriched by the ideas and empathy of their classmates. The students found the courage to confront and reflect upon the emotional impact others had had on them through discussion groups. In many cases, the students created space to reflect upon their emotional encounters with others by reading and discussing their responses to small groups. The comfort they found in the seriousness with which the group took toward empathetically listening to each other allowed the students to develop a connection to the group, one that created spaces for reflection and the drawing of new conclusions about their work.

Comfort was essential to this spirit of collaboration. Initially reticent, the students explained that all too often their words are lost in the chaotic world of classroom discussion. The students explained that classroom chaos can have two negative effects on the creation of imaginary spaces. First, the disquieting notion that one’s voice may be lost cuts students off from honest discussion of the emotional impact of
others. Second, those who do share their emotional encounters cannot hope to expect creative feedback from half-interested listeners. The findings of this study suggest that small group discussion can create spaces for collaboration and reflection so long as a sense of openness and empathy define the group.

**Implications**

This section will address three implications emerging from this study. The first of these is the viability of alterity as concept for opening up spaces for imaginative spaces for self-definition. A second implication lies with the exploration of the imaginary spaces, the invisible subjective worlds of high school English students. A third implication arising from this study is the use of poetic representation as a research methodology involving English language arts classrooms.

**Alterity as a Vehicle for Self-Definition**

It is significant that this study employs the concept of alterity rather than identity. Although identity, e.g., racial, ethnic, or otherwise, can certainly be a strong component of one’s sense of self, this study suggests it is valuable to consider that alterity, that which make us infinitely different from each other, is not only our racial/ethnic heritage but also the subjective stances that separate self from other. And just as Luke (2003) reminded us that the marginalization of racial or ethnic minorities limits the power of those differences to
transform the self so too does the denial of difference (or
alterity) limit the ways the self may come to define or redefine
itself (Grosz, 2005).

According to Badiou (2001), infinite alterity is quite
simply what there is. Building from this point in Chapter Two,
this study suggests, the “is” of alterity is quite sufficient
for not only finding connections to literature, but for creating
spaces for definition or redefinitions of self. By grounding
English instruction in the theoretical concept of alterity,
educators can provide students with infinite avenues from which
to construct connections between self and literature that are
neither limited nor irrelevant to their senses of self.

Imaginary Spaces

The privileging of imaginary spaces and their exploration
by high school students lends another view to the question of
self-definition. Critical theorist like Lalik and Oliver (2007
and Luke (2003) have focused on identifiable (if socially
constructed) categories like race, gender, and ethnicity and
their role and self definition. These factors, while important,
restrict the exploration of the self to spaces defined by
racial, ethnic or gender categories. Focusing on the ways
infinite alterity can open up imaginary spaces can help
researchers and teachers liberate the inner, invisible worlds of
their subjects and students. By honoring these invisible worlds,
teachers and researchers can become more aware of and better meld their instruction and research aims to the ever-shifting and sometimes contradictory forces that structure the subjectivities of the students, a benefit Rosenblatt (1939) acknowledged in her rebellion against the New Critics. By allowing students explore their mediated responses to literature and to reflect upon the ways in which those responses are products of emotions, events, and others, teachers can create opportunities for students to engage with imaginary spaces through their interactions with alterity.

Poetic Representation

Poetic representation allows the voices of the participants to be “hearable in ways that a conventional prose account does not” (Tonso & Prosperi, 2008, p. 18). It was out of a desire to make the students’ voices hearable that poetic representation was chosen as a methodology for the presentation of this study’s primary findings. An extension of this desire was the need to capture the students’ journeys towards self-definition. To this end, I wanted “to give prominence to human imagination and agency” while at the same time preserving the emotional import the students’ invested in their work (Reissman, 1993, p. 5). By allowing the students’ to compose their poems, I felt I could achieve these goals while minimizing researcher bias.
However, as the study evolved, the students took ownership of the process of composing the poems in unanticipated ways. These ways strengthened and enhanced the benefits of poetic representation as a methodology. As a result of their contributions, these six diverse poems cast light on complementary --- and often overlapping --- aspects of the research questions. And though it cannot be claimed that these poems were entirely free from the influence of the researcher, the findings suggest new opportunities to grant agency to research participants. In attempting to do this, further research is needed to forward approaches that place the voices of participants at the center of studies.

Questions for Further Research

Much of the discussion in this study has centered on using mediated responses to text as a tool for opening up spaces for self-definition. While this and past studies have shown how these mediated responses can create spaces for self-definition, little work has been dedicated to the what types of emotional/imaginative spaces may emerge out of diverse modes of response. The findings of this study suggest further research is needed to address the ways varied modes of response affect imaginative spaces for self-definition.

Another area that requires further research arises out of this study’s use of poetic transcription. Though the students in
this study were granted the freedom to compose their own poetics, the question of agency lingers. Many of the students found paths to self-definition through their visual responses, yet these visual elements received attention only through their associations with the students’ poetics. This arrangement leaves open the question of the role of visual elements in research methodology. Why should it be the case that linguistic forms, poetic transcription, should be presented as primary findings and visual forms as secondary? Do we, as researchers, need to begin developing methodologies that designate visual representations as primary and verbal representations as secondary? These and other questions might aid in opening further imaginary spaces for self-definition.
APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The questions listed below guided the interview, but that the interviews were not bound by them.

FIRST INTERVIEW: To develop a baseline understanding of how each student defines him or herself and how literature, or other forms of media, or other people may have played a role in developing that definition. Students will be asked to bring a book or piece of media that is meaningful to them.

- Could you read (or describe) what you’ve brought with you?
- How does that piece make you feel? Could you tell me more about...?
- In what ways does that piece relate to some part of you? Could you elaborate?
- In what ways do you think that piece defines some part of you? Could you tell me more about...?
- In what ways do other form(s) of media relate to some part of you?
- In what ways do you think those media forms define the way you think about yourself? Could you tell me more about...?
- In what ways have experiences with other students in English class impacted you?
- In what ways have those experiences you’ve described defined the way you think about yourself? Could you tell me more about...?

SECOND INTERVIEW: To explore their experiences with others in the class, their semiotic engagements with text, and in what ways they feel these class experiences have impacted their definitions of self.

- Describe your experience with watching Life Lessons.
- In what ways did you capture that experience in your response? In what ways did the experiences of Lionel, Paulette, or one of the other characters in Life Lessons bring to mind something you’ve experienced? Could you tell me more about...?
- In what ways did that experience impact the way you think about yourself? In what ways does the experience of
watching *Life Lessons* change the way you think about yourself? Could you talk about…?

- Describe your experiences with watching and discussing the film with your classmates. In what ways does that experience you’ve just mentioned stick out from other experiences?
- In what ways did your classmates challenge, complicate, or facilitate the way you viewed the film? Could you tell me a little more about…?
- How did the students respond to your response? How did you feel about their responses?
- In what ways do you feel you’ve realized something about yourself having watched the film, spent time with your classmates, or responded to the film in the way you have?

**THIRD INTERVIEW:** To explore their experiences with others in the class, their semiotic engagements with the course literature, and in what ways they feel these class experiences have impacted their definitions of self.

- Describe your experience with reading *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*?
- In what ways did you capture that experience in your response?
- In what ways did your choice of a response strategy impact or shape your experience with the novel?
- In what ways did your classmates challenge, complicate, or facilitate the way you read the novel? Could you tell me a little more about…?
- In what ways did the experiences of Billy or one of the other characters in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* bring to mind something you’ve experienced? Could you tell me about more about…?
- In what ways did that experience impact the way you think about yourself? In what ways did the experience of reading *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* change the way you think about that experience? Could you talk about…?
- Describe your experiences with reading and discussing the novel with your classmates. In what ways does that experience you’ve just mentioned stick out from other experiences? Could you tell me a little more about…?
- How did the students respond to your response? How did you feel about their responses?
• In what ways do you feel you’ve realized something about yourself having read and responded to the book and spent time with your classmates?

Fourth INTERVIEW: To further explore the students’ experiences with each other, their semiotic engagements with literature, and their definitions of self.

• Describe your experience with reading The Virgin Suicides.
• In what ways did you capture that experience in your response?
• Talk about your choice of the response strategy. In what ways might it have challenged, shaped, or facilitated the way you think about the novel?
• In what ways did your choice of a response strategy impact the way you think about yourself?
• In what ways did the experiences of the boys or girls in the Virgin Suicides bring to mind something you’ve experienced? Could you tell me more about...?
• In what ways did that experience impact the way you think about yourself?
• In what ways did the experience of reading the Virgin Suicides change the way you think about yourself? Could you talk about...?
• Describe your experiences with reading and discussing the novel with your classmates. In what ways does that experience you’ve just mentioned stick out from other experiences?
• In what ways did your classmates challenge, complicate, or facilitate the way you read the novel? Could you tell me a little more about...?
• How did the students respond to your response? How did you feel about their responses?
• In what ways do you feel you’ve realized something about yourself having read and responded to these books and spent time with your classmates?

Fifth INTERVIEW: To explore the student’s poetics and member check my narrative analysis against their intentions in the poem.

• How would you describe this poem? Could tell me more about...?
• What words or phrases are particularly powerful to you?
• In what ways are those words or phrases powerful to you? Could you tell me more about...?
• In what ways do those words or phrases define the way you think about yourself now? Could you tell me more about...?
• In what ways, did you favor one transcript over another?
REFERENCES


This qualitative study explored how six secondary English students imagined definitions and redefinitions of themselves through encounters with self and other within the context of semiotic engagements with literature. A conceptual lens for exploring these imaginary spaces was fashioned by the braiding together of current trends from philosophy, critical theory, feminist theory, literary theory, and semiotic theory. These braided theories guided the research design. This conceptual frame allowed an investigation of the ways the interplay of alterity, the radical difference between self and other, and literature study created imaginary domains where the students could fashion definitions and re-definitions of self. Over a twelve-week period the students read and responded to texts
within the context of semiotic theory. Data collected included: field notes, observations, student artifacts, and interviews.

Poetic representations described the fluidity of self-definitions that emerged in the context of the literature study. These poetics made the voices of the students’ central to this study. Composed by each student with guidance from the researcher and comprised entirely from excerpts from interview data, the poetics served as the primary findings for this study. The six poetics revealed unique journeys of each student’s exploration of self. A narrative analysis of the poetics revealed that the challenges to and conditions for the exploration of self blended to create and sustain imaginary spaces within which students could explore the fluidity of self-definition/ redefinition.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT
MATTHEW ITTIG

Father Isaac grew up in abject poverty in Nigeria. When he was a boy, he told his mother that he wanted to get to the place where the books end. This story was relayed to me as an after comment to a homily one Sunday morning. Being young when I heard this story, I had visions of this place, a shining city where long division was but a dream. I remember very clearly when he left our parish on a leave of absence to fulfill his promise to his mother. I remember too when he returned. I asked him if he made it to the place where the books end. He smiled and patted me on the head. Half a week later he left the parish to accept a tenure track position in the philosophy department of a university whose name I no longer remember. I have given a great deal of thought to that smile and that pat on the head. It was an acknowledgement of a kindred naiveté that we shared at that moment.

Of course, the books never end. They are the conversation pieces that hold our professions together. They inspire conversation and are born out of our frustrations, our passions, and most assuredly our encounters with others.

It is out of a desire to participate in rather than escape the world of books that has made the process of writing this dissertation possible.