

THIRDSPACES, TACTICS, AND BRICOLAGE:
POSTMODERN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE
COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

By

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SIGNED: _____
Claire Lauer

DEDICATION

To my friends,
who read drafts and provided invaluable comments and support that rescued me from the most convoluted of times.

To my parents,
who told me I could succeed at whatever I pursued in life, ,who supported me in so many ways, and who are the only ones I know looking forward to reading this dissertation.

To Roxanne, my chair, mentor, guide, and friend,
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who never fail to inspire and teach me.

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, Claire Lauer proposes a spatial-metaphorical model for exploring and communicating the self in composition. She uses the concepts of Edward Soja's Thirdspace, Michel de Certeau's tactics, and Turkle and Papert's bricolage as lenses through which to analyze and understand the spatial-metaphorical self-constructions that students in her classes built in the virtual reality of the MOO. These lenses reveal a new kind of agency, one that finds power in complexity and refuses reduction. Through their sites, students show themselves to be comfortable with the unfamiliar and the ambiguous, but also able to adapt, change shape, and see the *I* as an *all*—as an infinite sum and ever-changing total. Lauer argues that offering students the opportunity to construct themselves spatially and metaphorically disrupts their assumptions about identity and provides them with new ways of expressing their postmodern subjectivities—of speaking to and about their ever-shifting proximities to the people and events in their lives.

Lauer argues that recognizing the complexity of identity facilitates a recognition of the complexity of culture and communication, and shows how identity construction assignments can thus serve as models for larger knowledge exploration and construction. She concludes by arguing that the analysis and production of new media in the composition classroom is essential to the continued goal of composition instructors fostering critical engagement in the classroom. As an extension of identity investigation, such engagement should be a cornerstone of first-year composition and does not have to be at odds with the more practical work of preparing students for their academic careers. In fact, it facilitates the more practical work instructors do in composition because it allows students to see the constructed nature of all discourses and become aware of how we both compose and are composed by the texts we encounter.

I. Revisiting the Student Subject in Composition

Imagine, for a moment, that you are walking through a long hallway lined with rooms, in what appears to be a college dormitory. But this is no typical college dorm, you realize as you glance at the strange names listed on signs above each doorway. The names describe such mysterious places as “Spiritual Kingdom,” “House on Paper Street,” “Complete Darkness,” “As of Now,” “The Long Closet,” “Island of Shame,” “Open Road,” and “Pool of Light.” Not quite sure what lies beyond each of these doors, you decide to enter the next one you see. The sign above the doorway reads: “I-10 East.” You step inside and read,

“Today I woke up sucking on lemon.” Radiohead's eerie "Everything in its Right Place" is playing on the radio. You are driving. An endless road takes you mile after mile, rest stop after dirty rest stop, closer to the space between your two homes, [...] and [...]. Here, in the ambiguous darkness, you are none. You are a citizen of the world, a stranger - an intruder, with your headlights for eyes and the blowing wind for a soundtrack. You look to your right, and see the person you love best staring off into space in a moment right out of David Lynch's "Lost Highways". The backseat, full of your fellow crusaders, has long fallen silent. You decide to pause in the desert and take a look at the stars, unmarred by lights from either city. Someone pulls out a pack of cigarettes and passes them around; there are no second-hand smokers here. The stars look close enough to touch, and

you begin to hear music as the others talk softly and mill around. You can't shake it from your ears, and you begin to realize that this part of your journey might have to be alone. And all you have to do is close your eyes.

You close your eyes momentarily, and when you open them you notice “cigarettes,” “stars,” and a character named “HannaBarbara.” You take a closer look at each, starting with HannaBarbara:

HannaBarbara

"You may say I'm a dreamer/ but I'm not the only one (John Lennon)." I'm the biggest cynic, and the biggest romantic. "I wear my scars like the rings on a pimp/ I live life like the captain of a sinking ship (Atmosphere)." My life is a constant bout with social self-preservation, but I strive to remain swaying on that edge - there is no god but my own desperate spontaneity. I worship at the altar of carpe diem. "It's so easy to laugh at yourself/ When all those jokes have already been written (Beck)."

The blend of lyrics and reflection leave you wondering who or what this HannaBarbara is. Your attention then moves to the cigarettes.

Cigarettes

You're a smoker without a cause. What is it in your coddled suburban life that makes you so eager to destroy yourself? As you take a drag, you savor the heady feeling of nicotine entering the system, hijacking the healthy oxygen do-gooder molecules.

You feel drawn further into this scene, and look up to notice the stars.

Stars

Maybe it's just an optical illusion, but you become more and more convinced that the stars are within reaching distance. You stretch out your arm, and make a grab for one. You are startled when a glowing ball comes away in your palm, sticking to it slightly. Blinded by the light, you feel the star with your fingers. You tug on an edge slightly, and are shocked when it unravels in your hands, revealing just a piece of yellow crepe paper...and rather dirty, at that. The light dims after you unfold the star, and inside you see another piece of paper, telling you, "Other people are waiting for cues from you."

"That was in the fortune cookie I got last week at Panda Express!"

You cry out, and disgustedly roll up the star once again, which seems to be mildly snickering at you. You quickly throw the star back, and it jumps to its place at the head of the Big Dipper - in good shape, but flickering slightly.

The music in your head transitions from delicate harmonies to a relentless futuristic bassline ala Clockwork Orange...dum..dum..dum DUM dum..dum..dum..dum DUM, and you twirl around to find yourself in a smokey flashing chamber, or as most call it - Club Freedom.

This site is just one example of spatial identity construction created online by a student in my freshman composition class. Rather than having students relate their sense of themselves through narration, I instead encouraged them to construct their identities spatially, in this case, in the virtual realm of the U-MOO.¹ Spatial self-construction provides students with an opportunity to explore their assumptions about what constitutes identity and to articulate the heterogeneity that characterizes their postmodern subjectivities.

Offering students opportunities to explore their postmodern subjectivities has been tacitly denied in composition classrooms. In his book *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, Lester Faigley argues that despite the existence of a condition of postmodernity in the last half of the twentieth century, and the emergence of postmodern subjectivities in students, instructors assign essays that knowingly or unknowingly require students to occupy a modernist subjectivity. Over a decade has passed since Faigley's book was published, though not much has changed in the field of composition and in the practices of teachers with regard to exploring identity in the classroom. In his 2004 book chapter "The Database and the Essay," Johndan Johnson-Eilola challenges the assumption that "We understand reading and writing subjects as ongoing, contingent constructions, never completely stable or whole. In short, we're at ease with postmodernism" (199). In fact, Johnson-Eiola argues,

While we live in a time of contradictions and contingency, we often fail to recognize these features in the worlds we live in day-to-day, in our

¹ "MOO" is an acronym for "Multi-user domain, Object Oriented." U-MOO is a pseudonym

classrooms and offices. We tend, despite all of our sophisticated theorizing, to teach writing much as we have long taught it: the creative production of original words in linear streams that some reader receives and understands. (200)

Later in this chapter I will present several reasons why our classroom practices have not adapted to our seeming “ease with postmodernism,” and why the continuation of a modernist subjectivity in the composition classroom is problematic. But to provide a context for these arguments, I’d first like to offer a brief overview of the historical transition from a “modernist” to a “postmodernist” subjectivity.

Modernist subjectivity is derived from what Lyotard calls the modernist “project,” describing the larger philosophical construct that dominated Western thought from the Enlightenment until the mid-twentieth century. As an overarching cultural consciousness, Modernist ideology embraces the idea that progress will lead to universal human emancipation. More specifically,

The progress of the sciences, technologies, the arts, and political freedoms will liberate the whole of humanity from ignorance, poverty, backwardness, despotism. Not only will it produce happy people, but, thanks to education in particular, it will also produce enlightened citizens, masters of their own destiny. (Lyotard “Ticket for a New Stage” 81).

Lyotard presents socialism as an example of a modernist project in that its supporters subscribed to the idea of universal emancipation through their declaration of the rights of the worker. Rather than liberating humanity, however, the Stalinist movements of the

twentieth century proved guilty of committing wide-scale atrocities against humanity. Stalinist Russia was able to commit its atrocities under the guise of progress toward a socialist republic (Lyotard "Memorandum on Legitimation" 56-57).

What also challenged the viability of the modernist project was the way in which scientific and technological development evolved to become its own independent force, acting to determine human need, rather than occurring in response to it. The status of the subject as user of technology has been complicated by the rapid and unrelenting development of new technologies, to which the subject must continually respond (Lyotard "Note on the Meaning of 'Post-'" 78). Advancements in communications and transportation technologies that began in the mid-twentieth century paved the way for the emergence of a postmodern subjectivity. Technologies such as the telephone and television, commercial airplanes, as well as more recent technologies such as the Internet, mobile computers, and cell phones bring the diverse cultures of the world closer together and create an instantaneous stream of information and images that subjects must process and respond to. In his article "Social Saturation and the Populated Self," Kenneth Gergen argues that face to face interaction has been replaced by multiple other forms of technologically-mediated communication that allow people to traverse cultural and geographical boundaries without limit, expanding a person's community ever outward. Gergen argues that the self has become saturated by what has become a relentless exposure to information, ideas, cultures, and images. This exposure contributes to the instability, multiplicity, and fragmentation that characterizes the postmodern subject (25).

The electronic technologies that mediate people's exposure to information have also radically altered the consciousness of the postmodern subject. Marshall McLuhan writes:

Electronic circuitry is an extension of our central nervous system, [and] profoundly involves men [sic] with one another. Information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously. As soon as information is acquired, it is very rapidly replaced by still newer information. Our electrically-configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition. We can no longer build serially, block-by-block, step-by-step, because instant communication insures that all factors of the environment and of experience co-exist in a state of active interplay. (63)

The breakdown of boundaries between the subject and electronic technology is one that Donna Haraway argues has allowed for the emergence of a "cyborg" reality. Haraway's cyborg is a

hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction [...] mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting very fruitful couplings (150). The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self – this is the self that feminists (and everyone) must code. (163)

Haraway argues that it is our responsibility to engage in this blurring of boundaries to counter the dangerous traditions that have previously limited the self, including the “tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the production of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other” (150). A cyborg reality counters such traditions in how, as cyborgs, we exist without origin and without identification with nature or the organic family structure. Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism (176).

A cyborg reality coincides with what Baudrillard argues is the loss of the real, or more specifically, the loss of any relationship between representation and reality. Baudrillard argues that we are in a state of the “hyperreal.” Instead of image representing reality, image distorting reality, or image masking the fact that reality does not exist, we now live in a world where image has no relation to reality whatsoever, but has instead become its own reality. It is a “generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1).

Composition’s Love Affair with Modernism

The emergence of a postmodern subjectivity in the late twentieth century is largely acknowledged by the intellectual and philosophical community, including composition scholars. Yet as Faigley shows, composition instructors on the whole promote a modernist conception of the self in student writing. Instructors reveal their

investment in modernist subjectivity through their preference for essays that appear as though they are produced by unique individuals, with privileged insight into their own inner motivations and desires, and who exemplify honesty and originality (Faigley 111).

Faigley uses Ihab Hassan's list of Modern vs. Postmodern characteristics to show how the characteristics listed in the modernism column coincide most closely with what composition instructors' value in student texts. Hassan's list includes:

<i>Modernism</i>	<i>Postmodernism</i>
romanticism	paraphysics
form (conjunctive, closed)	antiform (disjunctive, open)
purpose	play
design	chance
hierarchy	anarchy
mastery/logos	exhaustion/silence
art object/finished work	process/performance/happening (14)

It is common for instructors to emphasize the need for essays with logical organization, including a strong thesis statement that communicates the purpose of the essay, followed by points that support the argument. Instructors often advise students how to establish a credible ethos, as an author who is qualified to speak on the topic in question and as one who can show a certain "mastery" over the subject matter through research. A student's work is not usually valued as a work-in-progress, but instead it is made to stand on its own as a final product to be evaluated and measured. And although the concept of "process" is listed in the postmodern column, in fact, Faigley argues, "while composition

studies has professed to value process, it is not process for its own sake, but rather the process of teleological development toward a product” (14).

Composition’s disciplinary function originated in response to a modernist need for teaching students about the workings of language and to help students manage the demands of higher education and corporate life (Schlib 178). Composition’s competitiveness and economic viability within higher education is dependant upon the need higher education has for the services that composition offers. As universities are funded less and less by state legislatures, they must cut costs and find outside revenue streams for support, including raising tuition, pursuing corporate grants and sponsorship, and streamlining their curriculum to achieve a more focused specialization. The University of Arizona is a land-grant institution, supported in large part by funds appropriated by the state legislature. Because of billion-dollar state budget deficits over the last several years, the legislature has made substantial cuts (3-5% per year) to the operating budget at University of Arizona, prompting University administrators to raise tuition as well as eliminate or merge a variety of programs in an effort to achieve greater institutional efficiency. In order to endure the least possible cuts to the English department’s already downsized budget, our department hired its own consultant to produce a report that would show how vital the department is, economically, to the University (including how many students we serve and how much funding we are able to generate from tuition dollars). Nonetheless, University administration is looking to cut costs, programs such as mine have been required to justify their requests for continued funding by the services they provide to University students and by their own economic

viability. One way a department can better ensure their economic viability is by focusing exclusively on the production of academic discourse in the classroom, in lieu of other forms of writing, such as the production of non-traditional texts or experimental forms of personal exploration that would give students more opportunity to challenge the established ways of knowing and communicating in our culture.

In addition to a department's need to prove the economic value of composition to the larger university community, composition instructors hold tightly to the modernist notion of the subject because it is simply more "teachable." Diane Davis argues that in fact, the larger field of composition

has been shortsighted and rigid, trusting in its own discourse of mastery and silencing and/or ignoring what it is incapable of appropriating. When the stable self exploded and the "universal foundation for knowledge" crumbled, when the discreet partnership between "knowledge" and power was exposed and the linguistic ground of "rationality" was dis/covered—composition instruction quietly continued *to do what it had always done*, as if its goals and motivations had not been tremendously problematized by what had been going on outside its own house.... Within the typical composition classroom, a writing for futurity, an extremist writing that pushes the limits of knowing and explodes thinking's border zones is sacrificed for the sake of "teachability." *Composition*, it's time to admit, is a control freak. (8)

Like Davis, Victor Vitanza argues that the field of composition has the strong will to control language—to systematize it, be an authority over it, and teach it to students (140). Although these ends seem noble, “informed by a set of assumptions that (democratically-capitalistically) value heterogeneity (in the name of the “individual”),” they really just expose “a reactionary devaluing of heterogeneity through the homogenization of heterogeneity (as mass society)” (141). Vitanza cites Lyotard’s concept of the “mercantilization of knowledge,” in which “knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange” (qtd. in Vitanza 142). Instructors raise the economic value of their students by passing on the will to control language, and teaching them the tools to use language toward their own ends. This encourages a modernist subjectivity, inducting students into a homogenous community that values reason and power over desire (142).

And yet, instructors’ own economic realities contribute to their desire for “teachability” as well. Almost all first-year composition courses are taught by graduate student teachers or adjuncts, not tenure-line faculty. And although workload issues for graduate students and non tenure-track instructors is outside the scope of this dissertation, there’s no doubt that in the busy graduate and non-tenured worlds of those who teach composition, the most “teachable” pedagogy is that which is least taxing on the instructor’s time and energy. It is a pedagogy that will take as little prep time as possible, will require no outside technologies, and will be most agreeable to the department and goals of the larger institution.

Allowing economic, institutional, or workload issues to further a modernist subjectivity in the classroom may be understandable, but it is problematic. Encouraging a modernist subjectivity does not come without consequence. It is not a “neutral,” or non-ideological act. Berlin argues that all teaching is ideological, and that no instructor is free of that responsibility. In his 1988 essay “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” he argues that “rhetoric can never be innocent, can never be a disinterested arbiter of the ideological claims of others because it is always already serving certain ideological claims” (477). By furthering a modernist subjectivity in the classroom, instructors teach a contained perspective of the subject while making invisible all other perspectives. Kenneth Burke and Paul De Man have argued that a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. When instructors see the modernist subject, they do not see alternatives to that subject. When they encourage the idea of a stable and autonomous individual capable of self-emancipation, they deny the possibility for other selves to exist and obscure the dangers of the modernist project.

The modernist subject maintains its stability through the exclusion of otherness. Judith Butler as well as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have all have argued that there is “no subjectivity without repression, no illusion of coherence without negation” (Davis 38). The task of maintaining a stable, coherent subject requires the exclusion of anything that challenges the cohesive whole of the individual. Butler shows us how categories for gender are based exclusively on perceived biological differences between sexes. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler claims that our current model of gender is based on the binary sexual categories of “man” and “woman” (5). If one is “woman,” one cannot be

“man,” and the stability of each category is achieved by each embracing their separate and distinct characteristics and negating the characteristics that define the other. Based in sexual difference, these categories seem natural and all-encompassing, and lead people to believe that there is no other option for gender outside of the sexual differentiations of “man” and “woman” (6-8). Believing that it is possible to choose only one category—one idea of what it means to be an “individual”—squashes the possibilities for heterogeneity in the self and allows for only one self to emerge where there are many.

Exploring the Self in Composition

Composition is fraught with teaching practices that rely on modernist notions of the self. This is most obviously apparent in the nature of the personal writing assignments teachers give to students. Faigley argues that personal writing assignments primarily create selves “that achieve rationality and unity by characterizing *former selves* as objects for analysis – hence the emphasis on writing about past experience rather than confronting the contradictions of present experience” (Faigley 129 – author’s emphasis). This practice furthers the assumption that the self can be coherent and contained, understood and fully examined from a detached vantage point, and cancels out the prospect that the self is heterogeneous and multiplies without limit.

There have been pedagogies that suggest alternatives to the personal essay and more traditional ways of exploring the self (see Alcorn, Davis, Rouzie). Yet often, new ways of exploring the self actually further a modernist subjectivity, revealing how deeply instructors value the modernist subject. Greg Ulmer put forth a multi-textual approach to

student self-exploration in his textbook *Internet Inventions: From Literacy to Electracy*.

Ulmer presents a series of assignments as part of a new genre of text that he calls “mystory.” He claims that one of the goals of general writing classes should be to provide students with “models of self-knowledge for living the examined life” (5).

Ulmer’s students develop “widesites” in which they reflect on their relationship to and experiences with four institutions: career, family, entertainment, and community.

Students compose a variety of texts throughout the semester (including websites and micro-narratives), culminating in the “mystory” which is an explication of the “guiding image” of the self that each student has discovered after examining their collection of widesite texts at the levels of image and sensory detail (rather than levels of meaning and theme). One student’s mystory is that of a “stick man,” another finds her mystory to be that of a highway, while a third student’s mystory is expressed in the image of a lock.

Having students create widesites provides them with ways of “inventing” the self through a variety of texts and contributes to Ulmer’s goal of fostering an electronic literacy in students, an “electracy” that is grounded in invention. However, reducing those texts to a single “guiding” image that characterizes an *a priori*, identifiable self, may ultimately further a modernist subjectivity. Ulmer suggests:

Everyone’s life manifests such patterns: every person possesses a wide or guiding image (actually an interrelated set of four or five primary images) if only in a potential state, as a disposition or propensity. Moreover, all the elements contributing to the pattern of “being”—the state of mind—

expressed in the image of wide scope *are in place by the time a person reaches the age of eighteen.* (18 – emphasis added)

The concept of these patterns being “in place” by the time students enter college is alarmingly deterministic. Moreover, the assumption that students will find a pattern or “guiding image” that is present in each of their wide-site texts suggests that the texts students create are not so much a collection of diverse selves, but instead are mini-representations of a single self. Finally, Ulmer asks students to reduce their multiple wide-site texts into one “guiding image,” one self, which reduces the diversity and heterogeneity of the self to a stable, static core.

Supporting this modernist subjectivity even further is what Ulmer describes as a “sense of illumination” that most students come to at the discovery of their “guiding image” (18). Ulmer creates a situation in which students are able to “find” themselves by reducing their heterogeneous elements down to a manageable core. This approach reflects what cultural theorist Iris Young calls a “culture of logic” that pervades identity construction in Western culture. Young characterizes this logic according to several traits that configure the self as something that can be “identified, counted, measured” and as something that seeks to reduce our plurality of selves to a single unifying principle, in an attempt to flee from the “sensuous particularities of experience” and repress the “play of differences” that constitutes the postmodern subject (239). In the broader social context we cannot fully appreciate the “difference” of others until we come to appreciate and understand the heterogeneity inherent in our own selves.

Fostering this understanding and developing ways for students to “confront the contradictions of present experience,” provides instructors with the opportunity to relinquish some control over their teaching, loosen their expectations, and play with other possibilities for identity construction. Diane Davis argues that instructors must engage in “turning teaching arse upwards” and teach by “supposing we don’t know” (223). Only when instructors relinquish their will to control the truth and act as the distributors of knowledge in the classroom can they begin to entertain the possibility of a postmodern approach to pedagogy. This pedagogy would not be about

a writing that stabilizes identities but one that b-l-o-w-s minds [.]. A writing that puts finitude into play and unceremoniously shatters what Cixous calls “the eggshell [that] we are (*Three Steps* 63). A writing that costs us a myth...but then grants us life. (235).

The myth is the modernist subject that has dominated composition pedagogy for long enough. The life is the potential that exploring a postmodern subjectivity can grant for students in the classroom.

Introducing the MOO

In an attempt to allow students the opportunity to explore their selves from a more radical perspective, students in my classes logged on to the virtual realm of the U-MOO, and engaged in an assignment in which they could explore their ideas about their selves beyond the narrative and linear space of the page, and play with constructing real and imagined spaces and objects that better reflected their heterogeneity. Rather than

reducing the self to a single image or story, I sought to allow students the opportunity to construct their selves metaphorically and materially—in space and as space—giving them room to lay out the myriad facets of their selves simultaneously, juxtaposed and intertwined, trumping linear efficiency in an effort toward a greater complexity of the self. Before expanding on the assignment itself, let me first introduce a MOO.

A MOO is a virtual reality environment, described through language², that allows users to log on as characters and navigate through the spaces that constitute the MOO architecture (Haynes and Holmevik). While in a MOO, characters can communicate with other characters who have logged on, and they are often granted the ability to build their own spaces and objects to contribute to the already existing MOO framework. MOO is the acronym for Multi-user domain, Object Oriented, but if the acronym seems cryptic and unhelpful, MOOs have been described in a rich variety of ways that attempt to make up for it. Sherry Turkle refers to a MOO as a “virtual reality,” “virtual community,” “virtual space,” and “world of words.” Haynes and Holmevik have used “architextural,” and “player-extendable place.” Amy Bruckman calls a MOO a “virtual meeting place,” “collaborative environment,” “on-line environment.” Pavel Curtis has called it a “communications technology.”

A “MOO” is not a single “room” on the Internet that people go to interact, but is in fact comprised of myriad “rooms” that are described using spatial and sensory detail. For example, when a user logs on to the U-MOO, they will start at the “Walkway” and see this description on the screen: *“You find yourself strolling down a walkway, heading*

² Web-based MOOs also allow for the use of visual icons and images to accompany the textual descriptions of their spaces.

toward the Fountain of [U-MOO]. Several benches sit beneath the huge palm trees that line this walkway..."). The U-MOO is just one of dozens of MOOs, all of which have different names (i.e. LinguaMOO, LambdaMOO, DUMOO etc.) and serve a variety of purposes. The MOOs I've listed here are all educational MOOs, but in fact, MOOs started out as social spaces for people to log onto and engage in role-playing games or social interaction. As long as you have an Internet connection you can be logged into a MOO – from New York to Norway. I limit the focus of my discussion here to educational MOOs, which are developed to simulate a variety of educational settings, usually including classrooms, meeting spaces, instructor offices, student spaces, community spaces, and others.

A MOO is “**M**ulti-User,” which means that any number of characters can be logged on together at any time. It is also “**O**bject-**O**riented,” which allows users not only the opportunity to build and describe spaces on the MOO, but objects as well. Objects can be anything that a person can name and describe, from a desk to a river, to mysterious vile of Chemical X. There are also a variety of pre-programmed objects that have certain features and act in specific ways. An example of this would be that as a teacher in a MOO classroom, I can create any number of educational tools from an existing catalogue of MOO objects that are programmed to perform certain functions (i.e. a slide projector, bulletin board, white board, tape recorder, etc.). I can also create generic tools that I can name and describe and that I can also program to do certain things. Let's say I decide to create a bulletin board. Because it is from a list of already programmed objects, I can call my bulletin board whatever I want and describe it

however I want, but there are also certain pre-existing commands that are included in the “object” of the bulletin board that allow a character to post notes and papers on the board, view the contents of the board, and remove notes and papers from the board.

The early 1990’s saw the emergence of educational MOOs with the implementation of Connections MOO in 1994 and LinguaMOO in 1995. MOOs were exciting new additions to computer-mediated-communication technologies in composition because instead of just providing a blank screen in which to chat, MOOs actually supplied a virtual environment, a textually described place in which students could meet, hold class discussion and attend office hours. In addition, MOOs allowed users to create their own characters and build objects and spaces to describe and inhabit. Creating and describing characters and setting the gender of characters who were not necessarily the students who embodied them brought to light in a new way issues about identity, gender, race, and other social and cultural issues already being discussed in composition classes at the time. More importantly, they brought forth the power of language – written language – in discourse and in creative description. The popularity of MOOs surged in the late 1990’s as a result of a flurry of articles published in a special issue on MOOs in education in the online journal *Kairos*, in *Computers and Composition* and in the essay collection *High Wired: On the Design, Use and Theory of Educational MOOs*. Graphical User Interfaces (GUIs) such as Haynes and Holmevik’s enCore interface were being developed which made MOOs more visually accessible and easier to navigate.

Composition instructors celebrate MOOs as educational tools, writing about how MOOs foster collaboration and creativity, and work as a platform for distance education. MOOs have an intrinsic appeal to writing instruction because they are language-based environments built through descriptive imagery that require students to interact through written discourse. Having students log onto the MOO for class discussion, then share and respond to each other's ideas in real time reveals in a very real way the power of language in discourse. Leslie Harris argues in "Using MOOs to Teach Composition and Literature" that the MOO can serve many purposes for both composition and literature instruction, as well as for more creative projects. He recounts his experiences using Diversity University MOO over several semesters to provide a virtual classroom for his students and students from another university to meet and hold class together. As he explains,

Since writing becomes the primary means of communicating with a synchronously present audience, students learn that writing is an important, powerful act—a way to influence one's peers and to convince them of the validity of one's views. I have also used the MOO as a creative, literary environment. By recreating literary worlds in the MOO (such as a MOO version of Dante's *Inferno*), students learn skills of close reading, while gaining a greater appreciation for the richness of Dante's descriptive detail. In a utopian literature class, furthermore, students can draw upon their readings throughout the semester to represent their own ideal worlds on the MOO. (1)

Avigail Oren, in her article “MOOing is More than Writing,” emphasizes the potential for “active learning” to take place on the MOO because of the real-time interaction students have with places, objects (such as texts) and other people (3). This active learning is also apparent in the way that the MOO creates a unique hybrid of oral and written discourses (“speaking” to others by typing on a keyboard), combined with kinesthetic experiences users have interacting with the places and objects they encounter on the MOO.

Tari Lyn Fanderclai argues that MOOs challenge our traditional classroom practices and provide new possibilities for learning. In “MUDs in Education: New Environments, New Pedagogies” Fanderclai recounts her own experiences as a MOOer and writing instructor, recalling that “The possibilities seemed endless. Students could have contact with people from cultures and subcultures outside their own. They could construct their own spaces and try on new personae, new ways of thinking, new ways of interacting. They would get immediate responses to their ideas and to the text objects they created, experiencing dynamically the effects their words have on others” (8). Indeed, because MOOs require language to communicate in, navigate through, and construct the world itself, there is an increased awareness by users of the consequences of their language use on several levels.

In addition to the more composition-specific applications of the MOO, instructors and theorists have used the MOO to explore issues of identity, play, postmodern theory, space theory and more generally, to push the boundaries for what the self can be. Lisa Nakamura and Cameron Bailey each call into question the unique position of race in

cyberspace. Amy Bruckman talks about the practice of gender-swapping and the fluidity of gender in a world where users can set their gender to anything from the traditional male/female, to the more theoretically intriguing, Royal (“We”), second-person (“You”), and many others. Sherry Turkle writes a comprehensive account of the changing dynamics of identity in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Turkle presents the experiences of social MUDers³ who engage in role-playing for a variety of reasons, including the ability to access social support systems and engage in romantic relationships that they may not have access to in their “real” lives. MUDers also have the opportunity to play with categories that traditionally define our identities, creating and occupying a variety of characters, human and non-human, that they describe from myriad race, gender, class, and sexual preference perspectives. MOOs and MUDs heighten our awareness of the malleability of subjectivity. Turkle writes:

MUDs imply difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation. Such an experience of identity contradicts the Latin root of the word, *idem*, meaning “the same.” But this contradiction increasingly defines the conditions of our lives beyond the virtual world. MUDs thus become objects-to-think-with for thinking about postmodern selves. Indeed, the unfolding of all MUD action takes place in a resolutely postmodern context. There are parallel narratives in the different rooms of a MUD. The cultures of Tolkien, Gibson, and Madonna coexist and interact. Since MUDs are authored by their players, thousands of people in all, often

³ MOOs are “object-oriented” versions of MUDs, which stand for “Multi-User Domains.”

hundreds at a time, are all logged on from different places; the solitary author is displaced and distributed. (185)

MOOs and MUDs allow people to complicate the materiality of the body, to bring with greater force the idea of multiplicity. Turkle's research shows how

now, in postmodern times, multiple identities are no longer so much at the margins of things. Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated [...] Traditional ideas about identity have been tied to a notion of authenticity that such virtual experiences actively subvert. When each player can create many characters and participate in many games, the self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit. (180).

The MOO is a space that allows for new ways of expressing a spatially-situated self—of allowing students to build themselves spatially in an effort to come to an understanding of the ways in which their sense of identity is shaped by their ever-shifting proximities to the people, objects and events in their lives.

The Assignment

The assignment I developed, the results of which I will be analyzing throughout this dissertation, asked students to “build” themselves in a space on the U-MOO. Students were free to create as many or as few “rooms” and objects as they could describe, and organize them however they wished. The only requirement was that everything in the space must somehow reflect something about their selves. This

assignment was part of a unit that focused, in a variety of different ways across a variety of semesters, on questions of identity, technology, and space. I incorporated this assignment into my freshman, honors, and advanced composition courses that I taught from 1999 to 2003. In my freshman composition courses, this assignment served primarily as a replacement for the traditional personal exploratory essay that was required by my department at the time. In my advanced composition courses, this assignment served as a part of a larger investigation of how various media and technologies work rhetorically in our culture. The assignment arose out of a combination of several factors, including my distain for the personal essay as it was traditionally taught in composition, my reading of postmodern and technology-related theory (Lyotard, Baudrillard, Turkle), and my experiences with the newly implemented MOO at my university. This three-fold inspiration was the perfect impetus for the assignment because there were certain things I had experienced more intuitively (i.e. my dissatisfaction with the personal essay in composition, my fascination with the possibilities for identity development on the MOO), and those experiences were fueled by theory I had been reading that had broadened my perspective even further.

Each course in which I included the assignment was designed a little differently, and I chose a variety of themes and readings to incorporate for each. For instance, one course focused on the rhetoric of space, including a unit in which students read autobiographical essays from people like Richard Rodriguez, Barbara Kingsolver, and bell hooks, and in which students wrote about the role that space and place played in their own lives. A unit in another course focused on MOO technology and virtual identity. In

that particular semester, I wanted to experiment a little and see how our ideas about identity were shaken up when we threw an on-line technology like the MOO into the mix. I introduced students to the MOO and had them create a character and engage in on-line class discussion. Later in the unit, I had students create a second character to role-play that was different from the first. Half of our classes met on-line—in our designated MOO classroom one day, and in the local MOO bar/cafe the next. Accompanying these activities and discussions were readings by Sherry Turkle, Lisa Nakumara, and Cameron Bailey, who talked about shifting identities and the apparent slipperiness of gender and race online. Students discussed about what these categories really meant in online environments—where characteristics such as physical appearance, gender, and race could be dictated by a simple description—and how that relative freedom informed our off-line ideas about these categories as well. We learned first-hand through our role-playing exercises how despite our best hopes, that the MOO would not be able to liberate us from our binds to race, gender, and physical appearance; that often, the characters people would create were simply exacerbated stereotypes, which revealed not only our dependence on these categories, but the panic that ensues when we are forced to interact without them.

But exploring the complexity of identity would have amounted to very little were students only able to read about it in the articles I assigned them and not been able to play around and experiment with them directly. It took the experience of actually playing a “different” self, a “version” of a self, to see how many selves really emerged from that singular, central core that students were so convinced drove their “identity.” My students

examined first hand what Kenneth Gergen meant when he suggested that “a multiphrenic condition emerges in which one swims in ever-shifting, concatenating, and contention currents of being,” and as I will show throughout this dissertation, it was in the myriad spaces my students built that these multiple, often contradictory selves lived. The spaces not only revealed a multiplicity of selves, but also allowed students to explore how their selves existed simultaneously; how they shifted, connected, and disconnected with the fluidity that is so often used to characterize our postmodern condition.

Identity_Crisis@moo.arizona.edu

We have spent this unit exploring how we negotiate ideas about identity and authenticity in our culture. The purpose of this project is to play with those ideas and in the process raise your awareness about who you are and what kinds of self-representation are possible on the spatially driven world of the MOO.

For this project you will construct your self/identity through a character and site on the MOO. This will require you to name your character, describe your character in-depth, and build a site on the MOO for your character. The character and space you create on the MOO is going to serve as a representation of who you are. We all have ideas about what constitutes our identities, including what things we value and what cultures we associate with. Now it is your job to translate those ideas into spatially metaphorical descriptions in the virtual world of the MOO. This

may feel like a difficult process because you will be constructing yourself primarily in terms of descriptive, metaphorical language. But it will also be a process that may provide you with new languages and new angles from which to consider your identity.

You will accompany your character and site with a 5-7 page reflective/analysis essay in which you examine the metaphors and descriptive imagery of your space. I would like you to consider "who" it is that you've attempted to capture in your site and how the spatial environment of the MOO has influenced your perceptions of your self/identity. In your analysis, I would like you to reflect upon how your site is organized, what objects are included in your site, and how each object and space is described. Overall, how do your character, object, and space descriptions, as well as the organization of your site contribute to the self-construction that your site represents? When you take a step back and look at your site: who have you become?

The process by which you begin constructing your site can take a variety of forms. You may choose to brainstorm ideas by writing down anything and everything that comes to mind when you think about your self. Or you may choose to just begin outlining and composing your site with no overall picture or organized plan. As there is a due-date for this project, you will not have the time to construct yourself in all the ways you may wish to. Knowing this, try to pay attention to the decisions

(consciously and unconsciously) you make throughout the construction process, and consider not just what appears in the site, but what does not appear as well.

The design and content of your MOO space are up to you, and I will not evaluate you on these elements. Instead, all students will begin at a flat score from which points will be removed only if the space is incomplete, unedited, or un navigable. The essay will be graded for organization, clarity of prose, and quality of analysis, all of which will be discussed more extensively in class before a draft of the essay is due.

This project encouraged students to envision themselves spatially and metaphorically. In the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I analyze my students' self-constructions through a variety of spatial and theoretical lenses, including Soja's Thirdspace, de Certeau's tactics and Turkle and Papert's bricolage. These lenses reveal the complexity and multiplicity that is possible in spatial-metaphorical self-constructions—a complexity that personal writing assignments do not typically accommodate. Exploring the myriad facets of the self through these lenses gives students the opportunity to explore the complexity of their selves within an infinite context, rather than a select scene or situation from the past. Students can see themselves as part of a broader spectrum, caught up in an ever-expanding web of culture, meaning and relationship.

Dissertation Overview

In Chapter Two I introduce contemporary theories of space by critical geographers and rhetoric and composition scholars—that support a renewed understanding of the metaphorical and material importance of space. I introduce a concept I call “Thirdspace identity construction,” which borrows from the work of critical geographer Edward Soja. Soja’s “Thirdspace” represents a dynamic realm in which established binaries/dualisms that dominate our contemporary cultural understanding (such as subject/object, social/historical, center/periphery, real/imagined, material/mental, etc) are reworked in an effort to open up other possibilities for understanding (xx). While Soja uses Thirdspace as a lens through which to analyze what he calls “real-and-imagined” places such as the city of Los Angeles, I argue for a “Thirdspace identity construction” as a lens through which instructors can reinvision the personal writing of students and offer possibilities for students to articulate a real-and-imagined, spatially-situated self. I analyze how the sites my students built on the U-MOO capture a Thirdspace identity construction by allowing for a juxtaposition of binary facets of the self and a negotiating/transcending of those binaries to form other possibilities for understanding identity.

In Chapter Three I analyze students’ sites through the lens of Michel de Certeau’s “tactics” of escape, which he outlines in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau argues that the larger systems that dominate our cultural consciousness and sense of self work through language, media, and the material objects that we consume. He asserts that theorists have only ever looked at what messages such objects carry with them, not what

users do with such objects or how they use them for their own ends once consumed.

According to de Certeau, users everyday practices act as tactics, through which users act in powerfully subversive ways, though undetectable, and thus unappropriated by the larger society because they occur on such a basic, everyday level.

The sites that I analyze in this chapter challenge traditional ideas about identity by engaging in bizarre, random, fragmented, and ironic descriptions. These sites are fast and unexpected, vivid and mystical. They manipulate the clichés about age, sex, and physical appearance that have so dominated ideas about the self. They twist and turn around our expectations, and appropriate literal objects in new ways, forcing new meaning-making to occur while subverting established convention.

In Chapter Four I show how the concepts of tinkering and bricolage discussed by Sherry Turkle and Seymour Papert allow students to piece together knowledge in new ways and come to new ideas about the self. Bricolage is both an end result – a text that balances and manages diverse elements – as well as a process by which knowledge is developed in new ways, juxtaposing elements and bringing them together in ways that develop new relationships. A bricoleur approach to identity construction is flexible, negotiated, and non-hierarchical. It is both a way of coming to new knowledge, as well as a way of managing diversity without the need for logical progression or hierarchical arrangement of information. The exploration of the self in a non-hierarchical, multifaceted way opens up possibilities for using combinations of cultural, linguistic and material objects to engender a better understanding of the self. Students who adopt the role of bricoleurs “tinker” with their identities by piecing together a wide variety of

abstract images and material objects that reveal selves who are in constant flux and growth.

In my final chapter I conclude by suggesting that the metaphors and practices of Thirdspace, tactics, and bricolage that can so fruitfully inform identity construction are the same metaphors that can inform overall text production in the classroom. These metaphors offer new lenses for creating knowledge through multimedia, web, and visual texts in ways that do justice to the complexity of contemporary communication. The symbol systems we engage with every day, including image and multimedia systems that we encounter in popular media and the Web, communicate as much as writing does, but in languages that instructors aren't as familiar with and thus don't value as much in the classroom. To be "literate" in the twenty-first century no longer means simply having the ability to compose academic discourse or other forms of written discourse, but means being able to "effectively construct and comfortably navigate multiplicity," to analyze and engage with meaning from a variety of sign-systems, using a multitude of expressive technologies including those found in print, electronic and digital sources (Williams 22). Instead of simplifying composition so that it can be more easily managed in the composition classroom, reconceptualize the potential of composition in an effort to help students negotiate a variety of subject positions and discover new ways of knowledge-making.

II. Constructing the Self in Thirdspace

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: We are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a life-long developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein (237).

--Michel Foucault "Of Other Spaces"

In his lecture "Of Other Spaces," Foucault marks a shift from what he describes as the nineteenth-century's "great obsession" with history, to a twentieth-century epoch of space. With this epoch comes an expanded sense of connectedness and relationship, prompting people to look differently at how they interact with/in the world, and how they shape and are shaped by the spaces they conceive of and inhabit in their lives.

In this chapter I introduce a concept I call "Thirdspace identity construction," which borrows from the work of critical geographer Edward Soja. Soja's "Thirdspace" represents a dynamic realm in which established binaries/dualisms that dominate our contemporary cultural understanding (such as subject/object, social/historical, center/periphery, real/imagined, material/mental) are reworked in an effort to open up other possibilities for understanding (5). While Soja uses Thirdspace as a lens through which to analyze what he calls "real-and-imagined" places such as the city of Los Angeles, I argue for a "Thirdspace identity construction" as a lens through which to

reinvision the personal writing of students and to open up possibilities for students to articulate a real-and-imagined, spatially-situated self.

A Consideration of Space

Space is something people tend to see as neutral, a backdrop to their actions that take place within, but separate from, the space that surrounds them. And yet, as Edward Casey argues, We do nothing that is “unplaced” and the spaces that surround us affect our experiences and shape our actions just as we actively shape those spaces in return (x). A renewed recognition of the metaphorical and material power of space allows for a broader examination of lived experiences and provides new avenues for communicating ideas about the self. Gaston Bachelard argues that people are inherently spatial beings. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard suggests that in the psyche, image precedes text. Images exist at the “very origin of the speaking being” and the novelty of those images is what prompts people to speak, thereby engendering language (xxiii). For Bachelard, images remain forever just above the language of signification. Acknowledging the power of these images and investigating the ways in which they inform one’s lived experiences can give rise to a more thorough understanding of the self.

A spatial representation of the self is a richer representation of the self because the memories that help comprise one’s most intimate self are also inherently spatial. Bachelard argues that memories are not dominated by mere dates and times, but are in fact “motionless” scenes of places and objects (9). Intimate spaces, such as the house, and objects that segue between spaces, such as the door and window, reverberate strongly

in a person. Bachelard suggests that the common object of the door “can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect. The gestures that make us conscious of security or freedom are rooted in a profound depth of being” (224). In the combination of both its material and metaphoric elements, the object of the door expands beyond its wood and hinges, to embody myriad emotions and capture the complexity and breadth of the self.

Spatial metaphors are found everywhere in language. Nedra Reynolds shows how composition scholars have developed a wide range of spatial metaphors to articulate their work and the disciplinary goals of the field. Metaphors such as “webs of meaning,” “contact zones” and “turf wars” are used frequently, as well as metaphors of the “container” and the “frontier” (27). Compositionists are especially prone to using spatial metaphors because such metaphors are “inseparable from and embedded in our language, especially our language about language” (12). Reynolds shows, for example, how the “container” metaphor reveals the assumption that all discourse operates within boundaries, and she cites as an example the routine criticism that an instructor may give when she feels that a person’s argument “has gone too far” or “doesn’t go far enough,” or the more recently used warning “don’t go there” (13). Reynolds also shows how the frontier metaphor, which dates back to Mina Shaughnessy’s work with basic writers in the midst of the Open Admissions program at City College of New York in the 1970s, has been an especially powerful one for composition because it positions instructors as “brave, noble conquerors” and reflects a yearning for the open space of the frontier, in contrast to the overcrowded classrooms that were the standard at City College in the

1970's and continue today (29). Spatial metaphors such as the "frontier" bolster scholars' desire to project Composition as a discipline of vision, hope, and possibility, whose work sounds new, untamed, and exciting (31). But Reynolds cites Joseph Harris, who argues that in fact, such metaphors of change simply mask the fact that the "politics of space" in Composition really haven't changed at all. Composition is still dealing with the material realities of over-crowded classrooms and under-funded programs that metaphors such as the "frontier" serve to hide (31).

The material reality of a space, including its size and location, as well as its architecture and the arrangement of the objects within it, influence people's actions and behaviors. Roxanne Mountford examines how material spaces, specifically the pulpits of both real-life and fictional preachers, exert their own rhetorical force in conjunction with, not simply as background to, the events that take place there. In the first chapter of her book, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*, Mountford analyzes how pulpits are depicted in nineteenth and twentieth-century American literature. In one example, she compares the distinctively different preaching spaces of Father Mappel, of Melville's *Moby Dick* and Dinah Morris, of Eliot's *Adam Bede*. Father Mappel's pulpit is representative of the authority of the Methodist church and the stern face of its Calvinist God. The pulpit is positioned high up in the church, above the congregation, built with chest-high walls that create a fortress around Mappel, and lend him a powerful and intimidating presence. Mappel pulls up from behind him the rope ladder on which he ascended to the pulpit, further distancing himself from the congregation as an untouchable authority (18). By contrast, Dinah Morris' pulpit is

fashioned out of a horse cart drawn under a maple tree in a meadow, where the unordained Morris preaches “under the inspiration of her own simple faith” (18). The natural setting of Morris’ pulpit positions Morris in close proximity to the farmers and laborers who congregate there and “decidedly apart from institutions” (18). This “transitory” space allows her to preach a God of humility and forgiveness, in contrast to the God of rigid severity that embodied the ills of the institutional church at the time. (18)

Reynolds and Mountford both assert the importance of material space, and show the material and the metaphorical as interrelated, “contributing to a complex production of space and spatial practices” (Reynolds 43). How space is produced and how spaces can be interrogated to enact institutional change is discussed by Porter et. al. in their essay “Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change.” Interrogating the production of space and the boundaries that define the work of rhetoric and composition instructors can facilitate a greater understanding of institutional power and create “zones of ambiguity” (Sibley qtd. in Porter et. al. 624) in which to challenge institutional norms on a micro and macro level. Porter et. al. assert that institutional change will occur when members of the rhetoric and composition community take control over how the spaces in which we work (such as the classroom) are constituted, and when the field as a whole is able to “define its institutional location more broadly,” not as composition instructors in a university, but as “writing experts” working in a larger public realm (623).

The production of space and how power is exerted through space is discussed by many postmodern theorists and critical geographers, perhaps the earliest being spatial

theorist Henri Lefebvre and his book *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre argues that our ignorance of how space works in powerful ways that often go unnoticed is a result of the disconnect between space and social life, including the ways in which people construct social relationships within space and the how the particular architecture and arrangement of spaces influence the experiences and that take place there. Lefebvre argues that people are inherently social-historical-spatial beings, but tend to only consider themselves as products of the socio-historical, having difficulty coming to terms with their inherent spatiality (21). He seeks to impart an understanding of how social interaction creates social space and that as much as people are beings-in-time, they are also beings-in-space, with their social lives inscribed in spatiality.

People are able to ignore the spatiality of their lives by conceiving of it entirely in the realm of the mental (what Lefebvre calls “representations of space”), as one does when speaking metaphorically and philosophically, or perceiving of it entirely in the realm of the physical, measurable, and self-evident (what Lefebvre calls “spatial practice”)—as one does when mapping space, collecting information about it, and dividing it into segments (6). These appropriations set up a binary that forces one conception of space over another and ignores the ways in which people operate in space, the “lived” interactions with space and with others (producing space, not just occurring in space) that people engage in on a daily basis (what Lefebvre calls “representational spaces”) (33). Binary thinking suggests that one’s options are limited to an either/or choice, and squelches the prospects for new ways of arranging information and new possibilities for knowledge-making. The binary between material space (spatial practice)

and metaphorical space (representations of space) is one that Lefebvre brings together through an act of “thirling” to produce a triad that includes lived space (representational spaces). Lefebvre’s act of thirling, finding an/other (third) option to established binaries is what critical geographer Edward Soja calls “thirling-as-othering” and is a central component to Soja’s larger concept of “Thirdspace.”

In his book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places* Soja argues for the continued expansion of knowledge through the introduction of other possibilities to existing cultural binaries, such as authentic/inauthentic, body/mind, modern/postmodern, space/time. This act of “thirling” doesn’t just combine or go in-between established binaries, but actively transforms them. According to Soja, thirling is much more than a dialectical synthesis; it

introduces a critical ‘other-than’ choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness[...] It does not derive simply from an additive combination of its binary antecedents but rather from a disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstitution of their presumed totalization producing an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different. (61)

Thirdspace is an ever-open space that allows contradictory and seemingly incompatible ideas to coexist and be creatively restructured in new ways to produce new meaning.

Thirdspace Identities

I appropriate Soja’s Thirdspace to put forth a concept that I call “Thirdspace identity constructions,” in which binaries that people use to inform the self, including

male/female, margin/center, white/non-white, straight/gay, public/private, can be disrupted and creatively restructured to give way to alternative understandings of the self. Thirdspace identity constructions are characterized primarily by the ways in which they expose the binaries that people use to simplify the complexity of identity—reducing it to a series of either/or classifications—then creatively restructure such binaries, producing “a critical ‘other-than’ choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness” (61).

Restructuring binaries does not serve to negate the existence of such binaries. Rather, Thirdspace identity constructions do justice to the complexity of the self by giving space for the existence of binaries as well as a third/other choice. These constructions reveal a gathering together of the dichotomous elements of a person’s identity and a juxtaposing and restructuring of those elements in an attempt to better understand the relationships between them, and how those relationships, as much as the elements themselves, contribute to a person’s sense of self.

The Thirdspace identity constructions that I will be analyzing later in this chapter are ones that students in my classes built on the virtual realm of the U-MOO. Yet Thirdspace identity constructions need not be restricted to the realm of virtual reality. In fact, literary texts can also reflect rich and detailed Thirdspace identity constructions, and because readers are more familiar with such works, provide important examples from which to understand the power of Thirdspace. One such text is Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* is a Thirdspace identity construction by the way it ebbs and flows between myriad languages, literary genres, histories, and physical spaces that Anzaldúa uses to expose the seemingly

incompatible yet infinitely rich and expanding facets of her self and her life experience. In her book, Anzaldua uses the metaphor of the borderland to draw together these genres, languages, spaces and histories and allows them to coexist irreducibly with each other, and the relationships between all of these facets work to form ever new dimensions, histories, languages, genres, and spaces for a new kind of people, what Anzaldua calls “The New Mestiza.” Each facet of Anzaldua’s life story coexists simultaneously with all others, without the need for Anzaldua to proceed through them in a linear or logical progression and without the need for her to reconcile the contradictory and incompatible facets that she presents to the reader.

The geographical borderland that Anzaldua uses to navigate through the contrasting and paradoxical elements of her life is rooted in the real-life border between the United States and Mexico. It is around this border where Anzaldua grew up, that “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (3). While a border is set up to divide, to separate “us from them,” a *borderland* “is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (3). The border separating the United States and Mexico is an unnatural boundary, in part because its present location acknowledges only one delineation, that which was decided by the Mexican and U. S. governments after the signing of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty in 1848 and the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. This is but one version that cancels out the many borders of the area’s history. More importantly, the border is unnatural because its geographical division, separating one country from another by a line in the sand, has no

significance for Anzaldua, who has walked on all sides of the border, geographically, linguistically, sexually, and culturally. Anzaldua's *Borderlands*, in contrast, is able to capture the historical malleability of the area, first occupied by the indigenous cultures of the desert southwest, followed by the Spanish and then Anglo migrants to the area. The intermixing of all these cultures, and the redefinition of the border that accompanied each migration, gave way to the Chicano culture which Anzaldua considers herself a part. Chicanos, what she calls the *new mestizas*, descend from myriad influences and cultures and reflect a complex multiplicity that cannot be reduced to one history, one story, one border.

Anzaldua's *Borderlands* is a Thirdspace identity construction in how it balances the variety of languages and literary genres Anzaldua employs to reflect the complexity of her self and her life experience. She communicates her story using a mixture of English, Castilian Spanish, Tex-Mex, and Nahuatl, which, for Anzaldua, "reflects my language, a new language—the language of the Borderlands" (x). Anzaldua weaves all four languages in and out of her story, creating, as she described, a language of the Borderlands. Yet her juxtaposition of each language throughout her text allows each language to exist simultaneously and irreducibly from the others.

This linguistic oscillation also captures the complexity of Anzaldua's lived self by excluding the English-speaking reader. As few readers are fluent in all the languages Anzaldua uses, there are times when the reader is not privy all meanings. Anzaldua will insert words and phrases as well as entire paragraphs, providing no footnotes or other reference for readers unfamiliar with the language, series of sentences such as: "I have

come back. *Tanto dolor me costo el alejamiento. I shade my eyes and look up...*” (89) to paragraphs where most of the paragraph is written in Spanish or another language other than English:

The sudden pull in my gut, *la tierra, los aguaceros. My land, el viento soplando la arena, el lagartijo debajo de un nopalito. Me acuerdo como era antes. Una region desertica de vasta llanuras, costeras de baja altura, de escasa lluvia, de chaparrals formados por mesquites y huizachez.* If I look real hard I can almost see the Spanish fathers who were called “the cavalry of Christ” enter this valley riding their burros, see the clash of cultures commence. (89)

This code-switching prevents most readers from fully understanding and thus fully containing Anzaldua—her self and her story—in one neat sphere. It requires readers to acknowledge the incomprehensibility of many aspects of Anzaldua, because if readers are unable to understand Anzaldua’s language, they cannot hope to understand those facets of her self.

Anzaldua’s *Borderlands* is also a Thirdspace identity construction in how she creates a fusion of diverse genres throughout her story. She seamlessly interweaves poetry, prose, and song from not just her own voice but the voices of other authors as well. In one chapter on building a *mestiza* consciousness, Anzaldua spends a paragraph illustrating how the *mestiza* are “indigenous like corn [...] a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions” (81). From this paragraph she extends the corn metaphor into the story of a woman preparing tortillas:

Lavando y remojando el maiz en agua de cal, despojando el pellejpo.

Moliendo, mixteando, amasando, hacienda tortilla de masa. She steeps the corn in lime, it swells, soften. With stone roller on *metate*, she grinds the corn, then grinds again. She kneads and moulds the dough, pats the round balls into *tortillas*. (81)

Anzaldua draws the corn metaphor out even further by following this story with a poem that captures not just how the metaphor of the corn represents a *mestiza* consciousness, but how such a consciousness is built through all of the objects involved in the tortilla preparation process, and even contains one part that actively subverts that process. She relates this through poetry:

We are the porous rock in the stone metate

Squatting on the ground

We are the rolling pin, *el maiz y agua*,

La masa harina. Somos el amasijo.

Somos lo molido en el matate.

We are the *comal* sizzling hot,

The hot tortilla, the hungry mouth.

We are the course rock.

We are the grinding motion,

The mixed potion, *somos el molcajete.*

We are the pestle, the *comino, ajo, pimienta*,

We are the *chile Colorado*,

The green shoot that cracks the rock.

We will abide. (81)

Anzaldua and the New Mestizas are the corn, the rock, the rolling pin, the pestle, the grinding motion, and the tortilla. They are also something more subversive, however, in the form of the “green shoot that cracks the rock.” These contradictory and seemingly incompatible facets of Anzaldua’s self are allowed to coexist in the Thirdspace of her lived self. Anzaldua can be both old and new, established and rebellious, slow and powerful, a mild tortilla and a spicy chile. Anzaldua’s vivid migration extends ever-outward from prose to story to poetry, from corn, to tortilla, to all of the objects involved in the preparation of the tortilla to the green chile that cracks the rock upon which the corn is ground. She is at once the lifeblood of her ancestors, and that which breaks them apart and transcends them.

The Spatiality of the MOO

Anzaldua communicates a Thirdspace identity construction through her book that captures and reconstructs myriad spaces, genres, languages, and histories. The Thirdspace identity constructions of the students in my classes took place on the virtual space of the U-MOO. As I described in the previous chapter, a MOO is a virtual reality environment, described primarily through language, that allows users to log on as characters and navigate through the spaces that constitute the MOO “architexture.” While logged onto a MOO, characters can communicate with other characters on the MOO, and are often granted the ability to build their own spaces and objects to contribute

to the already existing MOO framework. In the previous chapter I discussed how compositionists have used the MOO to shape writing instruction in valuable ways. But more than emphasizing the MOO as simply a technology or tool to be “used” in the classroom for writing instruction, compositionists have also talked about the distinctive sort of space that the MOO is and how its unique spatiality can further add to exploring identity and text production.

There are a variety of terms that have been used by compositionists to characterize the particular space of the MOO, including “liminal” by Albert Rouzie and “potential” or “transitional” by Leslie Harris. These terms characterize MOOspace as an in-between space that incorporates both fantasy and reality thus allowing for play and creative inquiry without the limitations of “real-life.” “Liminal space” is derived from anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept of “liminality,” which can be described as a state of existing between two stable positions. In its original context, Turner used “liminality” to describe the state a person occupies when participating in initiation and right-of-passage rituals in pre-industrial societies. People experiencing these rituals find themselves in socio-cultural limbo, moving from one classification or group to another, while not quite a member of either. As a result, such people are not bound by the traditional cultural constraints, allowing them to deconstruct common-sense assumptions and reconstruct them in novel ways. According to Turner, what this results in is “the free or ludic recombination of cultural factors in any and every possible pattern, however weird” (54). This “recombination of cultural factors” is something that the MOO can facilitate, and something I’ll discuss in greater depth in a later chapter on bricolage.

Rouzie applies Turner's concept of liminal space to a graduate class he taught about "liminal literacies"—or what he described as hybrid states of textuality and communication taking place through email, MOO communication, formal essays, and hypertext. For Rouzie, liminal space describes both the community of graduate students that were in his class as well as the "discourse situation" created by the synchronous on-line communication they participated in. Rouzie argues that graduate students are already inherently occupiers of liminal space because they are "neither solely students nor truly professionals," but occupy a state that "brings with it both freedom and constraints, confers them with power and limits their power" (1). The MOO is a space that brings forth the liminality of Rouzie's graduate students and others who participate in it because MOO discourse as "just separate enough from normative reality to offer license for freedom, but connected to the real in how it reflects and affects it" (4). Characterizing the MOO as a liminal space emphasizes the MOO's peculiar state of being both part of established reality and separate from it.

Similar to this characteristic of liminal space is Leslie Harris' classification of the MOO as "potential" or "transitional" space. In his article "Transitional Realms: Teaching Composition in Rhetland," Harris argues that MOOs create "potential spaces" that "unleash the playful creativity of the self." "Potential space" is a term Harris borrows from child-psychologist D. Winnicott, describing it as a transitional realm that exists between external reality and fantasy; allowing students a space in which to incorporate real-world objects in new ways thereby fostering creativity and self-development. MOOs are potential spaces in the way that they are virtual worlds that both

mimic and extend beyond external reality. One example of this is how characters in a room on the MOO can interact with each other as they would in a real classroom, yet be logged on from computers that are located miles or hundreds of miles apart. The linguistic nature of the MOO--the fact that the MOO comes to be through the language that describes each room and object--has the effect of both mimicking real-world spaces and extending beyond them. This is true with regard to rooms on the MOO as well as the characters who inhabit the MOO. Though often resembling typical human and architectural characteristics, people who log onto the MOO have full fantastical control over how their characters and rooms are described.

Harris uses the MOO to create what he calls "Rhetland," a computer-mediated version of Seymour Papert's "Mathland" – a fun yet stimulating educational context. Harris uses "Rhetland" to help his students understand their role as writers immersed in a writing situation with an audience and purpose (46). Harris claims that by inhabiting characters and spaces on the MOO and communicating with others on the MOO, students get to practice skills of description, narration, and argumentation. By designing their own characters and spaces, students "learn to use language to depict the world" (48). By engaging in class discussion with others, students learn to share their opinions in an environment that exists somewhere between speech and writing (speaking on the MOO while writing that speech on the keyboard), and receive immediate feedback to their comments that they can, in turn, immediately respond to.

But Harris focuses primarily on Rhetland as a place for students to develop skills of description, narration, and argumentation, and both he and Rouzie largely ignore the

possibilities for using potential and liminal space to explore issues of identity in composition. Existing in-between fantasy and reality, potential space opens up opportunities for students to take the physical and abstract “realities” of their identities and creatively extend them, infusing their known reality with fantasy and wish fulfillment in order to examine their assumptions about identity and play with alternate incarnations of their selves.

MOOs are fertile spaces for constructing identity because they are real-time, interactive virtual realities that are often modeled after real-life places, thus situating MOOs in a unique space between fantasy and reality, and calling into question our definitions of each. Diane Davis argues that MOOs challenge the stability of dichotomies such as fantasy/reality. She suggests that dichotomies, or “conceptual border zones” of “authentic/inauthentic, human/machine, interior/exterior,” have thus far limited our understanding of the self. Such dichotomies

scan as linguistic guardrails for what is called “humanity” but they don’t really exist; they have no essence or sub/stance; they’re phantasmatic oppositions that desperately need to be reimagined...they are powerful but empty. (279)

Located in/as the space between traditional dichotomies, MOOs are able to expose the instability and emptiness of such dichotomies and provide a space to reimagine what’s possible. MOOs are dynamic spaces that allow an infinite variety of objects and spaces to exist simultaneously and irreducibly to each other. They allow for the construction of

new spaces, Thirdspaces, that offer students the opportunity to restructure and transcend the binaries they so often use to define/confine the self.

Thirdspace Identity Constructions on the U-MOO

As I discussed in Chapter One, I developed an assignment that offered students in both my first-year and advanced composition courses the opportunity to explore identity through the construction of their selves in/through a space on the U-MOO. The space could be however large or small, and could consist of any number of “rooms” and objects, in any conceivable (or inconceivable) order, described in any way. As a part of the actual site construction, each student had to name and describe their MOO character (the persona they embody when they log onto the MOO) and include it/him/her/them in some area within their site. In addition to the site, students were required to write an analysis essay that attempted to account for the details and descriptive decisions they made throughout the site (whether planned or unplanned, understood entirely or not). What “self” or “identity” meant for each student was up to them and could be interpreted how they saw fit.

The three sites I analyze as examples of Thirdspace identity constructions are *The Long Closet*, *Music Man’s Flat*, and *Berkembang River*. These three sites in particular were composed by students who exist on the margins of American culture, either as a result of their race, cultural identity, or sexual orientation. I chose to focus my analysis on these sites because they convey especially vivid accounts of the difficulty each student has had negotiating the dichotomies that divide their sense of self, and also reveal how

these students were able to construct Thirdspace identities within their sites by creatively restructuring and transcending the dichotomous aspects of their selves that had previously limited them.

The Long Closet

The Long Closet is a site that attempts to negotiate the tension one student feels between her multiple beliefs and cultural affiliations. This site was constructed by Maya⁴, the MOO character of a student who is a first-generation American, born and raised in America after her Indian-born parents attended graduate school here and decided to stay. Maya sets up a number of binaries in her site that she struggles to negotiate, most notably between her Hindu faith and her American upbringing. Her site captures her struggles on a variety of levels, and ultimately exemplifies a Thirdspace through a cafe that Maya constructs. As a Thirdspace, “The Cafe” disrupts the divide Maya has fostered between her American and Hindu cultures, and is a place where both come together to inform her sense of self.

⁴ A pseudonym. Maya’s character name was the same as her RL name so it has been changed.

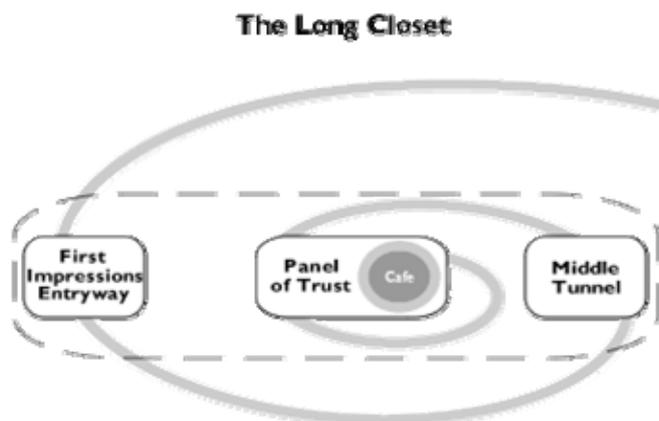


Figure 1: Representation of The Long Closet

The Long Closet is Maya’s attempt to find spaces for her diverse and conflicting cultural values to coexist. She struggles as both an insider and outsider to American culture; Maya shares a common geography with other Americans, but expresses a feeling of alienation from other Americans because she is a “different race” and has different “values.” As she writes in the essay that accompanies her site,⁵

My site embodies many of the insecurities I have had growing up in an environment where everyone around me was a different race than myself [...] I was born and raised in the United States, but I have retained a variety of cultural roots. The cultural roots my parents have instilled in me through Indian practices have given me morals and values. Despite this, I am very insecure about revealing these morals and cultural values as I feel that people may not [be] open to them. This is why when a person

⁵ Excerpts from student essays will appear in plain text, while excerpts from student sites will appear italicized.

first meets me I put up a façade that shows I am just as American as anyone else.⁶

Maya's site is constructed as a closet, typically the part of a house in which things are stored away and kept out of the sight of others. Michael Brown, whose book *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* discusses the metaphor of the closet in relation to gay identity, and argues that "the closet is a term used to describe the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men. It describes their absence – and alludes to their ironic presence nonetheless – in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be" (1). For Maya, the closet symbolizes not her sexual orientation, but her need to conceal her Hindu cultural heritage because of the "denial," "erasure," and "ignorance" of it by Americans. As she states in the excerpt from her essay above, Maya sees herself as a "different race" than most Americans, so her cultural heritage is present in her skin color, yet made absent by the lack of acceptance she feels from other Americans. The fact that this closet is "long" is indicative of the fact that Maya has struggled with her conflicted sense of self since childhood, and that coming to terms with it may prove to be an equally long process. The three areas of *The Long Closet* are representative of the various levels at which Maya reveals her cultural beliefs to others and feels accepted by others. She acknowledges a discrepancy between how she would like to be and how she feels she must present herself in order to be accepted by who she calls "typical" Americans—those

⁶ Though never mentioned in her site or essay, this assignment began shortly after September 11, 2001 and in my opinion, the anxieties of being of Indian descent and not feeling accepted in American culture following 9/11 no doubt played a huge role in this site construction and reveal how very oppressive the experience can be for someone who is both American and not.

who are not of the same race nor religious affiliation as she, but who she feels dictate that white-American is “the only way to be” (Brown).

Maya’s character is located in the Long Closet, but outside any of the three areas that the closet contains. Her character description embodies her struggle between the diverse cultures of which she is a part, and how limited she often feels interacting with “typical” Americans her age:



Maya

You see a person [who] looks so typical but yet so different, but you see that there is unique difference about her. She dresses and likes what most like, but you see that she has more to her. She looks to others for guidance on what she should be doing. Her hair, her face, her constant smile make you feel like she is hiding something about herself.

Maya sets up a binary between what a visitor to the site “sees” in her character and what they “know” of her. She critiques the tendency of the visitor to judge her by her physical appearance, and reveals the limitations of that tendency by using her appearance to remind the visitor that there is something they cannot see.

Maya describes American culture as materialistic and homogenizing, and constructs the first area of her site, “First Impressions Entryway” to reflect the immense pressure she feels to look and act exactly like other Americans her age.



First Impressions Entryway

As you walk into the long closet you see a large mirror that takes up the whole wall. You are drawn to this mirror, it reveals the essence of the room it is located in. In a distance one can see a faint flickering flame. As you come in you sense a feeling of familiarity, you feel like you have been here before. You see in a corner a computer and television, the television is flashing familiar faces and familiar conversation. There is a large cherry oak armoire with antique faded gold rims and handles. The door of the armoire is slightly ajar allowing you to look inside. As you look into the armoire of clothing, you notice an element of clothing you have, as you continue you see that all the clothes look familiar. You see magazines and a music selection that you have heard and seen before. You suddenly realize that this is much like your room, you continue to walk and see the distant flame come more into your vision.

“First Impressions Entryway” is a remarkable collection of all the things Maya feels that a “typical” American teenager is expected to have, wear, and watch. Maya takes advantage of the second-person perspective that all spaces of the MOO are described in (you see..., you hear...) to impart an intense feeling of familiarity on the visitor of the site. She includes objects in the room that symbolize the homogenizing effect she feels that American culture has on young people, including a mirror, an armoire of clothing, a computer, a television, and a stereo. She provides additional descriptions of each object that paint a picture of the pressure she feels to conform:



The Mirror

This mirror is so large it seems like it takes up the whole wall. It watches everything you do, and also acts as a constant reassurance that you are fitting in with the surroundings of the entryway.



The Television

This television is as big as a movie screen. It's perfect for watching movies and shows and at the same time getting the theatre like presentation. This television is playing constant episodes of Beverly Hills 90210 and Friends. You get a sense that the owner is much into shows about her age group. The television is constantly running it seems to never have a blank screen.



Armoire of Clothing

This armoire is elegant and has fine detail. The armoire is dark cherry oak with antique gold rims and handles. As the door is slightly ajar, you see many shirts, pants, skirts, and shoes, they all look so familiar. It seems if you have these same articles of clothing. There is something [about] these clothes that reflects comfort and classic, they [are] clothes that never really stand out in a crowd.

Maya's accompanying essay that addresses this section of the site is equally stark, and reflects her insecurity in an almost matter-of-fact way. She presents a reality of living in America that is not often acknowledged:

Looking at the mirror, the visitor sees an aspect of himself or herself, because at first glance I want to seem like everyone else. [...] I fear that if I am not typical, people will not accept me. The mirror covers a large part of the wall, which reveals the magnitude to which physical appearance plays in my life as well as the lives of others in society. Since I am a minority I also feel strongly about my physical appearance and do everything possible to fit in to the norm of society. I try to fit, due to my need to entice visitors to go further in the site in order to get to know me.

But her account becomes slightly more complex as Maya vacillates throughout her essay (and site) between herself and the American culture she blames for her "having" to conform to the typical interests of young people in America. On the one hand, she describes feeling that she must possess certain things to "keep up with society." She depicts herself as a victim of American culture by claiming that "this is my attempt to show how substantially American culture and technology has influenced me, since these objects say nothing about my beliefs or my desires." But on the other hand, she admits that "this entryway is filled with things I like that have been shaped by the society I live in." As much as she wants to dismiss the way she's been influenced by American culture as somehow existing apart from a deeper self, she slowly comes to terms throughout the

rest of her site with the fact that her likes and dislikes, however typical or materialistic, are still a part of who she is.

The variety of spaces and objects that make up *The Long Closet* compose complex negotiations among various aspects of Maya's self, and she continues to vacillate between dichotomous elements of her self in the second space of her site, "The Middle Tunnel," where the visitor is surrounded by a cacophony of objects from American and Hindu culture:



The Middle Tunnel

As you make a slight swift turn right you see another part of this closet. You sense a feeling of heritage and culture, you look around you feel you know just a little more about the occupant of this space. To your right you see a plush stiff red couch covered with red silk embroidered pillows. Next to that a table with Christmas candles, and children's books, and an worn out library pass, next to the chair you see a cactus which survives from the illumination from the sun, which the glass walls provide. Across from that you see a large portrait of the Taj Mahal which seems to illuminate the room in its large silver carved frame.

For Maya, these objects "reveal my history, and symbolize aspects of my cultural heritage that have shaped the person I am." Maya's analysis of these objects shows what they symbolize for her, but they also reveal the tension that she feels between who she is and who she would like to become. For instance, by clicking on the object of the

children's books, visitors to the site learn that *"these books all look worn out as the pages are folded and the covers are slightly torn."* In her essay, Maya claims that these books, and the worn-out library pass, reflect her love of reading that started as a child, and that *"fiction allows me to feel emotions that I am not getting from my own life."* And yet, she admits that the worn out pass *"reflects that I have been overdoing this escaping. I feel that I have escaped too much and I need to start spending this time changing aspects of my own life that may bother me."* Maya's love of reading has enabled her to foster dichotomies between fiction/real life and escape/confrontation. Her realization of these dichotomies and the ways in which they have limited her sets the stage for her Thirdspace identity construction of "The Cafe" located in the next area of the site.

The Thirdspace of "The Cafe" provides a space for Maya to challenge the dichotomous thinking that has thus far limited her interactions with others and the ways in which she has been able to perceive herself. It is a space where the dichotomies that she has set up between her American and Hindu cultural traditions are deconstructed and reconstructed to form an/other option – one that allows her two cultures to come together to inform (rather than divide) her sense of self in ways that Maya had previously thought impossible.



The Cafe

The cafe has a large bar serving any possible beverage from Cappuccinos to Coke. There are comfortable red chairs which are covered with beaded white pillows. There is Indian art covering the wall, they all seem to tell a

story as they are so detailed. There are pictures of Indian people, temples, and culture all around the cafe.

The Cafe is representative of what Maya describes as a “very American” coffee shop, but it is one that is filled with Indian artwork and furniture which serves to create a “perfect mix of Indian culture as well as American culture.” “The Cafe” is a space in which Maya can “reveal this blend of cultures” to others – enjoying the company of her diverse friends, and educating those who she meets about her two cultures in ways she previously avoided for fear she would be rejected by them.

However real the division between her two cultures has felt for Maya, the Thirdspace construction of “The Cafe,” tacitly “critiques through its otherness” (Soja) the very existence of that division. Maya is able to bring together cultural elements she had previously assumed to be incompatible, and the hospitality she shows to her guests in this space reflect how complex a reconstruction has actually taken place:

In order to show appreciation to my close friends around me, I give them all the possessions I have. I want them to relax and have every luxury that I may possess. Being hospitable and taking action in order to cater to the needs of your guest is a significant part of Indian culture. In order to be hospitable I provide tangible things rather than actions, providing tangible things is a technique I have learned growing up [in America].

The hospitality that Maya sees as inherent to her Indian culture is facilitated through her giving of material possessions to her guests – something she sees as inherently American. More than “The Cafe” being a space where her Indian and American cultures simply

coexist, Maya has selected and creatively restructured elements of each culture to achieve a Thirdspace construction that transcends the divide between her cultures and provides her with an/other option with which to inform her sense of self.

MusicMan's Flat

Music Man's site reflects the struggle between the public and private realities of sexual orientation, and coming out in a world that does not readily embrace difference. The chasm between public and private self that was apparent at the start of *The Long Closet* is at the center of *Music Man's Flat*. Brian,⁷ the student who constructed *Music Man's Flat*, is a homosexual, but at the time was not yet comfortable acknowledging his homosexuality publicly. Like Maya, Brian's site originates out of his feeling that he is unable to be the same person privately and publicly. But where Maya constructs Thirdspace through a *place* in her site ("The Cafe"), Brian constructs a Thirdspace identity through the *character* of his site—a man he calls Kevin Masterson—through whom Brian's private realities and public fears are transcended and an/other option for his self revealed. When a visitor first enters *MusicMan's Flat*, they enter the idealized, top floor, Park Avenue apartment of a successful conductor and musician named Kevin. The apartment is beautifully furnished, with the finery of wood floors, high ceilings, plush couches and bookshelves. There are six spaces branching off from the central space of the living room, including "The Music Lounge," "The Outdoors," "The Pool," "The Party Pad," "The Round Table," and "The Unknown." Some of these rooms are

⁷ A pseudonym

more familiar representations of real-life places, like “The Pool” and “The Music Lounge,” and some are abstractions, like “The Unknown,” where the material details of the room matter little compared to the thoughts and emotions that occupy visitors to the site when they are there.

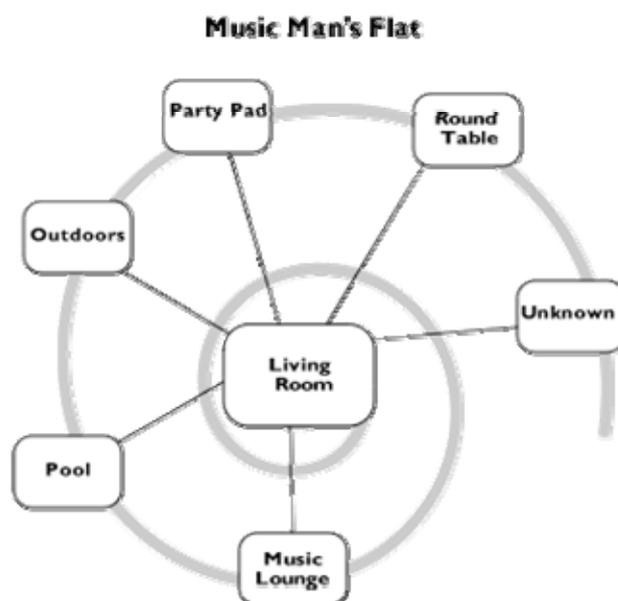


Figure 2: Representation of Music Man's Flat

Visitors enter the site through “The Living Room,” and are immediately addressed by Kevin, the flat’s owner, who warmly welcomes them, “Welcome to my apartment.... Explore, look around, check everything out and enjoy!” Kevin plays a different role in this site than the MOO characters of most other students because instead of serving to embody a sketch or some part of the student who constructed the site, Kevin is described as a character deliberately set apart from the student. As the screen shot below shows, when the visitor clicks on “MusicMan” they see a description of Kevin Masterson, which is not the student’s real name, followed by a section that lists the

student's real name, email address, and interests. Unlike the student's "real-life" description, his character Kevin Masterson is described as young, well dressed, charming...and a homosexual.

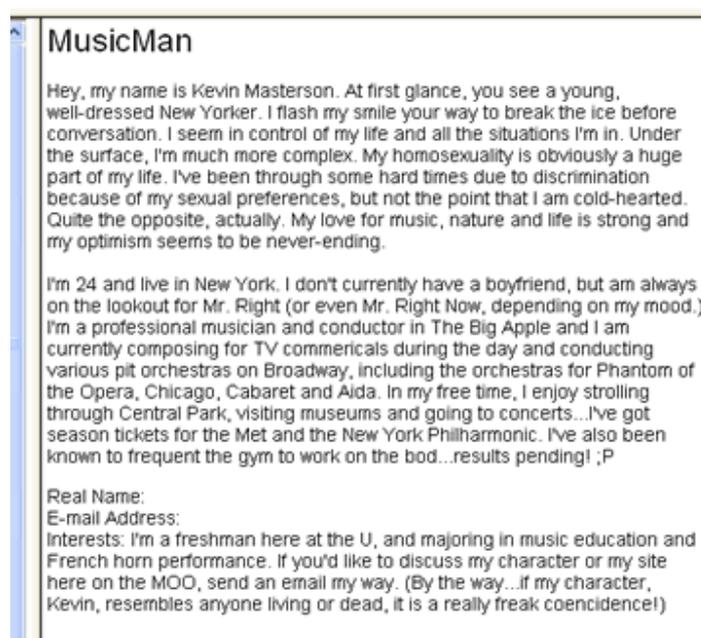


Figure 3: Screen shot of Music Man's character description

This description of Kevin Masterson reveals a complexity underneath what otherwise is an idealized version of life as a successful musician in New York. Kevin describes himself as having seeming control of his life, but "under the surface I'm much more complex. My homosexuality is obviously a huge part of my life." He has experienced discrimination and has been through "some hard times" because of it, but describes himself as optimistic. In Kevin's character description, his homosexuality is described in a lighthearted tone, making jokes that perhaps he hopes people will relate to,

about finding “Mr. Right (or even Mr. Right Now)” and working on his “bod...results pending ;p”

Kevin acts as a Thirdspace identity construction by the way in which he embodies a reconfiguration of the public/private, in/out binaries that Brian feels currently divided by. Similar to Brian’s private self, Kevin is gay and a musician. But unlike Brian, Kevin is living publicly as a gay man, and Kevin’s success and happiness in life, despite the hardship he endured coming out for the first time, transcend the divide between public/private, normal/abnormal to provide an/other option that is gay *and* successful *and* accepted *and* considered “normal” in both private *and* public life. Far from closeted, Kevin is actively present in Brian’s site, and appears to site visitors as charming, funny, generous and hospitable. Kevin serves as an ambassador for Brian and the larger Gay community as an/other option to the binaries that Brian fears may keep him on the margins as a gay man.

Kevin as Thirdspace, as the reconstruction of Brian’s public and private selves, is further revealed in the interplay between Kevin’s character description and Brian, whose RL name and description of interests is listed below Kevin’s description. On the U-MOO, student’s RL names are listed under the description of their character, and though there is space for a student to provide a RL description of their interests, rarely have I seen students in my classes provide one (presumably their sites take care of this). Brian, however, provided a description of his interests that both resembles his description of Kevin (being a music major), and distances himself from Kevin by revealing no other details that might link Brian’s RL self to Kevin. In his RL description, Brian invites the

visitor to “discuss” Kevin, but follows that invitation with the disclaimer that “by the way...if my character, Kevin, resembles anyone living or dead it is really a freak coincidence!” suggesting the depth of anxiety that Brian continues to feel about people finding out that he is gay. And yet, Brian locates Kevin in the central room of the site, “the Living Room,” where visitors first enter, and through which they must travel time after time to get to the other areas of the site. So although Brian disassociates himself from Kevin initially, as site visitors get to know Kevin (and thus Brian) better during the visitors’ tour of the site, they grow to like Kevin (despite his sexuality), and their approval will engender an opportunity for Brian to come out and be looked upon favorably as Kevin is.

Brian constructs Kevin as a Thirdspace who embodies both Brian’s RL characteristics and his fantasy desires. Brian writes in his essay, “I think the reason I created Kevin was to experience a life I have dreamed of living and a personality with the confidence I dream of having.” And yet, just as he brings himself in closer association with Kevin, Brian distances himself again by describing Kevin not as a future self, but as a “special friend” and “brother”:

Kevin is that special friend that you wonder how you were ever lucky enough to meet. And you realize that your meeting was more than dumb luck. I feel like Kevin and I are supposed to be friends, and we are supposed to learn from one another. Our personalities are alike in many ways and yet unique enough for us to compliment each other. Kevin has

opened my eyes in many ways to views and ideas I didn't necessarily realize I had.

Brian's belief that Kevin opened his eyes to "views and ideas I didn't necessarily realize I had," reveals how as a Thirdspace construction, Kevin provides an/other option through which Brian is able to transcend the dichotomies that currently divide him.

Although Brian differentiates himself from Kevin, relegating Kevin to the role of "friend" or "brother," the lines between Brian and Kevin blur once again by the manner in which Brian discusses the significance of various rooms in Kevin's Flat. Brian starts his discussion of each room by saying what the room reflects not just for Brian, but for Kevin as well. For instance, in Brian's initial discussion of "The Music Lounge," he says, "Music is a part of my life I can't begin to explain, and Kevin feels the same way. The Music Lounge is perhaps the most important place for myself, and the place where Kevin spends the majority of his leisure time." Brian's discussion of the Outdoors reflects a similar relationship:

I love nature and everything about it, so Kevin also enjoys spending time out in the world. The Outdoors represents my desire to see the world and really experience nature. In The Outdoors, Kevin and visitors can go anywhere, the ocean, the jungle, the mountains, the sky...there are no limits. There is no fear of getting lost, unlike in real life. Whenever I am out in nature, I can't totally put my "regular" life out of my mind, and thus I do worry about getting lost and having that become a problem in my life.

Brian's discussion of "The Outdoors" brings Kevin and Brian together, but it also serves as a tacit acknowledgement of the two selves that Brian has created for himself, one who lives a "regular" life (public, non-gay, lost) and one who escapes to the outdoors (private, gay, found). But if the outdoors represents Brian's private persona, his invitation to site visitors to "go anywhere" in this space, is an attempt to bring them closer to his private persona. And yet, Brian's anxiety about the divide between his two selves remains apparent in his admitting that even in the outdoors (private persona) he can't shake the worry of getting lost, as though, by not acknowledging his gay identity publicly, his denial might seep into his private self and "become a problem" in his life.

An important dimension of Kevin as a Thirdspace identity construction is revealed through Brian's attempt to use Kevin to charm his way into the hearts of site visitors, and make his case for the visitor to be open-minded and conquer their fear of difference. Such attempts are most apparent in the more abstract rooms of "The Round Table," and "The Unknown."



The Round Table

You enter my personal meeting room. But don't let the term "meeting room" make you think this is a stuffy place where you'd rather doodle or fall asleep than listen to a boring voice drone on and on. Instead, you are welcomed by the comfortable decorating job. In the center of the room, you notice a dark oak table surrounded by large, plush leather chairs on heels. In the corner is an espresso machine along with a fridge full of your

favorite snacks and drinks. A microwave is on the counter near the fridge. (Microwave popcorn, anyone? Extra butter?) Sit at the table, and let your ideas flow. We all have our opinions on every topic imaginable, and this is the place to express these ideas and hear what others have to say. There are no limits on the topic of conversation, but keep in mind one thing: Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, and no one has any more power over anyone else to condemn someone else's thoughts.

“The Round Table” is a comfortable room with everything the visitor might need to make them feel welcome here, including plush leather chairs, an espresso machine, microwave popcorn, and “a fridge full of your favorite snacks and drinks.” In knowing what will make the visitor feel comfortable in the space, Brian (through Kevin) presents himself as someone visitors can relate to and enjoy the company of. Brian looks to charm his visitors and set them at ease because he seeks to open up a dialogue with them, laying all opinions out on the table to discuss, including, opinions about sexual orientation. As Brian relates in his essay,

In this room, Kevin and visitors can discuss any issue they want free from fear of ridicule. I have learned that ten people can have eleven different opinions. The ideas and thoughts people have about every aspect of life can be as original and different as the faces in a crowd. The other thing I truly believe is that everyone must respect others opinions in order to make things more peaceful. After all, who is to say that I’m any more right than you are? Kevin believes all these things, and knows all to well the

hurt that can come from people not respecting others opinions. As a gay man, Kevin has faced far too much hate from others who believe they are superior. However, Kevin still believes that there is always hope for open communication.

This search for open communication would presumably lead visitors to a greater acceptance of gay people like Kevin and Brian. But fear is something that also keeps people from accepting others, and the conquering of fear is what Brian sets up in “The Unknown.”



The Unknown

You enter the Unknown. What are you afraid of? Think hard and think deep. What is it that you fear the most? If you fear the dark, then this room is totally void of light. If you fear embarrassment, then everyone is laughing at you. Then you may be asking yourself, "Why am I here? I should leave..." But wait, and stay a moment. Everyone has things they fear, and facing these fears can give you a new perspective. More importantly, look closer, for you are never alone in this room. Everyone is in this room, everyone fears something. Give comfort to those around you, or seek comfort with others. Don't expect your fears to be cured, but rather, get more comfortable with what you fear. Try to figure out why, and then you can start to confront your fear. However, keep in mind one thing. Linger here, being overwhelmed and consumed by

your fears, is not what this room is for. Fears cannot become your only view of life.

Though Brian is addressing the visitor, his own fears are on trial in this site as well.

The Unknown brings together Brian's fears—about being discriminated against as a homosexual—and the fears of the visitor, who may see homosexuality as something to be feared. This space takes the inherently isolating experience of fear—that which positions a person against the something they feel threatened by—and strives to transcend the divide between the feared and the fearer through the common experience of fear itself. Rather than fear acting as a mark of isolation, my student suggests that visitors to the site “look closer, for you are never alone in this room. Everyone is in this room, everyone fears something.” Brian acknowledges his own need to face that which he fears, and once again position Kevin as a Thirdspace, who too has fears, but who has been able to transcend those fears, as Brian has not:

The Unknown is the place where Kevin goes to become more comfortable with his fears before he can truly kick their ass. As fun loving, confident and in control as Kevin seems I did not create the bionic man. He has his own fears and inhibitions, as we all do. Kevin has found, however, that working through and facing your fears is a wonderful way to become more at ease with them. I, on the other hand, have not yet had the courage to do this with everything I am afraid of. There are things I fear that I have not confronted, and I imagine many visitors to Kevin's flat are in the same boat. Kevin, on the other hand, faces his fears and benefits from this

experience. The biggest thing he feared in all his life was coming out to his family and friends. However, after he gained the strength to come out of the closet, he found the strength to get over his fears of other things as well, including failure. I think I created this room for Kevin with the hopes that someday I too could get rid of some of the things that I feel haunt me.

Through the construction of his self in a space on the MOO, Brian is able to explore the divide between his public and private personas that has prevented him from acknowledging his sexual orientation publicly. He creates in Kevin a Thirdspace identity construction through which he is able to transcend the divide and come “out” to an/other possibility for the self.

Berkembang River

Evelyn⁸ is a first-generation American of Palestinian descent. Her site reveals a sophisticated synthesis of her diverse Palestinian and American cultural influences. Rather than constructing Thirdspace through a single room in her site, as Maya did, or through her character, as Brian did, Evelyn’s entire site, including her character, serve as a Thirdspace identity construction. Throughout every space in her site, Evelyn selects elements from her Palestinian and American cultures and arranges them to form an/other identity, one that is neither exclusively Palestinian nor exclusively American, but is an exciting and vibrant Thirdspace identity construction that takes selectively from each. Evelyn feels a strong connection to her Palestinian heritage and has family both in

⁸ A pseudonym. Evelyn’s character name was the same as her RL name so it has been changed.

America and in the Middle East. But instead of these two cultures being at odds with each other, Evelyn’s site is an adventurous cacophony of myriad cultural elements that come together to reveal a Thirdspace identity that flourishes in diversity and contradiction.



Figure 4: Representation of Berkembang River

Throughout her site, Evelyn mischievously challenges the visitor’s expectations, and seems to revel in the unique facets of the various cultures of which she is a part. Evelyn’s site both begins and ends at “Berkembang River.” Her site takes visitors through places such as the “Pedantic,” “Genesis Tributary,” and “Habeeb Bazaar” on their way to what seems like some final destination. In fact, just when visitors are nearing the final space of the site, they find themselves back at “Berkembang River” to begin their journey all over again. Evelyn explains that the organization of her site is but

one of many paradoxes that she came to realize are “outgrowths of the subconscious tensions between different beliefs, loyalties, and cultures within me.” She continues:

At first, the layout of my rooms seems linear. The visitor follows the text and arrows from one room to the next, each representing different parts of me or my life history. But the story line is, in a sense, both backward and circular. The visitor begins at the end, Berkembang River, which is the destination for two smaller rivers. [...] This intermingling of beginning and ending reflects my observation that beginnings – my roots and past experiences – influence my present mood, behavior, and beliefs in an almost random way. This explains why my rooms contain out-of-place objects; there is often no logical explanation for the influence of childhood memories or family histories.

By characterizing the journey through her self as being both backward and circular, visitors to Evelyn’s site approach her self from a variety of directions, angles, perspectives that are exemplary of a Thirdspace understanding of the self.

Evelyn’s character is a Thirdspace in and of itself, and is part of her larger Thirdspace site. Her character conveys a sense of excitement, adventure, and abandon that comes from the intermingling of her past, her present, and the various cultures with which she associates:



Evelyn

You see an eccentric woman of indeterminate age sitting on a motorcycle. Her feet are bare, her red toenail polish chipped. Silver bangles hang from her skinny ankle. She is wearing gym pants under her wrap-around sarong. Her white tank top is splattered with red mud - or is that spaghetti? Her curly hair is frizzed and tangled from riding too fast in the wind. You think you see a bindi or a small tattoo on her forehead; then you realize it's mud. Sometimes when she smiles, a faint dimple appears in her right cheek; other times, her eyes just wrinkle up.

In Evelyn's case, her character scarcely resembles her RL physical appearance, making it even more symbolically significant. Evelyn's character is a Thirdspace in how it creatively assembles diverse elements of her self, and more importantly, how it suggests as an/other option to the either/or categories of race, religion, and culture that people use to characterize themselves and others. Visitors to the site are unable to reduce Evelyn's character to a series of simple categorizations. For instance, visitors cannot tell whether the splatter on her shirt is mud or spaghetti sauce, and they mistakenly attempt to find deeper meaning in her physical appearance by assuming that a spot of mud on her forehead is the more culturally significant symbol of a bindi. But Evelyn's character challenges not just the visitors, but the contradictions that Evelyn herself sometimes feels. In her essay, Evelyn explains it this way:

I tried to depict a person who is a nonconformist – not deliberately, but incidentally. The conflicting beliefs and impulses within her are

simultaneously manifest in her oddity. For example, my character is “wearing gym pants under her wrap-around sarong.” The gym pants represent both activity and Western culture; the sarong represents femininity and Eastern culture. The blend of these two garments symbolizes my partial discomfort in either the East or the West, either as a tomboy or a “girly” girl. I am most myself when I blend both hemispheres and both aspects of my personality. The ambiguity surrounding the stains on my character’s shirt and the mark on her forehead illustrate my frequent uncertainty about my actions; I do not always know the causes of my behavior. The character is also barefoot on a motorcycle – a dangerous situation. Likewise, I love adventurous undertakings, but I am not always prepared for them. For example, the tension of living in unstable Muslim countries just prior September 11th actually excited me. But I was not emotionally ready to cope with my friend’s imprisonment on religious grounds or my teacher’s death in a terrorist bombing. Still, my character is resilient and forward-looking, as I hope the visitor is as he begins his journey at Berkembang River.

Evelyn’s acknowledgement of her own conflicting impulses is refreshing in its resistance to either/or simplification. Evelyn can be both adventurous and unprepared, uncertain and resilient. Thirdspace identity constructions not only allow for the both/and, but restructure such dichotomous elements in such a way as to evolve to something that is

better than the sum of its parts, as reflected in the resilience and forward-looking stance of Evelyn's character.

Like her character, the first space of her site, "Berkembang River," acts as a deliberate arrangement of diverse and unexpected elements that exemplify a Thirdspace identity construction. There is a pine forest enveloped in fog and "moist, cool air," but the visitor sees a palm tree and notices that "the soil is rocky and dry." If you look more closely at the palm, it is a supple plant, from which blooms a red and yellow flower, "but the tips of the leaves - like the stalk - are rough and dry." Evelyn explains the significance of the wet/dry, warm/cool interplay of the tropical plant in the midst of a pine forest:

berkembang is the Indonesian word for "plant," reflecting my memories associated with that nation, as well as my love for foreign languages. This tropical plant seems incongruous amidst the pines. It is meant for the moist, rich soil of a rainforest, not the rocky dirt of a dry forest. Indeed, I wanted this plant – this representation of me – to clash with its environment, as I have so often done. I remember visiting an open market in Indonesia. I was a head taller than anyone around me, and I was surrounded by a cacophony of Indonesian, Javanese, and other local dialects. I remember acutely feeling my whiteness amidst the broil of brownness; I wanted to convey this through the little plant, surrounded by aspens and pines. The other trees are wrapped in fog, so the visitor sees the plant more clearly than the other trees. Likewise, I am usually more

aware of myself than others. I feel invaded when others try to meddle in my life, so the image of the pines that “pierce the fog with their gaunt limbs” is deliberately bleak. But when the visitor shows genuine interest in knowing “this strange plant,” it blooms “into trumpeting flourishes.” [...] When I do reveal more about myself to others, our differences become more pronounced but also more beautiful.

For Evelyn, differences are not to be feared, but explored and celebrated. The visitor is exposed to the differences Evelyn perceives within herself, and the way she has played with and restructured the differences she discovers between herself and others.

This celebration of difference is revealed throughout the remainder of Evelyn’s site, and exemplifies Thirdspace to an even greater degree with each area presenting an alternate but simultaneously existing perspective that informs her sense of self. Where Evelyn’s character communicates her own feelings about her self, The Pedantic represents how Evelyn feels that she is perceived by others and how their perceptions inform her own sense of self, Genesis Tributary represents how her past informs her sense of self, and Habeeb Bazaar represents how her Middle Eastern heritage informs her sense of self. Evelyn included these perspectives in her site because she came to recognize how the self is not simply an island that exists apart from all other people and cultural influences, but is enriched by its interactions with others.

For Evelyn, the Pedantic represents how she feels she is perceived by others. As she explains:

In this room's planning stages, I meant it to be only a picture of how others see me – not the “real” me. But I realized that perceptions of me affect the “real” me, and these perceptions are not always wrong. The Pedantic characterizes me as focused and bookish, which I am. The room is sparse, suggesting a preoccupation with the abstract. Although sometimes I am abstract, I think I am more absent-minded; abstract is what I hope to become! Still, I love to read and reflect, and I appreciate silence and solitude, all of which are central to this space. The red Persian rug, though, with its intricateness and unexpectedness, throws off the predictability of the room. I purposefully demonstrate that I am not only how others perceive me; I am multi-dimensional. Classmates are often surprised that I play rugby; friends usually wonder how I maintain my G.P.A. if I am such a daydreamer. The detail of the trap door under the rug, which leads from the enclosed room to an open river, is a hidden message that I have “ways out” of being contained or confined by one definition. But I am also willing to let others see these different definitions, if only they try.

Evelyn then has the visitor travel to Genesis Tributary, in which she explores her past and its influence on her sense of self. She explains:

After the visitor falls through The Pedantic's trap door into a canoe on Genesis Tributary, he unearths my background and its influence on me. As its name suggests, beginnings are important to me, because I have begun

new lifestyles, schools, relationships, and perspectives numerous times. I chose the name Genesis because of its religious connotation; religion has influenced my family life and activities. Genesis is harder to navigate than the other tributary, because my past is not easily reconstructed or understood. Genesis Tributary is also “narrower and the current . . . stronger,” reflecting my desire to rebel against what I have been taught. Nevertheless, it is a pleasant, nostalgic place, which mirrors my emotions regarding my childhood. The three houses the visitor passes not only depict actual houses I’ve lived in, but they detail different stages of my psychological development. At the first house, the “two little girls playing outside” are my sister and me, representing the stage of early childhood in which I relied only on my family. The second house has several children playing together, showing my progression to where I received support from my friends. The final Victorian house has no children. This image not only conveys that I have left home, but the Victorian style of the house represents my parents’ older generation and my separation from it; I no longer live with them, rely on them, or blindly accept their values.

Following Genesis Tributary is a gate that the visitor must pass through to reach Habeeb Bazaar. The gate is decorated with fantastical scenes of turbaned men battling lions alongside belly-dancing women. The visitor is asked for a password in order to open the gate, and they reply by exclaiming “Open sesame!” The journey through the gate to the Bazaar represents Evelyn’s journey through her stereotypical perceptions of

Middle Eastern culture that she held in the past (hence the location of the gate in Genesis Tributary) and her current understanding and appreciation of Middle Eastern culture:

The gate signals the beginning of my examination of how my expatriate lifestyle has affected me. Depicting how I once viewed foreign regions, especially the Middle East, the gate is fanciful, simplistic, and stereotypical. Before I lived there, I, too, associated the Middle East with turbaned men and belly dancers. I thought that bridging the lingual and cultural gaps would be as easy as “Open sesame!” But once I entered that world, I had to discard all my assumptions.

Upon entering Habeeb Bazaar, the visitor is immersed in a “vibrant” city that includes both traditional and contemporary, Eastern and Western cultural elements, revealing her experience living in a more complex Middle Eastern reality:



Habeeb Bazaar

A vibrant city bustles before you. The air is hot and dry, and sand blows against stone churches, goatskin tents, and the copper pots clanging from the vendors' stalls. You move among the displays of sarongs, veils, prayer mats, figs, cashews, camels. Men wearing turbans, white robes, business suits, and jeans walk past. Women glide by under swaying, black, curtain-like robes. Dusty-toed children bump into you in the narrow alleys. Clove cigarette smoke wafts among the vendors' calls, "Ifaddali, shufi a lal tafah. I geeve you good deal, special price!" The minarets broadcast to

their faithful, "Bismillah ar-Rahman, ar-Rahim". Hidden among folds of linen on a display table, a calendar lies open.

Evelyn is able to locate herself in this city through the symbol of the calendar, which blends in, "hidden among the fold of linen" on the merchants table, but is open to reveal images and a schedule that is distinctively American:



Calendar

You flip through the calendar. It has typical pictures of United States national parks. Appointments, practices, and classes are scheduled in scribbled pencil: piano 4:30. Recognition Dinner 7. Rachel's play 5:30. At the bottom of the December page is written, "A new year, a new place. All endings renew at Berkembang River."

Evelyn's commentary on this object reveals the deeper cultural difference between Western and Eastern conceptions of time that she has experienced:

Habeeb means "love" in Arabic, and this space illustrates my love for the Middle East. Habeeb Bazaar is realistic, with its displays of food, religious materials, forms of transportation, and a variety of clothing. Again [like the object of the plant in Berkembang river], the featured object – the calendar – seems out of place. Time is a significant source of cultural clash between East and West. Easterners say, "Time is a rubber band," emphasizing its flexibility; the Western adage is, "Time is money." The calendar, with its emphasis on date and time, is a very Western object

amidst the vivid Eastern images. I, too, felt out of place in the Middle East, like an object that belonged in a different hemisphere. Yet because I see myself as that struggling, out-of-place plant by Berkembang River, I – like the calendar – really do belong in the Bazaar.

The reflections Evelyn makes in this last paragraph show the extent to which her site acts as a powerful Thirdspace identity construction. Both her site and her self embody myriad philosophies, languages and material objects that allow her to transcend the limitations of an either/or choice between cultures, and arrive at an/other space from which she can speak to her own struggles and the ways in which she is able to negotiate her unique cultural experiences. These experiences, brought forth in Thirdspace, have broadened Evelyn's sense of self in rich and colorful ways. Evelyn's assertion that she really does "belong in the Bazaar," boldly embraces her position as both/and – Eastern and Western, in-place and out-of-place, a "head taller than anyone" and "hidden among folds of linen" – in ways that break wide-open the possibilities for understanding and articulating the complexities of the postmodern self.

Toward a Thirdspace Agency

The sites of students like Maya, Brian, and Evelyn that I present in this chapter are examples of a new kind of identity construction—a Thirdspace identity construction—that offers students the opportunity to bring together the dichotomous fragments of their selves and creatively restructure them, drawing selectively from each, and arriving at an/other/third option that opens up possibilities for the self where fewer

existed before. But more than opening up new possibilities, Thirdspace identity constructions engender a new kind of agency, one that embraces complexity and refuses reduction. To illustrate this new agency even more fully, I turn once again to Gloria Anzaldua's autobiographical text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Through her construction of a Thirdspace identity—a *mestiza* consciousness—Anzaldua is able to disrupt and reconstruct the dichotomous elements of her life, including the geographies in which she has lived, as well as the myriad languages, discourses, and cultural practices that she both speaks and is spoken by. Her agency resonates through the story she tells of the “brown woman:”

Caught between the sudden contraction, the breath sucked in and the endless space, the brown woman stands still, looks at the sky. She decides to go down, digging her way along the roots of trees. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them to see if there is any marrow in them. Then, touching the dirt to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes a few bones, leaves the rest in their burial place.

She goes through her backpack, keeps her journal and address book, throws away the muni-bart metromaps. The coins are heavy and they go next, then the greenbacks flutter through the air. She keeps the knife, can opener and eyebrow pencil. She puts bones, pieces of bark, *hierbas*, eagle feather, snakeskin, tape recorder, the rattle and drum in her pack and she sets out to become the complete *tolteca*. (82)

Anzaldua's New Mestiza consciousness arises through the process of sifting and digging through her past, sorting the items of her present, discarding some, making room for others, and proceeding on with her newly assembled self. She contemplates the weight on her back, and wonders "which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo?" (82) It is all jumbled together now, in one backpack, one Thirdspace, and the brown woman finds it difficult to differentiate among it all. But still she steps forward, making a

conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct. She becomes a *nahual*, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. She learns to transform the small 'I' into the total Self. (82-83)

Anzaldua positions herself as one who does not exist apart from nor can fully identify the cultures, geographies, languages, and customs from which she has emerged. Yet, her connection to it all engenders an agency that prompts her to "shake the bones" of the past to see if they have marrow, and with that knowledge, set out as a self that is informed as much by past reality as by future possibility. A Thirdspace self is one who is comfortable

with the unfamiliar and the ambiguous, but one who also has the ability to adapt, change shape, and see the *I* as an *all*—as an infinite sum and ever-changing total.

Like Anzaldua's brown woman, Maya, Brian and Evelyn construct sites that explore their myriad selves, sifting through what they find, discarding some elements, embracing others, and creating new spaces for change. Thirdspace identity constructions allow students the space in which to negotiate the infinite ways they are spoken—by their cultures, histories, and experiences—and the space to find new ways of speaking. These constructions allow students the opportunity to question the perceived dichotomies pulling at their selves, and the confidence to call such dichotomies into question, giving rise to alternative possibilities that expose the fragile logic on which such dichotomies depend. Thirdspace constructions prompt us to transcend such dichotomous thinking, and encourage the construction of ever open spaces for our real-and-imagined selves.

III. Engaging in Tactics of Ambiguity and Play

Exploring the myriad dimensions of identity and subjectivity in a composition course is an endeavor not easily squeezed into a single unit, much less an entire course. And yet, offering students the opportunity to explore their postmodern, socially-constructed identities is important because the agency with which people feel empowered to act in the world is directly related to their relationships with larger power structures, and people's ideas about themselves are more than ever being shaped by their exposure to media, marketing, and their roles as consumers. Theorists such as Jean Baudrillard have argued that one facet of living in a post-capitalistic society is that our identities are defined by what we consume. Marketing the products and services that vie for our consumption has probably become the most conspicuous form of identity manipulation. In "consumer oriented" advertising, advertisers attempt to create in consumers a certain feeling or idea about themselves. If we buy an Apple computer, then we are a person who "Think[s] Different." If we wear this or that brand of clothing we're cool, hip, and sophisticated. People buy products or services with the hopes of looking more attractive, healthier, and younger. Some advertising even tries to counter the idea that people should purchase products to change themselves, and instead advocates that their products will allow people to stay true to their "real" selves. An example of this is the Dove "Real Beauty" campaign that showcases women of all races and body types who are meant to represent the idea of a "normal" woman, as if to suggest that as long as you use Dove, you can be proud of who you "are," rather than wanting to be someone or something else.

But the inundation of advertising and the level of consumption that occurs in post-capitalist societies makes the question of who you “are” that much more enigmatic and our search for meaning and agency that much more challenging.

Locating Identity in Virtual Space

To bring questions about identity and meaning-making into the composition classroom, I offered students in my classes the opportunity to explore identity through the construction of their selves in/through a space on the U-MOO. The space could be however large or small, and could consist of any number of “rooms” and objects, in any conceivable (or inconceivable) order, described in any way. As a part of the actual site construction, each student had to name and describe their MOO character (the persona they embody when they log onto the MOO) and include it/him/her/them in some area within their site. In addition to the site, students were required to write an analysis essay that attempted to account for the details and descriptive decisions they made throughout the site (whether planned or unplanned, understood entirely or not). What “self” or “identity” meant for each student was up to them and could be interpreted how they saw fit.

In this chapter I analyze a multitude of MOO character descriptions and student sites that capture both the struggle students have over the increased instability of their identities, and the ways in which students are able to find meaning and develop a personal sense of agency through their manipulation of and play with the categories and spaces that supposedly define them. I use Michel De Certeau’s concept of tactics,

introduced in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, as a lens through which to show how students use their MOO sites to “poach” language and cultural objects, manipulate and extend real-life spaces, and engage in play in an effort to enact change on a personal level. These tactics show how students are able to pursue new avenues of meaningful action, on a personal level, within the confines of the larger culture of which they are a part, yet avenues that are significant nonetheless because of the ways in which they allow students wiggle room to explore and understand themselves in new ways. By using their MOO spaces to manipulate and play with the real-life spaces, objects, and language available to them in the construction of their identities, they can challenge established ways of knowing while remaining immersed in the larger cultural structures of which they are a part.

De Certeau distinguishes between two forms of production in culture – that of the dominant cultural systems, and that of consumers. The systems of “production,” which include media outlets, urban development, and commerce, are blind to the consumptive practices of its “consumers” because they “no longer leave “consumers” any *place* in which they can indicate what they *make or do* with the products of these systems” (xii). In contrast is “consumption,” which is really a form of production by the way people use the products of the dominant culture. De Certeau characterizes such consumption as “devious” and “dispersed” but as something that “insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly” (xii) because it does involve the creation of one’s own products, but rather the use of dominant cultural artifacts. The MOO provides students with a place in which to do and make what they will with the objects and spaces of their real lives.

Although the MOO can facilitate the creation of whole new objects and spaces, the sites students create are largely manipulations of already existing spaces and objects, which is significant in the dynamic created between the real-life referent and its incarnation on the MOO. Were students to have only created largely unfamiliar worlds, existing beyond any frame of reference, they would offer little in the way of understanding our relationships with the real-life objects and spaces of our everyday experiences and how those objects and spaces inform our understanding of identity. However, by creating sites that manipulate spaces and objects from real life, students come to new knowledge about themselves and challenge established meaning while working within the cultural systems that surround them. The MOO facilitates poaching, the manipulation of space, and an engagement in play by providing a place that is both real and fantasy—in which spaces and objects, though familiar to real-life, can be extended beyond the realm of physical reality, and thus provide students the opportunity to challenge the ways in which dominant cultural forces determine what can be considered real

De Certeau and “Tactics”

“Tactics” is a term de Certeau coined to describe the ways in which people (whom he terms “users”) operate with power in the world through their interaction with and manipulation of the objects, places, material items, and non-material messages (through media, language, etc.) that they come in contact with everyday. This manipulation takes place *within* the personal lives of users without publicly challenging the static spaces and systems of the dominant cultural forces (including government,

corporations and other entities in a position to shape the spaces and cultural practices of users), so it remains largely undetected. However, de Certeau shows how users' tactics still have tremendous power for users in their ability to operate with meaning in the world, not as passive consumers, but active producers.

How people operate in the world is a topic that, according to de Certeau, has been largely ignored in favor of investigations of the larger systems at work upon people. Social structures, mass media, consumer goods, and language – the ways in which all larger systems shape and largely dictate the actions and perceptions of people – have been studied by theorists such as Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes. However, what people actually *do* with the particulars of these systems that they encounter every day is what de Certeau explores. Through his analysis of storytelling, urban spaces, and common activities such as walking, reading and cooking, de Certeau shows that people are not merely worked upon by these systems – passive and helpless to the persuasive powers and controlling influences that they encounter. Instead, users' actions become powerful through the tactics of “poaching” – or appropriating well-established objects, modes, and parts of language in their own ways and using them for their own purposes. In fact, he argues, if we focus on the ways in which people use/appropriate the particular objects they encounter on a daily basis, we will see not a mass of homogenous drones, but powerful subjects who subtly assert their own sense of subjectivity through their appropriation of spaces and materials for their own ends.

De Certeau's notion of tactics provides an important lens through which we can see the understanding that many students already have about the ways in which they are

shaped by dominant culture and the ways in which they are able to participate in their own meaning-making despite the spaces and cultural forces that work to define meaning for them. Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, I will be focusing on three kinds of tactics that students in my classes engaged with in their MOO sites as they explored their identities. The first tactic I discuss is a tactic of ambiguous identity, or how students created MOO characters with cryptic names and ambiguous descriptions that work to sidestep traditional categories (such as race, gender, and physical appearance) that traditionally contain identity. The second tactic I discuss is a tactic of poaching and spatial manipulation, or how students use the unique descriptive possibilities of the MOO to extend real-life spaces, thus exposing the confinements of real-life spaces and manipulating such spaces to create their own sense of personal space to challenge the ways in which real-life spaces confine and define them. The third tactic I discuss is a tactic of play, or how students act as trickster characters to expose and disrupt, on a personal level, the static structures of the dominant cultural forces that they would normally have very little control over.

Tactic of Ambiguous Identity

Identity is often characterized through a series of categories and classifications that people use to paint a picture of who another person “is.” Categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, and physical appearance define and confine people, and such labels are loaded with a multitude of cultural norms and experiences that further shape people’s actions and thoughts about themselves.

The tactic of ambiguous identity is exemplified in sites by students' who describe their MOO characters in ways that are abstract, indecipherable, or mysterious, essentially removing the confinements of the given identity categories that they are normally subject to. It is largely impossible to change the categories that define people, but by creating character names and descriptions that refuse to engage with such categories students are able to challenge the presumed truth of what it means to look a certain way or to be classified as a certain gender or race.

Some students created MOO characters whose names and descriptions do not engage with any traditional identity markers at all but instead focus on abstractions:

 **CAPsLOCK**

@DESCRIBE ME LATER AS GONE

 **Enanogordo**

my purpose is to sail past the sunset

By choosing abstract character names and making ambiguous the character descriptions that visitors use to help identify and classify the identities of students, students are able to maintain a sense of control over the visitor's perception because the visitor is unable to use the information provided to index the student in the visitor's frame of reference.

The character of CAPsLOCK is described in such a way as to not even be present to the visitor, thus leaving the visitor no way to classify the character, now or later, when he will be "gone." The character "Enanogordo" even sets out to deceive the visitor.

Enanogordo, means “fat midget” in Spanish, and is the name of a student who is neither short nor fat. In his analysis essay, the student elaborates on the significance of this particular name by saying "In reality, I am tall and thin. I chose [Enanogordo] to convey the message that things are not always what they seem and that real-life physical appearance is nothing when using MUDs and MOOs." The author uses his character to challenge our assumptions about traditional identity markers and in doing so leaves the visitor in an insecure position, requiring the visitor to question the reliability of language to effectively convey the “truth” of one’s identity.

The characters of other students allude to a being or persona, but deliberately avoid references to gender and other standard identity markers, instead choosing to reinforce the imperceptibility of their character:



Dreth

I am a faceless presence that is usually noticed only in its absence, as I am noticed now. This place is no home to me; home is and always has been just out of sight over the horizon, an idea rather than a place, one that is shapeless and undefined. Sometimes I don't know if I'll ever realize it. But if I do, it will be my idea and mine alone. Some things are best saved for oneself.



trh

When you gaze at trh, you see a genderless and shapeless mass. The mass is unmoveable and unstoppable. trh is more of a feeling than a being: a pure entity of energy.



Spaztic

You see a figure who blinks at you



Dave

An enigmatic persona, very difficult to perceive, nearly ethereal, when you realize that you're just seeing a shadow of yourself.

The character trh deliberately avoids allusions to gender and physical appearance and also presents to the visitor two seemingly opposite traits, those of being both unmovable (as if static and grounded) and unstoppable (as if already in motion). Instead trh is energy, which is the very essence of life, but which cannot be contained nor seen and moves freely through even the most static structures. Trh's use of "energy" as a metaphor for her identity epitomizes the quiet power of the tactic of ambiguous identity because engaging in such a tactic does not dismantle the social structures that it seeks to resist as much as it negotiates paths through such structures and, remaining largely unseen, trh is able to navigate her own sense of meaning under the radar of the dominant culture that seeks to manage her.

Spaztic and Dave both transfer attention off of their characters and onto the visitor. Spaztic is described simply as a “figure who blinks at you,” leaving the visitor wondering not about who Spaztic is, but what Spaztic is seeing in the visitor that causes Spaztic to blink. Dave, too, turns the emphasis back onto the visitor by appearing as a shadow of the visitor, thus calling into question the visitor’s ability to discern between herself and Dave, and making increasingly indiscernible the relationship between them increasingly.

Students also created characters who emphasize the imperceptibility of their characters by describing their characters as shifting in and out of the visitor’s focus or view:



Mirage

Far away in the distance, a figure floats above the ground; in and out of focus it dances. Just when you think you are close enough to capture all of the details, the figure disappears leaving you to think if you even saw anyone in the first place.



Jennaro

You see an apparition that comes and goes... here one day, gone the next. It is different each time you see it, and you often don't know why.



Brett319

You see a constantly shifting image. It is hard to focus on one particular aspect of his shape because he, like his real life persona, is in a constant state of growth and change. No one is static in life, and his character reflects that.



tamtam

Here stands an individual in a transient state. The constant shifts of environments and influences leave little solidity left behind.

Mirage, Jennaro, Brett319, and tamtam, as out of focus, an apparition, and two constantly shifting characters respectively, evade the visitor's gaze, and disappear entirely just as the visitor is ready to determine who they are. This playful evasion reveals people's tendency of immediately classifying others they encounter, but this tactic prevent such classification, thus leaving the ultimate power to determine identity with the student's character.

Some characters do mention gender, but only as a pronoun while maintaining an otherwise mysterious sense of self:

 **JonasH**

A mystery. A dark man with piercing eyes that are constantly looking for the answers to questions that have yet to be asked. He doesn't stand out, but he doesn't blend in. He is just there.

 **Etoile**

A black-cloaked figure stands in the corner of a coffee house playing her guitar.

 **HeatherHyatt**

*no one really knows who heather hyatt is.
well, that's not true, I don't know who she is. the thing is, she is a complete mystery and she takes different forms every day in my mind. sometimes i think i might see her walking by on the street, other times maybe on tv or in a magazine. or maybe she is already gone from this world and so far gone that i'll never meet her, let alone know her.*

 **Soi-chan**

You see a tall, mysterious figure wearing a black cloak that covers all of her features. She glides across the floor without making contact.



Radiance

You see a girl, a clouded figure you can't quite make clear. She is a creative mix of things imagined and unreal. You squint to get a better look, but she evades your questioning stare. The curves of her lips appear to be her only tangible identity. You look again and become lost in the glistening gray of her eyes. As you blink she disappears, and all that remains is the faint smell of ocean wind mixed with palm trees.



Nytskyz

Shrouded in mystery, yet ever noticeable, she gazes at you with the intensity of the stars that burn across aeons... and although content on the ground for a brief time, she yearns to be nothing if not just a part of the majestic night sky...

The sense of mystery these characters exude brings attention to the indecipherability of their characters and a resistance to easy classification. The student who is represented through Soi-chan described her use of mystery this way: “I like to believe that I have an unpredictable personality, because it keeps other people guessing. If other people are always trying to figure out who I am, then I feel free to continue life without pre-conceived notions.” Each of these character descriptions work as a tactic of ambiguous identity that resists simplified notions of identity by deliberately leaving out identity markers such as gender, race, class, physical appearance in their descriptions, thereby

calling into question the reliability of our traditional ways of identifying and classifying others. These descriptions do not engage in agency that seeks public or cultural change, but an agency that allows students to question, for themselves, the ease with which we can use categories and other identity markers to simplify identity. These descriptions suggest an awareness that identity is not so easily contained within such categories (and the preconceived notions that go with them), but includes other, malleable attributes that paint a much more complex picture of identity.

The Tactic of Poaching Through the Manipulation of Space

Another tactic exemplified in student's sites is students' manipulation of space in ways that defy physical reality and subvert the static and confining spaces of their real-life experience. How power is exerted through the production of space is discussed by many theorists, including Henri Lefebvre in his book *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre argues that the ability of centralized powers to partition and classify space is especially dangerous because such control over space often goes unnoticed by those operating within it.

Indeed, each new form of state, each new form of political power, introduces its own particular way of partitioning space, its own particular administrative classification of discourses about space and about things and people in space. Each such form commands space, as it were, to serve its purposes; and the fact that space should thus become classificatory

makes it possible for a certain type of non-critical thought simply to register the resultant 'reality' and accept it at face value. (280)

Power comes from having control over space and people's perceptions of that space. Lefebvre argues that the politically powerful appropriate space in ways that reinforce authority but seem to others to be natural, neutral.

Like Lefebvre, De Certeau considers spatial organization to be a source of control for dominant cultural forces over people, with how the organization of spaces "secretly structure the determining conditions of social life" (96). De Certeau's theory of "tactics" describes the power of peoples' everyday practices in subverting the strategies of dominant cultural forces. These strategies include control over the organization and usage of space, communication, and cultural artifacts and practices.

Many students are especially subject to the arrangement of space because they are at a point in their lives when they do not control the production of the spaces in which they operate. When considered through the experience of typical 18-21 year-old university students, most of a young person's life has been playing the role of "student" and the spaces of a university campus and other practices and conventions of higher education work to further a certain sense of what it means to be a "student." The construction of typical classrooms position the student as subject to the knowledge and expertise of the instructor, and the isolated arrangement of departments and offices can have the effect of discouraging interdisciplinary collaboration by relegating programs and departments to their own floors and in their own buildings. Students are encouraged (and on some campuses required) to live in dorms in which they have limited personal space

and are subject to supervision. In addition to the spaces of the university campus itself, typical advising and orientation materials that students receive communicate the expectation that students be disciplined enough to graduate in four years, and directed enough to decide on a major relatively quickly into their college career. While at the university, students take classes that prepare them for something beyond their university life, but often they have very little choice in what courses they are able to take and how such courses are taught. Students coming out of high school are largely unable to afford higher education without the assistance of their families or scholarships—forces that often influence their course of study—and students are often required to supplement their educational expenses by working jobs that pay very little for work that requires very little skill. All of these spatial and material forces of the university system work upon students to help define who they are allowed to be, leaving them little room to exercise their own sense of power and control.

Largely without control over their own lives, students can be considered a part of a new sort of marginalized group, a group that de Certeau would argue the majority of people are a part of. He says,

Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates

itself. Marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority. (xvii)

In addition to being considered a “non-producer” of culture, students have the added disadvantage of being unable to own or manipulate the spaces that they are subjected to. De Certeau speaks of the “weak” not having “a space of their own; their terrain is ‘organized by the law of a foreign power.’” (xiii) Young people can be considered members of a culture in which they are subject to the spatial arrangement of others, whether that be as sons and daughters in their parent’s home, or as students living and studying at a university.

De Certeau shows that a tactic of the weak is “walking,” a practice whose participants “lack a place” but in this case, such lack provides opportunity for people to carve out their own space within, but separate from the static spaces that exist around them. In fact, de Certeau argues that such lack of place provides

a rich indetermination [, which] gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the functioning of articulating a second poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden, or permitted meaning. (105)

The opportunity to articulate a “second poetic geography” on top of static geographical and cultural systems is readily available on the MOO because of the way in which MOOs resemble physical spaces of real life, but are also able to extend beyond and transform them. For students, articulating another geography opens up possibilities for manipulating physical space in ways largely impossible in real life simply because of the

laws of physics. A multitude of sites transport visitors to fantastical places through time and space in ways not available to people in real-life. This movement extends the limited possibilities available in real life and acts as a form of resistance to the ways in which students feel controlled by space and the practices that are sanctioned in various places.

In the site of a character named “Duff,” the visitor “hurries along” a familiar road toward her class on a familiar university campus when suddenly she finds herself penetrating a barrier through which she decides to pass. Her choice of taking this passage and crossing over into this barrier is facilitated by her desire to escape the surrounding spaces that have contributed to the hectic and stressful atmosphere of the campus street she was traveling down:



Speedway

As you hurry down Speedway to the CCIT building you are stopped dead in your tracks. You hit an invisible barrier of some sort. As you press your forehead firmly against what seems to be a glass shield you see the reflection of the world behind you. You notice businessman speeding in their Mercedes to make their first appointment, bicyclists dodging traffic, and students rushing to class. Just as you are about to turn and rejoin everyone in the rat race called everyday life your hand presses against a smooth, circular button. The glass shield liquefies into a plasma-like membrane. You forget that you are late for your first class and suddenly your thoughts become engrossed in all the possibilities of what may lie

beyond this membrane. Without further hesitation you step through the membrane out of all the madness and into Life.

For Duff, passing through the membrane is what allows her to manipulate the spatial confines of identity. Rather than proceed in the “rat race” of her static reality, she chooses a path that opens up a world of flexible spaces that morph and change as she travels through them.

Once inside the membrane the full juxtaposition can be felt, as the visitor to Duff’s space proceeds through a multitude of rapidly changing places and times, including a tropical jungle, New York City, Venice, a beach, and Paris, with her the visitor changing from a student to a child and back again through the whole process.



Once inside the cell, away from all of the commotion of life in Tucson, you feel inspired to run. [...] When you first entered Life you were in the misty jungle of a tropical island, but now, with each step you make, you are propelled into new surroundings. You jog on through downtown New York City and smell the parmesan and pizza from Little Tony's on the corner. You stumble into a dark tunnel that you would expect would lead you to New Jersey but instead you come out into a green grassy park with an abundance of tulips and a dark statue of a little girl in a dress. As you jog alongside a

long, narrow canal you realize the entire city is made of canals. A man in riding in a narrow boat yells to you from up ahead "bonjourno." You slow your pace to a quick walk so that you can absorb all of the beauty in the little, narrow pastel colored houses. Your pace quickens and you find yourself running along the beach. You run past a rickety peer with an old fisherman. "Bonjourno" you say. He smiles in response. Suddenly it begins to rain. You feel tiny droplets of rain kiss your forehead and as you taste the salty tears of Life your body warms and you smile. It reminds you of when you swam at the beach as a young child. You look down at your feet and you see tiny blue flippers. Your arms are equipped with red plastic "floaties." You are a child. You skip and splash in the gentle waves. You feel complete. As you run and play the sand turns to squishy mud. You feel single blades of grass between your toes. Your jog has brought you to a new amazing sight. Towering over you are giant beams of steel that crisscross back and forth into the sky until your neck aches to see the top.

This space represents Duff's resistance to the stress of everyday life that keeps people largely contained and defined. She is able to momentarily disrupt that life, charting a course that takes her through an alternative, poetic geography that allows for much more than the space of her university life.

In the space that follows, Duff travels to the top of the Eiffel Tower, a journey that is then interrupted by a blinding whiteness of snowflakes that creates a "blizzard of emotion" in which she is "overwhelmed" by "love, hate, fear, excitement, anxiety,

fatigue, loneliness, ambition, discontentment, self-loathing, pride, lust, awkwardness, enthusiasm, and comfort.” Where her real-life spaces had previously confined her ability to feel these emotions, by surrounding herself by a blizzard of emotion Duff seems to allow herself to feel all the beauty of life that is around her, beauty that she often fails to see amidst the stressful events of her real life

When Duff is reminded of the real-life spaces that exist for her outside of the membrane, she does not resist returning to it. Instead, she realizes that her ability to better navigate the real-life spaces that confine her arises from creating “poetic geographies” amidst those spaces, geographies that exist within larger real-life spaces, but are created by her own hand and on her own terms. One such poetic geography is represented in Café Content:



Cafe Content

*Now that you are back in the craziness of Tucson, you decide to blow off class and get a cup of joe. You stroll down University to Cafe Content. You grab an iced cafe Americano (24 ounces, of course) with a shot of vanilla flavoring and plop down in a cushy chair in the corner. You sit and fiddle with magnetic poetry on the table next to your side. A copy of **GLAMOUR** rests at your feet waiting for you. Ella Fitzgerald belts out vengeful love songs in the background and you grin when you hear the words "bewitched,*

bothered, and bewildered". You feel at home and for these next few minutes you forget about all your responsibilities in the world.

She is back among all of the products and places that define and confine her, but Duff seems to feel at home and “content” because her journey, in which she was able to momentarily manipulate and traverse other spaces, seemed to engender in her a sense of personal agency to create her own experiences and navigate her own way through the spaces in her “real-life.”

Another site that engages in the tactic of manipulating space is that of HannaBarbara. HannaBarbara creates a space that exists in sharp contrast to the places of her home and university life. She comes to the realization by the end of her site that stories and spaces can be changed – on her own terms and by her own actions – and that her ability to manipulate the spaces and stories that confine her is powerful and satisfying, whether or not any real change actually occurs to the larger cultural structures of which they are apart.

HannaBarbara’s site consists of three spaces: a deserted highway, a crowded rave, and the set of a film production of Romeo and Juliet. Her first space, “I-10 East,” is a scene located along a dark and ambiguous highway, and is one that allows HannaBarbara to explore herself “outside” the confines imposed on her by the places that surround her life as a daughter (Phoenix) and as a student (Tucson). Her second space, a crowded, intense, rave scene allows her to engage in a collective rebellion, and makes her aware of the possibility for finding power on her own terms. Her third space, on the set of a film production of Romeo and Juliet, allows her to act with the nimbleness and creativity of a

trickster character, one through which she can act with power but one that remains undetected by the radar of the dominant culture. Her instantaneous transition to and from these spaces defies a real-life physical reality, yet her ability to transport into vastly different scenes so quickly allows her to juxtapose such scenes and expose their effects more clearly.



I-10 East

"Today I woke up sucking on lemon." Radiohead's eerie "Everything in its Right Place" is playing on the radio. You are driving. An endless road takes you mile after mile, rest stop after dirty rest stop, closer to the space between your two homes, Phoenix and Tucson. Here, in the ambiguous darkness, you are none. You are a citizen of the world, a stranger - an intruder, with your headlights for eyes and the blowing wind for a soundtrack. You look to your right, and see the person you love best staring off into space in a moment right out of David Lynch's "Lost Highways." The backseat, full of your fellow crusaders, has long fallen silent. You decide to pause in the desert and take a look at the stars, unmarred by lights from either city. Someone pulls out a pack of cigarettes and passes them around; there are no second-hand smokers here. The stars look close enough to touch, and you begin to hear music as the others talk softly and mill around. You can't shake it from your ears, and

you begin to realize that this part of your journey might have to be alone.

And all you have to do is close your eyes.

By beginning this first space with the quote, “Today I woke up sucking on a lemon,” HannaBarbara sets a scene of sour realization and dissatisfaction. She is driving from Phoenix to Tucson on Interstate-10 going east (hence the title of this space) but her description of this space suggests that she is in a placeless-space, both emotionally and physically. She describes the road as “endless,” and the scene as one of “ambiguous darkness.” This ambiguity of place reflects an ambiguity of identity as well. In this space she uses a variety of labels to describe herself, beginning with “none,” transitioning to a “citizen of the world,” a “stranger,” and finally an “intruder.” This progression reflects what HannaBarbara sees as her relationship to society and the world, and all the different roles she plays. She communicates herself as a non-presence in the larger scope of the world, which she supports by the fact that no one in the car is paying attention to her, and that “this part of your journey might have to be alone.” Her “aloneness” ostracizes her from her friends, but also (and more importantly) for what she knows of herself. The places in her life might overly define her; however, without a place, she appears without a location to anchor herself. She later describes in her essay that Phoenix is where her parents live and Tucson is where her school is, but she doesn’t feel that she “belongs” to either, nor does she even know if she wants to. So she is both “none” (without place) and a “citizen of the world.” But such a sophisticated title as that seems disingenuous, which is something she expresses more thoroughly through her description of an object called “stars”:



stars

Maybe it's just an optical illusion, but you become more and more convinced that the stars are within reaching distance. You stretch out your arm, and make a grab for one. You are startled when a glowing ball comes away in your palm, sticking to it slightly. Blinded by the light, you feel the star with your fingers. You tug on an edge slightly, and are shocked when it unravels in your hands, revealing just a piece of yellow crepe paper...and rather dirty, at that. The light dims after you unfold the star, and inside you see another piece of paper, telling you, "Other people are waiting for cues from you."

"That was in the fortune cookie I got last week at Panda Express!" You cry out, and disgustedly roll up the star once again, which seems to be mildly snickering at you. You quickly throw the star back, and it jumps to its place at the head of the Big Dipper - in good shape, but flickering slightly.

This stage of her site delivers the realization that what should be meaningful (the star) is really cliché, unoriginal, and meaningless (the fortune cookie). The scene continues its surrealist feel, capturing the myriad conflicts and thoughts that HB is struggling to control/understand/contend with through another object she describes in the space, cigarettes:



Cigarettes

You're a smoker without a cause. What is it in your coddled suburban life that makes you so eager to destroy yourself? As you take a drag, you savor the heady feeling of nicotine entering the system, hijacking the healthy oxygen do-gooder molecules.

She draws on the popular depiction of smoking in films to convey that her smoking is an act of rebellion...but against what? Coming from a “coddled suburban life,” she suggests that she should have no reason to rebel, so her smoking takes on an absurd emptiness. This is ultimately a question about identity – who is she, who is she supposed to be, and who does she want to be? As the nicotine from the cigarette hijacks her “do-gooder” molecules, she seems to suggest that she’d like it if it would hijack her do-gooder life as well. Perhaps she doesn’t want the responsibility of being “good,” of having to be in control, of having to make a place for herself in the world.

HannaBarbara’s contemplation is interrupted by a booming sound that she describes as reminiscent of the soundtrack to *A Clockwork Orange*. This sound becomes progressively louder and carries her into the second space of her site, which is a rave scene that she describes as a “*mass of twisting, glistening bodies – unified, and yet just a group of individuals.*” In her description, she makes comparisons between the individual style of the various dancers and what she describes as “*an undeniable atmosphere of unity, a community connected in the desire to party their troubles away.*” In contrast to I-10 East, where HannaBarbara seemed to recognize the strategies and spaces that she

was subject to, in this space she declares that the sense of community created by the music and dancing is “the one thing that they can never take away from us.” This space marks a transition from I-10 East (where she experienced apathy, meaninglessness, and powerlessness) to a place where HannaBarbara realizes that she has the power to enact change on a personal level and thus gain more control over her experience and identity. The scene description ends with HannaBarbara realizing that “*The possibilities are endless, you think, and you can change the future, the past, and stories that have been told time, and time again.*” This realization is mirrored in the description of a “margarita” that she includes in this space, an object that provides a transition to the final space in her site: “*Peace and love...you think of the greatest romance ever, supposedly ending in tragedy and confusion. You decide to change the story more to your liking, and this time, your transportation is all your own doing.*” Unlike her transportation from I-10 East to the rave scene, which occurred suddenly and without warning, HannaBarbara’s transition to the final scene in her site is “*all [her] own doing*” and reflects her belief that she is able to act with power and find meaning on her own terms, rather than terms tacitly dictated by the spaces and systems that surround her.

The Tactic of Play

In addition to HannaBarbara engaging in the tactic of manipulating space, she engages in another tactic, that of play and adopting the role of the trickster character. As a trickster character, HannaBarbara is able to act within existing power structures in ways that

disrupt the status quo and call those power structures into question while carving out new understandings and models for knowing:



Romeo and Juliet's Denouement...Or Not?

"Pride can stand a thousand trials, the strong will never fall. But watching stars without you, my soul cried." Cue the love theme, cue the love scene, cue the tragic ending. In Romeo and Juliet (as told by Baz Luhrman), Romeo falls with poison and Juliet with a single shot to the head (cue wide-lens camera shot). You step into the scene through a portal, just as Romeo enters the candle-lit tomb, with a tragic expression on his beautiful face. You know that this is Shakespeare, but in your universe, you can rewrite any ending. After mentally tipping your hat in respect to William, you approach Romeo cautiously with your hand raised. "Juliet's only sleeping," You say, considering using the word "merely" to channel some sort of Old English, but dismissing the idea. He looks bewildered, searching for her body among the dimly lit corpses. You address him again, explaining, "She took a 24-hour sleeping pill that'll leave her out for just another few minutes, looking like death so that she can fool her family, and escape with you to eternal bliss."

"And who are you?" He replies, then catches sight of her body with a gasp.

"Calm down. She's only sleeping. At least give me a few minutes to prove it before you try to kill yourself. As for me, I am unimportant - the messenger. Eh...the friar sent me."

Romeo cradles Juliet with his arms, unable to concern himself with anything else, but desperately believing you. An awkward silence ensues. You twiddle your thumbs, and look around a bit, admiring the cinematography. "Baz Luhrman is a genius," You reflect. Juliet finally moves one hand delicately, and Romeo cries out in happiness. As you watch the couple reunite, you wink briefly at the extras, lying still on their cement blocks. Your work is done here.

Frustrated with the tragic ending to one of the most famous love stories in history, HannaBarbara decides to try to change it—for herself, in the context of her everyday life. Although this scene has no effect on how future film and stage versions of Shakespeare's play will be produced, HannaBarbara's ability to create her own version of the play is significant because it shows a confidence to challenge the truth of such a dominant text in Western culture, if on no other level but her own, and recognize the satisfaction and sense of power that can result.

Challenging such an established text requires HannaBarbara to engage in play and trickery in an effort to fool the actors performing the play to believe her. Johan Huizinga, one of the first to write about the nature of play in human culture, describes play as

a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding,

having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life.” (58)

Huizinga’s understanding of play can be both fun and serious, though integral to the success of any play is adherence to the rules that surround the activity. For instance, if playing a chess game, both players would need to agree on the same set of rules for the game is to be successful. When children role-play, all those involved in the role-play activity must tacitly agree to the fantasy context of the scene if any of the roles are to be believed and thus be successful.

Play is not an entirely new concept to the composition classroom. There are several definitions of play cited by composition scholars who advocate for the use of “play” in the classroom, including Leslie Harris and Albert Rouzie. Harris cites Winnicott who describes play as occurring in a middle ground (“transitional” or “potential” space) between fantasy and reality, where objects from reality are imbued with new meaning, a new meaning that is never questioned within the potential space. Albert Rouzie’s discussion of play emphasizes the dialectical, powerful, and transformative nature of play. He associates play with the actions of the Trickster character, or one who seeks to disrupt social order and established norms, and in doing so reveals the vulnerability of cultural and social institutions. Rouzie associates play with experimentation, reflection, parody, irony, and jest, and suggests that instructors can encourage students to play with the technological tools of the web and the MOO to find new ways of communicating through text (he cites examples of hypertext and MOO spaces, as well as on-line discourse). Rouzie draws on Dwight Conquergood, who

provides further context for the role of the trickster in his article "Communication as Performance: Dramaturgical Dimensions of Everyday Life." Conquergood argues:

As soon as the world has been made, lines drawn, categories defined, hierarchies erected, then the trickster, the archetypal performer, moves in to breach norms, violate taboos, turn everything upside down. By playing with the social order, unsettling certainties, the trickster intensifies awareness of the vulnerability of our institutions. The trickster's playful impulse promotes a radical self-questioning critique that yields a deeper self-knowledge, the first step towards transformation. (83)

Rouzie's and Conquergood's emphasis on the importance of the "trickster" character to disrupt social order appears to contradict the notion of play as existing within a closed space bound by fixed rules. Harris' notion of play stressed the "closed space" element required in any occurrence of play, and this idea resonates with Huizanga's emphasis on play as occurring within a fixed time and place and having fixed rules that all agree to and that are absolutely binding. But if play is ended when the rules are broken, then what are we to make of Rouzie's notion that play is transformative, and, like the trickster, does not play by the rules, but instead seeks to disrupt the established social and institutional worlds that we interact in daily? It would help to broaden our understanding of play, and recognize how far-reaching play actually is in our culture. As we interact with others, we are "playing" a variety of roles, such as that of students, teachers, daughters, sons, wives, husbands, friends and others. Who we are able to be while playing these roles is dictated by the larger culture of which we are a part. What it means to be a "wife" in one culture

could differ vastly from how we would play that same role in another culture. As we can never exist outside of the culture that surrounds us; however, we often see our various roles as natural extensions of ourselves, rather than the constructs that they are.

Recognizing these roles as constructed offers us room to question their established “truth,” and in a very limited way, opens up the opportunity to act as trickster characters who can play with the boundaries of these roles, and challenge for ourselves the ways in which they dictate who we are allowed to be.

The notion of play as trickery ultimately provides HannaBarbara the creative license to allow her to entertain the possibility of an/other reality to that which is established. Acting as a sort-of trickster character, HannaBarbara has fun disguising herself to the characters in the play, whom she has positioned as actors who don’t seem to realize that they’re acting out roles, and who aren’t “in” on the constructed nature of their performance.

HannaBarbara acts as a trickster character to expose the entire scene as a construct, and alter the events of the play to her liking. After alerting Romeo to the “truth” of Juliet’s situation, HannaBarbara even takes a moment to comment on the genius of the director as they all wait (awkwardly) for Juliet to wake. Although the director, actors, and extras are referenced, no one but HannaBarbara seems to be aware that this is a play whose ending has already been written. Although she would normally have no space in which to change the ending, she is able to do so in her MOO site without incident. By playing within the rules of the story itself (i.e. acting as a character whom the friar sent), HannaBarbara is maintaining a façade of “authenticity” for the

actors within the production and is thus able to operate as a trickster character who challenges the notion that the play (or anything in culture) has to be played out a certain way.

House on Paper Street

Another site that exhibits a trickster form of play is that of CAPSsLOCK. In his site, “House on Paper Street,” CAPsLOCK creates a world in which identity is seen not so much as a serious topic of investigation, but as an ambiguity encompassed as much by randomness and inconsequential details as anything traditionally considered “important” to its definition. CAPsLOCK pieces together familiar cultural references and linguistic conventions in unfamiliar ways, challenging the visitor’s frame of reference and thus his ability, (and more importantly the perceived necessity - for the visitor and the student) to arrive at a stable determination of the student’s identity.

CAPsLOCK’s site begins on Paper Street. The visitor approaches a house that is unfamiliar to him, but one that he recognizes because, among all the abandoned and run-down structures in the area, this house is alive:



House on Paper Street

You search for the little sheet of paper on which you wrote down the address, 1123 East Paper Street. But you already know the old broken home in front of you has to be the right one. Not because it is the only house left standing on paper street surrounded by abandoned warehouses and run-down factories, not because the yard has been dug up and made

into a garden or rather a miniature self-supporting biosphere, but because the house had a heartbeat. You could hear the walls breathe and the structure pulse. By the time you reached the door, it was unmistakable, the house was alive.

For CAPsLOCK this space represents what happens “when you leave your materialism behind.” It is a space in which everything is stripped down to the bare minimum, presumably, the get a closer look into what we are made of without the materialism that we constantly immerse ourselves in.

But in the next space of his site, CAPsLOCK’s quickly turns any possibility for finding deeper meaning into an occasion for turning such meaning on its head, beginning with the title of the space, “Hairway to Steven,” which is a play off of the Led Zepplin tune “Stairway to Heaven:”



Hairway to Steven

As you pass through the door your feet step on to an escalator. The escalator starts to move and you transcend upwards. You try to look around you but the room is filled with a bright white light that burns your eyes. You shield your eyes from the light and look up to the top of the elevator where it is considerably darker. You slowly move towards the darkness and begin to make out figures riding down the elevator. Four men slowly riding down the elevator become visible as they leave the darkness above and enter the light. You are filled with horror as you make

out their demon faces, black and white with long frizzled black hair. Their tongues leap out from their mouths like serpents and a scream escapes their mouth like a tortured electric guitar. But suddenly you realize these are not demons but rather the memorable rock and roll band KISS and the scream was a distorted electric guitar after all. You give Gene Simmons a nod as he passes by and begin to make out more figures descending down the escalator. You become star struck as you realize you are in the presence of such legends as Alice Cooper, Poison, and Def Leppard. With every passing second more and more famous figures escape the darkness and join you in blinding light. As the darkness gets closer, only seconds away now, you begin to question why you are going up while everyone else is going down. But suddenly, you are again filled with fear as you make out a mechanical laugh coming from the darkness only feet away. The last thing you see before the darkness completely engulfs you is Steven Hawking smirking in his wheelchair his glasses reflecting a single ray of light.

CAPsLOCK creates a scene in which very little makes sense to the visitor as he travels up on an escalator toward darkness and away from light, and encounters what first appear to be serpent-like demons but who are actually members from the band KISS.

CAPsLOCK is acting as a trickster character by playing with the visitor's assumptions that things are always what they seem as well as his tendency to prescribe more meaning and significance to things than what they actually represent. This scene is one that

addresses the unknowns and fears surrounding the serious topic of death and the afterlife by playing with the symbols and signifiers associated with death thereby diffusing some of the significance and importance they often have in our lives. In his essay, CAPsLOCK discusses his desire to create a scene of parody, contradiction and confusion:

The Hairway to Steven is a parody of the Stairway to Heaven. The room has a resemblance to the afterlife. You are met with a blinding light, similar to what is witnessed during near-death experiences, except in this case you are moving away from the light not towards it. You are not going to hell because you are moving upwards, but you are not going to heaven either because you are headed towards darkness. It is not clear where you are going only that this is the quasi-afterlife.

CAPsLOCK admits that he included the hairbands in this scene “as a joke” in his attempt to depict what a “hairway” might be. The “evil” figure of Stephen Hawking (who CAPsLOCK describes as a “figure of science”), sits at the top of the escalator to complicate and challenge our ideas about an afterlife. But the figure of Hawking is also meant to “provide some comedy” lest the visitor begins to take any of this too seriously.

According to CAPsLOCK this scene is nothing more than a representation of his “dark sense of humor.” In fact, CAPsLOCK admits that this scene “isn’t to be taken that I have a love for rock bands or fear Stephen Hawking, it is just a joke. I really don’t have any interest in the bands or musicians I made reference to.” The significance of this site is that, acting as trickster, CAPsLOCK is able to simultaneously invoke in the visitor a

sense of seriousness with a sense of absurdity, leaving the visitor unsure of how they are supposed to react to the details they encounter.

CAPsLOCK continues to play with the visitor's sense of seriousness and absurdity in the next space of his site called "STP."



You wake up sweating in an empty room. You are completely alone in a room so bare and empty you can't tell the walls from the floor. You step over Billie Holiday's limp body but it is not really there. Your hands shake more with every passing second and your vision fades in and out like a flickering light. Your mind is racing. You find your desires in Bradley Nowell's cold dead hand but he is not really there. Your heart slows down and you catch your breath. You notice there is a record player in the room. Sid Vicious had put on a record before he slumped down to the floor. The record was skipping, playing the same line over and over like a setting sun like a setting sun like a setting sun. Minutes creep by. You realize there is a syringe stuck in your arm. You pull it out- but it is not really there. You release the belt from around your arm-but it is not really there. The room is not real but your addiction is. You are addicted to heroin addicts. The music they bleed and the destruction they cause. This does not upset you. What upsets you is the skipping record. You get up to fix needle on the record player. You close your eyes and sway to the last seconds of the song. The song fades and is replaced with the sound of a

rushing subway train. You quickly open your eyes and turn around. It is the 5 Train. Your train. You take off your headphones and board.

In this space, CAPsLOCK has created an even more surreal scene than the visitor encountered in the previous spaces and plays with the visitor's sense of reality and stability of meaning even further – surrounding the visitor with people, objects, and actions that aren't real or "really there" at all. CAPsLOCK explains that the title and theme of this space are based on a song from the band Sublime about a person in dire need of heroin. CAPsLOCK explains that there are several layers of meaning present, and plenty of confusing contradiction:

The room's description often contradicts itself. It is first described as a completely empty room, but then you step over a person, isn't really there after all. The sentences are short and punchy to illustrate the mindset of a drug-addict. The description also make reference to a Neil Young song about heroin abuse called "The Needle and the Damage Done". It makes references to several famous artist, who gave their lives to the drug. You read lyrics from a song that Brad Nowell wrote about his addiction. The room then changes as we discover that we are not really shooting up heroin, but instead listening to a song about heroin and imagining that we are there. The event actually takes place while waiting for a train but for those minutes while listening to the song we are transported to the singer's pain and anguish.

For CAPsLOCK, the addiction theme to this space describes not a personal encounter with addiction, but

a period of my life when I was very intrigued with the escapement and anguish of heroin users. It seemed like most of my musical and personal influences were fighting a constant battle with reality. Although I chose different means to escape, I often found myself feeling the same anguish that was apparent in the songs about heroin.

The play element takes a more serious turn in this space, though play as a concept can be as serious as it is ridiculous. The play apparent in this space is a rearrangement and reevaluation of our ability to clearly define who we are and what reality (and our relationship with it) is. The complexity with which our ideas about life, death, and reality that CAPsLOCK has played with thus far in his site is extended even further to notions of good and bad:



Castles Made of Sand

You exit the train. Your eyes glazed and your headphones blaring. You walk towards the rising sun - smoking menthol cigarettes in the acid rain.

Once again our experience of this scene is a surrealistic one, with the traditional walk into the sunset that a character might take at the end of a film being replaced by a walk toward the rising sun, in the “acid rain” no less. As CAPsLOCK explains, “acid rain is making a bad thing out of a good thing (rain) and menthol cigarettes try to make a good thing out of a bad thing.” By the end of this site, the visitor may not know which end is up, which CAPsLOCK as the trickster character does so well to show us. CAPsLOCK writes “It is

not a clear or perfect reflection of my identity but a jarred and somewhat unsettling look.” The major themes that occupy much of our existence (life, death, escape, reality, good, bad) are rearranged and messed with in a way that compels the visitor to question the stability with which he can address such questions in his own life.

Conclusion

Theorists such as Michel Foucault have argued that the “microphysics” of power exert control over people in ways dispersed and embedded, thus largely hidden, in the cultural systems with which they interact. Such power communicates ideas about what is normal vs. abnormal behavior, and are seen as natural and widely accepted, leaving users little room to develop alternative logics or practices.

Michel de Certeau argues, however, that alternative logics and practices do emerge, but go largely undetected because they appear at the level of the everyday. Users engage in tactics to carve their own path within the static structures of dominant cultural systems, and act with their own limited, personal sense of agency. The MOO, as a space that is able to replicate as well as extend real-life spaces, is the perfect platform in which students can explore the spatial, material, and linguistic confines of dominant cultural systems and create spaces in which they manipulate and play with such confines, carving new pathways of understanding within the larger cultural system of which they remain a part. The opportunity for manipulation and play is integral to the work of composition instructors because when students are able to explore the ways in which their identities are shaped and defined, they are better prepared to engage as active,

rhetorically savvy citizens with a more complex understanding of the ways in which persuasion works in culture.

IV. Tinkering with Bricolage

In previous chapters I have discussed various lenses that composition instructors can provide students to explore identity in new ways and come to new understandings about the complexity of their selves. In Chapter One, I used the work of Lester Faigley to show how personal exploration in the classroom is realized by assignments (like the personal essay) that examine the actions and implications of *former selves*, achieving in the process a rational, unified representation of the self, because of the detached vantage point from which it is examined. Rather than looking to the past in an effort to get in touch with the self, students should have the opportunity to explore what Faigley calls the “contradictions of present experience” (129). In this chapter, I present the possibility of bricolage as another avenue for self-exploration in the classroom, an avenue especially suited to dealing with the contradictions of our present experiences and the infinite elements that make up our subjectivities. Allowing students the freedom to adopt the roles of bricoleurs can enable an exploration of the self without the need for a road map or guide, or the need to follow some pre-existing framework or method. This approach would structure the self in a way that Warren McCullough calls “heterarchical” rather than “hierarchical” (200).

Bricolage can refer to both an assemblage of diverse elements as well as a process by which a question is approached and explored. Bricolage is a term that originated with the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, who used it to describe how non-Western peoples

create new knowledge by piecing together common materials in uncommon ways to achieve a goal:

The 'bricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions.

(19)

Levi-Strauss shows a bricoleur to be one who uses the available materials at hand to engage in a project for which those materials would not be traditionally suited. Sherry Turkle and Seymour Papert work from Levi-Strauss' notion of bricolage to discuss the process by which both children and adults work through problems they encounter. In his studies of the ways in which children approach problem-solving activities, Paper shows how one boy, committed to realizing his goal of building a moving robot, did not follow an exact plan to achieve his goal. Instead,

his goal was allowed to evolve as he worked. He did not build a robot by drawing on methods or materials made for that purpose; he used what he found at hand, even taking pleasure in using something made for an altogether different purpose. (131)

For Papert and Turkle, bricolage emphasizes improvisation and negotiation. Turkle describes bricolage in terms of “tinkering” and achieving a “soft mastery” of a subject. In her research with programming students at Harvard in the 1980’s, she discusses the learning styles of some students that seemed contrary to what was considered appropriate in their classes, and highlighted the experiences of several students who felt they had to adopt a whole new way of learning to make it as a programmer because the field was dominated by a hierarchical style of knowledge-making and an established method for writing code. Turkle uses the example of Lisa, a student who enjoyed tinkering with pre-packaged programming code and developing her own relationship with programming by writing her own programs. Lisa was discouraged from doing so in her classes, however, and was instead encouraged to adopt a “proper style” and stop playing with code in a ways that were “a waste of her time” (54). Turkle described Lisa’s style of working as “soft mastery,” which is a flexible, negotiated, non-hierarchical approach to work that allows users to tinker with varieties of ways of trying things. “Soft mastery” is a way of approaching work, rather than simply a stage on the way to more formal thinking (56).

Joe Kincheloe discusses bricolage in the context of conducting academic research. He suggests that researchers would do well to adopt the practices of bricoleurs, arguing that bricolage expands the perspectives and methods through which a researcher can examine a situation, thus bringing about a “defamiliarization” process in which new

discoveries can be made. Kincheloe describes this process as one that “highlights the power of the confrontation with difference to expand the researcher's interpretive horizons. Bricolage does not simply *tolerate* difference but *cultivates* it as a spark to researcher creativity” (687 – author’s emphasis). Cultivating diversity encourages interdisciplinary approaches to research and is important because as researchers engage with myriad methods, the multiple perspectives they encounter prepare the researcher-as-bricoleur to

address the complexities of the social, cultural, psychological, and educational domains. Sensitive to complexity, bricoleurs use multiple methods to uncover new insights, expand and modify old principles, and reexamine accepted interpretations in unanticipated contexts. Using any methods necessary to gain new perspectives on objects of inquiry, bricoleurs employ the principle of difference not only in research methods but in cross-cultural analysis as well. In this domain, bricoleurs explore the different perspectives of the socially privileged and the marginalized in relation to formations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. (687)

Cultivating a sense of complexity rather than pursuing a path toward simplicity values diversity. Instructors can use the model of the bricoleur to encourage students to see themselves and their relationships with the world as diverse and complex, rather than simple and clear. Encouraging students to adopt the perspective of a bricoleur to investigate their identities is strengthened by the fact that the process of engaging in bricolage is an inherently personal one. In her discussion of the relationship young girls

have with consumer culture, Russell quotes Levi-Strauss, who suggests that “the bricoleur may not ever complete his [*sic*] purpose but he always puts something of himself into it.” (222). The bricoleur process by which students engage in their self-constructions reveals aspects about their selves that help broaden their understanding, and provide other possibilities for constructing knowledge. Bricolage is both a way of coming to new knowledge, as well as a way of managing diversity without the need for logical progression or hierarchical arrangement of information.

Seeing bricolage as both a collection of diverse elements, as well as a process by which students can come to new knowledge about the self is showcased in student MOO sites as well as the analysis essays students wrote to help explain the meaning behind the elements of their sites and the process they pursued to create their sites. In my analysis of several sites, I show that when given the opportunity to explore the self “heterarchically,” without formal method or form, many sites embodied the process of coming to a more complex understanding of the self through the visitor’s experience of the site as they traverse it. The exploration of the self in a non-hierarchical, multifaceted way opens up possibilities for using cultural, linguistic and material objects to engender a better understanding of the self. Constructing the self through bricolage means not ignoring the smaller elements that inform our everyday lives, elements that do not fit within the larger categories of identity. Larger categories of gender, race, and class, for example, are categories that students do not own or control. But students have a great deal of other tools and materials to use to create a pastiche of their identities.

Bricolage as “tinkering” or “soft mastery”

Composition instructors have the opportunity to cultivate a classroom environment in which students can explore their identities using materials and tools other than those traditionally used in a writing class, such as past events and narrative-essay structure. Students who are offered the opportunity to adopt the role of bricoleurs “tinker” with their identities by piecing together a wide variety of abstract images and material objects that reveal selves who are in constant flux and growth. The virtual reality of the MOO is conducive to bricolage constructions because the MOO provides students with a space in which anything that can be linguistically described can be included as part of their sites. Rather than being limited to narratives of real-life personal experience, students can use any and all objects, language, and material descriptions to stitch together a sense of who they are. What results is a complex, far-reaching hybrid of real-life and fantastical elements that, together, paint a picture of a self-in-process – multifaceted and incomplete.

I analyze several sites in which students tinker to achieve soft mastery of their selves, revealing the power that taking a bricoleur approach to identity can have. These are sites in which students contend with the diversity of their selves by exhibiting a combination of the following elements:

- Sites that are unfinished/partial collections of random parts/elements. Such sites that can be traversed in any order and are not linear journeys through the self as much as they are collections of diverse elements that require no set direction to be understood. To emphasize this *in medias res* quality, site beginnings will seem

arbitrary, surprising, mysterious, unexpected, and disorienting from the very beginning that works to convey an ease with uncertainty as to where the self is going and how it is composed.

- Sites that convey a sense of uncharted exploration. Such sites may also present an overall pace and tone that exhibit a lack of control over what the visitor can expect to encounter next, and an inability to anticipate the next site/step.
- Sites that present a wide variety of objects, emotions, and experiences without need for logical transition or cohesion.

Haunter's Through the Storm

Through the Storm is the first space of a site created by a student who plays the character "Haunter." Haunter's site reflects the ways in which the student tinkers with a wide variety of tangible and intangible facets of himself in an effort to piece together a site that, he concedes, is only ever partial in its representation. In his analysis essay, Haunter describes the process of exploring his identity as one in which he engaged in "shattering my own crystal" and piecing together a new crystal out of the "shards" and "crystalline dust" that lay all around. What results is a site that captures a partial, imperfect representation of literal and abstract elements, in which "some parts aren't there, some are bigger than they should be, some are overshadowed by others." Haunter's construction shattered for him the myth that the self could ever be a perfect crystal – whole and fully knowable or understood from a detached vantage point.

The first space in Haunter's site sets the scene in which a visitor to the site is lost and disoriented, but curious.



Through the Storm

Your eyes are filled with bleakness and nothingness. Your mind reels at the thought of such a wasteland of oblivion. What brought you to this place? Consciousness slips through your grasping fingers as you fade into blissful sleep. When you open your eyes, you stand in the middle of a bleak plateau. Dark storm clouds gather overhead, and you can feel the icy sting of the wind as it whips across the featureless land. No trees, no sunlight, no warmth, no life exists on this blasted and annihilated plain. You begin walking aimlessly, time fades away to nothing. You feel no thirst, no hunger, no soreness in your legs from walking for what seems forever. You stop occasionally to look around, but you can't tell if you've even moved. Then one day in the distance you can see the faint outline of something big. As you approach, the outline gradually resolves into a picture akin to those you've seen of Nicholas Roche. An ancient mountain stands before you, the upper reaches obscured by the heavy black clouds that seem to hover around the summit like insubstantial vultures. Halfway up the mountain you can see an odd construction, it almost looks like a house? You feel yourself drawn inexorably closer to the masked mountain. A

small tornado of paper swirls over the blank ground, forming an infinity pattern.

For Haunter, this space is the beginning of the process of creating himself in a MOO site, and thus he makes it so a visitor to the site starts with nothing – no context, no safety, no sense of how it will all play out. But just as there is no need for certainty in this first space of his site, Haunter reveals himself as a bricoleur even further by the way in which he describes the choices he made about this descriptive imagery in his analysis essay:

When I read the description, there's something there that I know is distinctly me. But it's not any one thing in particular I can name, and whatever it is, it's only part of me. For example, the sense of desolation and emptiness in this cold waste just appeals to me. It has a real, surreal, and unreal quality about it, but all at once. It reminds me somehow of a dark windy day, with storm clouds covering the sky, the type of day where you could just sit around and do nothing and not feel bad about it. On those days, time loses meaning for me, and possibilities abound. The infinity symbol formed by the essay, the Roche reference (he painted pictures of exotic and alluring mountains that have an odd air of mystery about them), the landscape, all of this has a sense of timelessness and solitude that I really like. It's a feeling of something different.

Notice Haunter's language here. It's a profession of thoughts, but words like "just works," "almost," and "something about," show that this description captures things about himself that are inarticulateable in rational language. Although such a vague this

level of analysis may seem unacceptable for a typical composition assignment, as a bricoleur trying out a variety of elements in his exploration of the self makes Haunter's vagueness important because it reveals that not everything about his self can be explained away using rational logic.

From the wasteland of "Through the Storm," the visitor enters a very different space called "the Garage," which is described as a high-tech workshop containing pictures of flashy cars, a "slick and shiny" Honda Civic, "fiber-optic cables," and a wall of "powerful computers." In addition to his interest in high-tech automobiles, Haunter's comfort with "tinkering" is captured by the fact that "All sorts of random car parts lie around the room." and by the description of the Civic that begins by explaining that "some extensive work has been done on it."

From "The Garage," extends two exits that will take the visitor to two very different places in the site. These places are unrelated in their descriptions and disassociated from each other by the fact that they never connect to one another any further into the site than at this point. One pathway leads to the "Lounge" and the "Underground Lagoon" and one leads to the "Forgotten City" and the "Crystal Tower." The fact that these two pathways are so different and neither provides any indication that the other exists is representative of Haunter tinkering with two different possibilities for his identity, and coming to two equally valid, yet different results. As he comments in his essay regarding this directional split:

[The Forgotten City] was a departure from the decadence and extravagance of the [Lounge and Underground Lagoon], and as such it

formed a separate branch leading off from the Garage. Whereas the Lounge and Lagoon were filled with gadgets and items in order to seem real, the city gained its solidity through abstract and abundant unreality, and through a quiet and unstated grandeur and elegance.

Haunter creates an interesting interplay between reality and unreality, and shows how both of these seemingly dichotomous elements of himself can coexist without the need for synthesis or logical progression.

If the visitor takes the “mysterious tunnel” down into the Lounge, she will arrive at a space that bears very little resemblance to the Garage from which the visitor just came. Unlike the high-tech glamour of the garage, the lounge is a room “made for comfort and relaxation.” Instead of “powerful computers,” “the walls of the room are covered in various pictures of heavy metal bands, snowboarders, pipes, and “green leafy buds.” The visitor is reminded of the strangeness with which they encounter such disparate elements in these rooms by the last line of the Lounge description, which reminds the visitor that, “despite the appeal of staying and watching TV for eternity you do want to explore the rest of this odd construction, so you tear your eyes away and prepare for the next surprise this crazy place will throw at you.” By emphasizing the site as “odd” and “crazy” Haunter reminds the visitor that they are in an unfamiliar place and will only come to learn about the person behind the site as they go exploring through it, though such knowledge is likely not going to provide easy answers. There is no map or structure that guides the visitor. It is only through wandering exploration that the visitor will gain insight into the person for whom this site represents.

The room that follows the Lounge is the Underground Lagoon, located in a cave, and devoted almost entirely to smoking the “green leafy substance” alluded to in the Lounge. The visitor’s “jaw drops” as they look around this “smoker’s paradise” and the shelves of bongos and big black trash bag of “White Widow X Northern Lights.” There are recliners, a jacuzzi and a Zen garden all arranged in this space. This appears to be the end of the site, as there are no other rooms branching from the Lagoon, yet the site description makes no reference to anything other than the visitor wishing they had thought to bring a bathing suit. This rather anti-climactic “ending” is reflective of the bricolage nature of this space in that it constructs the self without beginning or end, and makes no attempt at a resolution to the strangeness and mysterious nature of the site. Instead, the visitor is left to smoke, relax, and take a swim in the jacuzzi.

However, if the visitor remembers, there is another route from the Garage available for her to explore that leads to another realm entirely. The high-tech and modern-day elements found throughout the first part of the sight are juxtaposed completely with the visitor’s experience through the Forgotten City, a surreal and deserted realm:



Forgotten City

As you emerge from the tunnel, your eyes are filled with an unbelievable sight. As they try and adjust to the sudden light, a scene from an eldritch world takes shape before you. An ancient city of delicate spiraling crystalline towers spreads out before you. A massive pyramidal structure

sits in the middle of the forest of towers, near one tower that seems to reach straight into the roof of this hollow mountain. Maybe it's just you, but it seems that this city is far older than the human race, and has apparently sat undisturbed since its tenants left. As you follow the marble walkway towards the center of the city you notice the curious lack of belongings, trash, or ruin. No evidence of the cataclysm that claimed the land outside exists here, at least to your untrained eyes. It almost looks like a house does after its owners move out. [...]The shadow of the great crystal tower you saw from the tunnel hangs over you like an ominous shadow. Is that an entrance hidden by the base?

Whatever familiarity the visitor could attach to the objects in the previous spaces is lost here, as the visitor is faced with a scene that seems to predate the human race. The reference to this space as a “eldritch world” emphasizes the “strange, unearthly, weird, eerie” atmosphere (dictionary.com) surrounding the visitor. And rather than high-tech gadgets, jacuzzis and smoking equipment, the visitor finds an “ancient city” of crystal towers, “far older than the human race” and with a “curious lack of belongings” In this space is located an “Odd Sculpture” which the visitor experiences as



Odd Sculpture

At once both beautiful and repugnant, there's something about this thing that bothers you. This grotesque sculpture resembles no style of art ever created by humans. Seeming to be a nightmarish representation of some

fiend beyond imagination, just the sight of the sculpture or the inscriptions that cover it awakens some long forgotten fear instinct.

The description of this sculpture emphasizes the bricoleur-sort of discovery that the visitor experiences as she wanders through this space, a space that she is clearly subject to, and whose “nightmarish representation of some fiend beyond imagination [...] awakens some long forgotten fear instinct.” The visitor is unable to anticipate what she’ll see next, and is struck by the effects that such unknown artifacts have on her –much like a bricoleur might be who is working through a problem without a preconceived plan, not quite knowing what to expect next. The emphasis on the “long forgotten fear instinct” suggests that there are aspects of our identities that we are not aware of nor in touch with, but that inform who we are nonetheless. Exploring the site without map or guide, continually subject to surprise and the unknown, allows for those elements to emerge as they may not normally have the opportunity to.

The doors to the Crystal Tower appear closed, “which leaves you dejected,” but the visitor approaches them anyway to look for some handles or some other way in:



The Crystal Tower

Suddenly you feel an odd tugging sensation, like being pulled upward.

Looking around, you realize that you’re moving up through the tower, and fast! You can see the whole city beneath you (was it really that big?) for a second, and then darkness. A soft hissing noise sounds above you, and you rise slowly into a room lit by glowing red gems. You settle to the floor and

walk cautiously towards the door in the rock wall surrounding you. This door opens at your approach, ushering you into what appears to be the summit of the mountain. Looking around you can see out through the transparent walls into the centers of the storm clouds that surround the mountain. Around you is a curious mix of plants, with jungle foliage lining the outskirts of the room, and an oasis outside the elevator room. The plants are dotted with Mayan and Egyptian sculptures and decorations intermixed. At the far corner of the room you see a stair case hidden behind a wall of dwarf palm trees. Walking up the stairs you seem to have stumbled into someone's den. A huge recliner sits near the center of the room, with a table filled with empty soda cans and books next to it. The center of the room is occupied with an odd pool of water, surrounded by a stone ring. One end of the room is filled with bookshelves, and a small kitchen of all things. Wandering to the other end you find what appears to be a bedroom or a study with a door leading to what could only be a porch (who would go outside in a storm?), and a bathroom hidden away.

What is this, someone's hideout?

The site is one of continued fascination and questioning, rather than one that provides any answers to the mystery of the self that Haunter presents. The pathway ends with a question rather than a resolution, a question to which the visitor is never provided an answer.

Nytskyz's The Brink

Nytskyz's site, called *The Brink*, is a site that is also composed of a wide variety of spaces that are pieced together to form a picture of Nytskyz's identity. However, Nytskyz's site is representative of a bricolage not only by the myriad objects and pathways included in it, but also by the disjointed phrases and words that are pieced together to form the site descriptions. The words and phrases used to describe each space are pieced together with ellipses in a stream-of-consciousness style that emphasizes the fragmented and transitory nature of the student's identity.

The first room of the site, "The Brink," begins by declaring that this is "*a room unlike any other you've ever experienced.*"



The Brink

*surrealistic... unrealistic... floating in a void... pulses of fey energy...
encompassing body...slowly... translucence... the stars appear... suspended
in space... suspended in time...suspended in your mind... hopes, dreams,
fears realized... racing through thoughts like pure iridescence... crackling
through essence... enlightenment comes... the search only now brings you
to... the brink...*

Contained in this fragmented description is a sense of bodily and cosmic suspension accompanied by "racing thoughts." The scene is described as a "search," which is significant because it suggests that Nytskyz does not presuppose a privileged insight into her self, or a preexistence of the self that she is using the site to transparently portray.

Setting up her site as a search for the self allows Nytskyz to discover and explore as she makes her way through the site, rather than presenting a self already whole and understood. In her analysis essay, Nytskyz remarks on her path toward self-exploration:

‘The Brink’ is so named because I feel like just now I’m barely on the brink of understanding myself. Many of the images used are vague and obscure, because I tend to think along those terms and I believe that I have no truly defined lines or boundaries to represent myself.

from “the Brink” extends several other spaces, which allows the visitor to reach the other spaces from the brink, but also continually return to it, as a space in which the visitor finds herself once again only on the brink of understanding. All other spaces in the site follow this disjointed style of prose; one space, called Nebula, emphasizes the incapability of the visitor to “pin down” the thoughts and ideas that race around about her self.



Nebula

floating, dancing images... traipsing about in the head... sparkling, ethereal ideas waiting to be fed with long wonder and genius... trying to pin them down... but... akin to quicksilver... they slip through the grasp... flitting away like butterflies... see them in the mind clear as... Sirius in the sky... but can never fetch them totally... completely... no... just fleeting glimpses... like out of the corner of your eye... a nebulous array of shapes and sounds... snips and pieces of confetti spiraling down in a gust of

wind... would be easier to capture than a single... incredible... perfect idea...

The thoughts and images “traipsing about in the head” are “clear,” but “slip through the grasp” and the visitor “can never fetch them totally...completely.” This space reflects the impossibility of capturing the self as “a single...incredible...perfect idea,” and instead shows the self to be “fleeting glimpses...like out of the corner of your eye.”

Another space that branches from “The Brink” is called “Belletrix,” and emphasizes the infinite and relentless aspect of the self that flood upon the visitor/Nytsky as she is faced with attempting to capture herself in a complete, cohesive way:



Belletrix

An angry wind assails you... but to no avail... you stand unmoving as the power of the monsoon thrashes through your clothes... ripping through your hair... fat, wet droplets of rain plop relentlessly against your body... spider-like lightning crackles furiously and tears across the sky... illuminating all for long, terrifying moments... yet you remain calm... absorbing the fury and strength of the storm... because somehow you understand that it is a part of you... energy courses throughout your being... surging with the ever-growing power... fueling the listless, restless spirit that lies within... you feel supreme... teeming with life force... physical... adrenaline seems a weak thing compared to the pure energy that courses through your system... you can take on anything... there is a

relatively tranquil area in this place, untouched by the more violent winds... a few items are carefully arranged here...

Nytsky absorbs the relentless cultural forces that work upon her and rather than destroying her, they make her stronger. Also represented in this space is the juxtaposition of disparate elements that capture the complexity of Nytsky's self. For instance, amidst the violent weather, the visitor remains calm and finds "a relatively tranquil place here." Also, there are "carefully arranged" objects within the space, including sparring pads and a wood floor – very tangible, real objects amidst a surreal and mythical scene. The sparring pads and wood floor are described in a way that reflects the discipline of Tae Kwan Do. The smooth floor is described as allowing Nytsky to move gracefully, and appreciate the "simple beauty" of the practice. This combination of surreal and concrete images reflect a bricolage in how Nytsky uses a wide variety of materials at her disposal, and does not limit herself exclusively to either abstract descriptions or literal representations of real life objects, but instead gathers together a combination of both to explore her identity.

Nytskyz writes that her site is "meant as a guide to the somewhat disjointed glimpse into my person through the MOO, though it may just serve to confuse people more." Yet confusion for the visitor and herself may be inevitable considering that Nytskyz sums up her site as a partial collection of "previously unconsidered aspects" of her self that "I should like to pursue further," emphasizing the self as complex and evolving achieved through the opportunity to pursue the self as bricolage.

Nytskyz's site represents not only bricolage as a process of discovery, but also bricolage as a combination of diverse elements that constitute the self. With Nytskyz's site there is no causal relationship between any of the spaces pieced together by the entryways stemming off from The Brink. The spaces can be traversed in any order and have neither a beginning nor an end. That is, visitors do not reach the "end" of the student's description in a sense in which she finds closure or completion. They simply reach the last of the representations that's been included in the site.

This style of organization is significant because it shows how much students welcome the ways in which bricolage provides a model for self construction that allows disparate elements of the self to coexist without the need for conciliation or logical progression. Bricolage allows for a process of tinkering, where a visitor to the site engages with a variety of scenes and scenarios that emphasize the wide variety of elements that compose the self. Such elements are encountered and arranged in new ways as the visitor traverses the site along a different pathway each time. The ever-changing, loosely-knit relationship between elements allows for a self that values complexity and difference over streamlined simplicity.

Nojer's Spiritual Kingdom

Another example of a site that reflects a bricolage construction is Nojer's Spiritual Kingdom. Spiritual Kingdom's overall organization manifests the gathering together of diverse elements that require no synthesis or "logical" progression. Spiritual kingdom is composed of an innocuous central area from which extends four other spaces:



Spiritual Kingdom

as you look around, your impulse is to believe that you have come to the wrong place. This simple little white walled apartment is hardly anything you would liken to a spiritual kingdom [...]

This first room serves as a simple starting point from which the diverse elements of Nojer's self branch in all directions and can be traversed in any order. One space that branches off this "white-walled apartment is a dark and unsettling "Basement:"



The Basement

You enter through a dimly lit crevice and are quickly surrounded by cool air and the clicking sound of dripping water as it echoes endlessly upon the stone walls of the cave....[author's ellipses] You can feel the darkness closing in and it makes it hard to breathe. In a strange way you find the blackness as liberating as it is confining as you no longer have (or are able) to base your reality on the meager reach of your eyes. The walls of the cave open up and you enter what seems to be a large room. You lose touch of the wall where you entered, and turn to realize that you will never find it again. Strangely you find peace in this black abyss, and don't feel disoriented by your sudden lack of ability to grasp or hold knowledge of where you are. You are alone, without eyes or body. Your thoughts fill the darkness.

The basement seems cool and welcoming at first, but the visitor soon loses touch with the wall and finds it difficult to breathe as darkness sets in. Despite this, “the blackness is as liberating as it is confining,” and you come to “find peace in this black abyss, and don’t feel disoriented by your sudden lack of ability to grasp or hold knowledge of where you are.” This statement emphasizes the initially frightening, but ultimately comfortable experience of exploring the self without any preconceived ideas or specific direction that must be followed. In his analysis essay, Nojer describes the Basement rather poetically as “born of my desire to watch the world without my eyes.” This seemingly paradoxical statement suggests Nojer’s belief that we take for granted that there is only ever one way of doing something. To “watch” the world it is assumed that we must use our eyes. But what if there were a different way? What if we tried to watch with our ears and hear with our eyes. Nojer seems to be challenging our assumptions about what is possible and most effective in our interactions with the world as well as our knowledge of the self

Another very different room available to the visitor is called the “Center Stage.” Rather than emphasizing solitary darkness, it encourages public engagement with the myriad sources of wisdom, knowledge, and diversity that we encounter as citizens in Western culture:



The Center Stage

You enter a small theater with dark seating and a center stage lit in such a way as to give whom ever speaks there a god-like presence. Anyone is free to stand upon the stage and be heard. The audience consists of the

likes of Aristotle, Shakespeare, Karl Marx, and the guy who created the Simpsons. You are free to sit or speak. In either case be prepared to passionately defend your beliefs and your reality with an open mind.

For Nojer, “this room is my daydream classroom.” In this room the visitor encounters various historical and contemporary figures whose worldviews vastly differ from one another (from Aristotle to Matt Groening of *the Simpsons*), but who all are known for their insights into human character and social relations: Aristotle through his Politics, Rhetoric, and Ethics, Shakespeare through his plays, Marx through materialist theories, and Groening through his culturally satiric television show *The Simpsons*. The light is what gives the speakers a “god-like presence” which suggests a postmodern sense of truth in that, while on stage the speaker assumes a cloak of truth that lasts only as long as they are in the light that bestows on them such authority. Knowledge—about the self and the world—is tangible and ever-evolving, suggested further by the distinction Nojer makes preparing you to defend “your” beliefs and “your” reality, which acknowledges how our diverse history of perspectives inform and complement one another, rather than cancel each other out. As Nojer comments in his essay:

The Center Stage embodies my curiosity and craving for perspective...Anyone can take the stage, and all words will be heard in the same plane of healthy skeptical judgment. This is because I believe that exposure to different perspectives is the most important part of learning.

Bricolage allows for the opportunity to investigate and compose the self by piecing together of a variety of elements of the self as a way in which to negotiate relationships

between disparate elements of the self and come to new understandings of those elements. Bricolage enables Nojer to consider a wide variety of perspectives about himself and his relationship with the world that he may have otherwise had to choose between were he to have to present a more streamlined and unified version of himself.

The two other spaces Nojer includes in his site are “The Playground” and “The Window.” The Playground captures a transition from childhood to adulthood and for Nojer was “a symbol of the beauty that I see in even the most insignificant of our endeavors:”



The playground

A sweat stained concrete slab stretches out before you. An old dirty basketball hoop shakes and creaks in the wind. A ball lies in the corner resting up against a chain link fence. Silence is the only sound now that the passionate playing is done. It was always so much more than a simple game to the boy who played here. It was a work of art, it was his life and his masterpiece. Then one day, he pulled off his jersey and proudly walked away - knowing he would always long for the days when he could play until the sun went down.

The emphasis on transition is significant because it reflects the malleable and evolving nature of our selves. In his essay, Nojer describes being devoted to the game of basketball, but after “taking everything it would give me,” he “followed my wandering heart onto something new.” This sense of wandering is captured even more vividly

through Nojer's description of the Window, which captures an ever-evolving and flexible notion of the self:



The Window

You step out the window and into the sky. You float at first then explode across the horizon in a burst of clouds. You sprinkle droplets of rain that hit the ground with the sound of ants feet then release an ocean upon the ground below and listen as it erupts in laughter and applause. After a time you feel weak and fall like a leaf to the ground, encased in the last drop of the storm, long and free into a puddle. It shakes and wobbles in happiness.

The visitor's ability to float and then explode across the horizon defies all laws of physics, and presents a fluidity of the self from which is released a torrent of rain and elements.

In his essay Nojer describes this space as

a symbol of my restlessness, and also the peace that I feel because of it. In its description is violent yet soft, but above all else is passionate and therefore peaceful. This is how I strive to live my life.

Nojer's remarks reveal a synergy of myriad emotions, and capture the sense of bricolage that occurred for him through the process of building himself in a space on the MOO.

Nojer concludes by discussing how impossible it would be to fully "capture" his identity, and characterizes his site instead as

a dimensionalized essence of certain moods, values, and characteristics all developed individually and in different spaces on the MOO. I too was an author inside my own story. Much of the time, I felt trapped in my creation, like I was merely watching as my online identity blossomed all around me. I often jumped from idea to idea, heedless of any set direction or plan, and was left with a strange feeling that I really played little conscious role in the creation of my site. Yet, I was amazed at how well the often-subconscious development of this representation of myself captured the essence of who I am.

By becoming the author *inside* his own story, “heedless of any set direction or plan, Nojer was able to let go and “watch as [his] online identity blossomed all around [him],” creating a more “dimensionalized” self that often alludes students who are limited to more linear ways of expressing and exploring identity.

Conclusion

The sites that I have analyzed in this chapter are examples of what can happen when instructors give students the freedom to come to new knowledge in whatever way works for them. With no guidelines or restrictions to the assignment, other than the fact that students should build something of themselves on the MOO, what resulted were rich and diverse sites that reflected a non-hierarchical kind of discovery.

Students’ sites reflect the fact that when given the opportunity to explore their identities outside of traditional essay assignments, many students adopted the workings of a bricoleur – one who pieces together available materials in a way that arrives at new

knowledge, in this case about the self. Rather than their sites being examples of a top-down understanding of a complete self—one with privileged insight into its own workings and mastery over its processes—students seem to work toward a “soft mastery,” one in which they tinker with the possibilities, coming up with something that is not the *only* way, but one of many avenues they can take to gain a brief and wonderfully incomplete understanding of the self.

Exploring the myriad facets of the self through the lens of bricolage gives students the opportunity to explore the complexity of self within an infinite context, rather than a select scene or situation from the past. Students can see themselves as part of a broader spectrum, caught up in a web of culture and meaning and relationship that cannot be contained. By becoming bricoleurs, students can appreciate the complexity of their selves, and thus others, and take advantage of the opportunity to expand ever outward rather than arrive at a neat and tidy conclusion.

Encouraging students to become bricoleurs can provide a multifaceted, dynamic approach that opens up opportunities for understanding the relationships between contrastive elements of the self. Utilizing Haunter’s metaphor of the shattered crystal, instructors can encourage students to shatter their own ingrained ways of coming to knowledge, and piece together the shards and crystal dust of their selves as a way to recognize the complexity and diversity of identity.

V. Making the Case for Complexity

As the Internet has expanded, so too have the ways in which people can represent themselves online, making our relationships with identity more slippery than ever before. Personal websites, blogs, online personal spaces (such as those available on Myspace.com and Friendster.com), simulated-reality computer games, and online 3-D virtual spaces such as Second Life all provide opportunities for people to extend their selves infinitely outward, distancing themselves from their physical bodies, and engaging with a multitude of new categories and virtual tools and spaces with which to construct themselves.

The identity construction assignment at the heart of this dissertation arose out of my desire to offer students the opportunity to build more complex understandings of their selves and recognize the broader relationships they have with knowledge and the world. Identity exploration has a place in the composition classroom because such exploration is never simply concerned with investigating the inner-workings of an isolated self. It involves the broader exploration of how cultural and ideological forces shape our ideas about our selves and the voices with which we feel empowered to engage in meaningful communication.

As I have discussed in this dissertation, students in my classes were offered the opportunity to construct themselves spatially and metaphorically, in the virtual realm of the MOO, which allowed them room to explore their assumptions about what constitutes identity and to articulate the heterogeneity that characterizes their postmodern

subjectivities. Rather than reducing the self to a single narrative articulated through the linear form of the essay, I sought to allow students the opportunity to construct themselves metaphorically and materially—in space and as space—and lay out the myriad facets of their selves simultaneously, juxtaposed and intertwined, trumping linear efficiency in an effort toward a greater complexity of the self. Unlike much of the identity exploration that occurs in the composition classroom, constructing identity on the MOO did not encourage students to turn inward toward an isolated, contained, modernist understanding of the self, but encouraged them to stretch outward, recognizing how they've been shaped by the webs of relationships and ideologies that surround them.

Investigating the Socially-Constructed Self

And yet, encouraging students to investigate the ways in which they are socially constructed is not a new goal of composition studies. It's been almost twenty years since James Berlin forwarded his notion of social-epistemic rhetoric in his landmark essay "Ideology and the Writing Class," yet instructors are still in the process of trying to find ways of realizing such ideological investigation responsibly in the classroom.

In his essay, Berlin builds his theory of social-epistemic rhetoric from Althusser and Therbon, and their ideas about the ideologically-infused self. He articulates how critically important it is to understand how ideology is inscribed in language and "provides the standards" for what we know of the self and the material world. Berlin quotes Therbon who says that ideology informs our ideas about

“*what is good*, right, just, beautiful, attractive, enjoyable, and its opposites....*What is possible* and impossible; our sense of the mutability of our being-in-the-world...[It is by way of ideology that] the consequences of change are hereby patterned, and our hopes, ambitions, and fears give shape” (479 – author’s emphasis).

Berlin emphasizes how crucial it is to understand the incredible force of ideology in determining our ideas about the self and what we consider possible in the world because it is from that determination that we decide how we will act and if we believe that change is possible (479).

Marshall Alcorn, in his book *Changing the Subject of English Class*, concurs with Berlin’s emphasis on ideology and the importance Berlin places on using the writing class to explore the ways in which our thoughts and actions are determined by a plurality of ideological forces that constitute our subjectivities. For Alcorn, however, there are two problematic assumptions Berlin makes in his essay. The first is the way that Berlin characterizes the subject as socially and ideologically constructed, but then suggests assignments that seem to allow the subject privileged insight into her own processes, leading to authorial control over her actions that would nullify his original characterization of the subject. The second is in Berlin’s failure to account for the libidinal and emotional bonds students have to their thoughts about their selves, bonds that cannot be easily forgotten by simply encouraging them to think other thoughts.

Alcorn argues that if we have not succeeded in helping students investigate their postmodern, socially-constructed selves in the classroom it is because instructors have

failed to respect the ways in which such investigation threatens the fundamental stability of students' selves. Alcorn claims that we often try as teachers to show through rational argument how even student's most fundamental desires are ideologically driven. Teachers do this to encourage students to examine those ideologies and adopt a more socially aware, socially responsible place in the world. Despite teachers' most convincing arguments; however, students often resist any efforts to redefine their subjectivities, and in fact, passionately defend their understanding of their selves (which are usually selves that resembles the autonomous, free-thinking individuals of enlightenment philosophy). Alcorn suggests that when instructors attempt to expose students to their ideologically-constructed subjectivities, students often resist because this exposure, in effect, *kills off* their existing notion of the self, one that has deep emotional roots, and one that students become defensive about losing. Alcorn claims that we can understand this resistance by using a Lacanian perspective of subjectivity:

Lacanian theory suggests that subjects, in their adhesive attachment to discourse, defend and tenaciously repeat the symptoms of their subjectivity. Lacan's description of subjectivity as a form of defense should lead us to appreciate more fully the problems of penetrating or undoing the libidinal attachments subjects have to discourse. Lacan's theory of the subject, like Althusser's, suggests that subjectivity is not, as Berlin suggests, an amoeba eagerly absorbing all the discourse that it encounters. It is more like an insect with a hard exoskeleton that protects its inner structure from penetration, from the hostile invasive facts and discourse that threaten its image of contained and harmonious self-identity. (18)

Alcorn argues that Lacanian theory can provide teachers with a broader understanding of student's emotional and libidinal attachments. With that understanding, teachers can then work toward providing a space for students to mourn the loss of their selves as their subjectivities change.

Alcorn's work is important because it furthers a more complex notion of student subjectivity, and owns up to the difficult task instructors may have encouraging students to investigate their selves while avoiding two pitfalls: the assumption that we can step outside of the self to investigate it from a detached perspective, and the potential for students to clutch more dearly to a modernist notion of their selves when the stability of those selves is challenged.

The identity exploration assignment that I've discussed throughout this dissertation is an example of one such way instructors can help students explore their identities while avoiding these common pitfalls because it does not require instructors to preach to students about ideology and the socially-constructed nature of their selves, but instead, simply provides students an entirely different way of approaching identity, in this case, by building it as a virtual space. But more than just avoiding pitfalls, assignments like this offer students the opportunity to actively *construct* their identities using material and metaphorical spaces, objects and more abstract elements, and thus see identity *as constructed*. As I have tried to show throughout this dissertation, the MOO sites that students built reveal not so much an attachment to a modernist notion of the self, but an understanding of the self as multiple, fragmented, and composed of diverse elements that

can challenge our traditional notions of identity while opening up possibilities for new combinations of elements with which to compose the self.

Edward Soja's Thirdspace, de Certeau's tactics, and Papert and Turkle's Bricolage are three lenses that I have argued can be used to best understand the complexity occurring in student self-constructions. The Thirdspace identity constructions that I discussed in Chapter Two are characterized primarily by the ways in which students negotiate the binaries that traditionally define their identities (binaries such as private/public, gay/straight, white/non-white, etc.) and creatively restructure such binaries, producing an alternative construction "that speaks and critiques through its otherness" (Soja 61). As the sites of Evelyn, Brian, and Maya show, restructuring binaries does not serve to negate their existence. Rather, the Thirdspace identity constructions of these students did justice to the complexity of their selves by providing space for the existence of binaries as well as a third/other choice, that together, helped them stretch into new areas of self understanding.

Like Thirdspace Identity Constructions, tactics are another way that students are able to refigure and resist the pull toward simplifying identity or reducing it to traditional identity categories. Tactics refer to the ways in which students are able to find meaning and agency on a personal level through their manipulation and play with the categories and spaces that supposedly define them. Tactics characterize a deliberate manipulation with the aim of calling into question the simplicity with which we operate and classify things. The sites of Duff, HannaBarbara, CAPsLOCK and others are just a few examples of students showing an engagement with tactics in how they "poach"

language and cultural objects, manipulate real-life space, and engage in play in an effort to enact change on a personal level within the larger confines of culture.

Where a use of tactics emphasizes resistance to the larger cultural codes that seek to determine how identity can be experienced, bricolage emphasizes a process of exploration that can occur despite (not in spite of) those confining categories and codes. Encouraging students to adopt the roles of bricoleurs can enable an exploration of the self without the need for a road map or guide, or the need to follow some pre-existing framework or method. Bricolage is both an end result – a text that balances and manages diverse elements as well as a process by which knowledge is developed in new ways – juxtaposing elements, and bringing them together in ways that develop new relationships.

A bricoleur approach to identity construction is flexible, negotiated, and non-hierarchical. It is both a way of coming to new knowledge, as well as a way of managing diversity without the need for logical progression or hierarchical arrangement of information. The exploration of the self in a non-hierarchical, multifaceted way opens up possibilities for using combinations of cultural, linguistic and material objects to engender a better understanding of the self. Students who adopt the role of bricoleurs “tinker” with their identities by piecing together a wide variety of abstract images and material objects that reveal selves who are in constant flux and growth.

When given the opportunity to explore their identities outside of traditional essay assignments, students composed Thirdspace identity constructions, engaged in tactics, and adopted the workings of bricoleurs to come to new knowledge and form new perspectives about the self. Rather than their sites being examples of a top-down

understanding of a complete self—one with privileged insight into its own workings and mastery over its processes—students' sites revealed a messier and multifaceted self, not so easily contained in a modernist mold. Exploring the myriad facets of the self through these lenses gives students the opportunity to explore the complexity of their selves within an infinite context, rather than a select scene or situation from the past. Students can see themselves as part of a broader spectrum, caught up in an ever-expanding web of culture, meaning and relationship. By composing Thirdspaces, engaging in tactics and becoming bricoleurs, students showed an appreciation of the complexity and difference inherent in their selves, and will thus be more likely to take advantage of future opportunities to expand ever outward, play, and create new spaces and combinations as they continue to explore their myriad identities throughout their lives. Together, these lenses stress complexity over simplicity and suggest unexpected avenues for coming to new knowledge about the self. But more than opening up new possibilities, these lenses engender a new kind of agency, one that finds power in complexity and refuses reduction. Through their sites, students show themselves to be comfortable with the unfamiliar and the ambiguous, but also able to adapt, change shape, and see the *I* as an *all*—as an infinite sum and ever-changing total.

These lenses help instructors articulate what makes these sites so interesting. But what is important to understand is that the lenses didn't drive the ways in which the sites were composed. That is, students in my classes didn't learn about bricolage and then become bricoleurs.

They already were bricoleurs.

Students simply needed to be offered the space in which they could operate as such. These sites provide examples of what is possible when we make our classrooms radically open spaces in which students are encouraged to be messy and inefficient, and to engage with knowledge in new ways through alternative avenues not traditionally taken in composition classrooms.

Students' self-constructions were facilitated by the unique space of the MOO, which provides them with a place in which to do and make what they will with the objects and spaces of their real lives and better understand their relationships with those objects and spaces, and with the power structures of the dominant cultural systems that surround them.

The MOO, as a space in which students are able to replicate as well as extend real-life spaces, is the perfect platform in which students can explore the spatial, material, and linguistic confines of the dominant cultural systems and create spaces in which they manipulate and play with such confines, on their own terms, to create their own sense of meaning. MOOs are fertile spaces for constructing identity because they are real-time, interactive virtual realities that are often modeled after real-life places, thus situating MOOs in a unique space between fantasy and reality, and calling into question our definitions of each. Located in/as the space between traditional dichotomies, MOOs are able to expose the instability and emptiness of such dichotomies and provide a space to reimagine what's possible. MOOs are dynamic spaces that allow an infinite variety of objects and spaces to exist simultaneously and irreducibly to each other. They provide students with a space in which anything that can be linguistically described can be

included as part of their sites. Rather than being limited to narratives of real-life personal experience, students can use any and all objects, language, material descriptions to stitch together a sense of who they are. What results is a complex, far-reaching hybrid of real-life and fantastical elements that, together, paint a picture of a self-in-process, multifaceted and multidimensional.

Multimodal Identities

The MOO identity assignment is just one way instructors can tap into alternative and more complex ways of investigating the self. Other composition theorists have also developed assignments that encourage exploration of the self through more than the essay. Although in the introduction to this dissertation I critique Greg Ulmer's work for furthering a modernist model of the self, his work remains important because of the ways in which he challenges the primacy of narrative and linear self-exploration, and proposes alternative constructions of the self through his concept of the "widesite." He claims that one of the goals of general writing classes should be to provide students with "models of self-knowledge for living the examined life" (5). Ulmer's students develop "widesites" in which they reflect on their relationship to and experiences with four institutions: career, family, entertainment, and community. Ulmer allows for invention in ways more complex and messy than instructors often allow, and encourages students to explore their selves through images, metaphors, and other avenues not traditionally offered in the composition classroom. Widesites provide students with ways of "inventing" the self

through a variety of texts and contributes to Ulmer's goal of fostering an electronic literacy in students, an "electracy" that is grounded in invention.

Another assignment I developed asked students to explore how our presentations of the self through various media inform our ideas about identity. Students explored how various writers and artists (including Dorthy Allison, David Sederis, and Cindy Sherman) composed their identities through the production of essays, artwork, photographs and poems. After studying the works of these artists and writers, I offered students the opportunity to compose themselves in three separate works: a written text, an image, and a spatial text (map or MOO space). I then asked students to write an essay analyzing how each of their compositions communicated a particular conception of themselves. Below are two visual texts and one written text (poem) as examples of the types of texts students composed for this project.



Figure 5: Father and Daughter

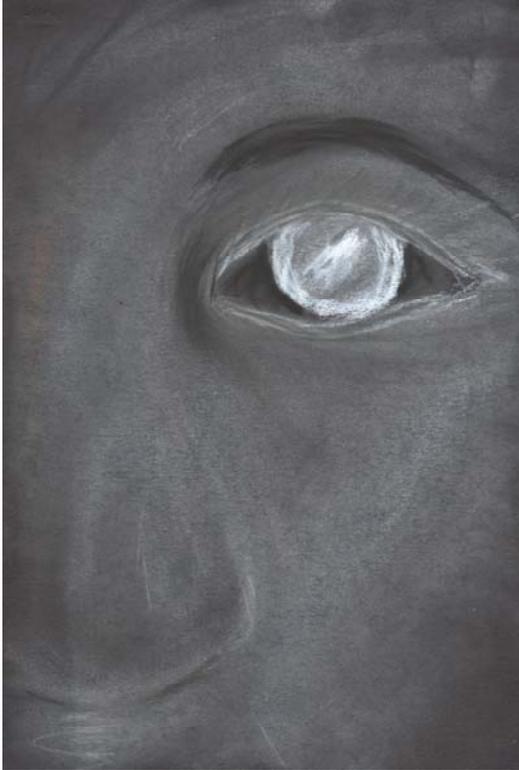


Figure 6: The Eye

News Update

I have been in the reach of every hand
That wanted to touch my hand in a friendly way

I have been not, with those, who laugh
With only half a smile

I have walked on many soils
And sprouted in many hearts

I havent counted the spots in the sun
Because I know that in only one spot
The world can easily fit into

Although it is said that I have my enemies
Everybody listens when I sing my poems

I have never been in the big markets of the Words
But I have said my story on time and with a smile

I thank all who played a role in my life
And contributed to this song

I have always talked about the impossible things
Because of the possible ones, we know to much already

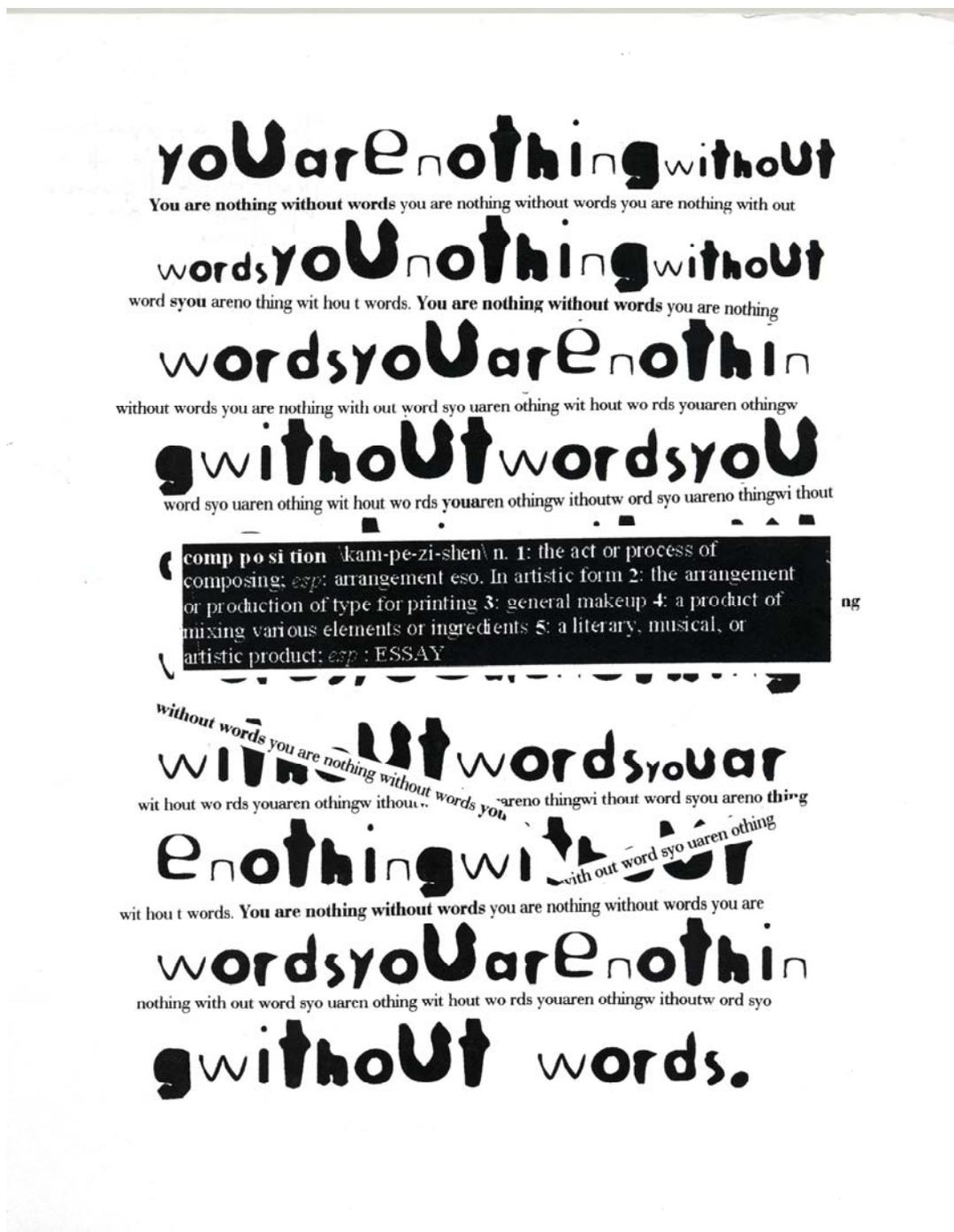
I learned to live in the loneliness
Because the word love sounds so empty

I like to have my faults
Because immunity to all
Will tear my soul apart

If someone seems pictured here
Know now what lies with a destiny like mine

Any claims or remarks
Send them without the letterhead
Good night my Enemies my Friends

Figure 7: News Update



composition (kam-pe-zi-shen) n. 1: the act or process of composing; *esp.*: arrangement *eso.* In artistic form 2: the arrangement or production of type for printing 3: general makeup 4: a product of mixing various elements or ingredients 5: a literary, musical, or artistic product; *esp.*: ESSAY

Figure 8: Nothing Without Words

This unit allowed students the opportunity to explore their own multi-faceted identities through a number of different lenses, and learn how various media communicate rhetorically in very different ways to serve a variety of purposes and audiences, rather than seeing one medium as better or more effective than any other. In this assignment, students were also able to see how various media complement each other and can create more from a combination of elements in the style of Thirdspace and bricolage. So instead of the image being binary to text, or subservient to it, both media can come together to help us move beyond our traditional linguistic modes of communication.

Literacy Expanded

When allowed to conceive of and create more complex possibilities for identity, students come to value the diversity of their selves and in doing so respect the diversity of others. Recognizing the complexity of identity facilitates a recognition of the complexity of culture and communication; identity construction assignments can thus serve as models for larger knowledge exploration and construction. The models that can challenge our assumptions about identity and better articulate the potentials of spatial-metaphorical identity production are the same models that can drive our interrogation of literacy practices and lead to further inquiry into what the composition classroom should do.

When it comes to literacy and literacy education, composition instructors can claim substantial expertise. Scholars in our field have explored the history and forms of literacy (Graff, Miller, Pattison), the various stages of literacy (Ong, Scribner, Baron), the ways in which literacy can be oppressive and homogenizing (Stuckey), and, more recently, the new kinds of literacies that technologies are engendering and the social, political, and economic factors that contribute to literacy education (Selfe 1999). Amidst all of this scholarship, however, we may forget that one of the richest sources of literacy education comes not from theorists, but from our own students. By opening up our classrooms and providing students with opportunities to contribute their own perspectives and experiences through textual forms that perhaps don't represent traditional forms of essayistic literacy, we can gain new insight into the kind of literacy practices that are playing a role in the lives of our students.

An example of such an opportunity that I developed for my classes took the form of a take-home final exam, in which students were asked two very simple questions about what it means to be literate in today's society and how composition classes can better serve this notion of literacy. The actual assignment sheet couched these questions within the context of our course activities:

Composition courses have long had the difficult task of simultaneously preparing students for their academic careers—where they will be required to hand in essays and other texts that are expected to be coherent, logically organized, and adhere to conventions of academic discourse—and encouraging students to examine critically those very

structures that revere the “logic” of academic discourse as the most effective way of communicating in our culture.

This semester you’ve written essays that have required you to engage with academic discourse, including in your writing such elements as introductions, thesis statements, topic sentences, supporting evidence, and concluding explanations. All the while, the content of the course has focused on analyzing more alternative forms of discourse, such as music, visual “texts,” films, MOO texts, and other cultural artifacts.

Though composition students have been increasingly encouraged to analyze such alternative texts in the classroom, for the most part, students are still required to produce traditional essayistic texts that reinforce the notion that academic discourse is the most effective way for students to come to new knowledge about their selves and the world. There have been two exceptions to this in our course this semester. One was the Unit 1 Project that required you to “build” yourself in the virtual environment of the OldPuebloMOO. The other was the McLuhan assignment that required you to add a visually-driven page to Marshall McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Massage*.

For this final exam, I would like you to consider what you feel the purpose of composition courses should be and what sorts of texts composition students should be encouraged to produce. Essayistic texts certainly prepare students for the work they will be doing further along in

their academic careers; yet, according to compositionist Sean Williams in his essay “Thinking Outside the Pro-Verbal Box,” focusing primarily on the such texts privileges only one form, one perspective from which we can access knowledge and fosters illiteracy in our students by not teaching them how to critically engage with the multiple textual formats they encounter in their daily lives (29-30).

As a student who is nearing completion of their composition requirement at the University and has produced both “traditional” essayistic as well as “non-traditional” visual and spatial texts, how would you respond to this dilemma? More specifically, I would like you to address these questions:

- ✦ What does it mean to be literate in the twenty-first century?
- ✦ How can composition classes better serve this notion of literacy?

Please compose a persuasive response in whatever format you choose.

Following your response, provide an explanation as to why you used the response style you did and how it connects to your overall argument.

The questions I posed to my students are enormous, and are more suitably addressed in books and dissertations rather than a take-home final exam in a freshman composition course. However, the open-endedness of both the questions and format in which students could respond provided them freedom to investigate these questions in new ways.

I have included here a few examples of the many incredible responses I received to illustrate the breadth of literacy practices that students are aware of and use on a

regular basis. The first example is from a student who decided to print her definition of what it means to be literate on a t-shirt because, she explained in her essay, it was a medium that was representative of a more common form of information exchange, and thus deserved more importance than we usually ascribe to it. An example of just one line from the t-shirt reads: “Literacy is not reading a book. Literacy is reading the world.”



Figure 9: “Literate” T-Shirt

A second example is from a student who wrote her response on her blog, then encouraged those who read her blog to respond with their own ideas. The screen shot below captures only two pages of a many-page blog discussion that resulted in a community-authored text with a variety of voices and perspectives contributing.

LIVE JOURNAL™

Welcome, [lyistre!](#) [Log out?](#)

Journal **Manage** Search Help About
 Entries Info Friends User Pictures Password Customize Communities

Upgrade Your Account

Search: Category: **Username**

We Are Generation X ([lyistre](#)) wrote,
 @ [2003-12-09 16:04:00](#)

Current mood: 😊 energetic

Respond in any format possible..
 "What does it mean to be literate in the 21st century?" as is the question forwarded to me from my English teacher.

It seems to be rather simple, at least to me.

I'm sitting here on my couch, clothed in boxers and a t-shirt, typing away on my live journal.

- +I'm online.
- +I'm interactive.
- +I'm AOL and AIM.
- +I'm a screen name.

I am (as of this moment) an identity that merely consists of words.

So back to pondering that question: Literacy in the 21st century is..interactive.

It is now a tangible experience. You can be completely immersed in TEXT.

Figure 10: Blog Entry

To be literate, we need to be able to read html and internet short-hand. We need to understand slang, smiley faces, and font change.

(Post a new comment)



Yes
[grybai](#)
 2003-12-09 22:40 (from 63.225.43.221) ([link](#))  
 Select

And on the internet, we chisel out our identities with words, whether accurate or not. The trouble with the internet is the words are increasingly becoming less significant. It's more about images, quick, fast, speed. Webcams and microphones allow for communication without written language.

[\(Reply to this\)](#) [\(Thread\)](#)



Re: Yes
[lyistre](#)
 2003-12-09 22:45 (from 205.188.209.14) ([link](#))  
 Select

unmasked.

Very true. And with that said...I don't think English in schools needs to be taught. Well...sorta. I actually meant formal english taught in schools, because it's not like we use it. LOL.

I think it'd be very interesting to learn about the other different ways we communicate.

Even professions don't always rely upon formal discourse to convey their messages.

e-mail. on-line journals. websites.

Figure 11: Blog Entry Continued

A third example is from a student who designed a museum exhibit from the year 2030, exhibiting communication technologies and media from today's world. Examples of the items on exhibit include a laptop displaying the Yahoo website, television sets showing programs like MTV and CNN, a music player and headphones, and even a

novel. Each item is accompanied by a plaque that provides context for the viewer. The plaque that accompanies the laptop and Yahoo website reads:

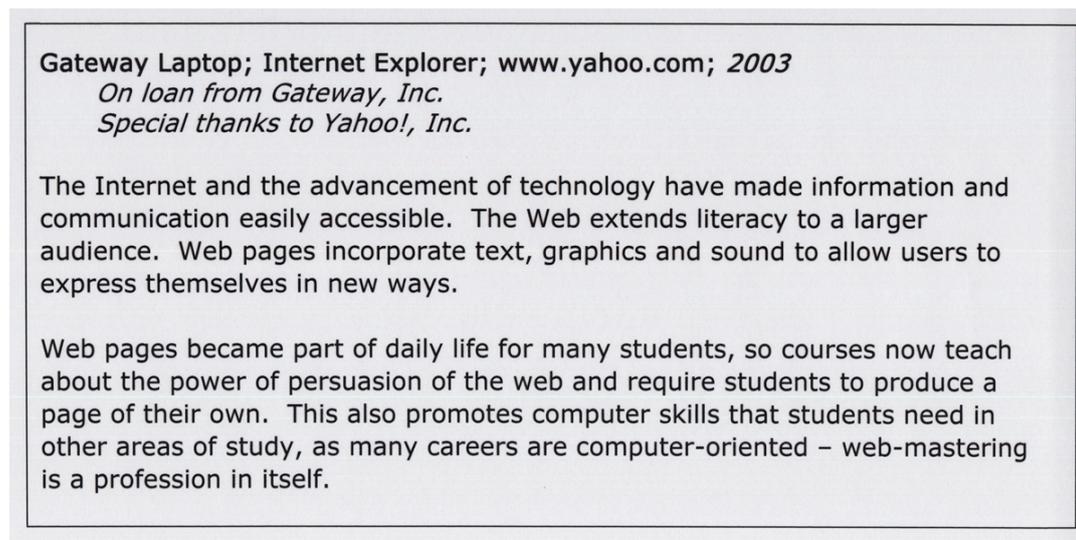


Figure 12: Museum Exhibit

This student includes as a form of literacy not just the items on the exhibit, but the exhibit itself, where the plaques that accompany the items become their own form of discourse and the multi-format presentation of display, plaque, and audio tour is exemplary of the multi-modal ways in which knowledge is communicated. She writes:

When you visit a museum, the plaques accompanying the artifacts are not written with a formal introduction, middle, and conclusion. Facts and explanations are directly given in order to introduce the viewer to the piece and help him come to new knowledge. This makes the activities and writings of a curator of an exhibit a form of discourse itself. Also, museums are flexible for visual, auditory, and physical learners alike. For

example, the visual learner can read the plaque and view the object while the auditory learner listens to a taped version of the exhibit notes.

The exhibit is meant to show visitors how these types of texts really do have a legitimate place in a student's education in composition, along with the traditional essay and other such forms of discourse.

A fourth example is a response created by two students, discussing the exam prompts over an instant messaging program:

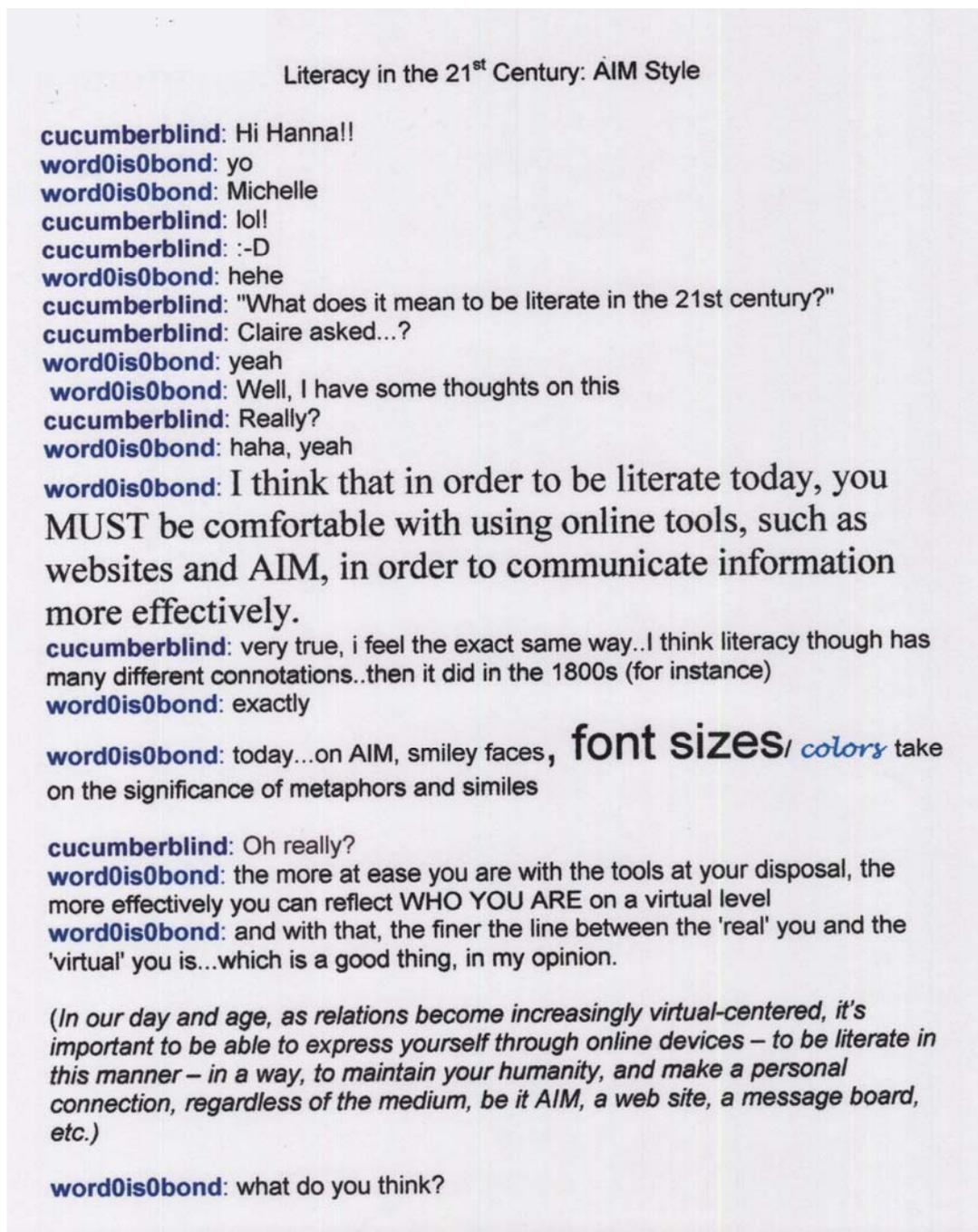


Figure 13: Instant Messaging Session

The page displayed here is just the beginning of a conversation that shows how computer-mediated dialogue has engendered its own form of literacy that students often use to collaborate and come to new knowledge.

A fifth and final example is a response written in Java, an advanced programming language that is used to drive everything from websites to the technologies in cellular phones and cars. The student's response is an example of a Java program, one page of which looks like this:

```

//
//
// - examines the issue of literacy in the twenty-first century
// - discusses how composition classes can better serve this issue
//
// *NOTE* - whenever you see something preceded by two slashes, it is a comment
//          intended to illuminate the otherwise cryptic text; this is, after
//          all, the baffling domain of the Nerd, a world not designed with the
//          casual layman in mind
//
public class EnglishFinal
{
    // "static final" means that the old knowledge can never be changed
    private static final String OLD_KNOWLEDGE = "traditional essay";
    private EnglishCompositionClass myClass;

    private class EnglishCompositionClass
    {
        // knowledge represents what each student learns
        private String[] knowledge;
        private int size;

        // this represents, obviously, an English composition class
        public EnglishCompositionClass(int students)
        {
            knowledge = new String[students];
            for(int ctr = 0; ctr < students; ctr++)
            {
                // when students come into the class, they are ready to learn
                knowledge[ctr] = "";
            }
            size = students;
        }
    }

    public EnglishFinal()
    {
        // this represents our English 109H composition class
        myClass = new EnglishCompositionClass(24);
    }

    // this represents education in a typical composition class
    public void EducateTraditionally()
    {
        // the old knowledge is regurgitated and is all the students learn
        RegurgitateKnowledge(myClass);
        for(int ctr = 0; ctr < myClass.size; ctr++)
        {
            System.out.println("Student #" + (ctr + 1) + ": " +
myClass.knowledge[ctr]);
        }
    }

    // this is what happens all too often in English classes
    public void RegurgitateKnowledge(EnglishCompositionClass aClass)
    {
        for(int ctr = 0; ctr < aClass.size; ctr++)
        {
            // the only knowledge gained is the old stale traditional stuff
            aClass.knowledge[ctr] = (OLD_KNOWLEDGE);
        }
    }
}

```

Figure 14: Java Program

The student explains in his essay that the code is running two programs, one in which students only write academic essays, and one in which students produce essays as well as visual and web texts. The execution of each program produces predictable results, with

the students who write only essays developing only an essayistic literacy, while the other students develop an essayistic literacy and well as a visual and web literacy. The Java programming language drives a great deal of knowledge transmission throughout the world, and yet is one that is largely invisible and unknown to people. In choosing this form, the student comments that computer programs, like this one are some of “the many ways in which we come in contact with new information in today’s world, and as an aspiring programmer I hope to be one of those who distribute information this way.” Our students come to our classes with a great deal of knowledge and perspective that can help inform and extend what we think of as literate in today’s society.

Each of these examples showcases non-traditional forms of literacy and shows how communication can work outside the realm of the academic essay in rhetorically significant ways. Important to understanding the potential of this assignment is that none of these texts would have been created had I as an instructor been uncomfortable with not having all the answers and not serving as keeper of all the knowledge about literacy and effective communication. Assignments like these show that teachers would do well to learn more from their students. More aptly: what our students can show us in the classroom will only happen if we let them bring their own emerging literacies and ways of knowing to the table so that they see all communicative practices as constructed and as serving various rhetorically significant purposes.

Further Implications

My desire is for assignments like these is to continue the dialogue about what the purpose of composition is and continue to prompt instructors to ask important questions about the kind of work we value in the classroom. In “Toward New Media Texts: Taking up the Challenge of Visual Literacy,” Cynthia Selfe quotes Sean Williams, who discusses the importance of teaching new media in the composition classroom:

“If composition’s role is to help students acquire skills to lead a critically engaged life—that is to identify problems, to solve them, and to communicate with others about them—then we need to expand our view of writing instruction to include the diverse media forms that actually represent and shape the discursive reality of students.” (qtd. in Selfe 72).

She expands upon Williams to argue that by including visual and other forms of new media literacy in its curriculum, we will be paying “more serious attention to the ways in which students are now ordering and making sense of the world,” in addition to expanding composition’s value in a world whose communicative practices are changing dramatically (72).

The analysis and production of new media in the composition classroom contributes, and I would argue is essential to, the continued goal of composition instructors fostering critical engagement in the classroom. Such engagement should be a cornerstone of first-year composition and does not have to be at odds with the more practical work of preparing students for their academic careers. In fact, it facilitates the more practical work we do in composition because it allows students to see the

constructed nature of all discourses and become aware of how we both compose and are composed by the texts that we encounter.

Instructors can begin incorporating the analysis and production of new media into the classroom by using some of the same principles of rhetorical analysis that they already use when working with text. It is true that websites are inherently different texts from written essays, including such elements as graphics, color, sound, movement, and hyperlinked organizational structures, but considerations of audience, purpose, and neo-Aristotelian rhetorical strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos are still useful starting points for better understanding the ways these texts work rhetorically in our culture. Robin Williams' *The Non Designer's Design Book*, which is a short, useful handbook, introduces students and teachers alike to how to articulate the design principles that work on the web and in print. But much of this book talks only about what is aesthetically pleasing, which is why teaching these concepts in a composition classroom and couching them in principles of rhetorical analysis is so important. We want our students to understand not only why something looks good, but also how design, as well as text, image, and other elements work rhetorically (and ideologically). For instance, the website for The Nature Conservancy may look good, but as an organization that survives off of grants and donors and attempts to conserve land and educate the public, the Conservancy has a much greater task to perform than aesthetics alone.

And yet, classroom practices alone will not lead to the consistent, wide-scale change. We must also discuss the ways in which instructor training and assessment practices can be modified to meet the changing needs of our students. With regard to

training, writing program administrators (WPAs) and department heads need to incorporate training at every level, most importantly by providing incentives for faculty and graduate students to expand their knowledge of media and technology through credit-earning classes, paid faculty development workshops, and course releases. Faculty development workshops, such as one offered for teaching advisors at my university last year, can be funded through grants obtained through the college, University, or other outside sources. Although writing grants may become yet another responsibility that falls on the shoulders of an already overworked WPA, grant writing needs to become a funding source for this sort of training, and is one that should count heavily toward tenure opportunities and the work that is valued by the university. Such grants and training can lead to publications for WPAs and faculty, and yet another challenge will be arguing for new media scholarship and electronic publications as an equal fulfillment of tenure as traditional print publications are.

This work should not fall to WPAs alone. Composition instructors themselves need to become more vocal about why the work they do is important to their students and the University. The research needs to be done and the arguments to department, college, and university tenure committees need to be made. There have been inroads made in getting peer-reviewed electronic publications accepted for tenure, though usually for faculty who are a part of technical communication programs rather those rhetoric and composition faculty more closely linked with traditional literature programs.

Assessment is important in justifying an expanded scope for composition instruction. WPAs or instructional computing specialists can conduct department-wide

surveys of the pedagogical goals instructors have and how those goals are being facilitated, and could be better facilitated, by technology and new media. Assessment of student learning is becoming increasingly portfolio-based, with electronic portfolios being supported by programs and universities who wish to allow students a place to accumulate and reflect upon the work they complete in their college careers. Theorists such as Kathleen Yancy (1992, 1997, 2004), Nedra Reynolds and Rich Rice (2006), and Edward White (2005) have made arguments in favor of using portfolios as an assessment tool and illustrate how it can be successfully implemented, both in paper and electronically. One model for portfolio assessment that I particularly like, and that can be adapted for both paper-based and electronic portfolios, is put forth by White in "The Scoring of Writing Portfolios: Phase 2." White suggests two elements integral to the portfolio process. The first is a goals statement developed by the instructor and/or department or university that clearly defines the learning outcomes to be achieved in the course. The second is a reflective letter that students write in which they take responsibility for how their work has fulfilled the goals outlined in the course, series of courses, or entire college career. Making the turn to portfolio assessment opens up the opportunity to reassess the goals composition instructors have in the classroom and the types of texts we should value, including how to read and produce an expanded number of texts that we and our students are encountering on a daily basis. Even further, in the move many universities are making toward on-line portfolios, students can collect and reflect upon their work throughout their college career, and in some cases, using open

source portfolio systems, will be able to maintain their portfolios indefinitely long after they have graduated.

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) has affirmed the need to incorporate new media in teaching and assessment. In addition to their already existing resolutions and position statements on “Composing with Nonprint Media (2005),” “Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments (2004),” and “Promotion and Tenure Guidelines for Work with Technology (1998),” CCCC has just drafted a resolution on the “Adoption and Use of Open-Source Software” such as that now in use for course management systems and on-line portfolios.

Learning from our students and from the work of innovative instructors who have contributed to the articles and resolutions that are helping make active change in composition will bring composition instruction to where it should be: helping students navigate and construct meaning across multiple platforms and technologies in an effort to understand how meaning and communication work rhetorically in the world.

I believe that it is possible and necessary for composition teachers to see composition in the broadest sense possible—composing essays and academic discourse, but also composing selves, knowledge, and relationships. As we make room for the integration of media and other elements into composition, we also need to make room for other ways of conceiving of the self and of textual production. As the lines between what composition *is* bleed out of our current textual boundaries and beyond our comfort levels, it becomes especially important for instructors to facilitate opportunities for composing that coincide with the textual, visual, and digital forms that students encounter in their everyday lives.

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