

READING FROM THE MARGINS: A STUDY OF EMERGENT BILINGUAL  
STUDENTS' WRITTEN RESPONSES TO TEXT

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## **ABSTRACT**

Beverly L. Schieman: Reading from the Margins: A study of emergent bilingual students' written responses to text  
(Under the direction of Madeleine Grumet)

There are myriad strategies for teaching literacy to emergent bilingual students that often reduce the amount of English that must be spoken, written, or read by the student so as to facilitate completion of assignments. Such strategies can bar students from meaningful literacy experiences for most if not all of their formal English education. In this study, I explore the use of margin writing in a sheltered middle school English Language Arts classroom for students identified as SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education). The participants are six Karen students who received their early literacy education in refugee camps in Thailand. Over the course of their eighth grade year, they wrote their responses to the class's assigned texts in the text margins for the purpose of facilitating in-class discussion about the texts. I use text analysis to investigate the students' interactions with the books they read, and to gain a greater understanding of their reading processes. I also conducted a focus group interview with the students a year after their middle school experience asking them about their personal histories with literacy learning, from the refugee camp to high school. Applying literary response theory and curriculum theory to the interpretation of the data gleaned in this research, I analyze the ways that margin writing freed emergent bilingual students from the constraints of formal English education and opened up their literacy learning. I propose that English language pedagogy that values and encourages open and

affective response to text will open doors for emergent bilingual students to access and navigate the literacy curriculum.



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**“And whoever thinks these are worthy, breathy words I am writing down is kind. Writing is neither vibrant life nor docile artifact but a text that would put all its money on the hope of suggestion. *Come with me into the field of sunflowers* is a better line than anything you will find here, and the sunflowers themselves far more wonderful than any words about them.”**

**(Oliver, 2016, p. 4)**

Dedicated to my Karen students who raise their heads  
and continue to turn towards the sun . . .

far more wonderful, indeed.

## PREFACE

One of my most prized possessions is a battered paperback copy of *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer* by Joseph Conrad (1902, 1989), obtained during my freshman year of high school in my English class. I hold it in my hand delicately, a cooled, compact heart of its own. If you open the book to the middle--the space between the short story and the novella--the binding cracks and exposes a white bone of cardboard between tanning pages. Across those tanning pages are the black bubbly print letters of a teenage girl. Writing hard, but fast . . . with purpose. The writing in that “space between” . . . after the last words on one side, “. . . seemed to lead into a heart of immense darkness” and on top of the centered title “The Secret Sharer” on the next . . . is the second half of a conversation between a fifteen-year-old girl and Joseph Conrad. It is the recorded document of one person waking up to the voice of another, finally realizing, after years of voracious reading that rolled in and out of her brain like pleasant movie reels, that someone REAL was actually talking to her. And she had to talk back . . . because what she was reading awakened her. She was asked to question what she had just heard, to join in the discussion, to add to it her own thoughts and experiences, which at fifteen, she had had just enough to have something to contribute. I mark this day, which I can still see so clearly in my mind, as a momentous one. I was already a reader, but I hadn’t really become a true responder until that moment.

As a teacher, I yearn to be the boatman that holds the hands of young readers as they step gingerly into the craft of a novel, take up an oar and begin to paddle. What will be their

*Secret Sharer*? However, as an ESL teacher, that job is sometimes beset with difficulties that I had not anticipated. A fifteen-year old is ripe to bring his/her lived experience to that of a novelist and have a conversation, if a green one. But what if those fifteen-year olds have never identified themselves as readers, going even so far as to self-describe as “non-readers”? What if those children grew up in a place where reading books was not a cultural standard? What if those fifteen-year olds bring to the book a world of experience that is rich, but incongruous? How will they respond to the conversation? Will that play a role, or can they start from scratch, a sojourner in a new land?

“I talk to the book like it’s my friend.” This is how a former student of mine recently responded to a casual question about his experience with books. This statement came a year and a half after he was first asked to read a book and annotate it for an enrichment activity. Recognizing him as an extremely bright and precocious child, I felt it necessary to differentiate his instruction to include more advanced reading to boost his language level to his academic potential. His first assignment was to read a graphic novel and respond in a journal, in which I gave him a list of prescribed vocabulary from the story and asked him to answer pre-written questions about theme and foreshadowing, etc. The vocabulary exercises were done hastily and the answers to the questions short and perfunctory; it was not the enriching experience I had planned. Even my attempts to respond to his answers with my own personal thoughts as models didn’t seem to elicit the deeper connection to the text I was hoping for. I felt immense frustration, as this work did not mirror the verbal responses and creative connections I had heard him share in class. Then I remembered my copy of *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer*, and decided to try, instead, to have him respond directly to the text between the lines. I purchased for him his own personal copy of *The Wave* (Strasser,

1981), a novel, based on a true story, about a teacher reenacting mob mentality in the classroom as a lesson about World War II. The book was selected based on my knowledge of the student's reading level and areas of interest. After a pre-reading session in which I showed him snippets of video about the true story of this experiment, and discussed what the good and bad sides of such an activity might be, I sent him home with instructions to read the first twenty pages of the book, annotating as he went. The next day, he returned to me distraught and embarrassed, admitting he only made it through sixteen pages after working for an hour. I was shocked and dismayed. Had I misjudged his reading ability? Had I pushed him into text he was not ready for? Then, I opened the book.

I had expected to find the typical annotations taught to every middle-school student: a few underlined vocabulary words defined in the margin (often out of context), an identification of a metaphor here and there to impress the teacher. There were vocabulary struggles, to be sure, of a student not yet comfortable using context to help with understanding, but what dominated the margins most were words and phrases of identification, curiosity, judgment, and even the creation of his own metaphors. He dubbed a character on page one as a "fortune teller" and identified others as good or bad friends to the protagonist. Several times he had underlined passages and written to the side, "This is ME." There were many lines written about the teaching methods depicted in the story, "I wish we could do this," or "He is not hard enough on the kids." He drew pictures of the devil next to the mention of Hitler, and when he read a funny part, wrote "Hahahaha" or drew a picture of himself laughing. There were connections to lessons from his other teachers, statements of what he did or didn't like, and agreement with character actions: "I would have

done the same thing”. Even, at the end of a chapter, a philosophical statement: “Everybody is meant to be different in this world, we are not meant to be the same.”

It was more than I had ever expected from him. He wasn’t annotating by checking off a teacher-provided list of what annotations should look like. He was in the moment, in the text and talking back to the author, judging the characters, siding with them, finding himself. He talked to the book like it was his friend.

A year and a half later, I had provided personal copies of other texts to him and five other students, all of whom were emergent bilingual refugees from Thailand, self-identifying as “non-readers” before their 8th grade year started. Technically, they could read within one or two grade levels of their actual grade, but they didn’t connect being “readers” to their identities. Now there exists 25 paperback novels full of margin writing in which these same students have conducted their own conversations with authors, becoming not just readers, but intimate conversants . . . secret sharers.

The students were given the texts to annotate at home, so that they might return to the classroom ready to share their experiences, adding to the insights of the other readers in the room. This method was culled from Kelly Gallagher’s *Deeper Reading* (2016), which postulates that sharing our thoughts on our reading and hearing those of others deepens our own experiences with the text. At no point while I was teaching this class did I really sit down and mine the texts themselves for what they hold, because the act was supposed to be an interpersonal one between the reader and the text...a means to feed the classroom discourse. However, leafing through the pages of the texts themselves, I realize there are multiple worlds waiting within these books, co-constructed between the reader and the text,

that may act as windows into the literacy experiences and intelligences of these individuals, and perhaps clues to designing pedagogy that might better serve them.

In the children's book *Many Moons* by James Thurber (1943) a king is dismayed because his daughter is sick. She tells her father what she needs to get better—literally, the moon. The king then calls upon his many advisors, all learned scholars, to figure out how to do this. Citing their own experience, the scholars proclaim that they know everything about the moon's dimensions, composition and distance (though each has different ideas about what these measurements are), and that the task that she asks is impossible. Distraught, the king turns to his court jester for comfort. The jester suggests that the person who holds the answer to what the princess needs might be the very person who needs it. "They are all wise men," the jester says of the consultants, "and so they must all be right. If they are all right, then the moon must be just as large and as far away as each person thinks it is. The thing to do is to find out how big the Princess Lenore thinks it is, and how far away."

The princess describes the moon as "a little smaller than my thumbnail" and "not as high as the tree outside my window" because that is her experience and view of the moon. Though she has not directly touched the moon, she is convinced it is "made of gold." The jester has the goldsmith make her a moon the size of her thumbnail that she can wear around her neck, and she gets better. The king worries that his daughter will discover the truth when she sees the moon has returned to the sky the next night, but when she does, she says that many things grow back when cut or are removed for one's own purpose, "And it is the same way with the moon...I guess it is the same way with everything."

I want to know how my students see the moon. I want to trust that they can take the weighty brightness of an English language text and make it a little smaller than their



thumbnail and not higher than the tree outside, because that is how they see it, and how they see it and experience it might just be enough to make readers out of them all. Finally, I want to see what happens when the text is made more full by the words they have added to the margins.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 The Problem: Emergent Bilingual Students and the Literacy Curriculum**

Emergent bilingual students face a myriad of challenges in K-12 education. Often, they are dropped into a system and curriculum that are blind to their cultural resources and practices, leading to feelings of inadequacy, isolation and pessimism regarding their academic potential (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999). Language barriers force well-meaning teachers to scaffold learning to the extent that autonomy is sometimes sacrificed and not developed, and students become “tracked” into remedial classes with less rich linguistic opportunities (Roberge, 2002). In efforts to make the work more accessible or easier to navigate, students are often not provided with opportunities for extensive reading or writing, and this can hinder academic development (Calderon, 2007; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2013; Roberge, 2002).

Emergent bilinguals at the middle and high school level often enter the system with differing levels of education, depending upon their socioeconomic status and cultural factors in their home countries (Garcia & Godina, 2004). Students who are “stateless”, or come from other countries as refugees, receive a majority of their education in refugee camps, and often this education is sparse and/or interrupted. Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) face specific challenges and prejudices. Many of them enter the country with limited literacy in their first language, and bring with them minimal background knowledge of the academic content taught in secondary schools. This makes it difficult to transfer literacy skills from one language to another, particularly when academic areas at this level have



content-specific literacy demands (Dooley, 2009; Windle & Miller, 2012; Zacarian & Haynes, 2012). SIFE are often tackling high-level academic content with literacy levels that are two years behind or more. (Zacarian & Haynes, 2012) Also, these students often have experienced, or have family members who have experienced, significant trauma and poverty in their home countries, and the majority of them live in poverty in the United States (Zacarian & Haynes, 2012). SIFE also often experience cultural dissonance (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011) when it comes to literacy experiences and conceptions. Zacarian & Haynes (2012) identify three major “hurdles” to the literacy instruction of SIFE:

1. (SIFE) are collectivist, pragmatic, and oral in their traditions, in direct contrast to mainstream US culture
2. Reading and writing are challenging to (SIFE), as these are often new activities for them
3. The individualist and academic orientation of schools in the United States presents a culture clash

These students are often viewed as deficient literacy learners because of their non-standard literacy backgrounds, and schools “often treat (SIFE) as empty vessels that need knowledge ‘poured in’” (Zacarian & Haynes, 2012). This kind of instruction can be intensive, but take little of their existing “funds of knowledge” (Amanti, 2005) into account.

Generation 1.5 emergent bilinguals are those who share characteristics of both first and second generation immigrants; they come to the United States in the middle of their literacy education, usually in the intermediate elementary age range, allowing them to rapidly gain familiarity with U.S. culture and the English language in an informal way. They “straddle two or more nations, cultures and languages” (Roberge, 2002). Students who enter the increasingly rigorous literacy curriculum of middle and high school find it more difficult to shed the label of “ESL”, and end up being “tracked” into classes that include highly

scaffolded and sometimes watered-down literacy instruction. On the other hand, students may also be pushed too early into “mainstreamed” classes, and provided with little to no support to handle the rigor and pace of the curriculum (Roberge, 2002). Both situations present problems. If students reject tracking and seek out the higher quality literacy curriculum of “honors” courses, they may be facing a “sink or swim” situation in which they do not receive the proper language support they need to succeed in those classes. On the other hand, if they are placed in long-term remediation classes where ESL support is provided, they may end up with a watered-down curriculum that does not meet the needs of their cognitive abilities, nor put them on a path for college. “In low track classes, ESL students may find the tasks more manageable. However, linguistic input in low-track classes are generally poorer, tasks are more mechanical, and classroom interaction tends to be minimal . . .” (Roberge, 2002)

Though teachers of emergent bilinguals are encouraged to allow students to read and write in their own language, and to use culturally relevant pedagogy (Garcia & Godina, 2004; Gay, 2010), scaffolding techniques and classroom modifications including word banks, multiple-choice assessments, cloze passages, and visual representations on assignments can be overused, creating a rigid and prescribed literacy curriculum. Often, writing instruction doesn’t keep up with the rigors expected of native speakers of English (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2013). As this continues from year to year and subject to subject with different teachers in secondary schools, students have a low cumulative opportunity to express themselves and respond to what they read, as a side result of “just getting through” the content. In the name of differentiation, but more likely for the sake of time, complex texts are repeatedly replaced with modified versions (Shakespeare plays in modern English, for example), when the

students might be able to navigate more complicated material with proper support and extended time.

As educators, we may “reach out” to emergent bilinguals, especially those with minimal formal literacy instruction, and do for them as if they cannot do for themselves. Though no one can argue that proper support is needed for transitioning, the students and teachers can tend to get stuck in this safe-feeling rut. Even though SIFE enter the literacy “play” already in progress, with its own momentum, stock characters, expectations and conventions, how can we, as educators, open up the literacy curriculum so that these students are encouraged and empowered to reach towards it themselves?

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study: Finding a Way In**

The purpose of the study is to examine the margin writing produced by emergent bilinguals and see if the blank space around text provides an opportunity for them to exercise greater agency as participants in the literacy curriculum. I seek to find answers to the following questions: **In what ways do emergent bilinguals who are asked to work independently with English language texts interact with the texts? What do the experiences and products of margin writing reveal about the literacy processes of these students?** My hope is that this research will generate new ideas about how we might not only provide a more liberating literacy curriculum for emergent bilinguals, but also open our own eyes, as educators, to viewing these students in ways that do not limit or essentialize them or their experiences. It is a quest for open doors: into texts, into the experiences and subjectivities of a group of students with a non-standard experience of literacy, and into our own potentials as educators who seek to help students open those doors.

### **1.3 Terminology Used**

In this paper, I am electing to use the term “emergent bilinguals” (Garcia, 2009) to refer to the participants in the study, rather than “English Language Learners” (ELLs), because the prior term acknowledges the fact that these students are developing skills in two languages, as well as the strengths and benefits this process can provide for the student, not to mention the classroom. In other words, “bilingualism is recognized as a potential resource, both cognitively and socially” (Garcia, 2009, p. 322), and because this is a central tenet of the study, it is appropriate and necessary for me to use language that reflects this. I also believe this term, with its inclusion of the word “emergent”, points to the limitless possibilities for the continued development of the students along their language paths, which is another theme of this work.

When the terms English Language Learner (ELL) and/or Limited English Proficient (LEP) are used in this paper, it will be in reference to the way the terminology is used to position them in educational or governmental systems. This issue will be discussed in later chapters.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Literacy and Agency**

Bartlett and Holland (2002) describe a “figured world of literacy” in which students are given positional identities based upon their interactions and expectations with and from other “actors” in the space of literacy instruction. These identities can be formed in several ways, and for my students who identified as “non-readers”, this positioning is likely derived from cultural attitudes toward reading and early education in their L1 (in which formal literacy instruction was minimal and extensive reading was not prevalent), the actors and practices in the literacy curriculum which position them as English Language Learners and SIFE when they enter the United States as refugees, and possibly family and friends who are their role models for literacy in their community.

At the same time that individuals develop positional identities within figured worlds, they also have opportunities to respond to these identities by “authoring the self” (Cain, 1998) via mediating artifacts. In this way they can create personal identities for themselves within the figured worlds, which can eventually lead to a re-positioning of the self as an actor in that world. Books are mediating artifacts in the figured world of literacy in that they represent the activity of reading and writing, preserving the cultural “history” of the figured world of literacy, and thus students use them as entryways into becoming readers, and positioning themselves as readers. Categories of books alone can position youth as “easy readers”, readers of “chapter books”, etc. Students who read Shakespeare, Henry James or Marcel Proust can claim a certain level of cultural capital for having read challenging texts.

Certain books like *Moby Dick*, *100 Years of Solitude*, or *A Tale of Two Cities* would be visible on lists of those considered “well-read”. However, these same artifacts can offer “possibilities for becoming” (Urrieta, 2007). Margin writing may provide students who identify as non-readers with opportunities to “become” readers. As responders, they are primarily responsible for authoring the text between the text and the reader, and concurrently they are authoring their own stories of reading.

Figured worlds proponents argue that the field of the figured world is constructed much like a story, play, or “narrative” (Urrieta, 2007) of that world, in which people are assigned roles and have “life paths” (Cain, 1998) through the world. An example of a life path of a reader in the figured world of literacy in the United States might include these examples of interactions with mediating artifacts:

- early childhood interactions with board books and cloth books
- being read to as a young child by a parent or guardian
- preschool interactions with “big books”
- early step-level readers
- picture books, early non-fiction books and reference books
- chapter books and more advanced non-fiction, articles and reference materials such as textbooks
- full-length novels and more advanced non-fiction books and research materials

...not to mention the variety of environmental text and new literacy texts provided by e-books, internet texts, social media, etc. Students are positioned via their interactions with these and other artifacts and actors in the figured world of literacy (teachers, peers, assessments) as “good readers”, “illiterates”, “struggling readers” or a myriad of other

positions (Bartlett & Holland, 2002). Emergent bilinguals from countries with limited formal literacy education entering the United States in the middle of their literacy education “narrative” are positioned as out of step with the literacy path, and must find ways to adapt, catch up, or re-position themselves.

Even though emergent bilinguals may come to the figured world of literacy in the middle of a play already in progress, they bring with them a rich history of experience from their cultural backgrounds. These experiences, however incongruous with the expected practices of the figured world of literacy, must nonetheless be integrated into the meaning-making of the text in front of them. Immigrant children bring with them cultural “funds of knowledge”, experiences and competencies that they will use in their transactions with text (Amanti, 2005). Schema theory (Anderson & Pearson, 1982) posits that students must use their existing knowledge of the world to comprehend what they read. Readers combine what they already know with the information provided by the text in front of them to create a “single schema or message” (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Teachers of emergent bilinguals can use this theory to provide their students with background knowledge in an effort to create a schema before learning new material. Stott (2011) argues, however, that this artificial creation of schema may not be as beneficial as extensive reading of texts, because the repeated act of reading will create a more natural schema for interactions with texts, eventually allowing comprehension to occur organically. When students position themselves as readers, they are forming a schema that is formed not simply by facts and vocabulary, but by an intimate relationship with the text itself.

## 2.2 Reader Response Theory and Emergent Bilinguals

Reading response theory asserts that each reader brings his or her background knowledge and “schemas” to text to help create a world of meaning. What is important is not the text itself, but what is created between the reader and the text (Iser, 1978). In his investigations of margin writing throughout history, Jackson (2001) found that this dynamic is not only naturally occurring, but has been so for thousands of years, and is essential for the reading activity to occur:

What that principle entails, as generations of critics have now demonstrated, is an acknowledgement that learning to read and write involves a whole lot more than mastery of the alphabet; it is an initiation into a set of shared codes of communication. Readers are obliged to recognize and negotiate their way around the conventions of writing, just as writers are obliged to work within the structure of conventions that their readers understand. Although levels of proficiency vary, the basics are indispensable to all readers trained under the same system: they could be scarcely said to be making sense of a text otherwise, let alone talking to one another about it. (p. 257)

In other words, we have to muck our way through texts, using a basic understanding of “shared codes” as our guide. Key to this statement is the phrase “making sense”, which posits that the reader is indeed creating *something* from the text, and this something clearly involves the senses, which are our doorways to comprehension. Hirvela (1996) takes this idea a step further regarding emergent bilinguals, stating that *reader* response should be differentiated from *personal* response to literature, in that the reader is telling the “story” of their own reading. Thus, the focus is on the transactional experience: “That is, the reader’s interpretation of the text describes not the text itself, but how the reader re-created it while reading it. It is, then, the reader and his or her reading process that we encounter when an interpretation of a text is supplied” (129). Hirvela says this requires a focus on the learner as “reader”, which could potentially point to a way for self-described “non-readers” to



reposition themselves in the figured world of literacy. The margin writing in which the students respond could represent the transaction between the reader and the text, and tell the story of reading for each individual.

The research question presented here assumes that when readers are left alone with texts and allowed to respond to them, that this affords the reader the opportunity to exhibit a capacity to interact with that text in a meaningful way specific to that individual. Typically, manuals on ESL instruction emphasize the importance of reading “comprehension” (Lems, 2010; Xu, 2014) rather than reader response, indicating that the text is a puzzle with a single solution to be unlocked. There are studies that eschew this passive reader-text relationship in favor of a more active engagement. Davis (1989) illustrates metacognitive monitoring by asking readers to self-question as they read foreign-language texts. This study, though it engages students more actively, still focuses on the students deriving the already existing meaning of the text, rather than co-creating it. Elliott (1990) took this a step further, showing with his study integrating language, literature and drama, how students can use reader response to help them become not just comprehenders, but adept consumers and producers of text. “Students need to feel involved in the language subjectively, in a similar way to a native speaker. They need to develop a feeling for the language as something living which they are able to use, if they wish, to express their own thoughts and feelings” (197). However, this theory views the reading response as a means to a linguistic end, with English language development the key goal of the activity. Though this is an important element, to be sure, in the instruction of emergent bilinguals, it should not swallow or overshadow the development of the readers themselves, nor their ability to interact with the text apart from linguistic goals. How something is being said or written suddenly becomes more important than the

experience and thought behind it. When language development consistently takes a front seat to thought, then the students are always “working on” this more technical aspect of themselves, seeking to fix, rather than to create, themselves. Hirvela (1996) discusses how literature has been used as a means to an end in English Language Instruction, pointing to instructional textbooks that claim that they include literature as a resource for “stimulating language activities” (128). He advocates for teacher-created reading response questions that activate the readers’ thinking about their reactions to the text, and how they interpret it, as opposed to standardized questions asking about author’s intentions. He also supports Rosenblatt’s (1994) ideas about transactional approaches to reading response, which state that the “evoked work” created between the reader and the text supercedes the text itself, and argues this is the best way to use literature in English language teaching. Though this more closely approaches the tenets of my research question in that it assumes that the reader’s immediate experience is important outside of linguistic aims, its focus is still on questions that the teacher provides the students outside of the reading experience, before or after, and does not look at what is happening during the act of reading itself. “Think alouds” are a strategy supported in ESL manuals (Lems, 2010; Xu, 2010), which is encouraged during the act of reading, but again, this strategy is asking readers to monitor their comprehension of the text’s content and author’s intentions, rather than their own literacy experiences.

What I seek to do is look to the authoritative text of the reader—the shorthand diary entries of the student sojourner in the co-created world of the book, to try to get a sense of the reader’s immediate transactional experience with the text.

## 2.3 Margin Writing

Though there is little research on margin writing in general, and even less in the field of education and how marginalia pertains to literacy, what has been published is primarily investigatory work into the minds of readers from long ago (Jackson, 2001; Orgel, 2015). Historical researchers and biographers are sleuths hunting for clues about their subjects' literary subjectivities. For example, though in libraries, annotations in publicly shared volumes are considered acts of vandalism, the discovery of an annotated copy of a book in the library of Thomas Jefferson is akin to finding a rare treasure providing a new insight into the mind of a genius (Scrimgeour, 2014). These books become goldmines of reader-responder insight, and sometimes simply goldmines when copies of books annotated by well-known individuals fetch high prices at auctions (Scrimgeour, 2014). Rarely, an annotated book can be a record of a community, as in the case of the Robben Island Shakespeare volume in which prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, marked and signed their names beside inspirational passages (Jackson, 2001).

Orgel (2015) claims that through the years, the reader-responder has breathed life into books through marginalia:

And marginalia are commonplace because even in the hands of a reader the book never adequately expressed itself, always needing something more that could only be supplied by the reader—commentary, explanation, something to help us remember it, or even simply something to make it ours, something to make it not absolutely dead. (p. 8)

He goes on to state that marginalia is at its richest when the reader is not just doodling, but participating in a dialogue with the book, “glossing, correcting, reminding, emphasizing, arguing” so as to form “an active and sometimes adversarial engagement with the text” (p. 24). It is this engagement I also seek in the margins, a “talking back” to

the author, narrator, characters, or even the overall theme of the story, a record of the “naturally occurring transaction between text and reader” (Jackson, 2001, p. 242).

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Participants**

The participants are six then-eighth, now-ninth grade intermediate emergent bilingual students with 2014-2015 WIDA ACCESS Academic English Literacy Proficiency scores ranging from 2.9-3.8, or “Developing” (on a 1-6 point scale). English proficiency is considered attained when the student receives a score of 5 or higher. There are two girls and four boys in the study. All students had been participants in the researcher’s sheltered Language Arts classes for 2-3 years. The novels being analyzed represent the first time the students had been asked to respond to books in the margins. The books were provided as part of the Language Arts class or, in the case of one student, as an enrichment supplement to reading outside of class.

All students arrived in the United States between 2nd and 6th grade (intermediate elementary-middle school) and are considered Generation 1.5 refugee students. All students arrived from refugee camps along the Thailand/Myanmar border, and had very little schooling in English prior to arrival. Upon arrival, their English reading levels were more than two grades below grade level. Thus, they would also be considered to be SIFE.

#### **3.1a Karen Language, Culture and Literacy Practices**

As stated in the introduction to *The Karen People: culture, faith and history* (Moonieinda, 2011), there is no single way to define Karen culture: “Among the Karen people there are different languages, different cultures, different religions, and different political groups. No one can claim to speak on behalf of all Karen people, or represent all

Karen people” (p. 1.) Karen comprise an ethnic subgroup from Southeast Asia, and within this group are several subgroups with differing languages, customs and religious practices. Karen make up the majority of refugees living in camps along the Thai-Burma border, exiled from their homes and villages in Burma where they were being oppressed, tortured and murdered by the Burmese military regime (Karen Culture and Social Support Foundation Inc., n.d.).

Buddhism, Animism and Christianity are the major religions of Karen, with Christianity being introduced by missionaries. The Karen families I have met have a mix of Christian and Buddhist/Animist religious traditions, while some have converted fully to Christianity, and some refusing to convert. I have also had students who served as Buddhist monks in their villages, donning saffron robes, meditating, and carrying alms bowls (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, 2011).

The two main Karen languages are Skaw Karen and Pwo Karen. All of my students speak Skaw Karen primarily, but several have relatives that speak Pwo Karen. They all are able to recognize Burmese, Skaw Karen, Pwo Karen and Thai when spoken, and most of them know at least a few phrases from each of the other languages. Skaw Karen is the language used to teach reading and writing in the refugee camp schools. Skaw Karen is the most common Karen language, and has a written alphabet developed by Baptist missionaries from Burmese script. (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, 2011). A layman holding Burmese writing next to Skaw Karen writing may think they appear very similar, with many circles, semicircles and dots. It is interesting to note that the current Karen script was formed from Burmese script—the written language of the land the Karen were forced to flee to escape persecution and genocide—and also that this script was formed by

missionaries who sought to convert the originally Buddhist and Animist Karen to Christians. One of my students says that there was once a pictographic written language for Karen, but much more difficult to learn, and likely disposed of when Christian missionaries took control of education away from the Buddhist monks. Thus, the Karen people have faced displacement in their homeland, religion and even written language.

Most of my students did not use any Karen writing in their annotations, though they were free to do so. When asked, about half of them (the ones who had come to the United States most recently) answered that they did most of their “thinking” about the book in Karen, but responded in English. Two students said there weren’t the right words for what they wanted to say in Karen, that they thought the Karen language wasn’t “deep” enough for it. Others really wanted to write their thoughts in Karen, but had not received enough instruction in Karen reading and writing to do so. One student who had attended American schools since Kindergarten said he used only English throughout, even when thinking about the book, because that was the first academic language he had learned.

Education is of high importance in Karen culture. Kindergarten lasts for two years and children start school as early as five, but some may not start until 10 years old (Neiman, Soh & Sutan, 2008). Teaching used to be primarily the duty of Buddhist monks, but with the introduction of Christian missionaries 150 years ago, this practice has changed hands (Karen Culture and Social Support Foundation Inc., n.d.). Though schools in the refugee camps on the Thai/Burma border teach both basic Skaw Karen and English, due to the tumult of war, education can be limited and interrupted, and teacher training and retention is a problem (Harper, 2016). One student, coming from a refugee camp farther from the border,

remembered his educational experience as more stable than those closer to the border. The teaching practices in refugee camp schools have historically been teacher-centered and based on rote learning, though this is changing (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, 2011).

In his study of Karen people, Marshall (1922) insisted that though an early written language was not apparent, the Karen were not “without a literature”, referring to the tradition of oral storytelling passed down through generations, “taught by certain elders to the youths . . . in order that they might transmit it in turn without change to those coming after them” (p. 34). He states that most of these stories were tales, legends and myths, as well as short sayings of “wise instruction” in the form of proverbs or riddles. Recollections of these oral literacy practices emerge later in this study in the focus group findings.

### **3.2 Data Set 1: Margin Writing in Class-assigned/Enrichment Texts**

The data consists of 18 texts containing margin writing from six different students. The margin writing for the first three titles (*A Step from Heaven*, *Of Beetles and Angels*, *Speak*) was done as part of homework for an 8th grade sheltered ESL language arts class. The students were asked to complete the reading and responding at home, and then come into class ready to lead and/or participate in discussions based on the previous night’s reading. One student, Thoo Wah, was not in the class the entire year, but was provided supplemental enrichment texts to differentiate for his reading interests. He also participated in the same reading response margin writing and post-reading discussion format (with the teacher and sometimes other students) for these texts. All texts were read between November 2015 and August 2015.



**Table 1: Students and Text Titles**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Book Titles</b>	<b>Total Books</b>
Ter Kwe Paw	<i>A Step from Heaven</i> <i>Speak</i>	2
Hsa Mu Htaw	<i>A Step from Heaven</i> <i>Of Beetles and Angels</i> <i>Speak</i>	3
Htee Khu	<i>A Step from Heaven</i> <i>Of Beetles and Angels</i> <i>Speak</i>	3
Lah Bwe	<i>A Step from Heaven</i> <i>Of Beetles and Angels</i> <i>Speak</i>	3
Poh Let	<i>A Step from Heaven</i> <i>Of Beetles and Angels</i> <i>Speak</i>	3
Thoo Wah	<i>A Step from Heaven</i> <i>Speak</i> <i>The Wave</i> <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	4

**18**

I then analyzed each text looking at the margin writing for common themes. Each entry was categorized into one of six groups, according to discovery. The annotations were then put into a chart showing the patterns of thought for each individual, and an overall picture was developed of the annotating experience for each. I looked for patterns across individuals, but the distinctions between students' responses became more important. The number of annotations was also counted and recorded.

### 3.3 Data Set 2: Focus Group Interview Transcripts

When meeting with the students to conduct interviews, the goal of data collection was to ask students about their literacy experiences, including:

- a) Their memories of their experiences reading and annotating the books
- b) Their memories of their literacy learning experiences, past and present, including
  - a. Earliest experiences with literacy
  - b. Refugee camp literacy instruction
  - c. Past experiences with literacy instruction in the US, including 8<sup>th</sup> grade
  - d. Current experiences with literacy instruction one year later, in high school

From the interviews, I hoped to get a better picture of the arc of the students' literacy self-perceptions—how they view their overall story of reading. Also, I hoped to get a sense of how they feel they are perceived as readers in the literacy classroom. Finally, how does margin writing add to that picture?

The students were recruited via email and face-to-face interaction, and all agreed to participate in the focus group interview. The students met with me in the same classroom where we held the sheltered ELA class in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. We were seated around a cluster of tables pushed together to form a larger table. There was food available, so we all snacked for a little bit and talked casually. Each student had his/her stack of books on the table in front of him/her. The recording device was placed in the center of the table where all students could see it. The interview was audio-recorded, and afterward, transcripts typed up for analysis. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the identities of the

participants. Also, any other identifying information has been omitted or changed. The focus group interview took place before the text analysis was performed.

### **3.4 Member Checks**

After the text analysis, I contacted each student to arrange a time to meet with them and share their individual results. If the students had anything they wanted to add to their analysis, I included their statements in that section of the paper.

### **3.5 Limitations to the Study**

There is an understandable concern that the teacher conducting the research would also be the one who conducted the class and provided the students with the text. There might be questions about the reliability of the truth of the students' answers, that they might be less likely to answer honestly in my presence as opposed to a disinterested third party. It is true that I have built strong relationships with my students over the past four years, but I argue that it is because of that relationship that I am more likely to get an honest response than a stranger might. In fact, when our school conducted a focus group of exiting 8<sup>th</sup> graders asking about their overall middle school experience, I was asked to remain in the room with my emergent bilingual students so that they felt comfortable and were *more* likely to give honest responses, or feel comfortable giving responses at all. It is not uncommon for emergent bilinguals to be shy speaking in English or perhaps be overly polite around those they don't know well, and my experience teaching Karen students has shown me that they are more likely to be relaxed around adults they know well, letting the veil of respect slip and speaking frankly. I feel quite certain that the students provided honest responses to the interviews, and that my presence as interviewer was the optimal way to get such responses. The interview was structured for the students to talk about their experiences in their current

classes, with their prior literacy instruction and with the texts themselves, and not to rate my performance as a teacher in class.

## CHAPTER 4: TEXT ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Overview

When looking over marginalia, it is natural to want to sort them into categories, asking, “What was the reader thinking here?” Like I did with my own copy of *The Secret Sharer*, we may peer into the books from our past and look for commonalities and patterns among the scribbles, a story of our own journey as a reader, the ways we left our marks on the adventures. Billy Collins, in his poem titled “*Marginalia*” (1996) writes:

*We have all seized the white perimeter as our own  
and reached for a pen if only to show  
we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages;  
we pressed a thought into the wayside,  
planted an impression along the verge.*

Jackson categorizes marginalia in categories defined by length: ownership marks (names and/or initials), signs of attention (underlining, brackets, highlighting), brief words or phrases (short comments like “don’t agree” or “good idea”), long notes (running along the space of the margins and sometimes to other pages, or at the ends of chapters) and indices (lists of page numbers to help the reader return to parts of the text) (2001). To Jackson, length is an indicator of depth of engagement. He asserts that there is an “obvious correlation between the level of interest and absorption in the reader and the length of the reader’s notes” (p. 30). On the other hand, he also states that the number of annotations in a book may also be “an indicator of the degree of the . . . reader’s interest” (p. 38). Though my own analysis does not factor in the relative length of each annotation, it does recognize the amount of annotation. This is because the amount of annotation, prolific in all of my students, was to

me an indicator of their interest and engagement in the text, as well as a *means* by which they remained engaged in the text.

What I was looking for, primarily, in the margin writing of the students, was the nature of the students' intentionality. In what ways, and for what, were they reaching in the text? This kind of analysis cannot be done without also asking from what subjectivities were they reaching? This last part is a little trickier, in that at any given moment, we may react to situations from myriad subjectivities, or even a combination of such. However, since my students, prior to my reading their texts, claimed that their feelings and opinions were the things that they wished were more "valued" in the classroom, Bleich's spectrum of emotional response to text helped to frame my approach (1975). He describes the basic components of emotional response as being either "affect" or "association", in which the former involves one's basic gut reaction to the text, and the latter involves forming analogous relationships between what is being read and either an imagined experience (metaphor) or an actual lived experience (memory). However, there is a flow between the "affect's" base reaction and the "association's" identification--one precedes the other. To me, both indicate an engaged intentionality at work, because in order to experience this spectrum at any range indicates a reach toward the experience of feeling.

Jackson asserts that the study of marginalia in books raises questions that must be "addressed case by case, with as much knowledge of the historical and personal context as we can muster" (2001, p. 43). Each text and its marginalia is a record of a highly personalized reading experience born of the dialogue between text and reader at a specific time. Though there is not enough room here for me to analyze each individual copy of text in its entirety, I have elected to look at each student's text set as an object of study. In this

way is the analysis done “case by case”. The focus group data is an attempt for me to gain as much knowledge as I can “muster” from the “historical and personal context” of the readers. My hope is that together, these snapshots will paint pictures of the individual readers in their approach and their experience with the text.

## 4.2 Analysis of Themes

The data consists of the margin writing produced by six eighth-grade participants in a sheltered Language Arts class. One student, Thoo Wah, did not participate in the class, because he was moved to a standard Language Arts class after 7<sup>th</sup> grade. However, he read the books as an enrichment activity, and wrote in the margins as part of this assignment. What follows are the categories of annotations, as I saw them, in the texts. The first three categories represent the most prevalent annotations in the texts overall.

### 4.2a Feeling

*Sometimes the notes are ferocious,  
skirmishes against the author  
raging along the borders of every page  
in tiny black script.  
if I could just get my hands on you,  
Kierkegaard, or Conor Cruise O'Brien  
they seem to say,  
I would bolt the door and beat some logic into your head.* (Collins, 1996)

Students wrote in the margins evidence of their feelings about the text. I considered these statements to be ones of “affective involvement” (Bleich, 1975), in which the students’ basic emotions were evoked and represented on the page:

- Empathizing/identifying with characters (“me too”, “I feel you”)
- Words of emotion (sad, happy, relief...etc.)
- Emotional interjections (“ugh”, “ew”, “yay”, “wow”)
- “I” statements (“I would not want...”, “I want to...”)

- Sensory statements (“I see”, “feel”, “taste”)

#### 4.2b Responding

*Or, they are fans who cheer from the empty bleachers,  
hands cupped around their mouths.  
'absolutely,' they shout  
to Duns Scotus, and James Baldwin.  
'Yes.' 'Bull's-eye.' 'My man!'  
check marks, asterisks, and exclamation points  
rain down along the sidelines. (Collins, 1996)*

In these statements, the students are active participants, talking back to the characters or author directly, or considering and offering ways to solve the problems presented in the text. These kinds of responses follow affective (emotional) responses as a matter of course, and most closely resemble what Bleich terms “associative” responses. To Bleich, this means that the responses reflect the reader’s “aggregate self-image, and the self-image at the time of reading” (p. 48, 1975). To me, this means that the reader has recognized herself as a participant in the text, essential for the dialogue to continue. Though this is a more active response than the purely affective one, the emotional response is the spark that lights the active pursuit present in these responses. I have sorted these responses into separate categories, but to me they are on a continuum, and are inextricably linked. When I look at the overall data for each student, I consider the Feelings/Response data as one entity.

Evidence included:

- Talking back to the text (often using 2nd person...”you”)
- Asking questions directly to the characters
- Answering questions directly posed by characters or narrator
- Judging the characters and/or narrator
- Theorizing, inserting one’s own philosophies to summarize situations or provide solutions



- Sharing ideas or solving problems in text

#### 4.2c Understanding

*Students are more modest  
needing to leave only their splayed footprints  
along the shore of the page.  
One scrawls 'Metaphor' next to a stanza of Eliot's.  
another notes the presence of 'Irony'  
fifty times outside the paragraphs of A Modest Proposal. (Collins, 1996)*

This category most resembles what one would expect to see a student do when asked to annotate a text for class. When annotating for Understanding, students use their learned terminology to identify literary devices, author's craft, etc. However, I've also included here their statements about their own comprehension monitoring in the text, such as "I'm confused," or "I don't know what is going on." These statements act as supports to keep them in the text so they can make it to the next station of clarity or identification.

These pieces of evidence, though they may seem to be smaller, more surface-level responses, are no less products of a students' subjectivity. Bleich (1975) calls the retelling of a piece of writing a "subjective perception" of the text, and that the "simple act of reading produces a subjective change in the text" (p. 21).

Pieces of evidence included:

- Statements of confusion
- Identification of literary devices (simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia)
- Paraphrasing
- Guessing about what is happening
- Defining unfamiliar terms
- Asking questions about the text

- Author's purpose statements
- Author's craft statements
- Inferring

#### **4.2d Connecting**

In this category, I placed statements in which the readers connected events or characters in the books to other books, movies, TV shows or people that they know. I did not count their own personal experiences here, as I counted those kinds of connections as statements of empathy, and since empathy is an aspect of emotional response, I placed them in the “feelings” category. Pieces of evidence in the Connecting category included “Reminds me of” statements about other texts, media, people, and events.

#### **4.2e Predicting**

This category includes instances where the student makes guesses about the outcome of events in the story. These do not include inferences about character's motives or feelings, but are strictly limited to cause and effect relationships between actions in the plot. Though this could be arguably categorized with Understanding, I feel it is a separate skill, apart from comprehension monitoring and identifying literary elements. It involves looking into the future, from an almost scientific viewpoint, serving as its own way to stay engaged with the text. Pieces of evidence in this category include what the reader thinks will happen to the characters or in the story.

#### **4.2f Pictures**

*A few greasy looking smears  
and next to them, written in soft pencil-  
by a beautiful girl, I could tell,  
whom I would never meet-  
'pardon the egg salad stains, but I'm in love.'* (Collins, 1996)

This category contains any images drawn in the text. An image can be as simple as a smiley-face to an intricate drawing of a metaphorical analogy. These arguably could have been included in the category of Feeling, since the majority of them were drawn in response to the readers' emotional reactions, or in the Responding category, as a few were images in which the students were trying to carry their own ideas to completion, or even in Understanding, as some pictures were drawn to create representational images of what they perceived they were reading (visual paraphrasing). However, because they are distinct from the other responses in that they are outside of language, I gave them their own category.

### **4.3 Text Analyses**

Though the above description helps to provide an overall image of the kinds of annotations that the students provided across the board, what I found in their actual writing is a more in-depth depiction of their reading processes. In each text I see the students moving from a surface-level interaction to one in which they shake off the constraints of culture and classroom norms and expectations for literacy learning, and recreate themselves in new ways. If we accept Bleich's assertion that this is the most authentic way to interact with literature, then we must see that this shows the inherent capacity presumed by Ranciere (1991), that within the closed circle of text, they have all the tools they need to navigate it. Ranciere calls this "intelligence" (the capacity to derive personal meaning from the text) and "will" (the impetus to reach for the text). For Bleich, the will to reach for the text is driven by the emotional response. I believe that the emotional responses and associations these students made with the text show us how literate they already are, and their gifts to be spotlighted for further literacy instruction.

Grumet states that “Meaning is something we make out of what we find when we look at texts. It is not in the text” (1988, p. 143). To me, the reader of the marginalia, the text fades into the background when the students step up to the margins. Under their pens, new characters are added, storylines are reconfigured, and possibilities emerge—not just for the remaking of the reader, but for the text as well. It becomes “the text as performed by Thoo Wah” or “Lah Bwe”, etc. The sides are swimming with intentional activity.

As educators, we may fear this generation of new text, because we are instructed to help students to view the text in the “correct” way. But when we fall in line with a way of thinking that assumes and requires homogeneity of thought, we remove the life that exists between the reader and the text, and the text becomes nothing but a “dead sign” (Grumet, 1988, pg. 116). In the margins, the students are free and encouraged to step into the text and fashion a new one from their own intentionality and the material of the text. When asked about how he is able to respond when faced with an unfamiliar text, Thoo Wah said “When your experience is blank, you just fill it in with the experience in front of you”—thus, a new world born of his subjectivity and the text is generated between the lines.

Grumet says this is the sign of a truly active reader, using intentionality and subjectivity to shape the texts in front of him/her:

There are no sacred texts. Let the cursor unravel the binding of the text as readers erase what they do not believe, or add whatever it is that the author left out. Why not invite them to weave their questions, responses and arguments into the texts themselves and so acknowledge the wisdom of graffiti? (1988, p. 146)

Grumet goes on to say that the possible worlds that are created between the text and the reader are places for aesthetic, or artistic, experience. When we create something new that points to new images, ideas and experiences, we are creating art, we are making meaning, and there is no end to it: “...meaning never rests in the Word but in our ceaseless rumination

and resymbolizations” (Grumet, 1988, p. 149). What is depicted in the next pages are the students’ graffiti—their ruminations and resymbolizations of the text. They become “actors” of the text, reshaping it with their own subjectivities and taking an active role in its exploration and interpretation:

Constructed from their experience and dreams, this liminal space cannot be reduced to the specifications of either the author’s or the reader’s world. It is a space for negotiation. It is the middle place of curriculum. Theater places action in this middle time and space. Literally, the action takes place....Performance simultaneously confirms and undermines the text. (1988, p. 149)

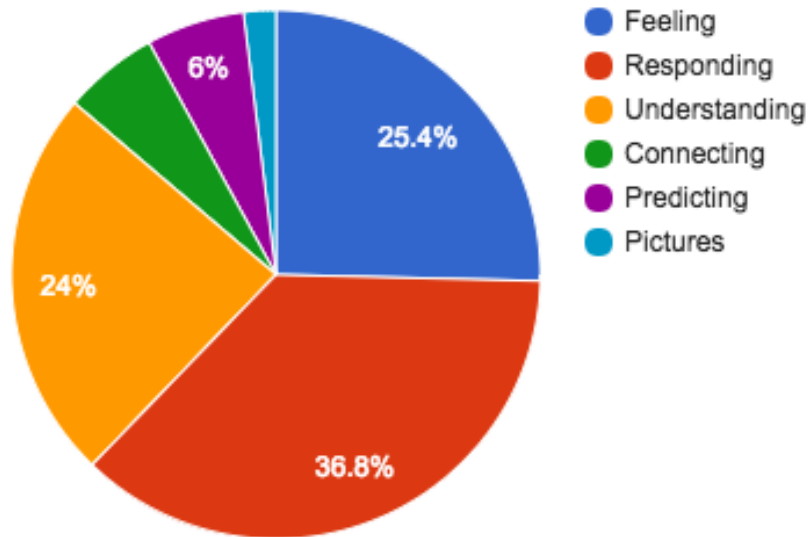
A script provides a multitude of “blank spaces” for each actor to fill in with his/her own experiences, interpretations and emotional responses. A new text is thus created, which is why we will go see different performances of *King Lear*. In a similar way, these texts act as scripts for the students to perform in the margins.

I selected and provided all of the texts for the students as part of their English Language Arts classes, with the exception of Thoo Wah, for whom I gave the texts as an enrichment activity. I chose the texts for different reasons. *Speak* (Anderson, 1999) was chosen because all eighth graders were required to read a text on bullying, and this was one of the options provided to the teachers. I had read *Speak* before, and found it inspiring, rife with imagery, and powerful. *A Step from Heaven* (An, 2001) was the first book we annotated in class, chosen for its sparse but poetic language and connection to the immigrant experience. Finally, we read a memoir/autobiography, a task required by the literacy curriculum standards. I chose *Of Beetles and Angels* (Asgedom, 2001), the story of a Sudanese refugee, because I imagined the students, also refugees, might be able to relate to the author’s feelings and experiences. My hope was that these selections, would ease them into the annotation process, and provide them with the textual fuel they needed to jump-start their responses. For

Thoo Wah, the texts *The Wave* (Strasser, 1981) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1884) were chosen to connect to topics he was learning or had recently learned about in Social Studies class--WWII and slavery—in hopes that his recent exposure might help provide a timely entrance into those texts. Drawing on the background knowledge and experiences of students is a technique used by ESL teachers (and really any teachers) who practice culturally relevant pedagogy, and this training impacted my choices at the time.

**Thoo Wah:** “*As a human, we need a mirror.*” (Ann., endcover in *The Wave*).

**Figure 1: Thoo Wah Text Analysis**

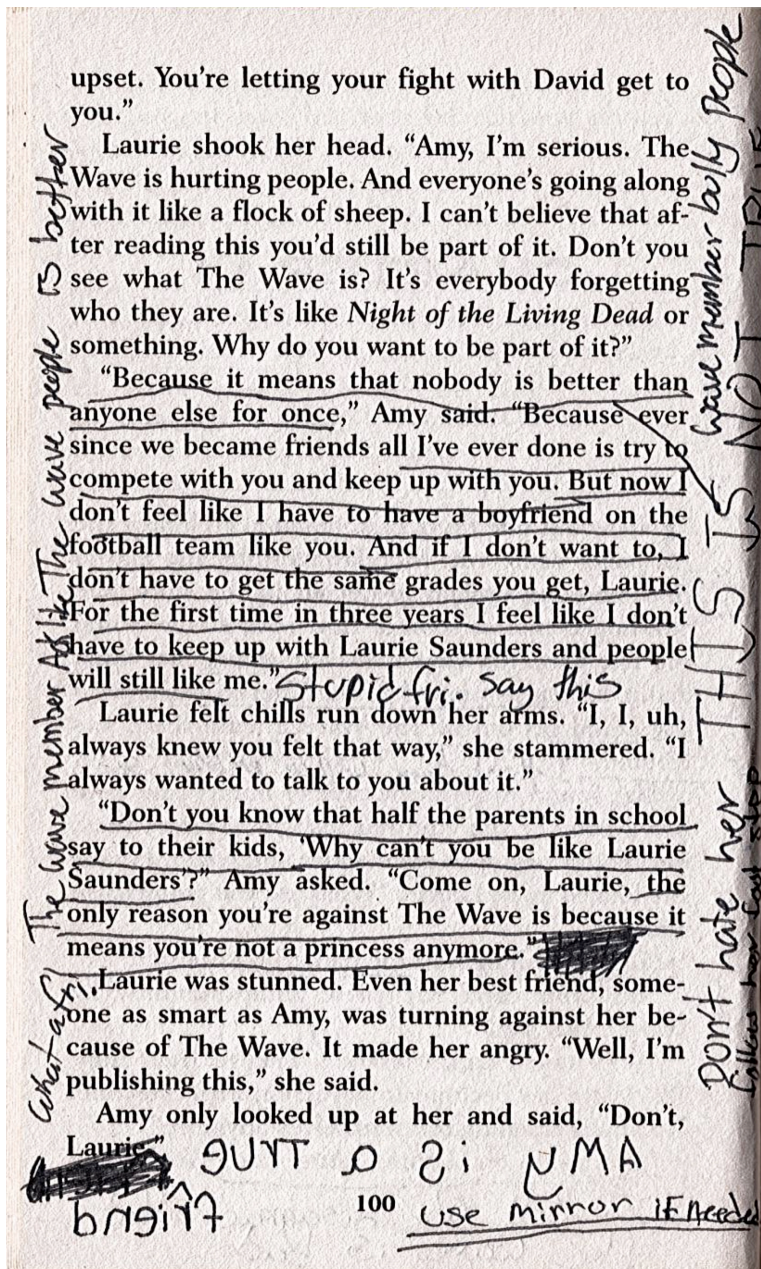


Thoo Wah is a prolific annotator. The total annotations over his four books are 2,032, averaging to 508 annotations per book. The average page length per book is 167 pages.

Though Thoo Wah is able to find literary devices, infer and discuss author’s craft, and does so when instructed, his annotations for Understanding are primarily paraphrasing and defining unknown terms. His relationship to the book, and his participation as counselor, sage and judge, is clearly more important to him than his overall comprehension of plot elements and vocabulary, since Feeling and Responding combined are more than twice the percentage of overall responses as Understanding.

Thoo Wah is a very “present” reader, emotionally responding to the situation in front of him, and participating loudly. He talks to the characters a lot, asking them questions, offering advice and admonishing them when they do things with which he disagrees.

**Figure 1.1: The Wave**



Thoo Wah almost never passes up an opportunity to answer a question that a character asks, as if he is in the room with the characters or in the characters' minds. In times of intensity, he will even step in and speak FOR characters. Figure 1.1 comes from the text, *The Wave*, in which a teacher facilitates a mob mentality exercise in his classroom to teach about the Nazi regime during WWII. In the text, friends turn against friends out of loyalty to the group.

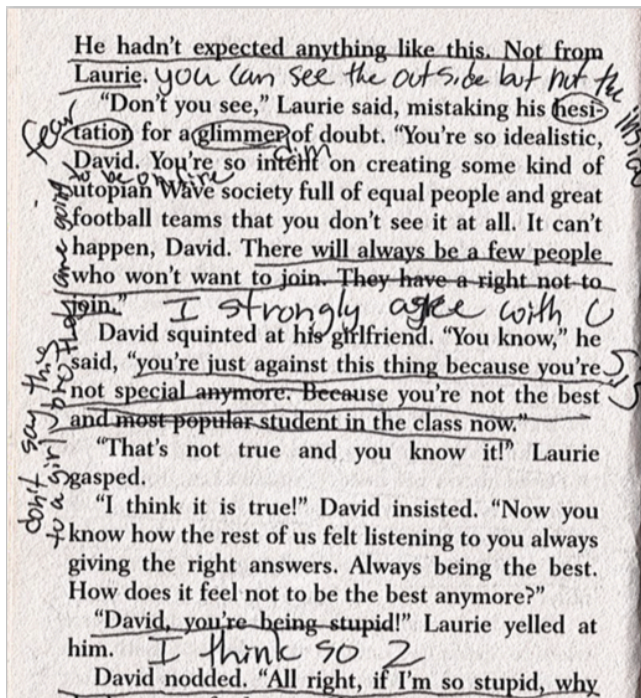
In his annotations, Thoo Wah responds loudly (in all

caps) to the statement made by one of the characters, and then proceeds to angrily judge the



kind of friend she is. He talks directly to the character at one point, “Don’t hate her, follow her footsteps.” Then he uses reverse writing to show how the character, Amy, is the antithesis of a friend. The page rings of judgment from top to bottom.

**Figure 1.2: The Wave**

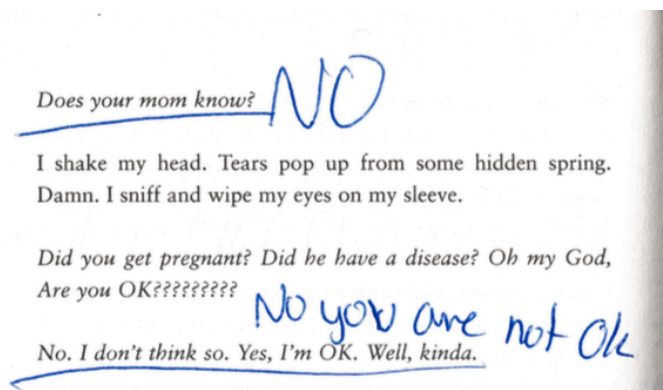


In Figure 1.2, Thoo Wah has stepped completely into the text and is talking directly to the characters in a very informal way, calling them “sis” and “bro,” appropriate since the characters are teenagers as well. He has settled in and made himself comfortable in the world.

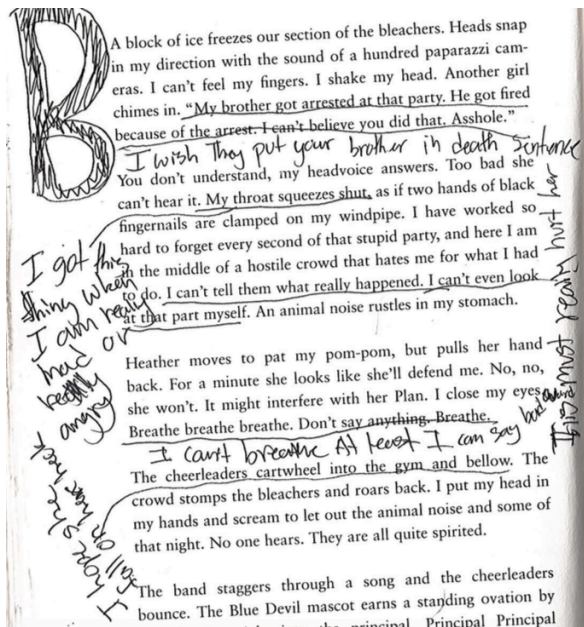
In Figure 1.3, during a point in the book *Speak* when the protagonist is

being questioned by her friend about being raped, Thoo Wah responds for and to the character at a time of heightened emotion, clearly frustrated with her unwillingness to speak up about the incident.

**Figure 1.3: Speak**



**Figure 1.4: Sneak**



Judging the characters' actions becomes a

big activity for Thoo Wah when he

reads. Characters are either morally black or

white for him, and he wants to categorize them

as either people to be loved or people to be

killed. His responses to characters that have

done things wrong is often a violent wish (as

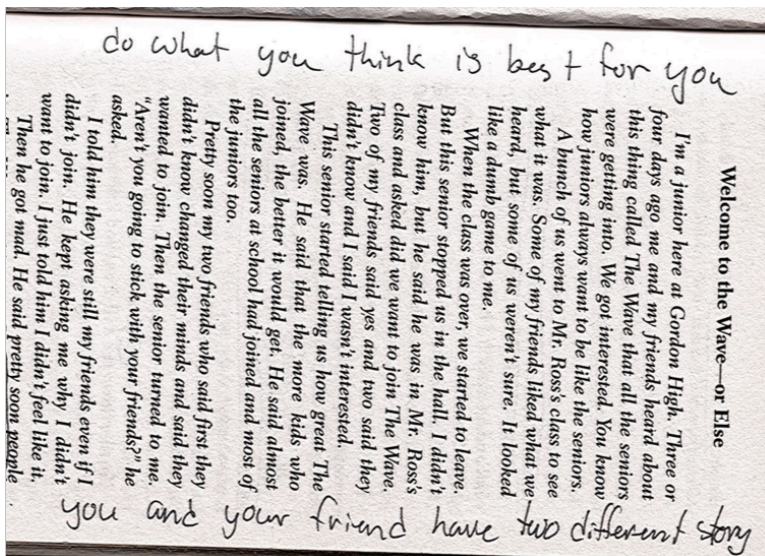
shown in Figure 1.4) while at the same time, he

deeply yearns for good fortune for the heroes

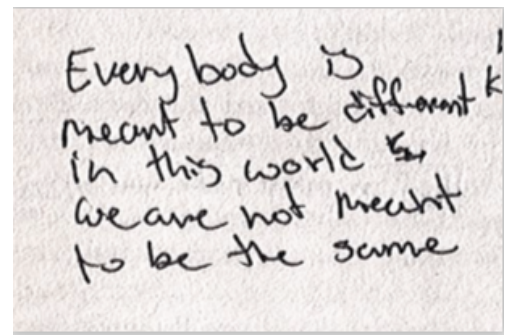
and underdogs in the story.

Thoo Wah also offers advice and wisdom to the characters, telling them what to do, and following his directions with a nugget of personal philosophy, as shown in Figures 1.5 and 1.6. In *The Wave*, he offers consolation to those characters who feel they must stand outside of the oppressive movement of the mob, encouraging them to stay strong.

**Figure 1.5: The Wave**

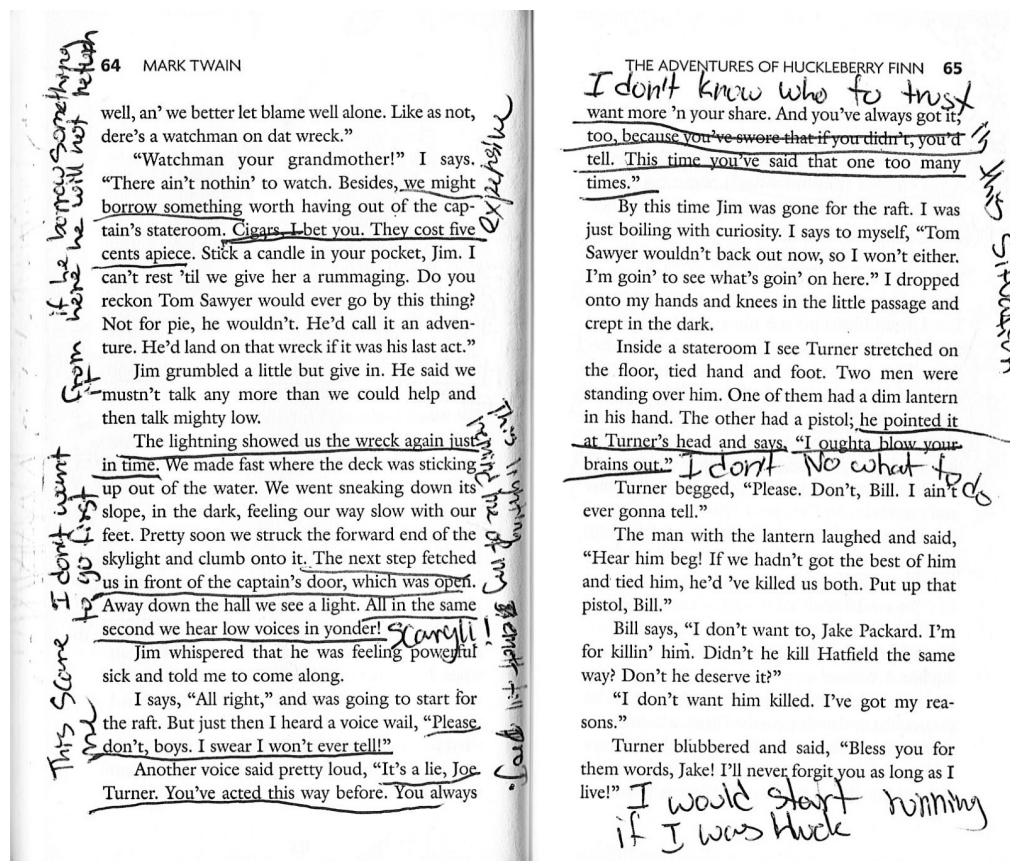


**Figure 1.6: The Wave**



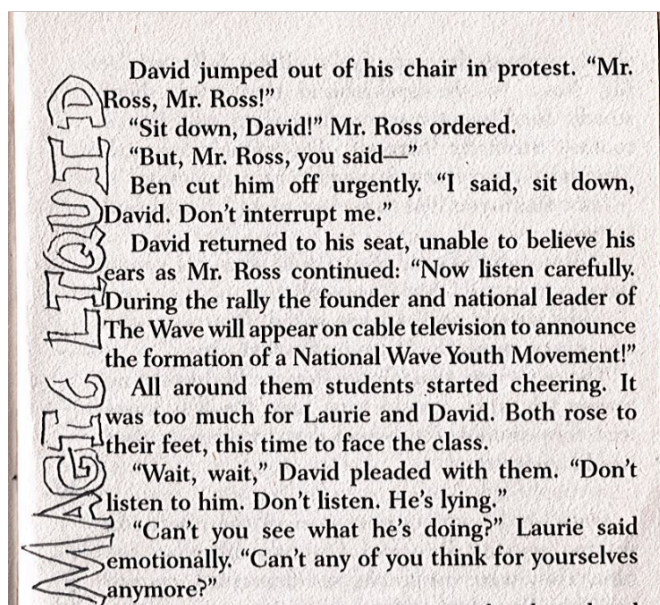
The environment of a novel affects Thoo Wah, and can make him scared or contented and push him to either reject or embrace the setting as if he were there. His attitude towards a book before reading is often formed by the kind of “journey” he predicts it will make him take. Also, he has said that he talks to a book like it is his friend. The book becomes a person in a conversation. In Figure 1.7, culled from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Thoo Wah responds as if he is in the perilous situation along with the Huck and Jim, facing immoral criminals, and he even expresses fear:

**Figure 1.7: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**





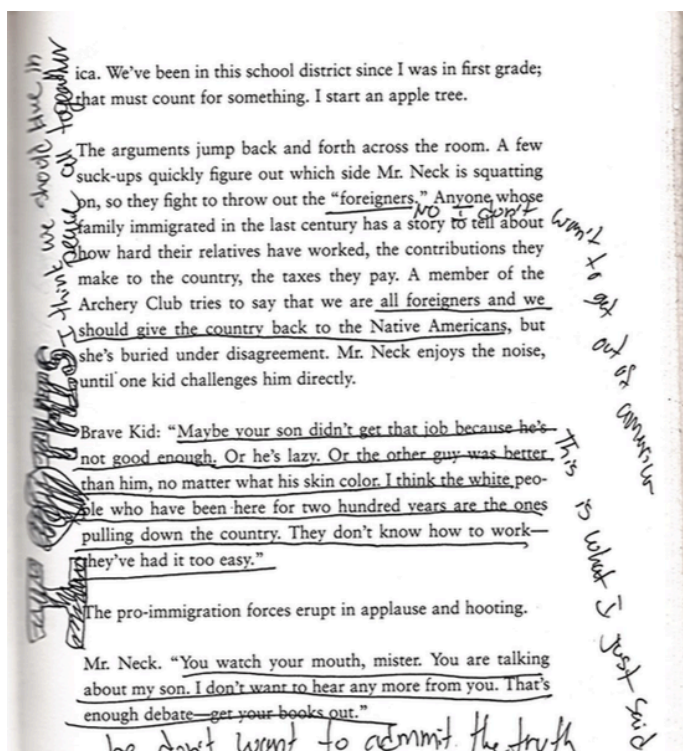
**Figure 1.8: The Wave**



In Figure 1.8, Thoo Wah relates the persuasive speaking tactics of the teacher to that of a legend that claims a magic liquid placed on the lips of a speaker could cause entire armies to succumb to his will. When asked from what culture this tale derived, he claimed that he didn't remember if it was Burmese or Thai or both. It was simply a story from his childhood. As observers

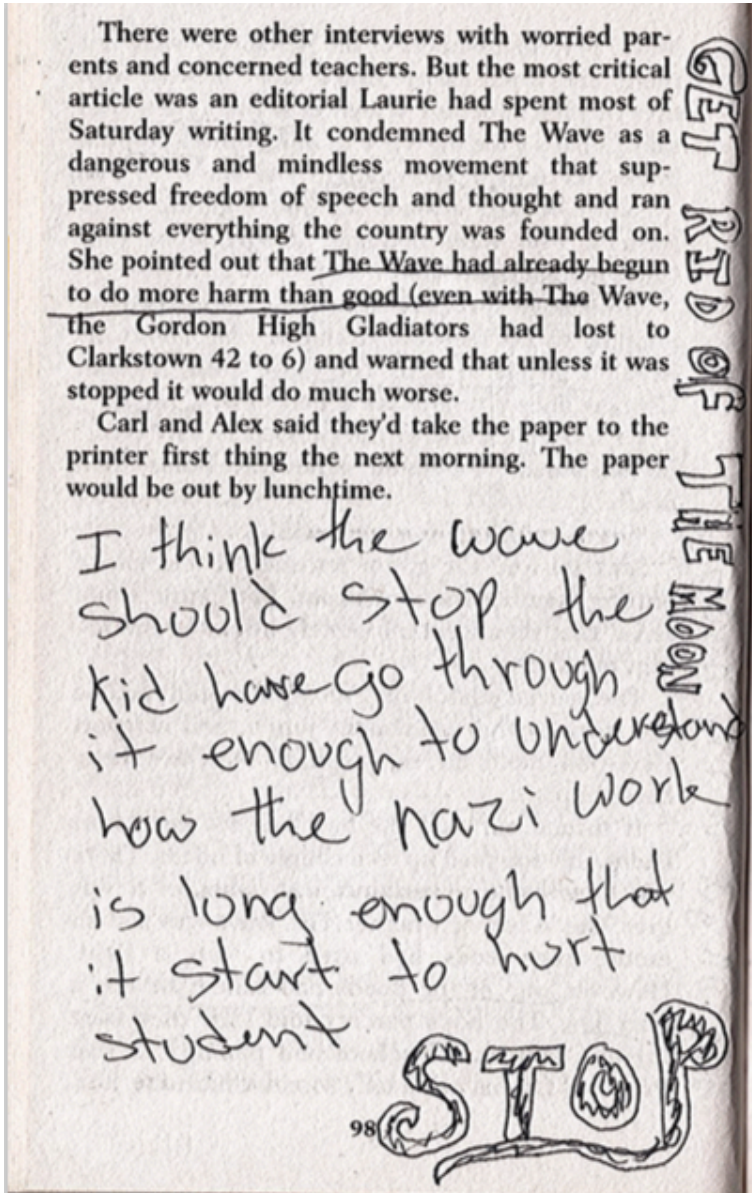
outside of his culture, we might be quick to attach a label to this story, but he is not. It is a tale from his experience growing up and hearing stories...an early literacy experience, but from his perspective not consciously culturally bound.

**Figure 1.9: Sneak**



In Figure 1.9, Thoo Wah takes personally the racist statements made by the teacher and students in *Sneak*, and also confirms a predictive statement he had made earlier in the argument. It is as if he is a student in the room with the characters, participating in the debate, pushing for peace.

Figure 1.10: The Wave



Thoo Wah is adept at creating metaphors for characters and situations. In the example presented in Figure 1.10, he depicts the influential teacher in *The Wave* as a “moon” pulling the “tide” of the students, which falls in line with the book title and name of the student group. He also does this visually in *Speak*, representing the overall mood of the text with a portrait and a simple phrase in block letters (Figure 1.11). In these examples, he has moved from responding as a character, to rewriting or amplifying the text of the author, engaging in the “resymbolization” mentioned by Grumet (1988, p. 149).

Figure 1.11: Speak

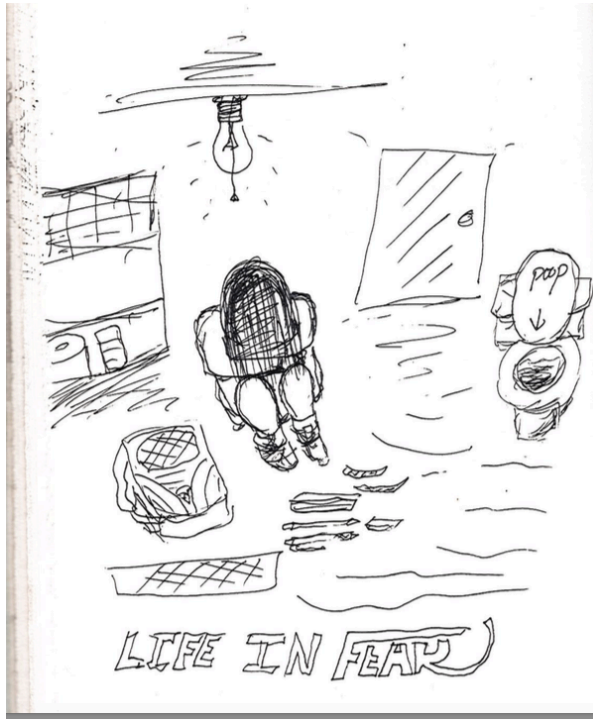
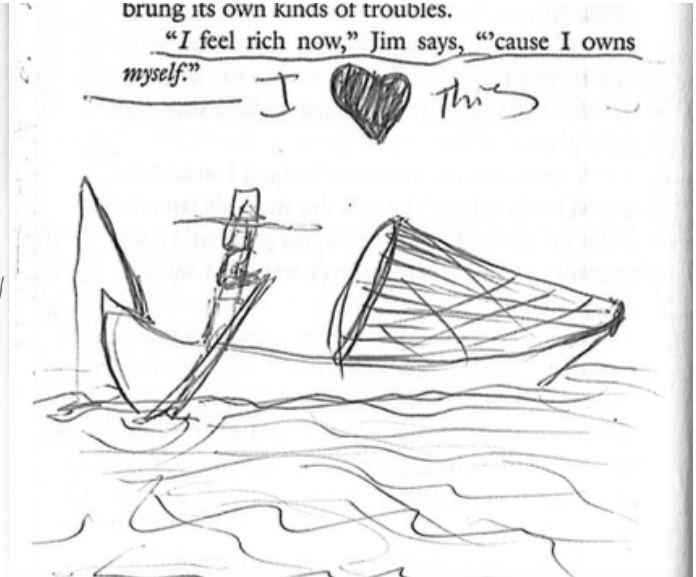


Figure 1.12: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

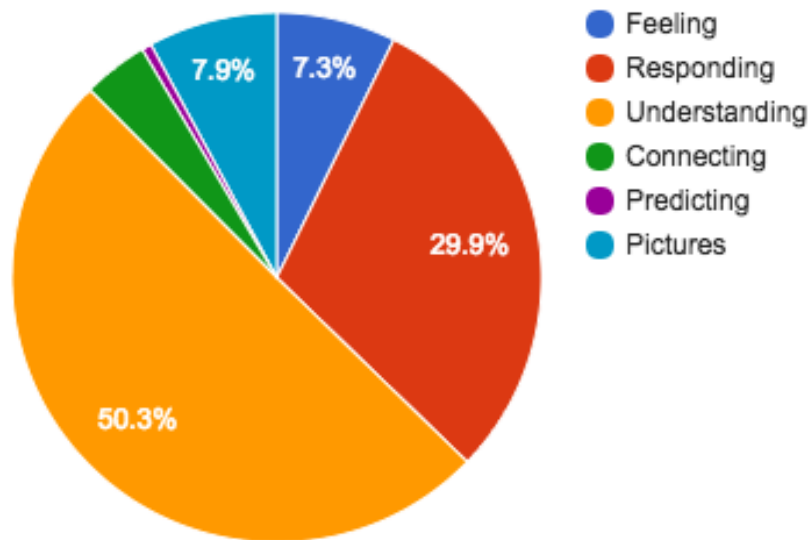


The above images are a beautiful example of Thoo Wah performing the text; he moves beyond words to put shape and line to the story. In Figure 1.12, it is as if the final line reached right in and grabbed his heart, and he felt not only the need to state his love clearly, but also to bring Jim right out into the light where we could see him, even in a rough sketch.



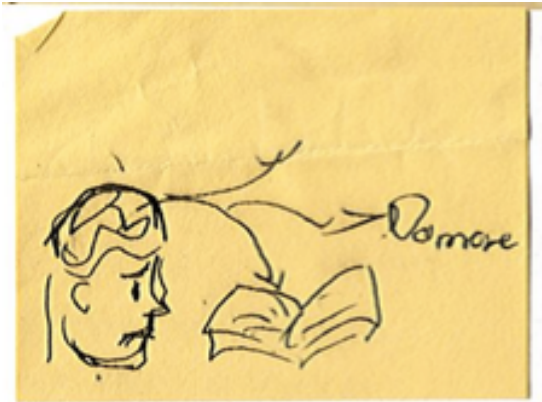
**Lah Bwe:** “Ask yourself, you are the one who sees the world different.” (Ann., p. 199 in *Speak*)

**Figure 2: Lah Bwe Text Analysis**



Lah Bwe is a sparse annotator, for the most part. His total annotations over three books number 1,002, with an average per book of 334. The average page length per book is 163 pages. This average, however, is misleading, as more than half of his total annotations took place in one book (543 in *Speak*), and mostly within the last half of it. He says this was due to the fact that I had expressed concerns over his not annotating much, and this pushed him to “explode” word-wise on the page. In his interview, he was the only one who said he disliked annotating, as evidenced by this sticky note annotation in Figure 2.1:

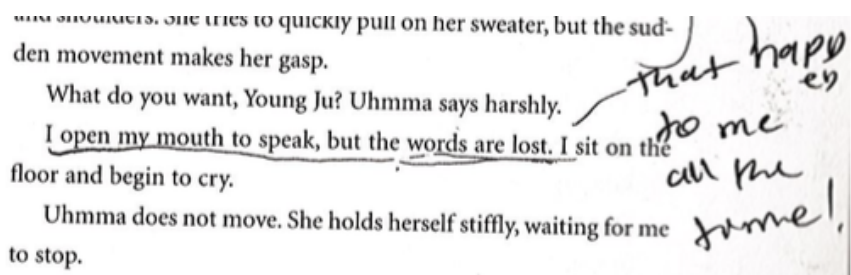
**Figure 2.1: A Step from Heaven**



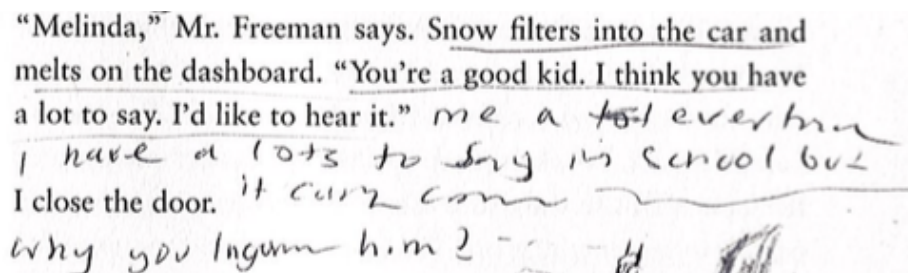
Lah Bwe was the quietest member of our class, and admitted that his shyness was one of his biggest obstacles. He rarely raised his hand in class, even though he said he wanted to. This frustration surfaced when he empathized with characters going through similar struggles, as

evidenced in Figures 2.2 and 2.3, admitting that he has “lots to say in school, but it can’t come.”

**Figure 2.2: A Step From Heaven**



**Figure 2.3: Speak**



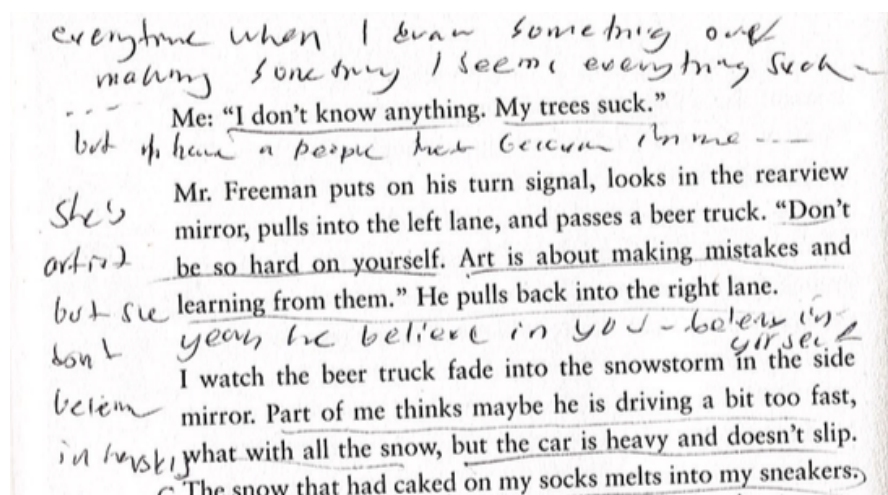
Though Lah Bwe was hesitant to annotate, his emotional response is still present. He uses the space and the textual situations to express his frustration with his reticence. The two protagonists in *A Step from Heaven* and *Speak* are overwhelmed by their respective situations, being pressed by authority figures to speak when they cannot find the words, and



Lah Bwe is able to empathize and respond. Even when thinking about his own situation, he is able to take a role in the text and ask characters direct questions, for example, asking Melinda in Figure 2.3 why she ignores her teacher. Though he understands her plight, he is able to step outside his own to try to change her actions.

Lah Bwe continues to empathize and identify with Melinda in the novel *Speak*, but is able to step outside his own emotions to become a counselor for her (Figure 2.4), telling her that “he (your teacher) believes in you—believe in yourself.”

**Figure 2.4: *Speak***



Lah Bwe resymbolizes his texts by bringing metaphors he identifies to life with visual representations. In fact, this is a major strength for Lah Bwe in his literacy skills. In Figure 2.5, he recognizes that the author is using the image of an unhatched egg to represent Melinda being trapped but having the potential for rebirth, and he supports his annotation with a egg beginning to hatch. He performs a similar resymbolization in Figure 2.6, using the visual representation of the rock in the ocean to modify the text and support his own understanding.

**Figure 2.5: Speak**

tables were lanes on Cupid's Highway. Ms. Keen draws a picture of an egg with a baby chick inside it.

ms. keen draws a metaphor of her

David Petrakis is fighting to stay awake. Does he like me? I make him nervous. He thinks I'm not like the other girls.

**Figure 2.6: Speak**

"stylish" clothes she likes. (Mother is the rock, I am the ocean.)

I have to pout and roll my eyes for hours until she finally wears down and crumbles into a thousand grains of beach sand. It takes a lot of energy. I don't think I have it in me.

Apparently, Mom isn't up to the drag 'n' whine mall gig either. When they announce I've earned new clothes, they add that I have to get them at Effert's, so Mom can use her discount. I'm supposed to take the bus after school and meet her at the store. In a way, I'm glad. Get in, buy, get out, like ripping off a Band-Aid.

metaphor

rock control the ocean

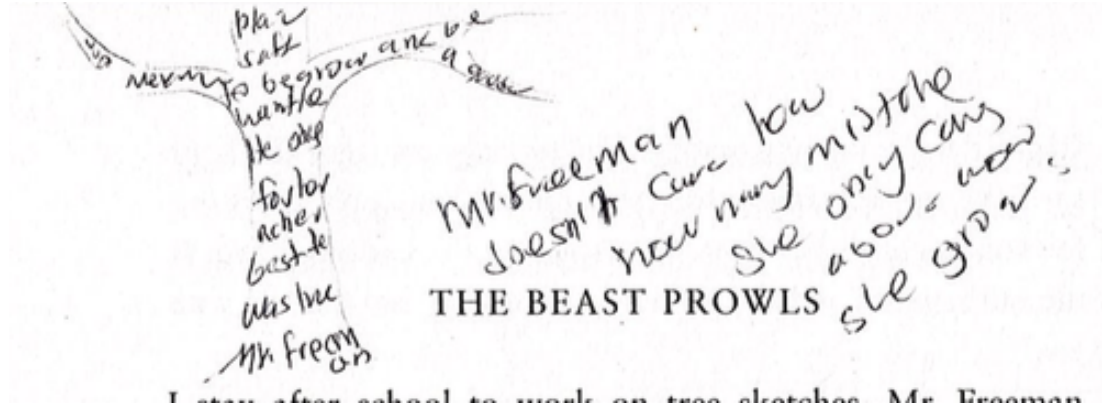
120

daughter

mother

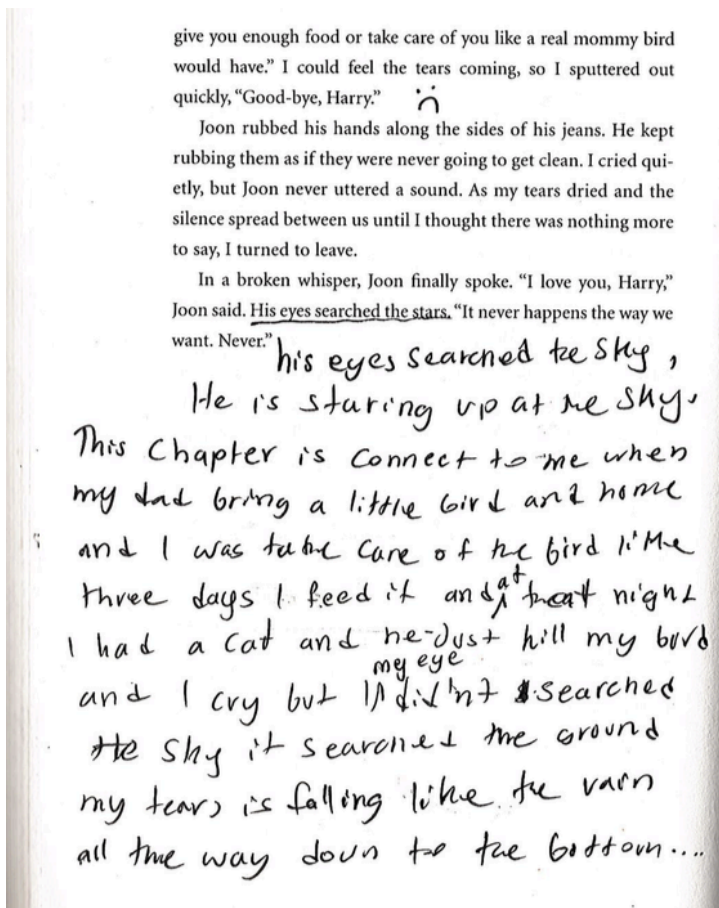
The majority of Lah Bwe's annotations are Understanding, meaning that he wrote a lot of comments about being confused, asked many questions, and paraphrased quite a bit. Also in this category, however, are literary devices; Lah Bwe was not only adept and prolific at identifying similes, metaphors, symbolism and personification in the novels, he often developed his own to represent the characters and their situations. Gallagher, in *Deeper Reading* (2004), states that this is an important tool for understanding text at its deepest level. In Figure 2.7, he plays on the extended metaphor of trees prevalent in the novel, *Speak*, placing it in the frame of a tree itself.

**Figure 2.7: Speak**



Lah Bwe will also utilize figurative language in his associative connections to the text, as evidenced in Figure 2.8, where he recounts a painful childhood memory evoked by the text. In the story, the protagonist and her brother try to rehabilitate an orphaned baby bird, but fail. The bird dies, and this reminds Lah Bwe of a similar situation from his childhood.

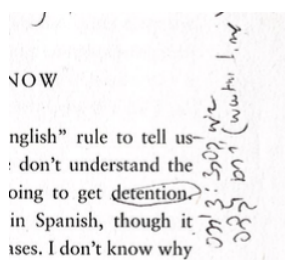
**Figure 2.8: A Step From Heaven**



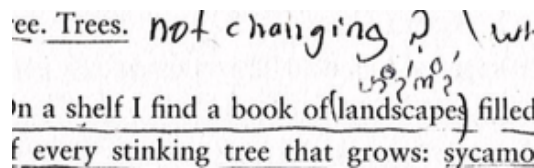
*A Step From Heaven* is a text rich with metaphor, one of which is an extended metaphor about waves and water. Lah Bwe builds on this metaphor in the book by adding his own, in which his tears are “falling like rain all the way down to the bottom,” his own metaphorical representation of a personal and similar experience becoming a rich and congruous extension of the story being told.

Lah Bwe, shy and reticent, is not one to ask for help in class. However, in the books, he has no trouble stating where he is confused, and repeatedly does so after passages or sentences he does not understand. He is also the only one who actually wrote Karen translations in his texts (Figures 2.9 and 2.10), and made a reference to a Karen phrase “big blood” (Figure 2.11) to help him describe a character who acts like he is superior to everyone around him (which is what “big blood” means in Karen). In this case, he is describing a security guard at the mall. Lah Bwe’s culture and language not only become a support for him in the text, they also help him claim it as his own.

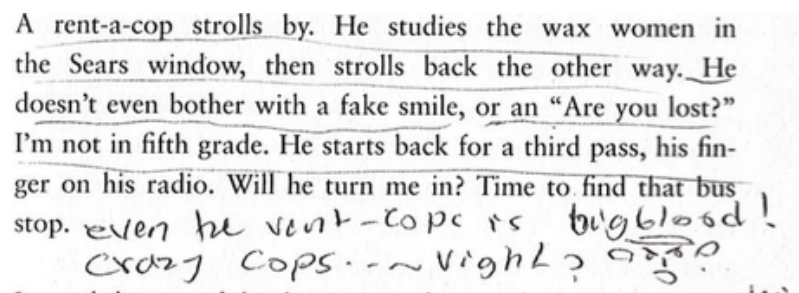
**Figure 2.9: Speak**



**Figure 2.10: Speak**



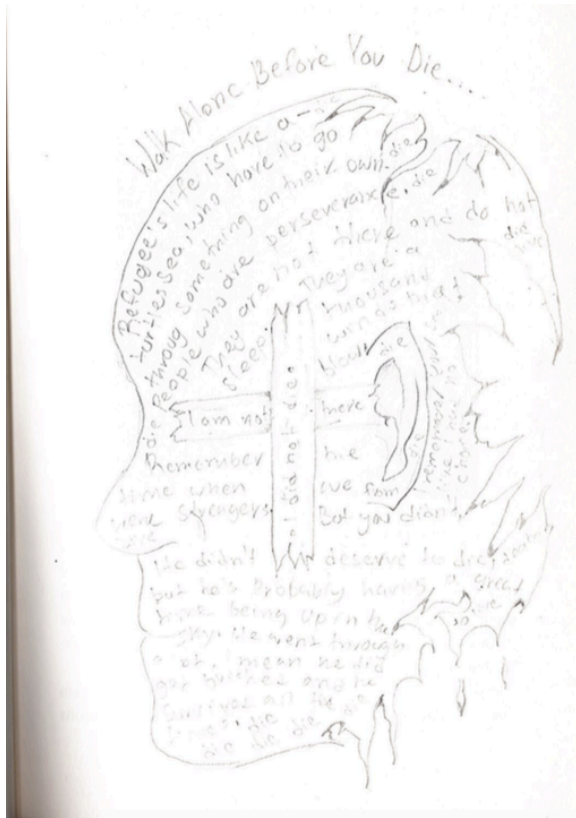
**Figure 2.11: Speak**



The most notable thing about Lah Bwe’s annotations is his use of images to perform his emotional responses to the text. They compose a larger percentage of his annotations than the other students’. Lah Bwe is a gifted artist, and this seems a natural way for him to express himself. The margin space, and freedom to write what however he chose, gave him

an opportunity to do so. His images are rich ones, often metaphorically representing characters, themes and situations in the book.

**Figure 2.12: Of Beetles and Angels**



In Figure 2.12, Lah Bwe drew a text-image to represent the pain of a refugee leaving his country and people behind, and the guilt that goes along with that transition. This is in response to a chapter in *Of Beetles and Angels*, the autobiography of a Sudanese refugee. As a refugee himself, Lah Bwe can speak to the experience from a personal place. He said some of the words he used in the drawing were lyrics from a song, but others, like the references to sea turtles finding their way home, are all his. Here, Lah Bwe has modified the text, extending it into a

collage of poetry and image. He is resymbolizing the pain of the author, and his own as well.

In Figure 2.13, Lah Bwe creates another text-image to represent the different forms that angels take in the same book, both people the characters have lost, and those that come to help them. Lah Bwe often took the opportunity a blank page or space provided to express himself through illustration of ideas and concepts, not simply representational, but also associative, with his own interpretation of the concepts.



### Figure 2.13: Of Beetles and Angels

why we saw her for what she was and still keep her in our hearts countless heartbeats later.

If you are out there, Charlene, and are reading this, I know your heart of gold weeps and smiles. Know that we have often thought of you and looked for you. When we look, we always look toward the heavens, for we know that is your true home. You are but a visitor here.



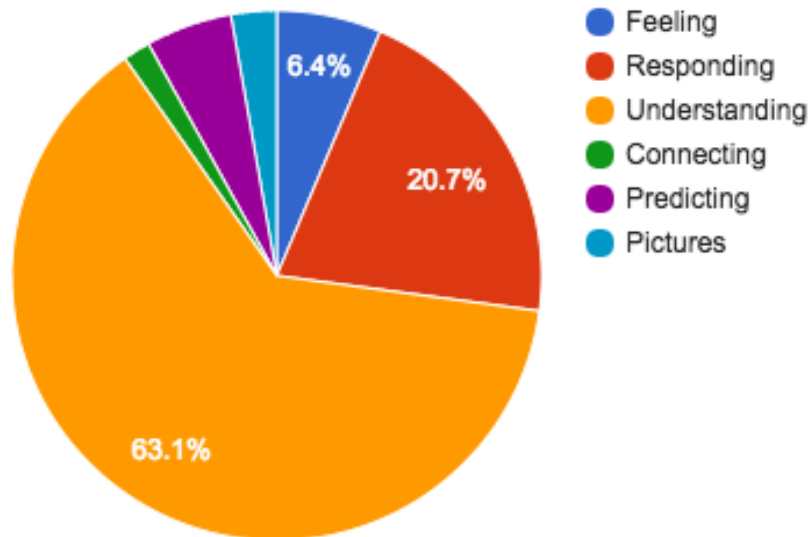
Lah Bwe writes an inscription that forms part of the angel's wing: "An (angel) can give you what you've already had before." He is writing in response to the death of a loved one in the book *Of Beetles and Angels*, and the author's own expressed feelings about the loss in the last sentences of the chapter. Lah Bwe has erected a monument to that loss, almost a gravestone, which can stand for Charlene and any angel who has left her mark on a life and then suddenly flown away. He

reflects on this idea with his winged text, considering how those that leave us never really do, but in fact become a permanent part of who we are, reminding ourselves who we are.

Though Lah Bwe was a reluctant annotator, his annotations are rich with aesthetic experience, expressing his emotions and adding layers to the text of image and poetry. Even his dismay at what he perceives as deficiencies in his own performance become part of the story, because they tie so closely to the experiences of the characters. He becomes the tragic hero, making beauty grow from despair.

**Ter Kwe Paw:** “~~bitch~~...didn’t mean to say it, when I read it, I get a little mad.” (Ann., p. 193 in *Speak*)

**Figure 3: Ter Kwe Paw Text Analysis**

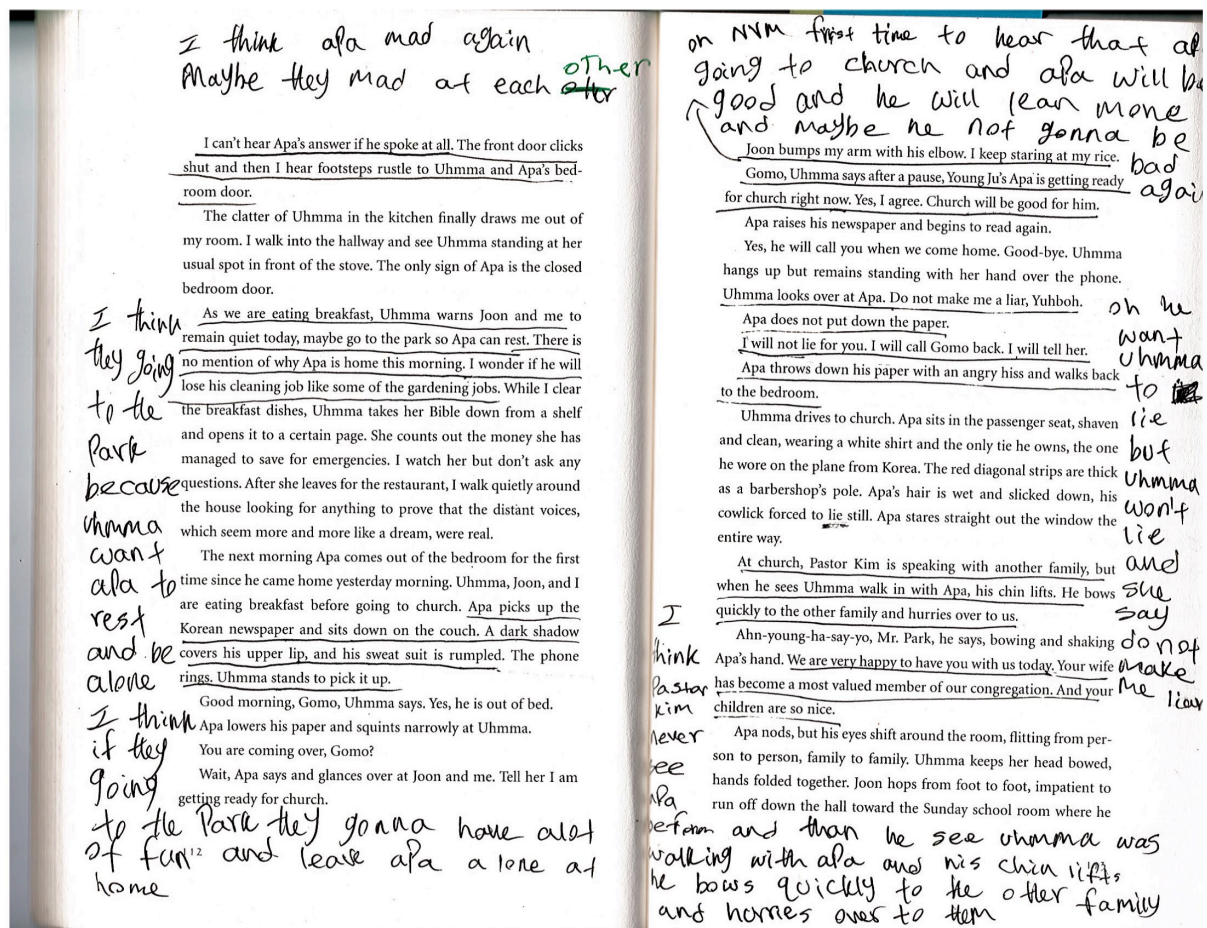


Ter Kwe Paw wrote 1,080 annotations over two books, with an average of 540 per book. Some of these annotations included entire paragraphs of paraphrasing at the ends of chapters. These two books represent Ter Kwe Paw’s engagement with a text. When she is less engaged, she is less inclined to try to understand, and therefore has less annotations in the Understanding category. I did not include the third text, because it was so sparsely annotated, it would have thrown off the percentages overall per page number, and was not representative of her work. She explained that her feelings toward that text were not as engaged. “I kind of didn’t like it because I didn’t feel like it was the right one for me. If I like

a book, I'm more interested and I'll write more and tell more. If I don't, I'll just leave it and write a little bit."

Ter Kwe Paw spends almost all her margin space paraphrasing, making inferences and asking questions, so much it sounds like a conversation where she is clarifying what is happening. Many of her long paraphrases that conclude chapters start with "I think", and "maybe" and "Oh" or "Oh, nvm" ..and end with statements that begin "And by the way..." For example, "I think Apa don't really like Young Ju because Young Ju is a girl." And "Oh, Harry is a bird. Wait . . . how did the bird die?" She often asks a question and then immediately or soon after, answers her own question (Figure 3.1)

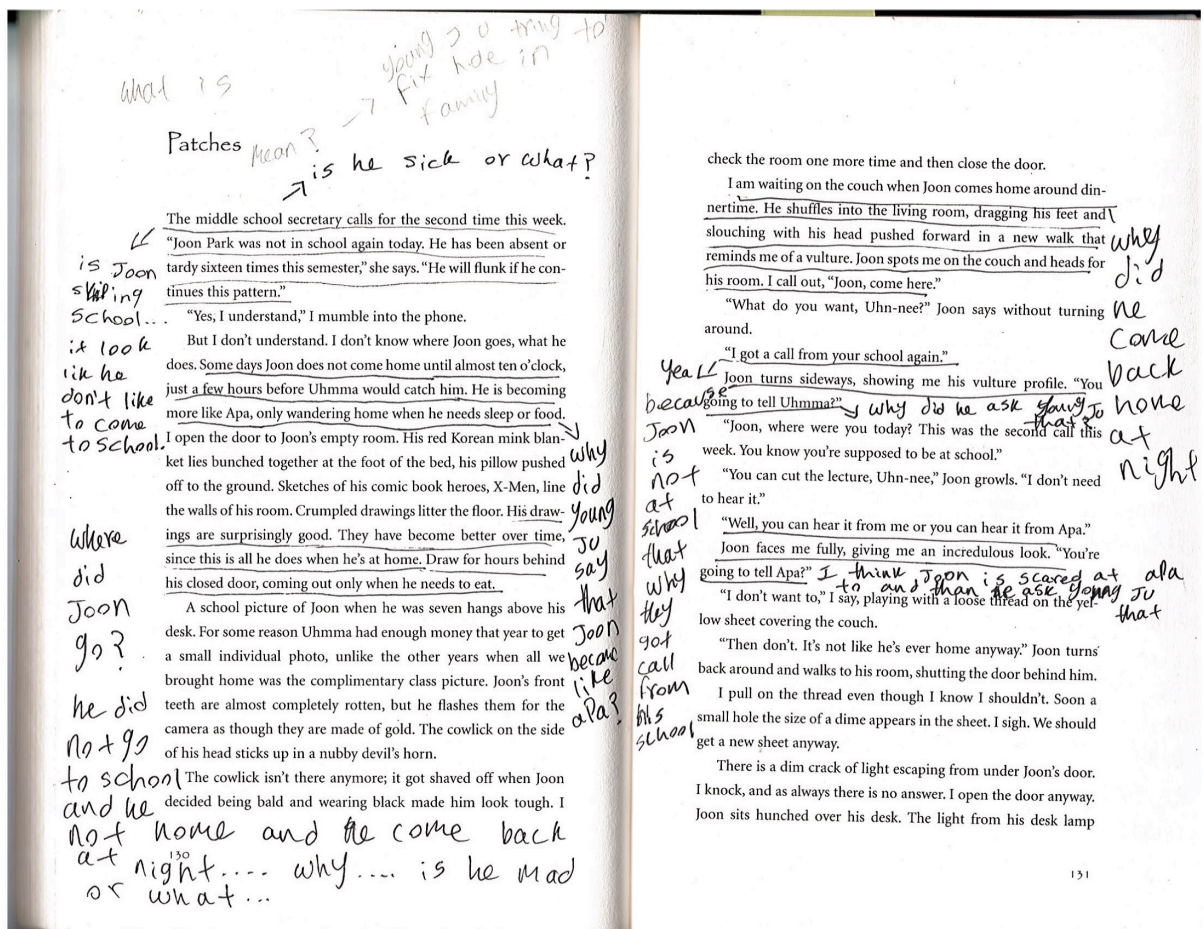
**Figure 3.1: A Step from Heaven**





In this way, Ter Kew Paw is performing her own identity as reader, stumbling through the text loudly, asking help from the author, or perhaps even herself, much as Alice in Wonderland does, talking herself through unfamiliar situations in an unknown world and using her own logic to try to figure them out. At points like the ones shown in Figure 3.2, Ter Kwe Paw doesn't so much respond to the book as much as she responds to herself asking questions in the book . . . helping to clear up her own confusion.

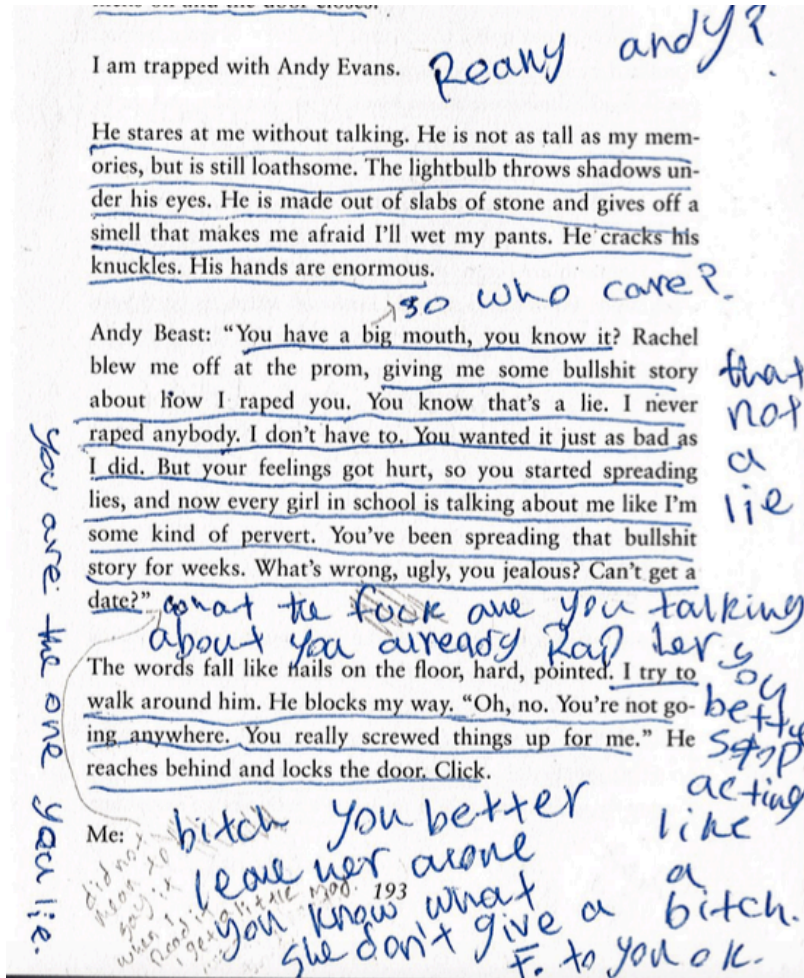
**Figure 3.2: A Step from Heaven**



Things change, however, when the situation calls for a hero. Ter Kwe Paw identified *Speak* as one of her favorite books. She consoles Melinda, a rape victim, throughout the

book, “screams” epithets at her attacker, and then apologizes (to the reader) for her anger (Figure 3.3).

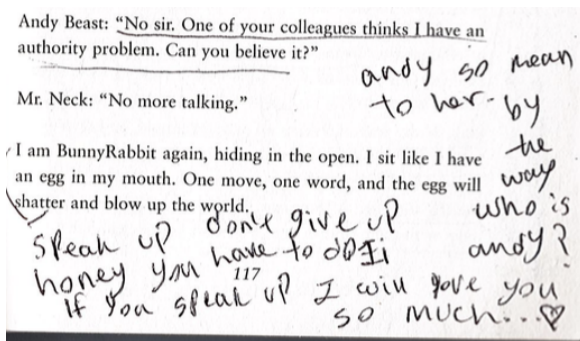
**Figure 3.3: Speak**



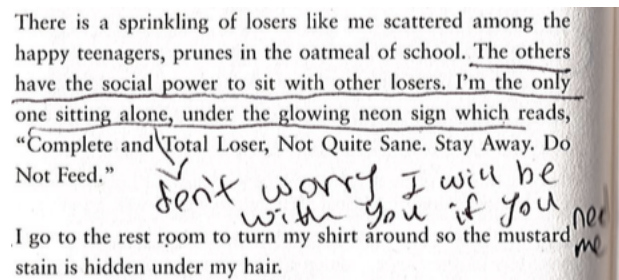
Here, Ter Kwe Paw ceases being the vocal wanderer and becomes the champion. She aggressively steps in to try to change the situation and protect the protagonist. Her responses are touching in that it appears as if she almost believes she can change the outcome of the text. In Ter Kwe Paw’s responses of this nature, more so perhaps than any of the other annotations I read, does her new “character” change the way I read the book.

She infuses hope and strength into the text. I find myself rooting for her as well. For example, in Figures 3.4 and 3.5, Ter Kwe Paw consoles the protagonist, who has been raped, by offering to be the friend the protagonist has lost in the story, “Don’t worry, I will be with you if you need me.”

**Figure 3.4: Speak**



**Figure 3.5: Speak**

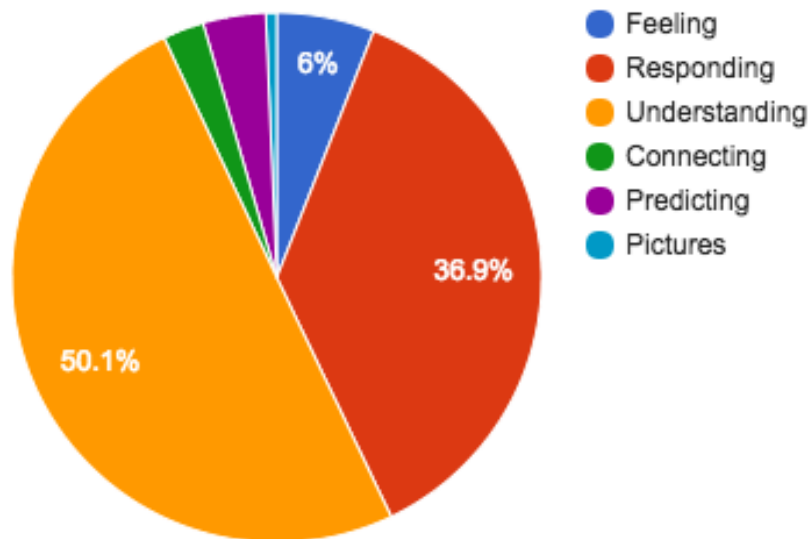


This is a sharp contrast to Ter Kwe Paw's behavior in class . . . she and the other female student did not respond in class or often share what they felt. She is a quiet student and if ever seems upset, will always respond with, "I'm fine" or "Everything's ok." However, in the books *A Step from Heaven* and *Speak*, both of which feature women being beaten or abused, she is a champion and a mother figure, speaking up loudly and firmly. She is not afraid to share how she feels and connect her own emotions and experiences to the characters. From these interactions, she derives meaning. Her heart is her way in, it is what binds her to a text, and the annotations become the expressions of her heart.

Ter Kwe Paw's response to my analysis was one of agreement, and she credited being able to annotate as a key to her engagement: "Mostly when I read a book I don't understand what it means, but when I do that (annotate) it helps me understand what it means."

**Poh Let:** “Some books can inspire you.” (Ann., p. 87 in *Of Beetles and Angels*)

**Figure 4: Poh Let Text Analysis**



Poh Let’s total annotations over his three books are 1,357, averaging to 452 annotations per book. The average page length per book is 163 pages.

Poh Let filled a majority of the space in his first book, *A Step from Heaven*, with questions and expressions of confusion. This may be due to the fact that this was the first book he annotated in class. Also, he seemed to connect with this book a lot less than the autobiography of the refugee, *Of Beetles and Angels*. He could identify more with the author of that text, and often wrote associations at the ends of chapters. For example, in Figure 4.1, he connects to the author’s experience of being bullied as a new student to the United States.

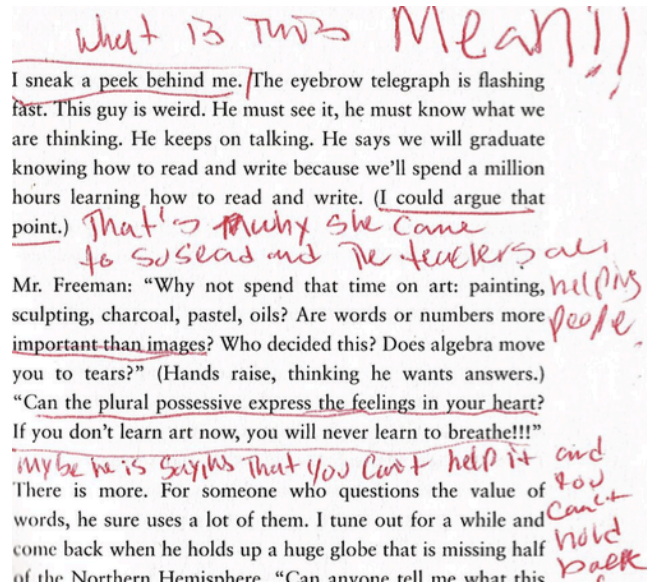


**Figure 4.1: Of Beetles and Angels**

I got billy too when  
I came to the us  
I thought it's sweet  
but when you find a  
friend it's not it for.

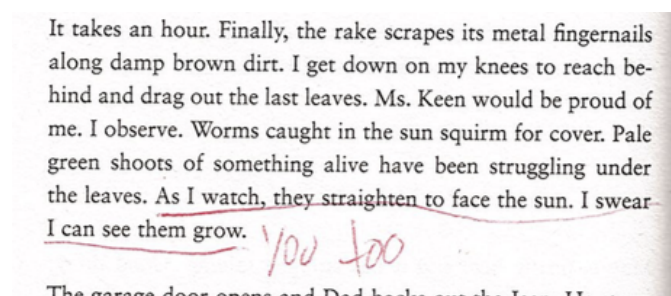
In the second book, *Speak*, Poh Let started out with a greater mix of Responding and Understanding . . . he had relaxed and found his voice a bit more. When I see students doing this, it's almost as if they are emerging from the shadows. Grumet states that we often, as educators, ask students to remain in the “shadow of the text” while adults are free to take it apart and “revel in the newfound light” (1988, p. 145). Where Poh Let felt at first restricted by his confusion, he tries to combat this by filling in the gaps; he likes to come up with reasons why people do things in the story. The most remarkable thing about Poh Let is his tenacity while reading. He breezes right past parts of confusion to find ways back into the text, even if it's just responding to a sentence, making a connection, or laughing (many of the students laugh in the text). He doesn't let points of confusion discourage him. One word I see many times in his annotations is “Maybe” (Figure 4.2).

**Figure 4.2: Speak**



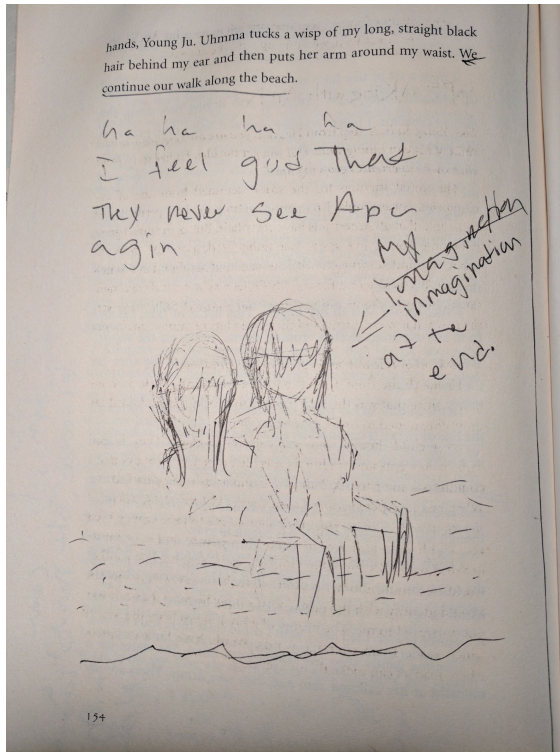
This practice of filling in the gaps revealed to me that Poh Let is skilled at inferencing and remains active when reading. He also talks back to the book, not just at times of heightened emotion, but at quieter moments as well. His ability to sum up the theme of a story is captured in Figure 4.3, with just two words of foreshadowing hope for Melinda, the rape victim protagonist of *Speak*:

**Figure 4.3: Speak**



Poh Let is also a skilled illustrator, and below, he resymbolizes not just a part of the story, but a part of himself. (Figure 4.4)

**Figure 4.4: A Step From Heaven**

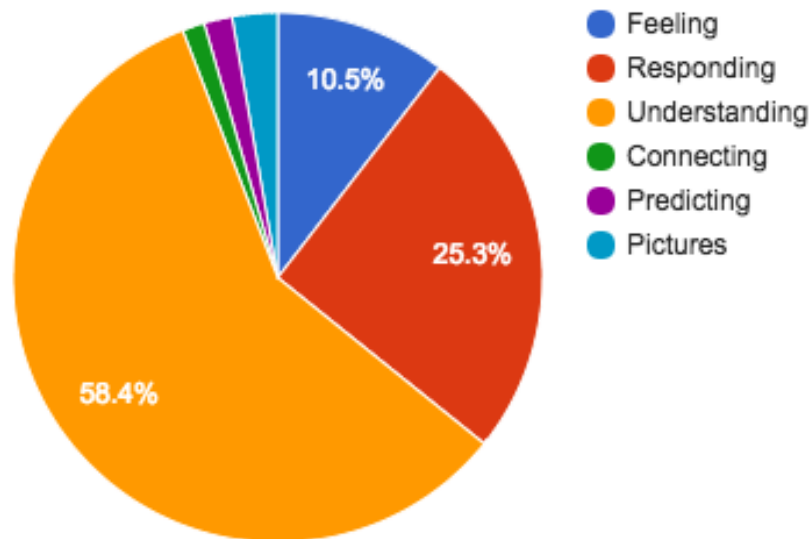


In this image, he draws an arrow pointing to the image of the protagonist and her mother side by side. Apa, or the father, was a bully in the story, and Poh Let's laughter appears as a release of the tension that built up and then dissipated once that character left. He also refers to "his imagination", or what the book had left in his mind. He sees the mother and daughter standing strong, together, and his imagination draws the new conclusion of the story. Poh Let takes over and ends the story for

the author, having the final word.

**Htee Khu:** “Just like my Karen people.” (Ann., p. 48 in *Of Beetles and Angels*)

**Figure 5: Htee Khu Text Analysis**

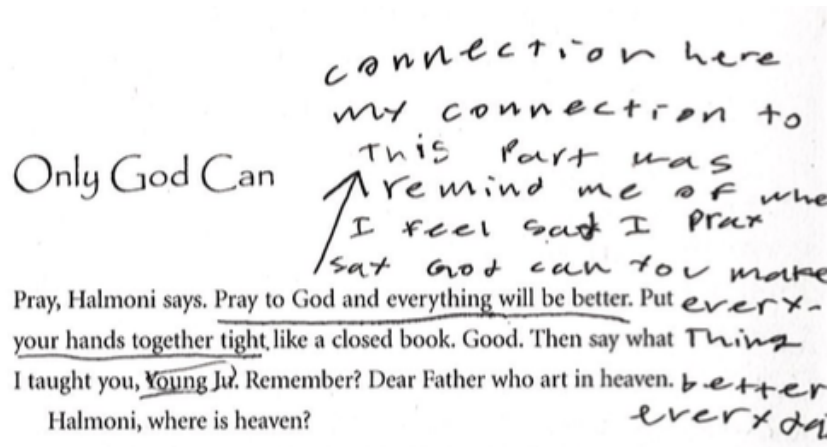


Htee Khu's total annotations over her three books are 1,624, averaging to 541 annotations per book. The average page length per book is 163 pages.

Unlike the other students, whose remarks are largely in the Understanding category in the beginning pages of their books before they begin to connect the text to themselves, Htee Khu's first remarks are usually personal connections or emotions. She empathizes immediately, as can be seen in Figure 5.1. Htee Khu describes her books as a kind of diary where she keeps her thoughts; they become precious objects.

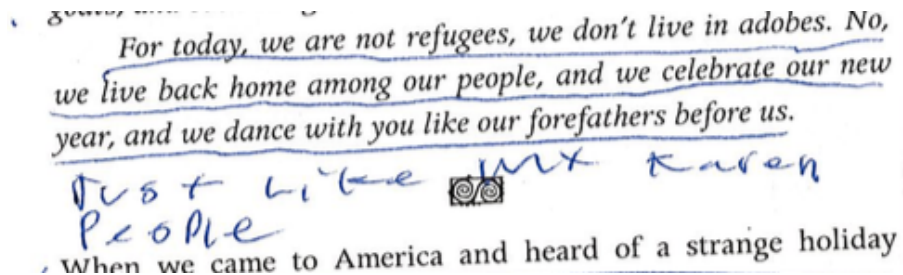


**Figure 5.1: A Step from Heaven**



Htee Khu is also quick to start talking back to the characters or narrator, offering advice and words of consolation, finding places of connection between herself and the “speaker”. She connects much of the story back to her own life, understandably more with the autobiography of the refugee, *Of Beetles and Angels*, and shares her own stories that are similar to what is happening. In the margins, there are a lot of references to her family, and she once mentions “my Karen people” (Figure 5.2).

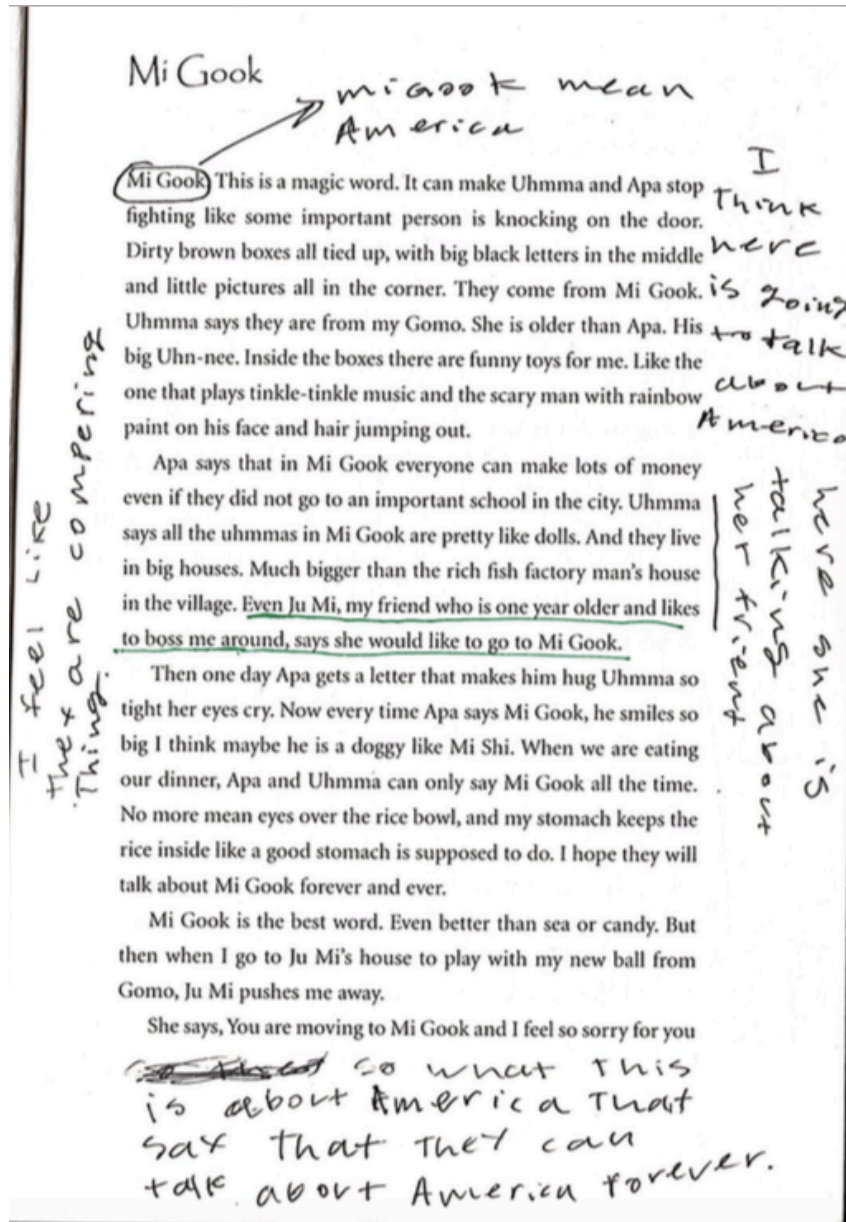
**Figure 5.2: Of Beetles and Angels**



When Htee Khu says she is confused, she connects less. In her efforts to understand, a lot of her annotations start with “This is talking about....” However, she constantly refers to the book as “talking” (Figure 5.3). Though this may seem like a more surface level way of making meaning, Bleich asserts that statements of perception, such as paraphrasing, are still

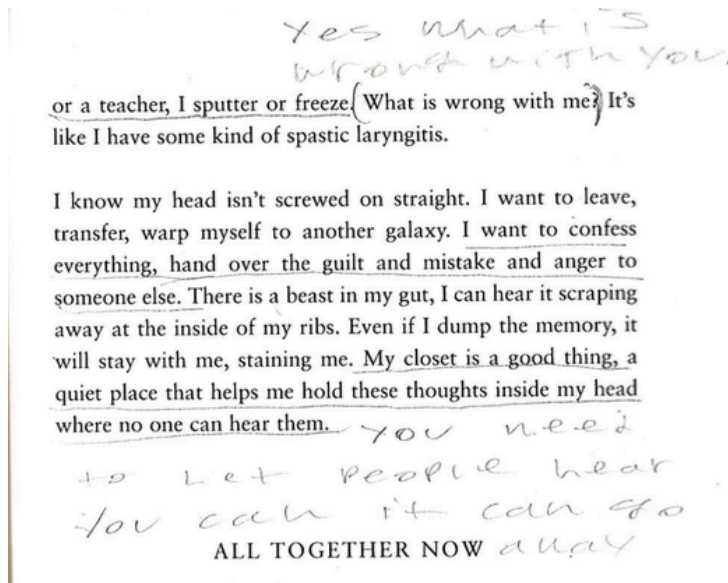
evidence of the reader's subjectivity (1975, p. 21). Htee Khu clearly still sees herself as a member of a dialogue, seeking to understand what the author is saying before she proceeds:

Figure 5.3: A Step from Heaven

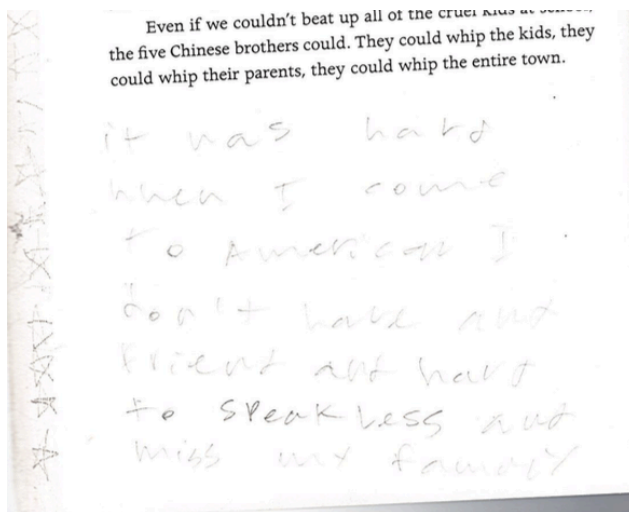


There are several points, however, where she finally talks back to the characters, answering Melinda's (*Speak*) questions and offering advice and encouragement to speak up (Figure 5.4).

**Figure 5.4: *Speak***



The ends of the chapters in *Of Beetles and Angels* contain her personal connections to her own life and strong emotions, even when they follow chapters that were difficult for her to understand (Figure 5.5).



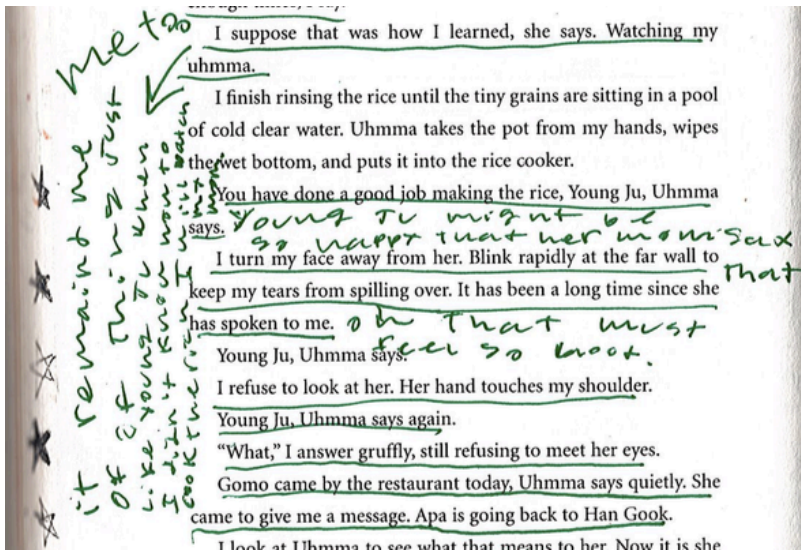
**Figure 5.5: *Of Beetles and Angels***

***("It was hard when I come to America I don't have any friend and have to speak less and miss my family.")***

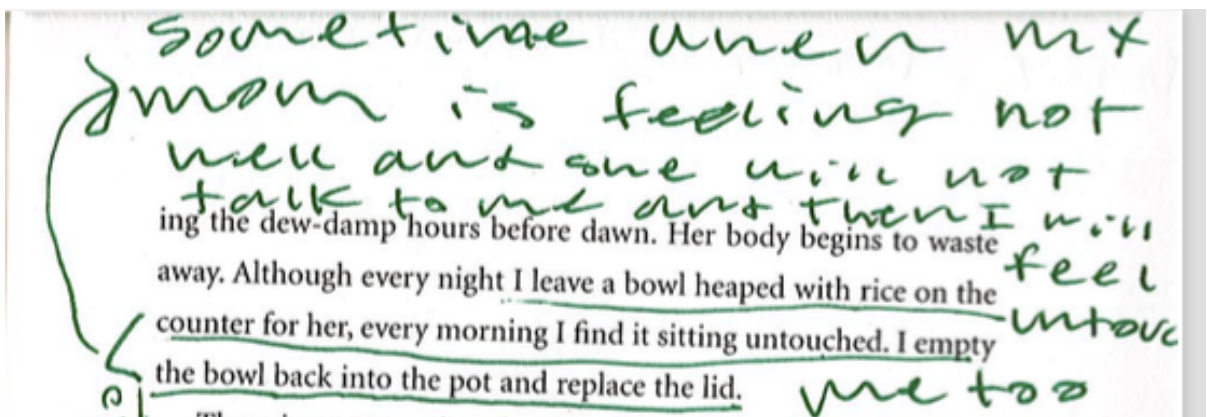
Because the book was an autobiography of a refugee, Htee Khu is able to insert her own experiences as a refugee into the text.

For Htee Khu, many of her ways into the texts are through memories; events from the text would evoke small events in her life, usually ones connected to close family members, like her mother (Figures 5.6 and 5.7).

### Figure 5.6: A Step from Heaven



### Figure 5.7: A Step From Heaven

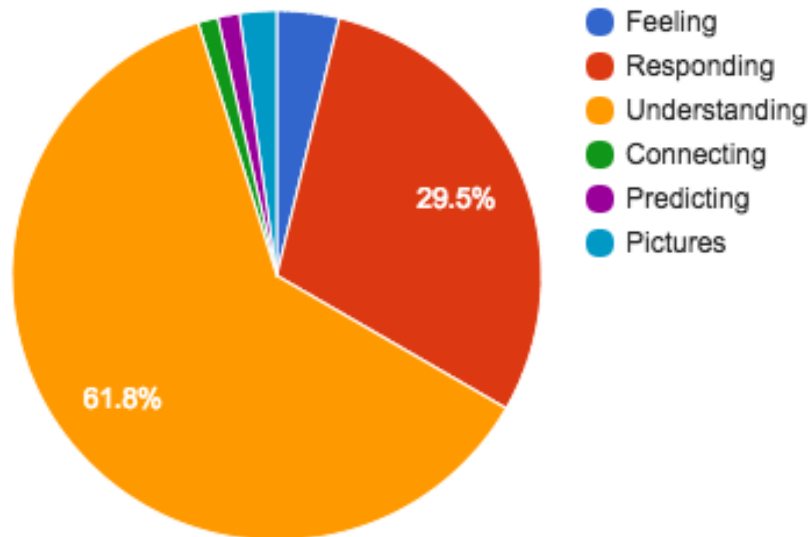


Htee Khu's references to her mother bring to mind deep maternal connections, learning to cook rice at her side, feeling deeply any emotions that the mother feels. Even an untouched bowl of food left for her mother leaves a hole inside her. Htee Khu uses these

bonds with her people, her family, to forge bonds with the text, which explains her description of it as a diary... the text becomes a kind of family member for Htee Khu, providing a cozy place to reconnect. This may also explain why Htee Khu was less vocal about sharing her annotations in class. The reading experience was more private than performative, or at the very least, it was performed for an audience of one.

**Hsa Mu Htaw:** “Good words sent you to a good place.” (Ann. p. 133, 48 in *Of Beetles and Angels*)

**Figure 6: Hsa Mu Htaw Text Analysis**



Hsa Mu Htaw was the most prolific annotator. His total annotations over his three books are 2,870, averaging to 957 annotations per book. The average page length per book is 163 pages.

Hsa Mu Htaw's first book in the class, *A Step from Heaven*, was almost consistently annotated in the Understanding category. I see him mainly struggling to make sense of the text but also to find deeper meanings. In Figure 6.1, we can see him taking “field notes” about the events and characters, even listing the individual family members to keep them straight.





Figure 6.2: Speak

(white hand upward. An apple tree growing from an apple seed growing in an apple. I show the little plantseed to Ms. Keen. She gives me extra credit. David rolls his eyes. Biology is so cool. <sup>Wow</sup> ~~the first time she is the apple~~ and ~~the people ate the apple~~ and <sup>she</sup> the only left is a seed and it's going to take a long time for the seed to grow and <sup>when it grows it's going to be a beautiful tree and it</sup> Rebellion is in the air. We only have a week left before Winter Break. Students are getting away with murder and the staff is going too worn out to care. I hear rumors of eggnog in the faculty lounge. This revolutionary spirit is even breaking out in social studies class. David Petrakis is fighting back about the freedom-to-speak thing. <sup>it's going to make her wish</sup> I get to class on time. I don't dare use a stolen late pass with Mr. Neck. David takes a seat in the front row and sets a tape recorder on his desk. As Mr. Neck opens his mouth to speak.

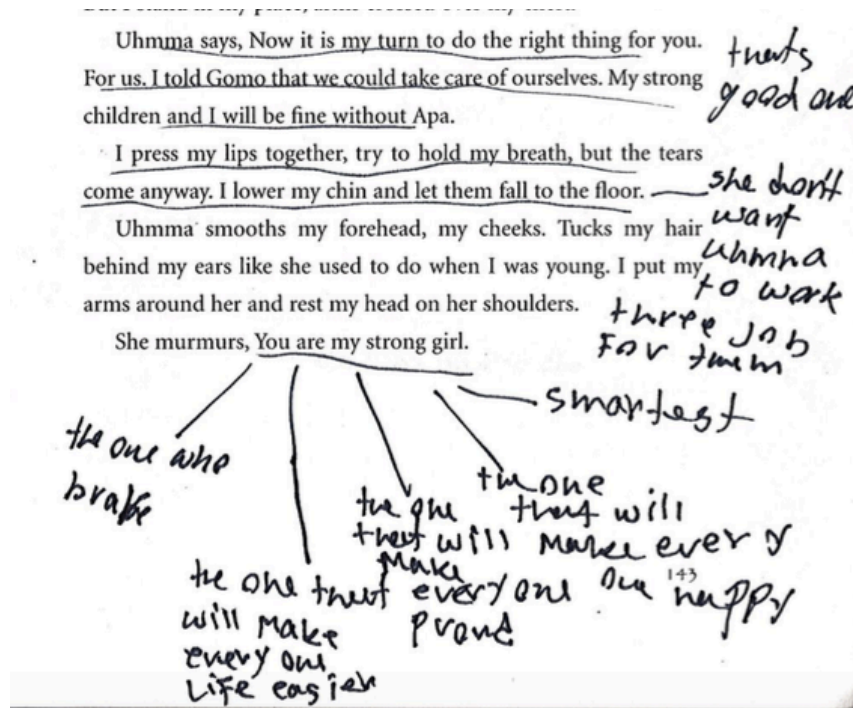
Figure 6.3: Speak

The room does not smell like apple. It smells like frog juice, a cross between a nursing home and potato salad. The Back Row just pays attention. Cutting dead frogs is cool. <sup>Life like her when she was small she is happy because of apple juice and now she she even talk about</sup> Our frog lies on her back. Waiting for a prince to come and princessify her with a smooch? I stand over her, with my knife. Ms. Keen's voice fades to a mosquito whine. My throat closes off. It is hard to breathe. I put out my hand to steady myself against the table. David pins her froggy hands to the dissection tray. He spreads her froggy legs and pins her froggy feet. <sup>when she was small and other stuff and now</sup> I have to slice open her belly. She doesn't say a word. She is already dead. A scream starts in my gut—I can feel the cut, <sup>what makes apple grow.</sup> I smell the dirt, leaves in my hair. <sup>Frog may be</sup> ~~and the frog is dead and~~ don't remember passing out. David says I hit my head on the edge of the table on my way down. The nurse calls my mom because I need stitches. The doctor stares into the back of my eyes with a bright light. Can she read the thoughts hidden <sup>doesn't shut peace</sup>



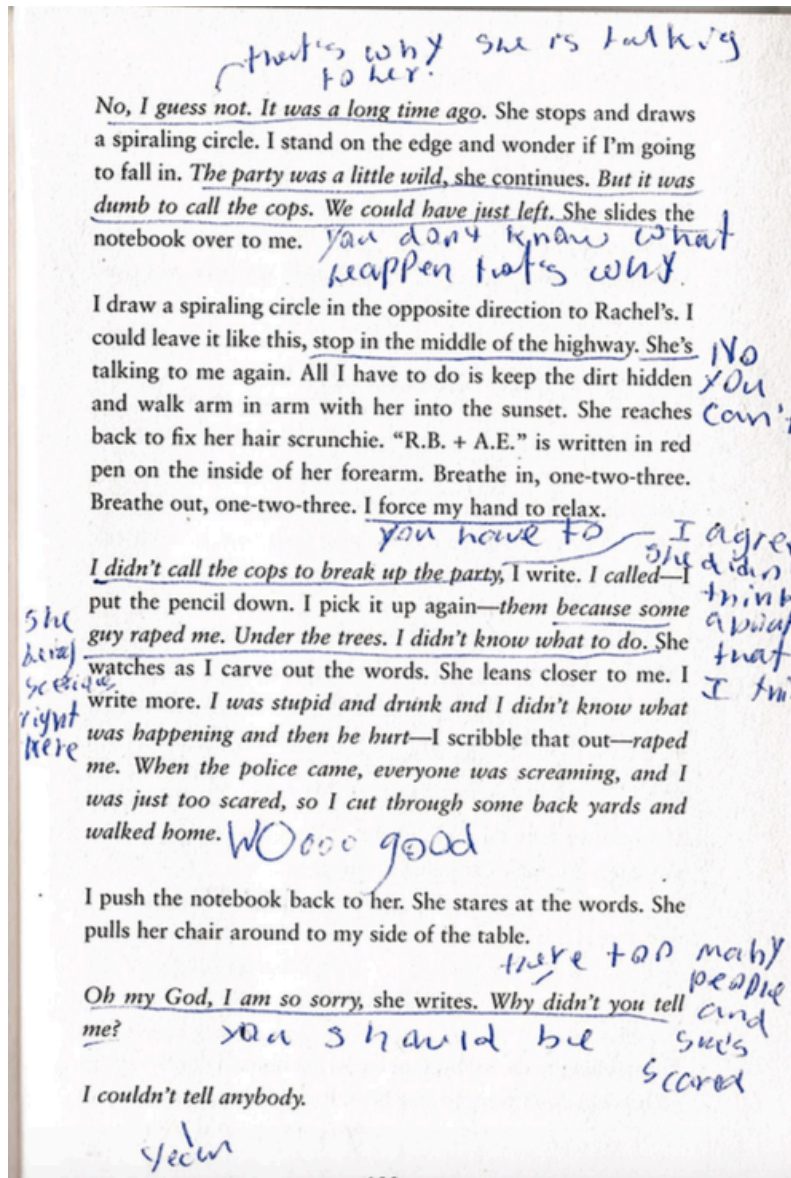
In Figure 6.4, Hsa Mu Htaw takes one of the last lines of the book *A Step from Heaven* and creates a web of the protagonist's roles played in the story, extending the reader's vision at the end of the story back over what he has read. He connects all the different roles of strength the protagonist was expected to fill, including the one where she wasn't strong:

**Figure 6.4: A Step from Heaven**



Near the climax and resolution of the books, however, his emotions take the lead. In this space, there is a lot of “talking” back to the characters, and judgment about actions taken. There are also numerous expressions of relief and statements of affinity. In Figure 6.5, he takes part in a conversation between Melinda and her former friend, becoming a third speaker. He sounds less like an outside researcher and more like a participant in the text.

Figure 6.5: Speak

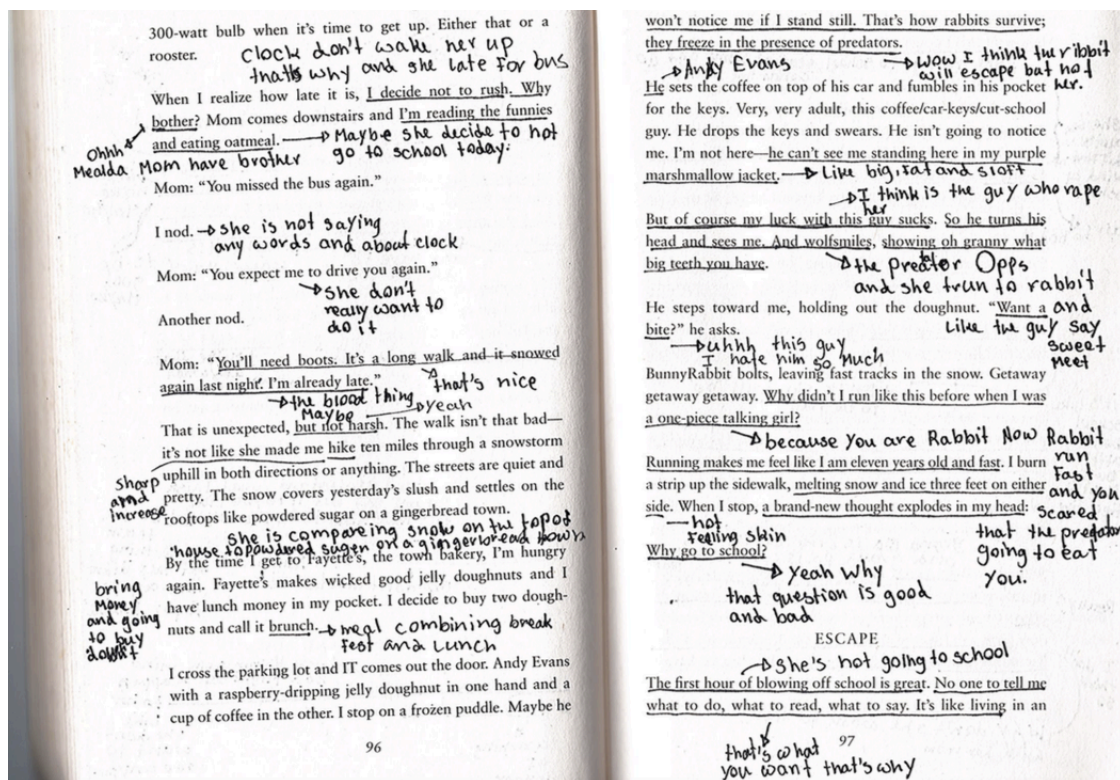


Pictures are Hsa Mu Htaw's way of illustrating metaphors that represent characters and ideas in the book. He will often draw images of the metaphors that are created by the author, as well as his own. In Figure 6.6, he depicts the regrowth of Melinda's heart, and adds a butterfly, foreshadowing the freedom she will experience once she releases her pain.

Figure 6.6: Speak

When asked about his annotating patterns, Hsa Mu Htaw said, “It is important to annotate and write down my annotations in the book. I feel like I’m in the book and passionate to learn, to grow.” Looking at his marks across the board, a good word to describe them is attentive and careful. He takes pride in his work, and views the annotations as marks of his own learning (Figure 6.7).

Figure 6.7: Speak



#### **4.4 Text Analysis Findings**

What struck me the most about the students' annotations overall was the amount of them. When you open to almost any page in the texts of any of the students, you will see a swarm of words filling in the white space around the story. Instantaneously, the eye is provided a visual cacophony of dialogue...a second voice snaking its way around a first one. For emergent bilingual students who, as a trend, tend to be more reticent in their classroom participation, and really, for any middle school student asked to annotate a text, this was an anomaly, and the impetus for me to want to examine the phenomenon further.

Overall, the pattern of margin writing was similar for all students except Thoo Wah. The majority of them spent half or more than half of their writing time engaged in perceptual responses connected to Understanding, whether they were expressing statements of confusion, comprehension, or reaching toward comprehension. These statements draw a picture of the student's journey of struggle and discovery in the text.

The second largest category of margin writing was Responding. In this space, students responded to the text by talking to it...whether to the narrator or the characters in the book. This kind of response often occurred during the climax of the story, or any place where the character was making decisions or struggling with problems. The students step in to offer advice, judgment or criticism. Sometimes the students outright yell at the characters, imploring them to act when they aren't. The tone for these statements is mainly conversational. The students will employ slang and use the second person. They seem to sense their role in the book; they see themselves as taking part in the dialogue and the action. Here is where the engagement is most apparent, stemming from the mind and the heart.

The third largest category for all but Lah Bwe is Feeling. In this space, students respond with statements or expressions that reflect their immediate reactions to the text and any empathy they may have for the characters. Here the student may have a gut response of “ew” or “this is scary” that shows what effect the text is having on the reader emotionally. It is less of a thinking action, and more of an emotive response. Also included here are statements of affinity and/or empathy such as “I love this” or “Yes, this happened to me.” This kind of response appears to come from the heart.

This said, as mentioned before in reference to Bleich’s ideas of “affective” and “associative” response (1974), the former precedes the latter, in that the emotions provide the spark that leads to the thought. The annotations in the Feeling category may be potential responses that did not find their way to conclusion, or were not strong enough to warrant that evolution.

The outliers in these above patterns, as mentioned, are Thoo Wah and Lah Bwe. Thoo Wah’s responses are more Responding and Feeling than Understanding, but this may be because he was not a part of the sheltered Language Arts class, and was reading his books independently as an enrichment activity. Though he did participate in discussions with me and sometimes the other students about the texts, and sometimes completed short writing assignments about his reading, there was no grade attached to his work, nor any responsibility to lead a discussion in class with the other students (save for Speak, which he did join our class to discuss). When asked about this, he said that he rarely felt “lost” in the books, and when he did, he waited until he was able to find his way back into the text to start annotating again. Thoo Wah’s annotations serve as a heart and mind “anchor” to the story, keeping him engaged and invested.

Lah Bwe's third largest category was Pictures, just edging out Feeling. This makes sense for Lah Bwe, who expresses himself best through art. He was also the one student to express his discomfort with annotations, which did not come naturally to him, and he said he was always concerned about saying the right thing, even though he knew there was no right or wrong answer.

A common thread across all the books is that the students will often start out with Understanding annotations, but as the book progresses and they get to know the story and characters better, they move into more of a response mode, offering advice, scolding, judging, and comforting. By the end of each book, every student has responded to the text in the second person.

Overall, I was most impressed by the way the students did not give up, or "go quiet" in the text following periods of confusion, which were many. Perhaps, this is because in the text being confused costs you nothing. The text doesn't go away, it sits patiently and waits. When asked about this, Thoo Wah said the difference between confusion in the book and in the classroom is, "In class there's like a blank space between your question and your answer, but in the book there's a lot of words that are like attached to the part where you're lost, and you have somewhere to follow...somewhere to trace your answer." Kristeva (1987) has a theory that mirrors this idea, in which language has a nourishing quality that sustains us in that hunger of the "blank space", and we quell that hunger by "chewing, swallowing, nourishing oneself...with words" (p. 26).

Though I have drawn out the dominant patterns in their annotations, each of them, at different times, were all judges, artists, champions, open minds, empathizers and

anthropologists. However, none of them were silent bystanders...a role too often adopted by emergent bilinguals in a classroom setting.

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## CHAPTER 5: FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

### 5.1 Silence, Feeling Like “the Other”, and the Value of Emotions

One of the major themes of the focus group discussion, in fact, one of the first themes to come up, was silence in the classroom. In 1981, Krashen theorized about the “silent period” during which students learning a new language will not speak for the first three months, absorbing the language around them. “This is a time when they are building up confidence via input, by listening. When they are ready, they start to talk” (p. 71).

However, elective silence by emergent bilinguals past this point is an issue that has been little studied. King (2013), introducing his study of silent behavior in English language learning environments, points out that this is an important topic for educators. “It is an issue that affects everybody who teaches; whether silencing the boisterous or encouraging the silent to contribute--both are part of educators’ daily classroom realities” (p. 1). It also emerged, rather quickly, as an important topic for the interviewees, who when asked about the differences between their middle school Language Arts experiences and their high school English classes, pointed to the silence as the major difference.

The first words emitted as a response in the interview were:

**“You don’t feel comfortable saying something...I don’t know, you just feel different.”**

This feeling of being the “other” in the classroom seems to be the reason for the silence. One student talked about how she used her margin writing strategy in high school as a way for her “voice” to be “heard”, even if she felt she could not speak:

**“Remembering back I just write on the side and asking questions and putting questions to ask, which was really hard for me to speak out because I was, my voice is, like**



**frightened...it is really hard to let it out when you don't have nobody, you feel...the signal, I guess?"**

The signal being that sense of being the "other", that feeling coming from the teachers and the other students around them that they are not expected to speak, or at the very least, speak well, because they are emergent bilinguals. Canagarajah (1993) found that students in a mandatory ESL class in Sri Lanka would be silent in the classroom as a form of resistance, but then voice their resistance in the margins of their U.S. History texts. Though similar to my student's asking her questions in the margins of her text, but not in the classroom, her margin writing seemed to be less an act of defiance, and more of a way of clinging to the voice she once felt she could use.

The idea of "othering" and non-participation in second language classrooms has been explored linking silence and "othering" to a sense of non-entitlement (Vandrick, 2000), shifting senses of identities (Norton, 2001), reproductive hegemonies in critical discourses (Lee, 2008), and even the construction of ESL education as an institution (Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000). Though any of these might play a role in the sense of isolation, underestimation, or the "signals" the participants feel they may have been receiving in class, what emerged in their responses was a sense that their individual feelings would not be valued, because feelings in general were not valued in the English classroom.

**"Here, we share...we don't really share what is going on in the story, but we share, like individual feelings, you know, our opinion, our perspective of seeing, how we see the book..."**

(another student chimes in) **"And our connection..."**

**"As there, sometimes we just share information, we just discuss what's going on in the book, but we don't really share like how we feel...and then, me I don't...sometimes I participate, but I see sometimes like people don't listen, so they kind of be rude and don't respect what I have to say, so I don't, like, participate no more. Sometimes I feel like they underestimate me, so I don't really be myself, like I be here."**

This commentary then leads back to that feeling of being the “other” in the class, that sense of not belonging.

**“I mean, they might or they might not, but it’s the feeling, like, when I see them, their reaction to me, is different than their reaction to other kids. Also the teacher, I feel like, cuz I’m a different color or I come from a different place, they kind of underestimate me a little bit. But, it’s fine, I kind of accept it, but,” ....(goes quiet)**

I prompted one of the other students to respond.

**“I mean, like, it’s harder. and sometimes the teacher went so fast, and like, but if you don’t understand and if you ask them, the other students look at you like differently, like...yeah. It happen a lot, but like, that’s why I don’t really ask questions this year.”**

(The first student continues) **“I would say less opportunity to speak up, for me it was , it really was less opportunity like I didn’t have the chance...the teacher would say if you want me to go slow I will go slow for you but like, it’s just the feeling the other students like, look at me and I feel...imitated?”**

Me: **“Intimidated?”**

**“And like I just get a feeling where this girl is holding us back...I feel like I’m holding all the class back if I’m saying if we can go slow so I never want to tell the teacher to go slow.”**

There seems to be a connection between the students’ sense of being “the other” and the devaluation of students’ “feelings” about what they read. Though one student mentions being viewed by the others differently because of her skin tone or place of birth, what they all bemoan is their inability to become part of the text through their connections with it.

**“Like (the other student) said, reading over there is like about speed and just what you can take out of the book and not put yourself into the book, but I feel like when I read for you, we have to...we make a connection with the book and put ourself into the situation in the book, like, connect ourself with it, but in high school it’s like trying to get the job done, just try to get the best possible grade, without really like having a connection to the book. “**

**“Yup.”**

**“It’s like a one-night-stand over there.”**

This student, Thoo Wah, whose margin writing is largely Responding and Feeling, is keenly aware of the lack of connection he is asked to have with books in high school, equating his experience with texts to that of a “one night stand”, as compared to a deeper relationship. He has said before that he talks to books like they are his “friends”, so it is not surprising that he uses an analogy of a superficial sexual relationship to describe texts where he cannot do this.

I find it interesting that there seems to be a close connection between being “othered” in the English classroom, and the devaluation of “feelings” about the texts. Our feelings and opinions are our own, unique to ourselves, and the students feel strongly that these need to be shared to feel less like an outsider, or to be able to use their voice in the classroom. There must be a significant difference between the students’ discomfort feeling like strangers in their classrooms, and their desire to assert their strangeness in their text responses.

The history of ESL instruction was built to “fix” what the students lacked or how they were deficient pertaining to the English language. In fact, the very terminology that originated with the U.S. Supreme court case *Lau vs. Nichols*, LEP or Limited English Proficient, indicates a level of deficiency and limitation in its very name, and the terminology is still used today by the federal government when referring to these students (Garcia, 2009).

Ranciere (1991) took issue with discourses such as Bourdieu’s, which sought to elucidate and denounce the inequalities inherent in institutions by accusing a dominant group of oppressing an ignorant and voiceless subordinate group, made blind by the structure and processes of the institution. The ethical problem with this argument, however, is by looking at the subordinate group from the position of a researcher, “the scientist is thereby granted a central role in delivering his ‘lesson’ with ‘the dominated’ posited as unable of themselves to

emerge from their own modes of thinking and being which the system of domination has assigned to them” (Pelletier, 2009). Therefore, by studying the dynamic between the oppressed and the subordinate, and claiming that the suppressed does not know they are oppressed, the researcher becomes a producer of the same dynamic he/she is denouncing.

Ranciere believed that even those who name and study inequalities in institutions, reproduce and perpetuate those inequalities by looking at them from a position of authority (1991). In other words, as teachers and researchers trying to take the mask off of social inequalities in schools, we are looking at those who “don’t know” through the eyes of those who “know”. By doing this, we create a distance between us and those being taught and/or studied, and thus we reproduce the very inequality we are trying to describe. Researchers of English language classrooms have confirmed this phenomenon (Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000; Lee, 2008), in which the very constitution of the ESL curriculum and even critical discourses in the classroom reproduce and perpetuate this phenomenon. There is a “presumed ignorance” of the students in the classroom, and the instructor is the one who holds all the knowledge. There is then a distance between those who know and those who don’t. This creates a “stultifying” (Ranciere, 1991) environment in which to learn, and once which continues to stultify over and over, always maintaining a distance between the learner and the knowledge. The translator of Ranciere’s text (1991) sums it up in this way:

Each, that is, by beginning with inequality, proves it, and by proving it, in the end, is obliged to rediscover it again and again. Whether school is seen as the reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu) or as the potential instrument for the reduction of inequality (Savary), the effect is the same: that of erecting and maintaining the distance separating a future reconciliation from a present inequality, a knowledge in the offing from today’s intellectual impoverishment--a distance discursively invented and reinvented so that it may never be abolished. (Ross, 1991)

However, what is it about a place for one’s feelings to be heard in education that maintains individuality but without stultification? If we agree with either Bourdieu or

Ranciere that the reproduction of inequality is something that should be ceased, how do we do this without sacrificing the individuality that is so prized by my students? Are there spaces where we can shed the labels that reproduce inequality, like LEP and ESL, and allow ways for students to recreate and assert themselves as individuals rather than “others”?

## **5.2 The Emotional Life of the Reader-responder**

Before Ranciere wrote about the distancing effects of stultification in the classroom, Bleich (1974) wrote about the separation between those who keep the knowledge, and those who lack it. He argues that even though our immediate and primary response to any situation, particularly the classroom, is emotional, we are trained to push those responses down and away in the pursuit of knowledge.

This shift is part of our trained conscious attitude that the student is there to get knowledge and the teacher is there to give it. The routine of class finds the teacher ‘correcting’ the student, judging his performance, and quantifying its value in a grade. This larger classroom routine serves an important function: it averts our uncertainty with regard to how to handle our feelings and those of our students, and it replaces our uncertainties with the simpler elements of exercising authority. (p. 2)

Bleich goes on to state that if we recognize that feelings and the pursuit and attainment of knowledge are inextricably linked, we can better realize the importance of the myriad perceptions, experiences, emotions and drives of the students making up the classroom community. The pursuit of knowledge, he argues, is driven by a passionate will to discover something new, or to seek to change existing circumstances. “Certainly the biographies of those who achieved the most and the best in civilization show that not only does feeling precede knowledge but that knowledge is achieved only because of the passion to know and discover. The passion preceded the knowledge--not vice versa.” (p. 3)

However, some designers of current literacy curricula eschew this concept in favor of objectivity in literacy. In April 2011, with the introduction of the Common Core to our

educational system, David Coleman, one of the founders of the curriculum, delivered a speech about it to a group of educators in Albany, New York. He stood in front of the group and declared the expression about what one thinks or feels had little to no value in this world:

Do you know the two most popular forms of writing in the American high school today?...It is either the exposition of a personal opinion or the presentation of a personal matter. The only problem, forgive me for saying this so bluntly, the only problem with these two forms of writing is as you grow up in this world you realize people don't really give a s\*\*t about what you feel or think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you're saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me. It is a rare working environment that someone says, "Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood." (Coleman, 2011)

If the devaluation of thoughts and feelings becomes a cornerstone for literacy instruction, it may better prepare students to be market analysts, (though this in itself seems doubtful . . . aren't market analysts supposed to predict what consumers will want to purchase? And aren't spending patterns dependent largely upon the thoughts and feelings of the consumer?) but at what cost to their sense of selves? What piece of literature is not someone's thoughts and feelings extended toward the world? It only makes sense to respond to this expression in kind, with one's own thoughts and feelings . . . a common language, and in the case of the emergent bilingual, perhaps the *only* common primary language, between the reader and the author.

Though this foundational idea behind the common core, which is currently the backbone of literacy instruction at the middle and high school level in the United States, may explain why the students in this study suddenly felt that their feelings about text didn't matter in their English classrooms, Bleich argues that emotional response is inherent and essential to the learning process, particularly when reading literature. "The content of literature, its origin, and its effect on readers all call for sophisticated understanding of emotional life," (p. 3,

1974) he states, asserting that literary texts are “symbolic works” of art, born of emotion, and carried through to completion when eliciting an emotional, and therefore individualized, response from the reader.

Therefore, it makes sense that my students feel they are being silenced and alienated from the learning experience when their subjectivity, composed of their feelings about and their responses to text, is devalued, and more of a part of the community when they are provided the freedom and encouragement to feel and respond to text in their own ways. Clearly, to the students, there is a negative association with being made to feel “different”, compared to a positive one when individual subjectivity is emancipated and even celebrated. As one student states in the interview, the same one who complained about being made to feel “different” at the beginning, he resents the thought of having to become the same as the teacher.

**“It depend on the teacher, it’s also different because, here in middle school, it’s like a time where we change a lot, I mean in (high school) we change too, but it’s like a slower pace, like right here we’re in a boundary between like stuff changing and from like not changing at all, like we’re in the middle of it, so like right here, we change a lot, like first we change a little bit, and then here we change a lot and then in high school it’s a slower pace. So this is like the time where we change a lot, so it’s different from there. And it really depends on the teacher how they teach, and what they expect from you and what they want to get out of you, cuz like see, for example, for the writing and stuff, they have different styles of writing and different styles of teaching, so sometimes they want, they expect, what they want, like...some teachers they expect different things from you, sometimes they just want to be, like, for you to be a writer like them and so they want to make you like them, but sometimes I feel like you want to make you, YOU...not them. “**

This student is keenly aware that adolescence is that time in your life when you go through great change, and views this as an opportunity for self-discovery and self-expression. He feels stultified by the teacher trying to get him to think and write like the teacher does. His subjectivity is being repressed by the actions of the “master.” He’s not

being allowed the freedom to be “different” in his own way. Ranciere (1991) asserted that the teacher’s method of “explication” creates a “pedagogical myth” that divides an inferior intelligence from a superior one. The teacher decides the right and wrong way to obtain knowledge and to show that it has been obtained.

To explain something is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself. Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid. (Ranciere, 1991, p. 6)

If we as teachers accept that the students’ subjective responses to text are valid and valuable, then we eliminate that pedagogical myth. We are stating that we believe that students have a way into the text from the start, using their individual motivations as the driving vehicle. Because this is something inherent in all students simply because they are human beings, and not something that the “master” dictates or transfers, this threatens the pedagogical myth, and the teacher’s role within it. The way into the text is driven by what Ranciere terms “the will” (1991) and Sartre, “intentionality” (1939).

### **5.3 The “Ins” and “Outs” of Text**

Before looking at the vehicles the students use to motivate their ways into texts, I want to look at the way the students describe access to texts. During the interview, they use the words “in” and “out” to describe their shifting loci in the reading experience. This indicates a movement towards or away from something.

**“Like (the other student) said, reading over there is like about speed and just what you can take out of the book and not put yourself into the book, but I feel like when I read for you, we have to...we make a connection with the book and put ourself into the situation in the book, like, connect ourself with it, but in high school it’s like trying to get the job done, just try to get the best possible grade, without really like having a connection to the book. “**

. . . and another student confirms this:



**“And they don’t tell you...for me, the teacher doesn’t tell us to connect to the book or how we feel about it, just how much we get out of it.”**

For these students, reading quickly and taking things “out” of the book lead to a lack of connection to the book. The students are not afforded an opportunity to move into the text, but are expected to mine it for information. To move “into” the book, is to go more slowly, to put oneself into the book and make a “connection” to it. One student even goes so far as to say he is putting himself “into the situation”, making the book not just an object, but an event in which he can play a role as a participant. The way into a book is through personal connection. When asked about annotating in high school, he admits that they are asked to do it, but that the annotations are not supposed to be about personal response, instead they are “trying to get the job done rather than trying to go deep into the book.” When their subjectivity is denied, even in annotations, the students cannot enter the text. When asked if the annotations are discussed in class, the students emphatically reply:

**“Nooooo...”**

**“It’s different.”**

**“He ask question and then we answer, it’s not that we’re sharing our individual feelings we’re just telling what happened in the story, so people are not going to be lost.”**

**“He just check the amount of the annotation, like, he said, four annotations or four of something in each paragraph.”**

The students recognize a strong distinction between being asked to read to understand, and reading to connect. Going “deep” into the book is a major difference between the two. One student went on to talk about how he was still annotating his feelings, but that didn’t seem right in his English class, since he was supposed to annotate what happened, but that annotating his emotions actually helped bring him back to the moment he experienced in

the text. So annotating his emotional responses actually not only helped him into the story, but time travel back to specific moments in the story as well, when need be.

**“Because For example, like, in this paragraph, the character this this...he feel like, this this, but I didn’t say that. I said like, really? OMG, I said like how I feel but not like what’s kind of happening in the story. Sometimes, it kind of help me, too, because it kind of like flash my feelings back at like a specific period.”**

Me: **“Oh, flash you back to what you were feeling at that time?”**

**“Yeah.”**

Thus the annotations become an anchor back to the moment of experience for the reader. By being able to reconnect with the feeling he experienced at that moment of reading, he is able to reconnect with the story itself. This makes sense; in life our strongest memories are connected to our moments of strong emotions. Like Proust’s iconic bite of a tea-soaked madeleine, our senses reconnect us to seminal experiences. Bleich (1974) confirms that experience and emotional response are inseparable: “In daily life, any new perceptual experience stimulates an emotional response immediately, and our thought about this experience is a reaction to our emotional response plus the experience, rather than just the experience alone” (p. 5). In order to go back and relive the experience, a doorway is the recording of the emotional response.

The same student goes on to describe the difference between “in” and “out” of a text:

**“It’s like a general feeling, if you’re out of the book, if you’re just getting information for information, but if you’re in a book then your information goes up, so when you’re out of a book, yeah, this is this, this is this, this is what happened, but when you’re in a book you’re like oh my god,... like it touch your emotion, you know, it doesn’t feel like you’re just getting information, but you’re in it. Like in general part, the story get you, but when you’re in in, you get the story.”**

Here the student talks about appropriation of the story, a sense of authority in which the power is shifted from the text to the reader. Earlier in the transcript, he also describes how

“into” the story he becomes at the climax, where he gets so angry on the protagonist’s behalf. This involvement is also apparent in many of the other students’ texts at heightened points in the story. Bleich (1974) confirms that the affective response to a story and its narrator “is a rather common event in one’s reading experience, perhaps the most basic event in our ‘getting into’ a work of literature. In our responses, we observe it coming into play, unsolicited, as it were, as part of a natural expression of how we feel” (p. 35). If this is, in fact, a “basic” response to literature, it makes sense that it would be suppressed in Ranciere’s concept of the pedagogical myth, in that its recognition would assume the reader already possesses what he/she needs to enter the text, and does not need hand-holding from the “master” (1991). What one would need, however, is an inciting force that sparks the emotional response, the thing that causes the forward movement towards the text. Certainly, this makes one think of phenomenology, and the relation of oneself to objects. If subjectivity facilitates the reader’s response to text, then intentionality is the driving force behind it.

#### **5.4 Where There’s a Will...**

Intentionality is a term that stems from phenomenology, indicating the way one moves toward an object to create an association with it; intentionality points to the act of “reaching.” This is sparked by desire. Bleich (1991) asserts that we cannot come to know literature, in this case, the object, without this motivation: “Yes, there is an object out there-- a novel, a poem, a play--that has, seemingly, an objective existence, and one does need to be able to read to conceive of it as an object. But just as one has to be motivated to learn to read, one also has to be motivated to think about what one has read--or, indeed to take the initiative to begin with” (p. 4). This initiative, this reaching toward an object, is intentionality.

Bakewell, in her 2016 overview of existentialism and phenomenology, unpacks the phrase “intentionality” to show that at its very core, it means to reach, “from the Latin root *in-tend*, meaning to stretch towards or into something...this reaching towards objects is what our minds do all the time. Our thoughts are invariably *of* or *about* something” (p. 44). She asserts that the mind is always reaching out “in all directions”, even in the dreams of sleep.

Sartre, in his brief treatise on the nature of intentionality, describes this reaching as a “bursting” out of oneself toward the object that one would know, and this, Sartre says in his interpretation of Heidegger’s and Husserl’s theories, is how we as human beings, come to “be” in the world, and he equates this with movement. “To be is to fly out into the world,” Sartre asserts, “to spring from the nothingness of the world and of consciousness in order to suddenly burst out as consciousness in the world . . . this necessity for consciousness to exist as consciousness of something other than itself is what Husserl calls ‘intentionality’” (1939).

But the knowing is not all . . . to phenomenologists, the affective response to the object is just as important in the consciousness of that object. Sartre states that representational knowing is only form of consciousness of an object; “I can also love it, fear it, hate it; and this surpassing of consciousness by itself—i.e., intentionality—finds itself again in fear, hatred and love” (1939). In order to truly know an object in a complete way we must understand our affective response to it. How we feel helps to define our relationship to it, and in that, our relationship to ourselves. Sartre states that subjectivity, which includes our emotional responses to things, provides “ways of discovering the world” (1939). Things reveal themselves to us, as we perceive and respond to them.

Thus intentionality and subjectivity become essential to truly knowing something. To fly out into the world is to move intentionally toward it. Ranciere (1991) calls this intentionality “will”, and believes that this is all one needs to be able to learn. Ranciere’s example of how this works, in his story of Jacotot, is a tale of second language learning. The teacher Jacotot provides his students, who are trying to learn another language, a text in the language they are trying to learn and a translation in their native language. Because Jacotot can not speak the native language, all he can do is provide them with the two texts. The students learn to speak French with these two texts, and the master does not have to explicate the new language to them. Ranciere’s assertion is that the students were driven to learn the language by their own wills to learn, their intentionality, and the wills expressed by the authors who sought to communicate in the text, and the teacher providing them with the text. That was all that was needed.

All their effort, all their exploration, is strained toward this: someone has addressed words to them that they want to recognize and respond to, not as students or learned men, but as people; in the way you respond to someone speaking to you and not to someone examining you: under the sign of equality. (1991, p. 11)

Ranciere compares this way of learning to that of children learning a mother tongue . . . stumbling along the way, repeating themselves and verifying what they are trying to learn, but always reaching, “blindly, figuring out riddles” (p. 10) To Ranciere, this reaching is the “will”: “One could learn by oneself and without a master explicator when one wanted to, propelled by one’s own desire or by the constraint of the situation” (p. 12).

To return to the example of my students’ writing in the texts, we see them propelled forward by their own wills, even after producing statements of confusion. They, too, are stumbling blindly, but propelled by their own desire and subjectivity, and according to Sartre,

this subjectivity feeds back into one's intentionality, which "finds itself again in fear, hatred, and love." Without emotion and desire, the will fades.

However, there is more to this process than just the will and the subjectivity. The role of the text also provides what Ranciere calls the "constraint of the situation." The constraint in the story of Jacotot did not originate from the master in his/her role as explicator, but in that the master provided the students with a "closed circle" of text for them to navigate, and allowed them the freedom to do so; "by leaving his intelligence out of the picture, he had allowed their intelligence to grapple with that of the book" (p. 13).

Grapple is an apt word, and as is evident in my students' annotations, grappling happened often. There were repeated comments of "I don't know what this means", or "I'm confused by this part," or "Maybe..." or "I think that..." as students tried to find their way around new situations and vocabulary in a text that was not in their native language. However, no student left pages of blank space in the wake of such statements. They always jumped back into the text after a few paragraphs with new insights or even an "Ohhhhh!" alluding to their newfound clarity. The closed circle of text provided the students with a world for which to reach, to burst toward . . . and to sometimes land in the dust. Their expressions of confusion are not statements of defeat, or ones that close a door; they are instead springboards of the will.

This, however, does not always happen in class. Confusion in the classroom often breeds silence, as the students mentioned in their interviews. When asked why their experience responding to the text was different than responding out loud in the classroom, one student answered that there was always something to reach for in the text, a target for his intentionality:

**“In class there’s like a blank space between your question and your answer, but in the book there’s a lot of words that are like attached to the part where you’re lost, and you have somewhere to follow...somewhere to trace your answer.”**

In other words, the students move themselves forward via their own will using the natural scaffold of the text, which is in itself an extension of the will and intelligence of the author. According to Ranciere, this dynamic, when compared to the distancing and stultification of the pedagogical myth, is one of emancipation. It presumes that the student in working with the text has all the intelligence needed to navigate it. It is a matter of the teacher’s will, however, to jumpstart the navigation by providing the student with a text, and then asking the student to “verify” what he/she had read:

A pure relationship of will to will had been established between master and student: a relationship wherein the master’s domination resulted in an entirely liberated relationship between the intelligence of the student and that of the book--the intelligence of the book that was also the thing in common, the egalitarian intellectual link between master and student. (1991, p. 13)

I believe that the prolific annotations provided by my students in the closed circles of the books reflect the cycle of intentionality, or will, fueled by emotional response which continues to give birth to further intentionality. If you remove any of these three elements—the will, the emotional response, and the closed circle of text—the reading experience falls apart. I believe this is what made the difference between their experiences with text in eighth grade and their reading experiences in high school. I’m not saying that role of the teacher is unimportant in this dynamic, but it is as one of nurturing and will, not one of superior intelligence. This will be explored further in the Discussion.

### **5.5 “Respond to Me”: The Role of Culture**

As a teacher of emergent bilinguals, I would be remiss to ignore the impact of culture on the reading experiences of the students. However, I will avoid the pitfall of assuming that one’s culture or primary language provides mainly barriers to reading and learning in a

second language. As has already been suggested by Ranciere, an emancipatory experience with text flies by these barriers, or doesn't recognize them at all as barriers, but as springboards for the will. My training in funds of knowledge theories and research (Amanti, 2005) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), as well as my own experience teaching emergent bilingual students, have taught me that students bring to school with them a wealth of resources from their homes and past experiences. Though I also believe that culturally relevant teaching theories should in no way be used as a tool to reify or essentialize students' responses to literature, I also don't want to leave this part of their experience unexamined, as this clearly forms an essential part of their subjectivity.

I choose the definition of culture as described by Au (1993). She asserts that culture is "a dynamic process which people use to make sense of their lives and the behavior of other people" (p. 4) and lists these characteristics as part of the "complex and dynamic" nature of culture:

1. Culture is learned via interactions with friends and family members
2. Culture is shared in that members have a "common understanding of the system, of ways of thinking, and of ways of behaving"
3. Culture is an adaptation, formed in response to environmental, political or economic conditions
4. Culture is constantly changing

Au also states that culture can include physical, mental and behavioral aspects. However, the most important element is that *"no individual ever learns everything there is to know about a particular culture, and each individual's understanding of a culture is somewhat different from that of every other individual"* (pg. 4).



The aspects of culture shared here are clearly linked to each student's individual experience, interpretation and understanding of Karen culture. They hearken to their earliest childhood experiences growing up in the refugee camps in Thailand, where all of them were born. What I sought to glean from the stories they shared, was how their earliest literacy experiences may feed and/or support their current ones.

Though there were some annotations in the texts that referred specifically and recognizably to a culture different than mainstream American culture, there were not as many as I had anticipated. Annotations in the autobiography of the refugee pointed toward similar personal experiences, as they naturally would, but even then, they seemed more experiential than cultural. There was much empathizing with the transition from one home to another, facing prejudice upon entering the United States, and confusion dealing with a new language and a new culture, situations common to most immigrant experiences across cultures.

One annotation compared the power exerted by a character in the book *The Wave* over other students to that of warriors in Thailand or Burma (he couldn't remember which) who were said to be able to put anyone under their control with their words after applying a magic liquid to their lips (see pg. 33, this paper). We need to consider the relation between content and function in this reference to a story from another culture. Is it necessary to make the distinction between the student's reference to this story compared to that of other stories the students have read in class, which they also use to draw comparisons? When they make these connections, are they consciously thinking, "This is a Karen story, different from this other story I have read?" or are they just connecting one of many chapters in the story of their literacy experience? It is easy for us from the outside to draw the distinction, but I think that

we must be wary of dividing the individual experience into two distinct categories, because we find one story exotic to our ears.

Though it may be difficult to discern with authority the influence of cultural specificity on the students' literary interpretations, the focus group responses about their earliest literacy experiences are more clear. The students spoke of a shared experience among them that seemed to be uniquely Karen when compared to practices in early literacy in the United States, and which I felt may have an important connection to the response rate that so surprised me when I first asked them to annotate. It is this experience upon which I want to focus.

Ranciere describes our accumulation of words and language in a beautiful way that illustrates the close link to culture, but also includes us all in a shared experience:

The words the child learns best, those whose meaning he best fathoms, those he best makes his own through his usage, are those he learns without a master explicator, well before any master explicator. . . what all human children learn best is what no master can explain: the mother tongue. We speak to them and we speak around them. They hear and retain, imitate and repeat, make mistakes and correct themselves, succeed by chance and begin again methodically, and, at too young an age for explicators to begin instructing them, they are almost all--regardless of gender, social condition, and skin color--able to understand and speak the language of their parents. (1991, p. 5)

What a cozy, warm space Ranciere conjures for the reader. One, pre-explication, in which we are surrounded by words as we would be by a warm, cozy blanket. It reminds me of the embrace Meg receives from Aunt Beast in L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), in which all the noise of the world is preceded by a pure light and warmth of communication—the mother tongue of Kristeva's reconceptualization of the “chora” (1995, p. 204). The image of the mother tongue brings to mind a cat licking clean her kittens upon first entering

the world, and in the loving gaze of the mother we can totter forward on wobbly legs, feel around blindly, and reach forward in pure unstultified will towards the world.

I was lucky enough to receive a story from my students of this kind of early literacy experience. They described the way that stories are shared from parents and grandparents to the children in Karen culture. I include it below in its entirety, because it was a story told by all of them when I asked them how their elders told them stories.

**HK: At night, they will say it, not write it. They will tell you a story, but they have heard their parents told them, and they will tell us.**

(most students in the group agree that this is the case)

**Me: What was the purpose of the stories when you were little? Why would your parents tell you stories?**

**HMH: When you're a kid that's what they do when you're a kid.**

**LB: To teach you about your future. Giving examples.**

**HMH: To put you to sleep or just to satisfy.**

**HK: For other reasons...**

**Me: Who told you stories?**

**TW: My grandmother had three sisters. Her smallest sister come live with us for a while, and she told me most of the stories, like yeah..those stories, they tell you one time and you could remember everything. You could repeat like, after that.**

**Me: After one time? Why is that?**

**TW: I don't know, like cuz you just lay there and you just listen to them, like you could remember everything, like you could repeat from the start to the end, you could repeat every word. Maybe not exactly, but (MP makes interjecting agreement sounds) you hear it one time and you could remember it...they talk kind of slow, and then...like when they tell stories like that you have to go "mmmmmm" (not really mmmm sound, voiced sound from back of throat, closest to mmmm sound") like constantly, like to show you are listening.**

(HK laughs and nods her head, HMH says, "yeah")

**Me:** So that's considered a sign of respect? To respond?

**TW:** It's not like...it's just like "yes, yes, yes" like throughout like the whole way when they tell you, it's like mmmmm, mmmm, mmmm...it's like each sentence I would guess? Yeah.

**Me:** How did you know to do that?

**HK:** You just know it.

**TW:** They tell you to, like...

**Me:** Do they stop and ask you if you understand? "Do you hear me?" (Shaking of heads, "no") How do they get you to go "mmmmm"?

**TW:** No, they just say it, and then maybe like, pause...mmmmmm

**Me:** Are they saying it, or are you?

**TW:** The listener.

**Me:** How did you know to do it, though?

**HK:** You just stop...

**Me:** But you have to learn how to do it, you're not born knowing to...

**TW:** Yeah, they tell you to do that.

**HK:** They tell you...

**Me:** They say, "When I stop make this sound"?

**TW:** They don't say it, but they say like, "you have to respond to me" (Confirms with those around him in Karen, and then) yeah, like "respond to me"

**Me:** It's not your teacher, it's your family telling you to do this, right?

**TW:** No, it's my young grandma,

**TKP:** like your grandma

**TW:** It's usually like older people that told you.

**TKP:** yeah

**KW: or your parents**

**Me (to TKP): Did you have this too? Were you told to respond?**

**TW: (turns to TKP to confirm) duh law...It's not like they demand you to, but they ask that you do.**

**TKP: yeah, they say...**

**Me: Is that what they say to you?**

**TW: yeah**

**Me: What does that mean?**

**TW: Duh law...is like...respond to me, like respond to me when I say like...don't be quiet, or just like, let me know that you're still listening.**

**HK: Till now, it happened. I still go mmmm when my parents tell me something.**

Aside from when the students were sharing horror stories of the abuses their camp teachers doled out to those who didn't do their work, this was the most shared experience they related. The story seemed to flow out of them as if out of one mouth, one mind. To me, this felt inherently cultural in that it was so obviously shared between them. It opened a window for me into their childhood. Stories for them were not only a soothing source of connection; they were important lessons and links between generations . . . so much so, that the children were asked to respond orally . . . "Duh law" . . . "respond to me." The transference of stories is a shared experience not only between the students in their memories, but between the children and their elders, warm, intimate and connected to feeling, and the children are required to respond. To me this answered one of my biggest questions . . . they were, from a very early age, responders to stories—annotators in the making.

Au (1980) writes about how it is important to understand and respect culturally different reasons for non-participation in the classroom, and to practice “culturally congruent” instruction so that familiar patterns exist between at-home literacy practices and the ones in school. She describes her experience with Hawaiian children, and how their non-responsiveness in class was linked to their culture:

Children in all the classrooms observed were likely to respond less well in situations where they were singled out to recite before the group, with their answers being subject to public evaluation by the teacher. These studies show that the children may in no way be characterized as nonverbal or linguistically handicapped, although there were settings in which they may appear to be so. (p. 92)

I heard a much different story about recitation from my students, who transferred their early learning of stories from the home to school (in Thailand) in a consistently culturally congruent way. I asked them if they would pass along the storytelling tradition to their own children:

**Me: How many of you think when you have kids you will do the same thing?**

**TW: I don't remember any of the stories.**

**HMH: Yeah, I don't remember my stories.**

**TW: I used to remember a lot of them, like, five or six, seven of them.**

**Me: But you said you could remember it after one hearing. But you don't remember it now? Why do you think that is?**

**TW: It's been a long time and I never retell them. I usually (used to) retell them.**

**Me: What do you mean?**

**TW: I tell them in Thailand, like, when we have free time in class our teacher say, “Who want to tell a story?” and then you volunteer...**

**Me: You volunteered?**

**TW: Yeah**

**Me: Who else did that, did anyone else do that?**

**HK: I was shy.**

**Me: Did a lot of kids do that?**

**TW: Like, a couple kids that knew stories. we weren't shy...it wasn't like...**

**Me: So you would voluntarily retell the story in class.**

**TW: yeah**

**Me: And how did the students respond when you told the story? Were they listening?**

**TW (smiling): mmmmm, mmmmm, the WHOLE class, mmmm, mmmmm.**

**Me: They all do it?**

**TW: Yeah, everybody, yeah.**

There was a long way for those stories to travel, across seas and across different worlds of literacy, and the students say they can no longer repeat the stories of their youth. The retelling seems to have been an essential part of the remembering . . . a link to it remaining a part of them. The thread of connection between the reader and the text (or the story) is continued when shared with a class of students that have had similar experiences at home, listening and responding.

What this taught me is that in my students' culture, they were taught at an early age to listen closely to a story, and to respond, even after every sentence, and *then* to be able to retell the stories in front of an audience. As a teacher, this would have been very valuable information for me to have had up front, knowing this responsiveness was connected to their earliest experiences with their mother tongue. The emphasis on response to story at such an early age could be part of the reason why all of them filled their margins with so much writing, even if it was just to say "Oh". They have been responding to stories all their

lives. Also, their experiences reciting the stories in class with their own voices, and hearing the affirming responses from their classmates could be part of the reason why they feel so alienated in their classrooms now, when they feel that others just aren't listening to them, or are not valuing what they feel or have to say.

This story they shared with me, more so than the annotations themselves, highlighted the most important link between their culture and their activity in the margins. The culture was perhaps coming through not in the written expressions themselves, but in the actual act of responding. It was a tool whereby they were able to express themselves as they were in the moment. Mother's milk feeds and nourishes us, helps to build the bones and muscle that are the foundation upon which we grow and continue to change. If subjectivity is the student's emotions and responses, and the intentionality is the will reaching for the text (or the world), then culture is the milk that helps feed the hand that reaches, coursing through it alive and ever-changing, shared as blood is shared between family members, a secret code deeper than skin connecting them through generations. It is the blood and bone and sinew of the reader-responder.

## **5.6 Readers in Exile**

My students are called "generation 1.5" immigrants. This means they have split their formative childhood years between one country and another. The members of the generation before them remain solidly rooted in their homeland, and carry its soil in their pockets each day. The generation after them is born here, and the homeland is a story they hear secondhand. My students are in the middle. They are the ones who were pushed from the nest where they snuggled and responded to stories with warm notes of recognition, and were brought to concrete buildings where they were handed Legos and muffins and taught about



street signs and escalators. In a poem one of my former students recently wrote, he describes it this way:

*I was separated from my parents, learning how to be white  
They gave me Legos, to build my new life  
I was given an apple from the garden of Eden  
and stripped of my culture*

*They expected me to be American*

All of us experience a loss when we are separated from our “mother tongue”, whether that means leaving a homeland, or letting go of our mother’s hand as we step into preschool on the first day. Kristeva believes that we have the opportunity to reconcile this loss when reading literature, because it takes us to a place where we can be reborn. This idea is well summarized by Smith:

It is precisely because the poetic word and literature take subjects beyond themselves that they simultaneously produce sculptures of anguish and excess, destitution and renewal. In so doing, they make us strangers to ourselves. This, Kristeva believes, is the essential human condition, where the riches of language compensate, but imperfectly, for an original loss that occurs to all human beings when they leave the amorphous world of childhood behind to become subjects of speech. (p. 17, 1996)

Thus readers become exiles in literature, strangers in a strange land, even unto themselves, and are faced with infinite possibilities to respond anew to the language in which they are enveloped, not unlike their earliest childhood experiences from which they were originally exiled.

Kristeva believes that, in the world of literature, the subject’s (writer’s and/or reader’s) identity dissolves within the generative space of language, and what are left are our “drives”, which I translate to our intentionality. The difference between Kristeva’s idea of intentionality and that of Sartre, or the “will” of Ranciere, is the significance of the

productive possibilities of the “drives”, in that there are infinite opportunities to create new identities, new language.

The difference in the alienation as described by Kristeva that takes place in literature, and the alienation as described by my students in the classroom, is the possibility of production. In the world of the stultifying classroom, identity is being erased and potential is being removed; the lack and limitations are illuminated. In the world of literature, identity is erased, but potential is added, and possibility is illuminated. All is possible (Smith, 1996). When the students talk about not wanting to be “different” in the classroom, but yet want to be recognized as themselves, to have their subjectivities heard and respected, it is this realm of possibility from which they speak. In literature, Kristeva claims, the constraints of society and identity can be “shattered” and new relationships between the “symbolic and the real, the subjective and the objective” can form (1980); it is a “‘place’ of meaning that does not *name*”(pg. 98).

Kristeva is herself an exile of language, forced to leave her Bulgarian homeland and language for Paris, France after the Yalta Conference divided Europe. When she talks about being a stranger to herself, she is speaking autobiographically as well as theoretically.

To put it bluntly, I speak in French and about literature because of Yalta. I mean that because of Yalta, I was obliged to marry in order to have a French passport and to work in France; moreover, because of Yalta I wanted to “marry” the violence that has tormented me ever since, has dissolved identity and cells....Consequently, as you may have noticed, I have no “I” any more, no imaginary, if you wish... (1980, p. 161)

She describes her literary journey in a non-native language as being “wedded to a torrent” (p. 162) in which she is fragmented and face-to-face with an object—text—which simultaneously invites and rejects identification with it: “it is not me, it is a non-me in me, beside me, outside of me, where the me becomes lost. This heterogeneous object is a body,

because it is a *text*. I have written down this much abused word and insist upon it so that you might understand how much risk there is in text, how much nonidentity, nonauthenticity, impossibility, and corrosiveness it holds for those who chose to see themselves within it.” (p. 163). Thus the text first becomes a place of undoing, and though this sounds violent, Kristeva follows it up with an image of maternity, what the text provides in the undoing: an opportunity for death/rebirth in the casting off of the “I”, reminiscent of the mother tongue, reflecting “echoes of a territory that I have lost but that I am seeking within the blackness of dreams in Bulgarian, French, Russian. Chinese tones, invocations, lifting up the dismembered, sleeping body. Territory of the mother” (p. 163).

So in effect, language is our home, or resting place, and at the same time, it alienates us. For my students, exiled from their homeland, where their families were persecuted and forced to leave, then exiled from the refugee camp to a second refuge, America, their resting place was continuously interrupted. In my student’s poem, he writes:

*There is never a place where we can call home  
We always sleep with one eye open*

In the margins of their texts, the students are always awake. They are constantly reaching for something, whether it be a connection to a character, a memory from long ago, an allusion to a text they have already read, a moment to laugh or cry or scream an epithet at a villain. They claim their confusion with as strong a pencil stroke as they claim their comprehension. I cannot say that they feel “at home” in the texts, and to this day, they still do not call themselves “readers.” Though this was a goal of mine at the beginning of the year, I have learned that this moniker is not so important as the process of responding. They were always responders. In fact, they were born responders. Perhaps they were just waiting

to have the opportunity to “listen to the black, heterogenous territory of the body/text” (Kristeva, 1980, pg. 163) and surrender to its demands, “duh law”. And perhaps this closed circle of text, filled with the regenerative possibilities of language, provided them with the opportunity, through their emotional subjectivity, to recreate themselves anew, casting off the pronouns applied by either themselves or others and resting in the “drives” (Kristeva, 1980) the pure emotional response that regenerates them beyond language, the part of them for which they wish, fervently, to be valued.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

### 6.1 The Emancipators

I began this study imagining that the students would have used the space in their books as a place to extend their agency in an educational system that silences them or makes them feel as if their voices have less value than others. Though the theoretical framework of “figured worlds” provided me with a jumping off point into the study, over the course of my research, I have since changed my mind. In the margins of these texts, I don’t see students actively fighting back against the system. I see them freed from the system. The text becomes a place in which the student is emancipated, freed to reach for the world and make discoveries. Here, the readers aren’t combatants; they are explorers, discovering new worlds in the texts and in themselves. When they talk about the unfairness of their current classrooms, there is no talk of using the text as a way to get back at the teacher or the school system, their dismay is more about how the community is run, and about how their voices are not heard. The students’ response to the figured world of the classroom is to say nothing. I think that the figured world of the classroom, the standardized literacy curriculum and even the ESL curriculum is opposite from the world of the text. The text is the antithesis of a figured world and its preset actors and positions.

I am not saying that there is no agency being exerted in the margins of the texts, but it is one of many responses that may occur. When Lah Bwe chose not to annotate, then explode with language in a kind of wordy rebellion, or use the endpapers to draw his way into the material, these were examples of ways he had been unfettered to respond at will. In other

words, the margins provide room for the readers to feel, be it sadness, anger, joy, indignation, confusion or empathy. They become passages through which students can find their own ways into the text.

In each of these books, I can hear the students' voices calling into the cave, reverberating back to let them know where they are . . . a kind of echolocation for the reader. The text feeds the reader with new ideas, terms, language structures, characters, cultural references, and experiences, and even in this tempest, the reader is the one in control of the product. No one is talking over the students in class, or trying to understand their accents, or waiting impatiently for them to form a response. Like Conrad's captain in *The Secret Sharer*, who was placed newly in charge of a ship on strange waters, they are able to find their own way, in their own way:

And I was alone with her. Nothing! No one in the world should stand now between us, throwing a shadow on the way of silent knowledge and mute affection, the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command. (1902, 1989, p. 192)

"Emancipation" is a meaty word; it's different from the simple act of "freeing" in that it implies an emancipator, one who sets the freeing process in motion. In the literacy classroom, this role is shared by two actors: the will and intelligence of the *student*, and the will and intelligence of the *teacher*, with the text as the "minimal link of a *thing in common*" between them (Ranciere, 1991). I borrow these terms from Ranciere because I believe they capture what is essential about the subjectivities and the intentionalities of the student and teacher. The subjectivity and will of the reader has already been discussed in the previous chapter, but what of that of the teacher?

Grinberg & Saavedra (2000) assert that the inequality experienced by emergent bilingual students is perpetuated by the discipline, curriculum and institution of second-language

learning, which they believe are part of an educational system designed to maintain the social order. In this system, there is a constant distance between those who “have” English, and those who “don’t.” This closely resembles the “stultification” described by Ranciere (1991), in which the distance between the “master”, or keeper of the knowledge, and the “student”, seeker of knowledge, is always maintained. There is little talk of the “intelligence” that Ranciere believes should be taken for granted as the most important element one needs to learn anything. Even when utilizing institutionalized terms such as Limited English Proficient, we continue to create this distance. Ranciere believes we can and should eliminate this kind of stultifying pedagogy for real education to occur.

It is easy upon first reading Ranciere’s text (1991) to assume the teacher is a non-entity in the learning process, that all a student needs is a text and a drive to make his/her way through it. But Ranciere does not say that teachers are unnecessary, quite the opposite. He states that we can all be “emancipatory masters”, as long as we have the will to provide our students with texts and to require that they speak of their experiences.

If we follow the tenets of Ranciere’s “emancipatory master”, the teacher’s role is to provide the “constraint” of the text and allow the student to use his/her intelligence to “break out” of it (p. 13, 1991). It is dependent upon a “pure relationship of will to will” (p. 13). A child, Ranciere admits, may need a master “when his own will is not strong enough to set him on track and keep him there.” It is acceptable for one *will* to obey another in this situation, as long as the individual *intelligences* obey only themselves . . . the method of learning is “purely the student’s”, but put into motion by the teacher’s provision of the text (p. 14).

According to Ranciere (1991), the emancipatory master has two essential jobs besides providing the constraint of the closed circle of text. Essentially, the teacher should 1) require the students to put their speech to what they have learned, and to 2) verify that the speech produced by the student is a result of close attention to the text. In verification, the reader is required to “say what he sees, what he thinks about (the text), what he makes of it” (p. 20), as long as all responses point back to the text in some way. Margin writing can be a good example of this kind of speech, as the words produced by the reader cannot get any closer in attention than to be adjacent to the text itself. In this scenario, the emancipatory master is a kind of firm but faithful patriarch, standing at the doorway of the text and exerting his will to get the students to prove what they have learned, however their individual intelligences may have learned it.

I wish to take this to a different level, and claim that as teachers, we need to be not emancipatory masters, but rather emancipatory *mothers*. Ranciere states that the same intelligence that allows students to learn a new language is the same that they use to learn their mother tongue: “by observing and retaining, repeating and verifying, by relating what they were trying to know to what they already knew, by doing and reflecting about what they had done” (1991, p. 10). If we take this idea back to the one shared by my students in their first literacy experiences, learning stories at the feet, or in the laps, of their elders, being asked to “verify” what they had heard with the command “duh law”, and then asked to repeat what they had learned in class, at first glance it seems to form a link to the concept of the emancipatory master. I believe that the elements of the “emancipatory master” that mirror the early literacy events of my students’ childhoods are ones we should adopt—the provision of the language in the form of story, the requirement for attention, and the demand for a



response that verifies that attention. However, there are maternal elements that seem to be missing from Ranciere's model of instruction, and present in the early literacy experiences of my students, that I feel are also necessary, and not counter to, the emancipatory learning experience.

Kristeva asserts that we are always mourning the loss of the nourishment from our mother tongue—that nameless space beyond text that encompasses pure affect and the force of the primal “drives”—and that words provide a replacement to fill that hunger (1987, p. 26). We are all exiles in text, strangers in a strange land, but we are afforded the opportunity to be reborn through the infinite ways we can respond to text through the creative powers of language. All languages, even foreign ones, afford us opportunities to feel and then be reborn; “I have left my motherland behind, but it is brought to life again in signs, in the mother-tongue...the semiotic causes language to thicken and bulge. It gives us something to chew on” (Smith, 1996). The semiotic that Smith is referencing is Kristeva's maternal semiotic, or “chora” ...a “matrix-like space that is nourishing, unnameable” (Kristeva, 1995, p. 204), where affect and the “drives” are the primary signifier preceding language. However, the provider of this mother-tongue, the mother, also becomes the bridge to spoken language for the child. In a similar way, the wordless semiotic attaches itself to text in ways that recall the mother-tongue, by stimulating the reader's intentionality, and producing an affective response, just as Sarte described the ways objects “unveil themselves to us as hateful, sympathetic, horrible, lovable” (1939). Like an infant reaching for his/her mother, we reach for the text when it first makes us feel.

However, if we agree with Kristeva that text can provide a way to fill the void left by our distance from the maternal, and we subscribe to Ranciere's concept of the emancipatory

master, wouldn't we need a master that is analogous to the text's maternal function? If the teacher is the provider of the text in which lives the word that sustains, then by being the source of that sustenance, the teacher is providing a maternal function. By allowing and encouraging the student to respond to, modify and build upon the text via his/her emotions (a.k.a Bleich's "affective response"), the teacher is countering the patriarchal approach to text that demands the student respond in a certain way, "to master the language, the rules, the games, and the names of the father" (Grumet, 1988, p. 21). She is providing her students with the opportunity to open up the text for themselves.

If the teacher is asking the student to "duh law"—respond to the story and respond to me—then the teacher is providing a maternal function. In the particular case of my students, they learned to respond to their mothers' stories—their first links to text and language—with sounds reflective of the maternal semiotic—"mmm, mmm"—outside of language. Consequently, they were able to verify that they had paid attention to the text by repeating the stories, word for word, in the community of the classroom. Teachers are performing a similar task when they ask students to produce an affective response to text. First, comes the link to the mother-tongue, the unnamable, wordless connection to the text and sense of the possibilities for creating new texts and new selves within those texts. Then follows the students' intentionality that results in the production of language—the performance of the text—in the response. Responding in the margins becomes the perfect antecedent to the early practice of retelling, maturing from the perceptual experience to be more affective and associative in nature.

I assert that another maternal function of the emancipatory mother would be to provide a watchful eye over the students in how they are using their unique intelligences to access the

material. In contrast, the traditionally patriarchal view, or “the look”, is one that essentializes students and negates individual response:

The look that constitutes identity in school is organized to undermine dialogue. The theater of the classroom manipulates what Lacan has called ‘the scopic drive,’ permitting students to be seen and to look, but never at what they desire to see....This look does not search for the student’s reality, as Buber suggests, for it does not receive the ‘purposefully streaming by of all things’ but only examines the student before it to note the resemblance between the child and the image established for its development. (Grumet, 1988, p. 112)

One of my students expressed his frustration with “the look” when he said:

**“...some teachers they expect different things from you, sometimes they just want to be, like, for you to be a writer like them and so they want to make you like them, but sometimes I feel like you want to make you, YOU...not them. “**

The look of the mother emancipator would not fix the student in place, but rather affirm and note the ways the student reaches and grows, a “sideways glance that watches the student out of the corner of the eye” (Grumet, 1988, p. 116). Grumet asserts that the mother is a link to the world for the child, and in a similar way, the teacher is a link to the curriculum for the student. The teacher sees the student “through” the curriculum (p. 116). The information gleaned from this study has provided me with a window into the subjectivities of my students, and I believe that studies like this could help inform teachers trying to select texts to introduce to their students. For example, with Thoo Wah, I used my observations of the way he judged characters, approached situations in text and immersed himself in the stories to provide him with future texts that might challenge his worldviews or feed his interests. I was asked myself, if he has come this far with this book, what book would provide a good next step forwards in his overall literacy journey, and in his continued creation of self?

Besides providing nourishment in the form of text, a gentle will and a watchful eye, the emancipatory mother would also provide a sheltered space for an emancipatory pedagogy to occur. The space should be one appropriate for what Ranciere describes as a “society of

artists” in which is repudiated “the division between those who know and those who don’t, between those who possess and the property of intelligence. It would only know minds in action: people who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone” (1991, p. 71). The artists in such a community naturally believe in their ability to describe how they feel and to make others empathize, to make all work “a means of expression” (p. 70). Thus, the charge of the emancipatory mother in the classroom is to create a kind of studio in which the students are freed to explore and produce expressive works. A requirement of this community would be, as was expressed in the voiced wishes of my students, that faith and value be placed in the intelligence, feelings and opinions of the class members, and that they are given the room to recreate themselves anew.

If the student has grown so tall from these experiences that they can stand before the class, or the world, and share what he/she has learned, the teacher has provided a maternal function. When my students were asked to annotate their texts, one of the goals of that practice was to be better able to share their thoughts and ideas with the rest of the class.

Gallagher (2004) asserts that part of reading deeply involves collaboration with others:

Someone once said there is not a single book on Earth that is completely understood by any one person. Every one of us comes to the printed page with different prior knowledge and experiences, with different viewpoints and biases, with different insight and blind spots. Though we can ‘comprehend’ text the first time we read it, deeper comprehension is more likely to occur when we discuss our reading with others. (p. 104)

After all students independently read each chapter at home, one student led the class discussion for the day. Selected students came ready to lead the class, placing their text under a document camera and sharing points of insight, revelations, associations or even

spots of confusion. They also came with questions—some that they believed would get others thinking in new ways, or some that simply requested help from the group in clarifying a portion of the text. We operated under the idea that seven heads were better than one, and that we all had something to learn from each other’s perspectives. This practice became an effective scaffold for my students’ comprehension, and they admitted afterward that this was the best part of reading together. Rather than devote time in class to “silent reading,” I saved those precious moments we had together for discussion. The actual reading and responding to the text took place at home. In class, we responded to each other.

Just as the margin writing provided a way for students to perform the text *inside* the text, the classroom discussions provided them a chance to perform the text *outside* the text. The students used the text they had created in the margins to inform their secondary (public) performance of it. Thus, their reading experiences were brought into the light and shared, expanding the reading experiences of others by pointing to more possible worlds. In this way, the act of reading becomes an aesthetic experience twice over: “Because aesthetic activity requires the making of things, comprehension is made palpable and accessible to the perception and response of other readers. Every time a text is drawn into performance, it is the reading of the text and never the text itself that is performed” (Grumet, 1988, pg. 148).

Just as language first forms in a dyad, between the mother and child, its growth is dependent upon interaction with others. Bleich (1978) states that it is essential that the members of a learning community be obligated to one another to build knowledge (p. 296). By sharing one’s learning experience with the community, it in itself becomes a text that all the members can look at and add to:

When a reader takes account of his own language in his proposal of knowledge, the proposal is subjectively authorized and collectively negotiable. In this process,

the response statement makes room for the reader to objectify himself and his experience—relative to himself. He sets his reading experience apart as the object of study and establishes the extent of his responsibility for his thoughts. The responsibility becomes functional within a prearticulated collective purpose. In this way, critical knowledge is inseparable from the reader's responsibility for it and from the collective interests of the reader's community. (Bleich, 1978, p. 297)

The overall goal of the learning community and this practice, according to Bleich, is to make meaning of the reading, and to thus better understand oneself as a reader. The result is a body of knowledge, constructed by the community, larger than the sum of its parts; a third text now exists from which all students can draw and add to their own experiences as readers.

## **6.2 Conclusion**

As a teacher of emergent bilinguals, one of the things I notice is my students often initially experience confusion about what they are reading, but in time, they get it. Well-meaning teachers often swoop in too quickly to “right” any misconceptions. Margin writing gives students the time and opportunity to struggle through the text and find their way out on their own. Though I don't believe that my students were actively choosing to exercise agency against a system, I do believe that emancipatory activities that assume their intelligence and capability, like margin writing, can only help serve to breed a sense of agency for the future. At the same time, for students to also see their intelligence and creativity, they need to first feel grounded and secure. This the job of the emancipatory mother, who provides students with texts to “chew” on, the freedom and encouragement to emotionally respond to and perform those texts, and a classroom community that supports and enhances that performance.

In my mind, Kristeva and Ranciere are unsung scholars of second language learning. The former draws from her own experiences as an emergent bilingual to produce complex

theories about how we all become “strangers to ourselves” in the throes of language, simultaneously experiencing exile, rebirth and reconnection with the mother tongue from whence we were separated. The latter bases an entire pedagogical manifesto upon a story of a teacher and emergent bilingual students and their accidental emancipation via a shared text. I think it is time we looked to some of these revolutionary theories to consider how we might open up our own ideas about second language learning, and the potentialities of our students.

There is a danger today in our emergent bilingual students’ voices becoming appropriated by others—especially in a political climate that shuns, distrusts, and marginalizes refugees and immigrants even more than before. There is a danger that my students’ voices will be watered down and mistranslated even by those with the best of intentions. I acknowledge that I am a white teacher, trying to provide a place for their voices to be heard in this paper, but I am well aware that mine is still the primary voice here. I suppose in a scholarly work, this is normal and expected. The larger point, however, is this: my students’ voices, inside and outside the text, must speak for themselves. For their cultures and races, yes, clearly they are better spokespersons than I will ever hope to be. But they also need to be able to assert their individuality to resist reification in all its forms. The best thing we can do as teachers is to provide them with the tools and opportunities to do that. Sometimes it begins with something as simple—and as powerful—as putting a text in their hands.

We also need to not be afraid to let students respond to texts with their own words, bringing to the fore their talents for using whatever means they have to express their feelings and opinions about what they read. Atwell-Vasey (1998) suggests that the rules we do teach about language should be presented as a means for them to achieve this end:

...I think to use language well, students need to stay close to the way they use words in life—as a way to sustain themselves and other people. Educators would be better off, I think, to focus on this signifying process of students, that is, what students mean and want from language. The grammars, structures, and stylistic forms so prevalent in the language curriculum should be treated as ancillary to the larger function of language as a signifying practice, and resituated to help students shape what they want. (p. 4)

At the time of this writing, a ban on immigration from Muslim countries has been put into effect, from whence a majority of our refugees come seeking asylum from persecution and murder. As I write this, we also sit in the middle of a 120-day halt on all refugees entering the country. I have students anxiously waiting to hear if their grandparents will be allowed to join them in this “free” country they wish to claim as their own. There has never been a time when teaching others to use their voices loudly has been more important, whether it is to speak up for themselves, for their race, for their family or even for a girl in a book being brutally attacked by an oppressor who wishes to silence her. My students may live in the margins, but the margins can be a perfect place from which to speak to the words closest to them . . . a place to forge a text that is their own.



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