Reading Experience: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Reading as "Not a Reader"

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ABSTRACT

MEREDITH N. SINCLAIR: Reading Experience: A Phenomenological Inquiry into
Reading as "Not a Reader"
(Under the direction of Madeleine Grumet)

For many high school students, being "not a reader" means lack of engagement in school-based literacy activities, including reading and writing, and a subsequent lack of academic success. Most importantly, the "not a reader" identity often comes with a particular understanding of reading, one that is limited to information extraction from texts and creates an artificial divide between the activity of reading in classrooms and the activity of lived experience in the world. Using hermeneutic phenomenology as a frame of inquiry, this dissertation attempts to understand reading as "not a reader," through the lived experience of three African-American high-school age leavers in a community literacy program and the teacher/researcher. It explores the gap between what the students thought "doing narrative" meant, the way reading and writing were talked about in schools, and the way they actually "did narrative," their use of language both as writers/speakers and listeners/readers. As part of this exploration, this study questions the boundaries of reading as defined by common classroom activities and curriculum documents, including the Common Core State Standards, and the way these boundaries work to form the "not a reader" identity. Using the idea that dialogue is a fundamental human activity underlying our identity formation and our interactions with one another, this work explores possibilities for engaging "not a reader" students in reading as dialogue that bridge the divide between classroom reading and the students' lived

experience. Drawing on Reader Response Theory, it offers an understanding of the activity of reading that suggests students must read texts in the world in order to engage in dialogue with them; that is, the texts themselves and the conversations around those texts must be rooted in the lived experience of the reader. Finally, this work seeks to offer insight into the type of curriculum that could allow for agency in reading, a curriculum that allows space for students to "talk back" to texts and produce meaning through dialogue with texts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter

SPIRAL ONE

NOT A READER – A TEACHER'S DISMAY

Blake first appeared in my classroom during the final minutes of back to school night. She had come along with a group of her friends to meet me, her freshman English teacher, before the year officially began the following week. In what I would come to know as typical Blake fashion, she was full of things to say - and full of questions: "So what are we going to be doing this year? What are we reading? You should know I *love* to talk." In that moment she possessed a self assured optimism and genuine interest in where the class might take her. But as she made her way to the door, something shifted. Her voice remained upbeat, perhaps as a pre-emptive defense, but words suggested defeat: "You know I'm not going to pass your class, right?" "But how do you know?" I countered. "We've not even begun." "Well," she said, "that test. I won't pass it. I'm just *not a reader*." And with that, she skipped out the door.

Years later I am still haunted by Blake's words – *not a reader*. As she predicted before we ever read a word together, Blake did not pass "that test" (the North Carolina End of Course Test for English I) and she did not pass my class. In fact, by the end of the year, she became more often sullen than sunny, convinced that she was simply "not a reader" and for that matter "not someone who did well in school." Looking back, I am ashamed that I did not challenge Blake's notion of "reader," that I was unable to convince her that the skills tested on the EOC were not all encompassing of what mattered in the study of literature nor an accurate measure of her worth as a student.

I do not know how Blake managed the rest of her high school days. Like a number of my other students, her talk had become more and more about getting out of school, finding an alternative to a daily routine that seemed to have no purpose for her; perhaps she joined the thousands of students who leave high school without a diploma every year. Or maybe she stuck it out to graduation. While I found myself increasingly frustrated with and even angry at Blake for her resistance to my offers of help and her increasing refusal to participate in class, I also found myself troubled by the institution that defined *reader* and *good student* as a test score. This was problematic not only because of the effect it had on Blake's understanding of herself as a student and her subsequent performance of that role, but also because it narrowly defined the act of reading.

What does it mean to be a reader? For Blake, being a reader meant the ability to pass a standardized, multiple-choice test on short reading passages, passages that she had likely never seen before, that were taken out of context, and that were disconnected from any other sorts of classroom activities (discussion, writing, etc.). When I asked her to read a text, Blake looked for a pre-determined meaning to extract and present; I remember her saying things like "I don't know what it's supposed to be! You're the teacher. You tell me." She operated under a model of text consumption, a model codified by standardized testing and state curricula and even by me as her teacher, a model that asked her to decode a text in order to extract particular information, the same *meaning* any other *good reader* would extract.

But reading is not an act of terminal consumption. Louise Rosenblatt (1995) calls the literary text "a mode of living" (p. 264); we navigate texts in the same way we

live our lives, constantly shifting perceptions and creating meaning based on our experiences. As Azar Nafisi (2004) advises the women in her secret reading group in Tehran, to read a novel "you inhale the experience. So start breathing" (p.111).

How do we teach students to "inhale the experience" that is reading literature? Reader response theorists like Rosenblatt have argued the answer lies in engaging student responses and experiences in an active creation of meaning. But what happens in classrooms frequently falls short of *doing something with* students' responses; students do not move to the deeper stuff of meaning making and develop an understanding of reading that is flat and lifeless. I do not believe that is what most teachers want or intend to do. What might we do differently?

If we make explicit the reading process, present it as an act of creation instead of consumption, what happens to the way students experience the text? What changes, if any, occur in the way they understand their identity as readers and students within the classroom moment? And what implications might a reading pedagogy centered on response and meaning making have for both the teaching of literature and the future encounters with literature students will have?

Ultimately, these are questions of agency. Traditional literature study and institutional practices such as standardized testing place meaning firmly in texts. Students are asked to become proficient consumers of text, capable of extracting specific information. Teachers are tasked with guiding students to that information, honing students' consumptive skills. The reader has limited agency to explore, confirm, or challenge her own thoughts about the text and the way they relate to the world at large. But, as Robert Scholes (1989) argues, reading "is not just as matter of acquiring

information from texts, it is a matter of learning to read and write the texts of our lives"

(p. 19).   When we read for experience instead of for the consumption of information,

when we embrace the role of dialogue and our ability to do in the world, we return

agency for meaning making to the reader. We start breathing.

Echoes: Birth of a Project

This dissertation examines the experience of students like Blake, those who

identify as *not a reader* as they encounter and transact with literature; it explores the

lived experience of reading as *not a reader*.   As I have found in writing this dissertation,

such exploration defies neat packaging. But as it must be packaged, I have arranged this

work in a series of spirals, imagining that each spiral represents another layer of my

thinking as I investigated the phenomenon of "reading as *not a reader*."   I have

borrowed the idea of spirals from Louise Rosenblatt, who describes reading as a

"constructive, selective process over time in a particular context. The relation between

reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually

being affected by what the other has contributed" (p. 26). I like the idea of spirals as a

way to describe both the reading process and the process of this investigation; as I will

explain more fully in the next chapter, I found the process of my inquiry mirrored in

many ways the reading process I hoped the students would engage in. At the center of

the spiral is the text – or the phenomenon of interest - around which circles our various

re-readings or stages of inquiry. Even as we move outward from the center to incorporate

our experiences, other texts, and so on, we revolve around the center, always returning to

it.

The spirals begin with myself, my experience as a teacher, my vision for this project, my interest in theory; gradually they broaden to take in the experience of the students in the project, to reach further into the world.   As I will argue later, this same spiraling happens when we read; our personal response – often an emotional one – is at the heart of our interest. From there, we move back and forth across text and experience to generate some meaning, some understanding of the thing; that is what I hope to accomplish here.

At the core of this project is the dismay I felt as a teacher about and for students like Blake. Before I became a teacher, I could not imagine that anyone could not love reading. But so many did not. They struggled to decode, refused to participate, or read lifelessly. I was angry at them for not engaging with me, angry at the system for restricting what counted as "teaching reading," and angry at myself for not finding some way to make reading work for everyone.   As an idealist (to a fault), I have to believe there is a remedy for my anger and dismay, a better way to teach reading that brings life and activity to texts. This is the story of my search.

September 11 – Event Memory[1]

There are 6 of us around the table – James, Andre, Micah, Sierra, Steven[2], and myself. They've all volunteered to be here, but even so are a bit clueless about what exactly it is they've volunteered for. And not quite sure what to make of me...Am I a teacher? Another one of the college students they are used to volunteering in the

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[1] Passages in italics represent my memories of the moment (indicated by date) recalled as I transcribed and re-read transcripts. They offer another representation of what transpired during my field work and are generally are associated with an excerpt from my transcripts. In chapter 2, I will explain these "event memories" further.

[2] Names throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms.

program? Some unknown entity? I, in turn, know little about them. I've been told by the

program director that they all tested into the program reading somewhere around the 8th

grade level. I know Micah is 17; Andre, James, and Sierra are 18; and Steven is 20 –

they are all African-American. I know that for some reason or another they all left high

school. And I know that they've all made the choice to enroll in this program with the

hope of obtaining their GED. Right now we are planning to work together two hours a

day, three days a week for six weeks meeting here at the local community organization

where their normal GED classes are held. I will soon learn that the program is

somewhat fluid; students are always coming and going and are in various stages of

completion. Some come in very motivated and finish quickly. Others linger, perhaps

with spotty attendance. Others still will leave the program as they did high school. The

five students around the table have all recently begun. It's September, the season when

school begins.

It's been five years since I've stood in front of a class of high school aged students

or sat among them as I'm doing now. I've spent that time reading theory, engaging in

intellectual debates, and working with pre-service teachers. Much of this work has been

driven by the question of how to be a better teacher to students like Blake; I feel her

presence, the ghosts of students past, in this room with me now. The past five years of

study have given me a language for many of the instincts I had as a teacher; what will I

do with that language? Now, here I am again, surrounded by interesting but possibly

disinterested young people, facing a test that claims to define them as literate or not.

Will the story be different?

We've been given a room down the hall from the main activities of the literacy program. It's not much – a small round table and half a dozen chairs, two computers over on the side, and walls lined with college pendants. Random posters of student work from the after school program for younger students come and go over the weeks. We don't do anything particular to claim the space as our own, but it does come to be "our room." A few months down the road we temporarily move to another room – both the students and I feel dislocated and are happy to return to "our space" the next week. We meet in the mornings – 10 to noon – usually someone is late and often they reach for coffee or hot chocolate to stave off sleepy eyes. As is the habit of many classrooms, we often close the door. In part this is to give a sense of privacy, to mark this as a safe space for sharing. But it may be also because I, in particular, feel self-conscious; will the work we do be perceived as unorthodox or worse as unimportant in helping the students achieve their GED? Even with the door mostly shut we can hear the sounds of another program running in the nearby gym, squeaking shoes and chants, pep talks for elementary kids.

After I give my brief "hello and thanks for joining the group," James starts us off: "I can read well, but I don't like reading." "Well, ok" I think. "Guess I've landed in the right place. I did want to read with students who claim to be not a reader." I suggest we might all introduce ourselves and explain that I'm a graduate student interested in how students make meaning from texts. I tell them I used to be a teacher and say a little about what I hope we might do together: we'll read some texts, write some responses, have discussions. I have this idea that we'll create these really cool scrapbook things where we can collect the things we create as we read. There are a few bemused and

skeptical glances but no commentary. We go around the circle. Like most first days of

class, the talk is a bit stilted at first; no one really knows any one else and no one wants

to say too much until we've tested the waters. "So why did you decide to come work

towards your GED?" I ask. That's an easy place to start, right? "What do y'all want to

do when you're done here? What's your plan?"

September 11 - Transcript

Steven: I'm going to college.

Meredith: So what do you want to study?

Andre: Business.

Steven: You gotta be smart for that.

Meredith: Do you have a sense of what you want to do with that?

Steven: I wanna open my own tattoo shop.

Meredith: Like you are an artist?

Steven: Nah, run one. I'll go recruit my own artists.

Meredith: And what kind of business do you want to do? *To Andre*

Andre: Um…my pops own like a lot of clubs and stuff. So if I get my business and marketing degree, I'll take over.

Meredith: Ah, ok. So you have a business empire waiting for you. What about you James?

James: I like working with little kids; kids who can't talk. *There's laughter*

Meredith: So what are you planning to do when you're done here?

James: I don't know …yet. I would like to have kids eventually.

Meredith: Do you want to go to school beyond this?

James: I'm done with school; just have to be here.

Meredith: What about y'all? *To Micah and Sierra*

Micah: I'm going to law school.

Meredith: Law school. What kind of law do you want to practice?

Micah: I don't know yet.

Sierra: I want to start off like being a case manager. And then finish going to school and I wanna be a social worker. Do you know how long it takes to be a social worker?

We often ask students the "what do you want to be?" question; I suppose it does give us some insight into what interests them and what they value. Here I think it shows something that the most sophisticated test scores cannot capture. These are students who define themselves and who have been defined by schools as *not a reader*. And yet certainly businessmen, lawyers, and social workers are people who read. So are these simply unattainable goals for these students? Some test scores would argue they are. Or is it that we need to reframe the way we think about reading and teach reading in schools to better reflect activity in the world?

From the planning stages of this project, I knew that I wanted work as a teacher to be part of my inquiry. Because access to a regular public school classroom would be complicated at best, I sought out other settings in which I might have a class of high school aged students. Since I was most interested in the experiences of *not a reader* students, I contacted various community organizations engaged in literacy work with youth. Success in Action, a GED preparation program sponsored by a small, local non-profit and housed under the larger umbrella of the local Literacy Council invited me to work with a small sub-set of their students.

Success in Action is open to students who have left high school and are seeking their GED. It is a self-paced program that relies on tutors to provide academic support. Some students move quickly through the program, successfully completing their GED in a few months. Others linger for a year or more. The program director suggested I might work with a small group of students he identified as testing on about an 8th grade reading level[3] who had recently begun the program or were about to start. These test scores coupled with the students' status as high school leavers made it likely that many of the students in the program would identify as *not a readers,* making the program a good place to recruit participants. I provided a recruitment flyer, and met with interested students individually to discuss the sort of work I hoped to do with them in the project. Five students initially volunteered to participate. Although I explained to them that I hoped the work we would do could improve their reading skills, which in turn could improve their performance on the GED, specifically preparing for the GED was not a part of our work together.

The project was originally scheduled to run for six weeks. We met for two hours a day (from 10am to noon), three out of the four days a week the students attended the program. By week 4, both Sierra and Steven had stopped coming to Success in Action at all; James, Micah, Andre, and I continued our work together. At the end of the initial six weeks, I suggested I might continue to come once a week through the end of the school year. This was in part due to the fact I wanted to continue to collect data and explore

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[3] While I never saw any test data on my participants nor did I give them any sort of formal assessment, I would challenge even what the program's entry test identified about them as readers. I would agree that James, Micah, and Andre all had varying degrees of difficulty decoding text and a range of comfort levels with texts depending on the type of text we were working with. But certainly their ability to reason and to make sense of texts and their experiences in the world was what one would expect of a 17 or 18 year old. So to say "8th grade reading level" already begins to truncate what one might mean by "being a reader" or engaging in the activity of "reading."

other ways of engaging the reading process, but it was also a decision driven by a growing student-teacher bond. The students were amenable to this extension, so I continued my work into March, spending a total of six months working with the students.

In the beginning, my plan for each week was to introduce a short text, have the students generate a written response, re-visit and share those responses, find other texts that somehow connected to the original text, and incorporate responses to those into our dialogue with and around the original text. The students' writings and the texts we used would make up a Reader's Scrapbook that I hoped would provide tangible evidence to the students of their meaning making process.   In Chapter 3, I discuss more thoroughly the background of this idea, how it fell flat, and what evolved to take its place.

In the early weeks of the project, we worked through a number of rather haphazardly selected texts, chosen largely because they were short– some poetry, some song lyrics, some short stories. The students' reading levels and pace seemed to make it necessary to use very short texts so they would be able to finish reading in the time we had to work (because absences were fairly frequent, it was difficult to continue texts over multiple days). Many times our conversations drifted to the concerns of their neighborhoods; we talked about their experience in schools, about violence, and about their communities. We spent one day in late September discussing the local school system after reading an op-ed by Jonathan Kozol.   This work seemed to move closer to engaging them in the sort of meaning making activities I'd hoped to nurture, but we were not quite there yet. I had hoped that the students would bring in texts of their own choosing for study with the group. Although they largely resisted this invitation (they did

bring in song lyrics on two occasions), I began to see that the conversations we were

having should influence the selection of the texts instead of the other way around.

In mid-October, I stumbled upon "Headline: Incident No. 1113" while searching

the web for just the "right" text to speak to the conversations we had been having.

Although it was "long" by the students' standards[4] – about 9 pages printed – I hoped it

would be engrossing enough that they would want to stick with it.

Headline: Incident No. 1113

Ballou Senior High School was used to bad days. And then came the day Thomas "T.J." Boykin allegedly shot James "J-Rock" Richardson.

By **Jason Cherkis, Sarah Godfrey, John Metcalfe, Annys Shin and Chris Shott** • March 5, 2004

Thomas "T.J." Boykin returned for his final year at Frank W. Ballou Senior High School last September with the simple goal of graduating. First, he needed a class schedule. But at Ballou, such schoolhouse basics couldn't be taken for granted.

T.J., like about 100 members of Ballou's student body, didn't receive a schedule on the first day of school. Nor the second. Nor even the fifth. Administrators blamed a computer virus. Instead of sending the children into classrooms with their peers, the school warehoused them in the cafeteria.

--from *Washington City Paper*

"Headline: Incident No. 1113" is a narrative account of a 2004 school shooting

motivated by neighborhood rivalries at an infamous Washington, D.C. high school.

Neighborhood violence had been a reoccurring topic of conversation; we'd even

discussed the ways it spills over into schools. All the students reported being somehow

connected to violence; they all knew people who had been killed and most had witnessed

a shooting themselves. James had been kicked out of school for his participation in a

violent assault on campus. Everyone described themselves as either directly connected to

or friendly with a gang (although they did not use that term).   They were expert on this

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[4] Chapter 4 explores further the students' opinions on the length of texts.

topic in ways I was not. I had wanted them to bring texts to our sessions that they found meaningful, that they could teach; their stories were the texts they brought.

I presented "Headline: Incident No. 1113" along with a list of links to various other sources – blogs, newspapers, school statistics, pictures – that were related to the shooting (had time permitted I would have asked the students to source these). I hoped this would generate conversation about the ways stories get constructed. I also hoped it would provide some ground for critical consideration of the situations around neighborhood violence they had already described and how they connect with the larger dialogue in society. Without naming it to either the participants or myself at the time, I was asking that they conduct the same sort of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry I was (described in Chapter 2) within the inquiry of my project – layers of experience. Chapter 4 explores how our reading in the project shifted as we moved to this set of texts and others like it.

After working through "Headline: Incident No. 1113" and related texts, we started a project to explore through the reading and writing of multiple perspectives our own community. Each student wrote (or began to write) a narrative describing his experience in his neighborhood. We read related texts as well, among them "In the City" (discussed extensively in Chapter 5). We also looked at other perspectives on school and neighborhood youth violence, including song lyrics, radio broadcasts, and essays.   As we read and re-read, we wrote through our conversation in a process mirroring that of this dissertation as a whole.

Not a Reader: Turning to the Literature

Before I return to the primary scene of action of this story – the six months I spent getting to know and working with the students who participated in this project – I would like to step back to the concern at the core of this project. Certainly I am not the first teacher or researcher to be troubled by or interested in why some students are *not a readers*. As is generally true of labels, the terms used to define and describe students who are not successful with traditional school literacy and reading tasks are both problematic and informative. They position students in various (often negative) ways; however, they do provide insight into the ways that schools, educators, and researchers view and treat students who do not fit the model of *reader*. *Struggling*, *at-risk*, *reluctant, remedial*, *resistant,* and *marginalized* have all been used to describe students who do not conform to school sanctioned literacy practices (Franzak, 2006). The use of these terms by schools and researchers tells us more about how these students are viewed by and positioned by institutions than they do about students' actual abilities or needs. In constructing this project, I struggled with how to talk about participants as *not a readers*, a label I borrowed from Blake's self description; any other term seemed limiting and reinforced the very ideas I wanted to call into question.

The various descriptors for *not a reader* exist because of the ways schools organize and process students, a need to sort and order students; like other categories, being *not a reader* is a socially constructed state dependent on how being a *reader* is defined within a particular context (in this case, the institution of school). I will return later in this inquiry to the social construction of identity, considering how the figured world of school reading might create the *not a reader* identity. Alvermann (2001) describes how those students who do not align with school literacy expectations are then socially constructed

as *struggling readers*; these struggling readers quite often have sophisticated literacies but for various reasons do not engage with school-sanctioned literacy in expected ways. This is the thing that has always struck me about students who did not engage in school literacy activities – we all tell stories; we all interpret the situations in which we find ourselves. Are these activities so different from what *readers* do with texts?

Schools are, of course, hardly neutral institutions, but rather are products of the political and social environment in which they operate. Education policy and education theory work to create particular expectations of students and can work to push students to the margins of school literacy (Franzak, 2006). As Franzak describes in a review of the literature on marginalized adolescent readers, one example of how education policy pushes students into set reader roles is the use of standardized test data, such as the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) results, to create a sense of crisis around the number of *failing* students. The problem is that results from these tests are extrapolated to become part of a student's reader identity and fail to account for other aspects of the student's literate life. Blake's assertion that she would not pass "that test" and therefore should not bother to engage in our class activities is symptomatic of this. Similarly, the students in this project were labeled as particular types of students based on test scores and school performance (including the fact they were introduced to me as "students reading around an 8th grade level").

Not all students labeled as something other than *reader* are those who struggle with literacy skills. In their discussion of student attitudes towards reading, Strommen and Mates (2004), use the terms *readers* and *not-readers*. They distinguishing the latter from *nonreaders* as a way to avoid implying these students lack reading skills; instead, *not-*

readers are students from across the ability spectrum who do not report reading for pleasure. Lenters (2006) similarly differentiates between *struggling readers* – those who have difficulty with literacy skills – and *resistant readers* – those who simply do not read. She notes, however, that *struggling readers* can easily become *resistant readers* and vice versa. Bintz (1993) describes *passive readers* and *reluctant readers* as two alternatives to *reader*. *Passive readers* are those who can read fluently but seldom read for pleasure or outside of school; these passive readers typically read for targeted information (like looking for key words to complete assigned questions) and often have difficulty with meaning making tasks. *Reluctant readers* actively avoid reading, frequently do not complete reading related school assignments, and may or may not have difficulties with the technical aspects of reading.

The problem with these labels is that they frequently get internalized by both teachers and students; at first imposed, the label gets taken up as part of the student's identity. At various times during the project, James, Andre, and Micah self-identified as *not a reader*. Their adoption of the *not a reader* identity may well be a result of this process. As Vasudevan and Campano (2009) note, "What are supposedly neutral assessments of a student's skills are really social assessments of their identities" (p. 325); labels have lasting impact. I never saw test scores for nor did any sort of formal assessment with Micah, James, and Andre; however, I can say with confidence that they were not monolithically *not a readers*. In our time together, I observed that each of them had varying degrees of literacy skills, varying reasons for engaging or not engaging with texts, and various strengths in other literacies that were valuable tools for engagement with texts.

As an alternative to the above labels which place responsibility solely on the student (as struggling, resistant, reluctant, etc.), the term *marginalized reader* has been increasingly used in recent years, as a way to acknowledge the role of schools and other institutions in students' relationships with literacy.   Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris (2008) define marginalized readers as "those who are not engaged in the reading and writing done in school; who have language or cultural practices different from those valued in school; or who are outsiders to the dominant group because of their race, class, gender, or sexual orientation" (p. 405).   These students likely do not perform well on (or are resistant to) traditional school literacy tasks, but they may well be proficient in other literacies or enjoy reading texts outside of school.   Moje, et al's definition of *marginalized reader* certainly fits Micah, James, and Andre; they reported being not engaged in school literacy practices, often spoke and wrote in non-standard English, and as African-American males were outside of the dominant group. *Marginalized reader* is still an imperfect solution to my labeling dilemma as it posits students in a passive role. Certainly schools, *do things to* students, but students frequently find ways to resist and talk back to what is done to them or expected of them.

One example of this resistance is the way students may use silence, not as an indication of lack of motivation, but as a way to protect themselves from being seen as poor readers or as a strategy to learn content they did not understand from their own reading. Hall's work (2006, 2007) with middle school readers found that students labeled *struggling readers* often are working to try to connect with and make sense of texts, although these efforts may be misread as disengagement. One way to understand these silences, or other strategies struggling readers may employ, is to engage students in

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discussions about reading practices and their reading identities, a strategy I adopted in this project.

It is also important to recognize that a student's reader identity is neither static nor one-dimensional. Bintz (1993) suggests viewing readers not as categories or labels but as "interpretive stances; that is readers who naturally demonstrate different literate behaviors and attitudes depending on the different stances they take towards different kinds of texts" (p. 613). This allows for not only shifts in reader dispositions through time and context, but also takes into account the social factors, including the complex relationship between reader and learning context. Students develop a sense of their reader identity through their experiences with texts in and out of school. Hall (2012) defines reader identity as "how capable individuals believe they are in comprehending texts, the value they place on reading, and their understandings of what it means to be a particular type of reader within a given context" (p. 369). I never thought to ask Blake what she thought of the reading I asked her to do or what she thought of herself as a reader; doing so seems a logical starting place for reimagining what reading can be.

While schools fail to engage many students in the study of texts, minority and low-income students (groups to which the majority of the participants in this study and in the literacy program from which they were drawn belong) are disproportionately represented in tallies of low-performers and school-leavers, a disparity Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) frame as a human rights issue. Although the standardized tests used to measure reading proficiency are not ideal (and serve to perpetuate the idea of reading for consumption), they do serve as an indicator that students' ability to make meaning with

texts is not being fully nurtured by schools, a fact particularly true for low-income and minority students.

In North Carolina, the EOC for English I serves as the reading component of the Adequate Yearly Progress measurement for compliance with the Federal No Child Left Behind Act. For the 2010-2011 school year, only 68 percent of African-American students and 72 percent of Hispanic students in North Carolina scored proficient or higher on the English I EOC; nearly 89 percent of white students met or exceeded the passing mark. Not quite 70 percent of students designated as "economically disadvantaged" (a category based on students' eligibility for free or reduced lunch) tested as proficient or better; 91 percent of students not in this category met the passing mark.[5]

The 2011 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tells a similar story at the national level. Eighth graders who were eligible for free lunch scored on average 25 points lower than those not eligible; those eligible for reduced lunch scored an average of 14 points lower than those not eligible. 41 percent of African-American students and 36 percent of Hispanic scored below basic; only 15 percent of white students fell into that category. [6] These statistics were reflected in the testing experiences of the many students I taught in my five years in the classroom. If our goal is to make all students able readers, interpreters, and critics of text we must change the way we currently approach the teaching of literature to offer all students the opportunity to develop an identity as *a reader*.

While being a *reader* is certainly more than a score on a standardized test for individual students, these scores can reinforce how students both self-identify as readers

[5] NC English I EOC statistics taken from
http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/reporting/leaperformancearchive/
[6] NAEP statistics taken from http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2011/reading_2011_report/

and how those students are seen by the school system tasked with nurturing their reading (Franzak, 2004; Franzak, 2006).   Blake landed in my class (an extended version of English I, designed to target *struggling readers*) because she missed passing by a few points the 8th grade End-of-Grade test in reading. That marginally failing score earned her a particular label – *struggling reader* – from the school and also served to validate her own self-doubts about whether or not reading was something "she could do."   This practice of using test scores to target students on the cusp of passing a standardized reading test for remediation or special classes is described in Franzak's (2004) observations of a middle school reading program called "Choices." As was the case with Blake and her classmates, students were selected for "Choices" because the school felt they were "'disinterested in school, but [had] an underlying potential to improve their reading skills'" (p. 193); or more cynically, they were close enough to passing that a small nudge might put them (and the school) back in the right number column.

In her profile of five students in the "Choices" program, Franzak (2004) finds that each had different reasons for their struggles with school literacy. Instead of working to individualize solutions and build on student strengths, the school imposed a one-size-fits-all solution – the "Choices" program - on them.   In a follow-up study examining the experience of the "Choices" students during their 9th grade year, Franzak (2008) found that the opposite approach, treating *struggling readers* like any other student, is not much more effective. For their 9th grade year, students from the "Choices" class were mainstreamed into "regular" English 9 classrooms (a common practice as schools do away with remedial classes). Franzak observed that for the most part, these students did

not see improvements in their school literacy and in many cases became even more

disengaged with school reading.

More often than not, policy statements on adolescents, reading, and literacy focus on

the crisis situation (typically defined by test scores) and suggest "best practices" type (or

worse, canned curriculum) approaches to reading and literacy instruction that rarely

account for individual needs and contexts (Greenleaf and Hinchman, 2009; Vasudevan

and Campano, 2009); in some cases, that best practice is simply to ignore the fact that

some students struggle with traditional school literacy practices and give them all the

same instruction anyway (Franzak, 2008). A more effective approach to providing access

to school literacies for all students requires a more nuanced understanding of adolescent

literacy, an understanding that I hope this dissertation contributes to.

Adolescents have multiple literacies and understandings of what counts as texts, a

variety that could be used as an asset in the classroom but that is typically viewed as a

detraction (Alvermann, 2001; Hull and Schultz, 2001; Moje, 2000; Carter, 2006; Moje,

Peyton-Young, Readence, and Moore, 2008; Vasudevan and Campano, 2009). Multiple

literacies can be seen as the "social and cultural ways in which students communicate in

their everyday lives as they *engage, analyze, and critique the world around them"*

(Carter, 2006, p. 353, emphasis original).   These authors suggest that if schools wish to

engage marginalized readers in the discourse of school literacy, they must provide spaces

for these other literacies to be explored and look for ways to bring what students can do

and are interested in into the classroom. Students who see themselves as readers

frequently report belonging to a community of readers outside of school (Bintz, 1993;

Strommen and Mates, 2004); reading instruction in school is often not the only or even

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primary influence on a student's development as a reader (Hall, 2006). This suggests that ignoring literacy practices outside of the school walls will prevent marginalized readers from fully engaging in school literacy practices. Part of my exploration of *not a reader* asks how we might engage the world outside the classroom walls in our engagement with texts.

Although I do not specifically explore my participants' out of school literacies, I wondered if these literacies might contribute to the work with texts students engage in during this project. Other work has shown that demonstrating to students that they are *doing literacy* in their interactions outside of school can be a gateway to *doing literacy* within the context of school. Moje's (2000) study of the literacies of *gangsta* adolescents demonstrates that even those literacies most easily dismissed as deviant or problematic show great sophistication and indicate students' ability to explore and manipulate language. Staples' (2008) work with young African-American males found that engaging students in popular culture texts that draw on their out-of-school literacies increases their future success with school-sanctioned literacy activities. Moje maintains that if we can find ways to merge these alternative or new literacies with the type of literacies traditionally expected in schools, we will not only help students become more successful but will also learn much about how literacies evolve and interact.

The pedagogy I used during my six months with James, Micah, and Andre is only one way we might foster more authentic interactions with texts. Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) describe another approach. They found the teacher, Ms. Ryan, offered students an academically challenging curriculum coupled with explicit support, teaching that built on students' cultural, linguistic, and experiential resources as well as their interests, and an

inquiry-oriented learning environment that positioned students as self-sufficient collaborators in learning.   Their profile of Terrance, a student in Ms. Ryan's class, shows that students can change the way they see themselves as readers and the way the engage with school literacy practices.

Researchers identify another component of changing marginalized readers' relationships with literacy is altering the way they define themselves as readers (Alvermann 2001, Hall 2012). This means having open and honest conversations with students about what it means to be a reader, who defines *being a reader*, and how they see themselves as readers. Hall (2012) argues that students are typically asked to conform to institutionalized norms about reading that we rarely ask them to challenge; in order to help students rewrite their reader identities, we must first make those identities and norms explicit and then provide the space for challenge.   Many students resist engagement with school reading or engage with it only on a superficial level because they see it as unimportant or disconnected; they may then use shortcut strategies that allow them to extract information for tests or they may refuse outright for fear of failure (Bintz 1993).   In her work with *at-risk* students in an after school literacy group, Lesley (2008) examined the interplay between institutionalized, school-sanctioned norms about literacy and the students' understandings of literacy practices in and out of school. She found that it was only after students came to take on a resistant stance as readers and challenged the school-sanctioned literacies, that they developed a discursive authority as readers.

Other studies suggest that reading and discussing literature can provide students a space to do important work in navigating their own identities as well as the social world around them. In her work with African-American high school students reading Toni

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Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Sutherland (2005) found that participants used "literature to shape their reality into one they could represent and confront on their own terms" (p. 391). In their discussions, the students used the text as a base to talk about society's expectations of them as young African-American women and how they saw themselves; as one participant noted, reading the novel "'made me really look at myself'" (p. 395). This sort of personal connection to literature and exploration of identity as one means of breaking the divide between school literacy and the activity of the lived world, is a possibility explored in this study.

This sort of identity work is only possible if we acknowledge the importance of students' multiple literacies, engage them in our classroom work, and resist categorizing students in limited ways. Moje (2000) cautions against casting "resistance" literacies in a negative light and encourages researchers and educators to consider the power of unsanctioned literacies in the lives and learning of marginalized students. She also notes that if as educators we continue to marginalize *at risk* youth, "we share the responsibility for the tragic consequences of these practices if we fail to acknowledge their power, find ways to support youth as they construct their own stories, and teach them how to reconstruct the dominant story" (p. 682). Because of their unique position in between childhood and adulthood and their ability to engage in metacognitive activities, adolescents can provide much insight into how their thinking evolves and how they engage in various literacy activities, including the development of a reader identity (Moje, 2002).

The concerns raised by this body of literature are ones I share and root my inquiry into the activity of classrooms. While much of what is to come explores my

understandings of the work of various theorists and the experience of the six months I spent working with Andre, James, and Micah, it is also a story about Blake and the dozens of other students like her who passed through my classroom during my years as a teacher. It is also a story about my attempt to make sense of a complex phenomenon – to read as *not a reader* – so that I might contribute more fully to the work of literacy and education, and more importantly, so that I might become a better teacher.

SPIRAL TWO

NOT A READER – STORY OF THE PROJECT

"Who dares to dream of capturing the fleeting image of truth in all its gruesome multiplicity?" -- Lawrence Durrell, *Clea,* book IV of the *Alexandra Quartet* (1960/1991), p. 13

I've always imagined myself a storyteller. I've written thousands of stories...all in my head. Committing them to paper has mostly eluded me. I'm not sure why, maybe the fear that they are not good enough, maybe a desire to keep them private, maybe for the ease of infinite dynamic revisions. If I send them into the world, will they be well-received? Not in the sense of well-reviewed, but rather what will happen to them once they are no longer mine alone? When another reader takes my words, my characters and reads herself into the text as I have done with countless others' words, the thing is no longer what it once was.

I tangled with these concerns once again in the process of creating this dissertation - the worry of sending my words into the world to be met by other readers who had their own agendas, intentions, and experiences. The fact I am writing about the experience of reading makes me even more aware of the fact that these words are only partly my own. They belong also to my participants, to the theorists, writers, and educators who have come before me, and to you who read this now.

The very qualities of language that make sharing our language potentially risky are the same qualities that make sharing our language possible. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel" Mikhail Bakhtin (1935/1981) argues that language usage is necessarily

dialogic; we always read the words of others against our prior encounters with that language and select our own language based on this prior experience as well. Language is never neutral. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia describes language as stratified along socio-ideological lines; our language carries different weight and connotations when used in different social contexts and across different social groups. These heteroglossic languages are in dialogue with each other, the process that allows language to evolve and for us to make sense of the language we encounter. This text is heteroglossic; in writing it I draw on multiple socio-ideological languages. I speak the languages of reader, teacher, curriculum theorist, social researcher, mother, white-middle-class female, and so on. In reading it, you do the same (perhaps with languages common to mine but also with others), leaving room for "error" in interpretation; you may not read as I intended. But as Bakhtin notes, this is how language grows. Our ability to draw on multiple languages and to pick and choose what best conveys and constructs meaning in a particular situation makes communication possible.

Laurence Durrell's *Alexandra Quartet* (1960/1991) plays with the heteroglossic nature of language. Each of the first three books in the quartet tells the same series of events, but from the perspective of a different narrator. This is not simply an exercise in perspective, a retelling of what each character knew that the others did not. Rather it demonstrates how we use our socio-ideological contexts, how we draw on prior language to construct meaning in the present. The fact that the reader of all three novels has access to all three of these versions plus her own context and experiences adds another layer of complexity – the "gruesome multiplicity" of truth.

We might fear this "gruesome multiplicity" or we might take it as an opportunity, a

way to engage the world. Bakhtin writes, "The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue" (p. 276).   As I lack the ability to read the original Russian, I'm not sure whether to attribute the particular beauty of that statement to Bakhtin or his translators. In any case, the image of strands of language wafting about, animated not by some mystical force but by their own living, is a powerful one. It reminds us that language is quite literally all around us; that just as a weaver selects threads to craft her cloth so do we select language to produce something new. All of this requires activity and dialogue within socio-ideological contexts; this idea drives both the subject of this project as well as the method to investigate it.

Origins

--"My Wife and My Mother-In-Law," an optical illusion[7]

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[7] First appeared in *Puck*, v. 78, no. 2018 (1915 Nov. 6), p. 11.

September 13 – Event Memory:

Our first few days were spent developing a rhythm – how much would I ask of them? Would they be willing to write as I intended? How much of themselves would they be willing to share? No doubt they raised similar questions of me – could I really be trusted? Were the things I asked of them worth their time and effort? The first day I brought pictures, optical illusions. "Are these texts," I asked? "No. They're pictures," was the universal reply. "Well, what do we do with them?" "Look at them." "What do you see?" An old-fashioned lady, an Indian because of the feather, a women in a fur coat, a tiger…no a lion. "So how do you know what's there?" "You look at them…see the pieces." "You read them." "Oh…so are they texts?" "Maybe?" "You saw things I've never seen in this picture before and some of you had a hard time seeing things I see easily. Why is that?" "What we knew about – like Indians have feathers." "Is there a right answer?" "My answer's right…it's a tiger!" "It's just how you look at it, what you see." "So, is that reading?"

The play in language, our ability to shape and shift it, has always fascinated me. As a young girl, I was taken by the stories of Jo March, Anne Shirley, and Francie Nolan. Like me they were readers and aspiring writers; their stories demonstrated not so much that words were powerful as that they were *empowering*. Reading, imagining, writing - all were powerful activities that allowed these characters to survive adversity and *become*. Needless to say, I have always been a voracious reader and while I have likely "written" a thousand times more in my head than on paper, the craft of writing has always been central to me as well. As an undergraduate, my interest in words took a scholarly turn; I began to explore how exactly stories were constructed and how language

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works. I was particularly fascinated by postmodern narratives and the liberties those authors took with language, blurring the lines between fiction and reality.

In the same moment that I became more deeply interested in pursing further scholarship in language and literature, I also became more aware of the complex socio-cultural and political landscape of public education. Although my mother was a teacher and I had attended public schools, I never gave much thought to schooling as an institution until I completed a project for a journalism class profiling the North Carolina ABCs accountability program.   As part of this project, I read Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991); I was taken aback by both the heavy role standardized testing was playing in public schools and the number of students who were not receiving the education they deserved.   I once again shifted my trajectory and began preparing for a career in education in the hopes that I might contribute to bringing equity and opportunity to all students.

In my five years as an English teacher at what I often describe as a very average American high school, I explored further both language and equity. Having encountered both through texts, theory, and scholarly study as an undergraduate and masters student, I was now immersed in the practice of both. The lived experiences of students as they worked (or did not) to engage language and literature and the various ways they experienced schooling were fertile grounds that deepened my understanding in both areas. I often tell the pre-service teachers I work with that you never understand something as well as you do once you've taught it. While I was a proficient reader and writer prior to teaching, the act of teaching and working with students gave me a more sophisticated understanding of both. Seeing the daily realities of schooling, the socio-

cultural and political implications of how schools work and how students are affected by them made me even more certain of both the importance of equity in education and how far we have yet to go to achieve it.

I include this personal history because the intertwined concerns of language and equity have been with me for many years and will continue to drive my scholarly and professional work. This project was conceived as a way to begin to integrate these interests in ways that could inform action. I was also drawn to work that sought to elevate the lived experience of marginalized students in education discourse. So often marginalized students are portrayed as passive, given agency only when they "choose" to drop out. They are reduced to statistics, the x percentage that has failed this exam or that and has yet to cross the void of the "achievement gap." From my teaching, I knew that these students have much to say and are rarely passive although even they do not always see themselves this way.

Finding My Question

October 17 – Event Memory:

We are a few weeks in. Our conversations are interesting, although they often veer well off the track I had anticipated. But writing is harder. I had wanted them to make tangible their meaning making process, to record what happened in their thinking as they read. Our efforts are stilted at best. By now Sierra and Steven have left us. Steven had missed as many days as he had come; like many in his position, he was torn between the lure of immediate money and the long-term prospect of a better job with GED in hand. The need for money won and as his work and class schedule conflicted, he left. Sierra disappeared, perhaps due to a family tragedy. One Monday I learned from

Micah and Andre that one of two shootings that had occurred over the weekend involved

Sierra's brother. He was left in critical condition. Perhaps the shooting or the events

around it caused her to stay away. Or perhaps the need to care for her young child made

it too difficult to continue. The director of the program told me all the contact numbers

he had for her went unanswered. "Sometimes that just happens. Not much that can be

done." Dropping out is rarely simple.

About this same time I stumbled upon a text that would take our project in a

slightly different direction. I had hoped the students would bring in texts for us to read

and discuss together.   Even my suggestion they share favorite song lyrics wasn't

particularly fruitful. Then I realized I was making the same move they had on our first

day together – "Is this a text?" They were full of stories, of texts. Our conversations

were texts, or maybe not texts but certainly grounds for meaning making and activity with

language. We were all constantly in the act of reading each other. I just needed a

different question.

I began this project wanting to somehow fuse my interest in the reading process as

the experience of meaning making, a model of reading that has much in common with

Bakhtin's dialogism, with my concern that our schools do not serve the needs of so many

of our students.   From our earliest conversations about the project, my advisor,

Madeleine Grumet, asked me repeatedly "Well, what's the question?" It took me well

over a year to figure out what she meant by "question" much less to understand what

"my" question was. The question did not become fully clear until I was immersed in it:

What is this gap between what the students thought "doing narrative" meant, the way

reading and writing were talked about in schools, and the way they actually "did

narrative," their use of language both as writers/speakers and listeners/readers? They used language dialogically and navigated the hetroglossic strands that surrounded them; yet, they had been labeled and even labeled themselves as *not readers*.

Max Van Manen (1990) writes that the phenomenological research question differs from the traditional research question in that it does not seek to lead to definitive answers; instead, the phenomenological research question "teaches the reader to wonder, to question deeply the very thing that is being questioned by the question" (p. 44). Like other phenomenological inquiry, hermeneutic phenomenology is interested in lived experience. The task of the researcher is not to generate generalizable data or even a depiction of a particular experience as in ethnography or a case study; rather it is "*to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience*" (p. 41, original emphasis). According to Van Manen, this understanding of hermeneutic phenomenology means balancing between the universal and the particular. As the researcher, I am interested in the particular experiences that occurred in the course of this project, not because they will lead to generalizable claims nor because they will allow me to create a narrative specific to my experience and the experience of my participants, but rather because they offer one way to understand the human experience of what it is to be *not a reader.* Van Manen reminds us that such questions are "unsolvable" in that we can always understand more, see a different way; there are no definitive, testable answers. Instead, this inquiry proposes to deepen our understanding of being *not a reader* and to lead to further investigation.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology: A Framework for Inquiry

Phenomenological inquiry builds on the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl

(1931/1999) and offers a way to understand the lived experiences of people experiencing

a phenomenon. As a research method, it requires the bracketing off of the researcher's

experiences, biases, and assumptions in order to clearly see the phenomenon of interest.

In this inquiry, my prior experience in working with students identifying as *not a reader,*

my belief that students can benefit from engaging with any text, and my ideas about

reading as an activity nurturing agency were among those prior assumptions I needed to

separate from what I saw in my work with the students in this project. But those were not

things to be completely ignored once recognized. Building on Martin Heidegger

(1927/1962) and Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1960/2006) expansion of Husserl's

(1931/1999) work, hermeneutic phenomenology suggests a move beyond description to

interpretation; the researcher is still aware of experiences, biases, and assumptions but

these become a part of the interpretive lens instead of things to be set aside. In working

to interpret the experience of this study, I return to my bracketed assumptions as another

way to help me understand the phenomenon, often finding those assumptions challenged

along the way.

Van Manen describes hermeneutic phenomenological research as

> the phenomenological and hermeneutical study of human existence:
> phenomenological because it is the descriptive study of lived experience
> (phenomena) in the attempt to enrich lived experience by mining its meaning;
> hermeneutics because it is the interpretive study of the expressions and
> objectifications (texts) of lived experience in the attempt to determine the
> meaning embodied in them. (p. 38)

Hermeneutic phenomenology is therefore a textual practice, and as such, a method

that felt appropriate given that the focus of this project is essentially just that – textual

practice.   I wanted to understand what students were doing and could do with texts, the way dialogue with and around texts generates new language, new meaning. I have this same curiosity about my own experience conducting this work; like my study participants, I too "brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads." How do I make sense of it? Madeleine Grumet (1988) writes that a dialectical phenomenology serves to "diminish the distance between the private and public poles of our experience. For the world we feel, the world we remember, is also the world we make up. The place that is familiar can be the place where we are most lost" (p. 65).   We often speak wistfully of "getting lost in a good book." I would argue that it is our very connections to the world and to language that allow that experience of "getting lost;" without those things, we would not be able to construct the place in which to get lost.   Understanding those structures could have powerful implications for the way students see themselves as readers.   In the same way, my own wanderings through classroom teaching, theory, and the experience of this project allow me to "get lost" in it. Creating the thing anew speaks back to the world and allows the dialogue to continue.

Research methodology functions to give shape to our work. We need a philosophical rationale for our approach and some sort of protocol to keep us on the course we intend. Van Manen (1990) outlines six research activities that compose a hermeneutic phenomenological research methodology:

1. Turning to the nature of lived experience
2. Investigating the experience as we live it
3. Reflecting on essential themes
4. The art of writing and rewriting
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented relation
6. Balancing the research context by considering the parts and whole

Although he cautions against considering these as either isolated or sequential, I think it is useful to describe below how I have addressed each in the course of this project to provide a framework for understanding my approach.

Ultimately this is a project about curriculum, all that we teach and the manner in which we teach it. It began as a search for curriculum that would engage these students in reading. It became about more than texts, about the experience of reading and writing and teaching. In thinking about what an investigation of the experience of curriculum might look like, I have found helpful the framework for curriculum theory research outlined by Madeleine Grumet, Amy Anderson, and Chris Osmond (2008) that acknowledges three intertwined strands that inform our inquiry of both teaching and curriculum. The curriculum object – in this case what we do with texts – is explored as a cultural object, as an event, and through the perspectives and experiences of the researcher. This dissertation attempts to balance these three strands, attending to the theory and scholarship on reading and meaning making; exploring the event of reading as captured during my work with students in this project; and de-cognizing my autobiographical experience of reading as a student, teacher, and scholar through reflection and writing.

Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience

I have described above something of the background of this project, the fact that it was rooted in concerns and interests that I have held throughout my life. Van Manen stresses that a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry must be born out of one's particular interests and orientations. Just as the starting point for reading is often the reader's emotional reaction to the text, so is the starting point for this work my visceral

connection to this particular lived experience. I am a reader. I am an educator. I have struggled to teach my students how to read as an activity instead of simply decoding. And I have watched them struggle to find interest and relevance in their school experience. I opened this dissertation with the story of my former student Blake because her experience, and my experience as her teacher, is the starting point of this inquiry; it is my lived experience.

From this starting point grew my central question: What is the nature of the gap between students' perceived textual and narrative abilities and their enacted abilities? As I work to address this question (but not to answer it, because it is necessarily unanswerable), my self is ever present. In some ways, the greatest challenge of this project is the bracketing required of phenomenological inquiry, how to tease out what it is that I thought I knew and to read my data acknowledging the presence of prior assumptions.   The fact that I began this project with an idea of how my participants would view themselves as readers and what that would mean for their work in the project is one such example of how these assumptions color the inquiry. Another ever-present dilemma was how to reconcile the differences in my experiences as an upper-middle-class, college-educated, white woman with those of my working-class, high-school-leaver, African-American male participants. Even the fact that I was *teacher* and they were *student* colors the way I understand the experience and seek to make meaning from it. My experiences as a reader and what I find valuable about reading were also assumptions challenged in the course of this work.

Investigating Experience as We Live It

Van Manen notes the ambiguity of data in the human sciences.   There is at once a pull to be "scientific," to gather quantifiable and objective data, and a frequently conflicting force that reminds us human activity and lived experience are not always quantifiable. Even so, we do "gather" or "collect" in our inquiry into lived experience. For this project, I have collected some typical sorts of data: audio tapes of my work sessions with the participants including interviews, the writing the participants did during those sessions, and my own notes kept during the project. Van Manen reminds us that these things are not themselves lived experience but that they are still a means to investigate lived experience. I also draw on my own experiences, both in this project and outside of it, as well as works of literature that speak to reading. In a sense, the work of theorists threaded throughout this project is also data, another aspect of the lived experience of textual inquiry. Grumet (2008) argues that a monological approach to curriculum study would have the effect of "wrench[ing] curriculum out of its lived world to study it as if it were something else" (p. 154). Data for this project then must come from the event of reading (as experienced in my field work), reading as a cultural object (the social and cultural history of reading that presents reading in particular ways), and reading from my perspective as the researcher (through considering my own experiences as a reader and researcher in this project). These intertwined elements are explored in each chapter.

October 8 – Event Memory:

"You know that thing is on, right" Micah nods to the small black recorder at the center of the table. "Oh, yeah, well…I'm not saying anything real important." Andre

laughs as he often does. The two had been discussing a recent shooting in which they knew both the victim and the perpetrator, working the narrative of what had happened, what should happen, and what will happen. Despite the recorder, their animated conversation continues.

Later I listen to the tape. Their voices sound tinny and a bit hollow. The transcript of the day sounds stilted and flat when I reread it. Even so I can follow the conversation in my head and recall my own discomfort and fascination with the events they describe. And I hear them reaching for threads of language.

Rebecca Luce-Kapler (1997) writes of the difficulty of capturing the dynamics of lived experience in transcript form. While the transcript may be factually accurate and capture the nuances of speech, only those who were there can "hear the voices re-echo in our memory" (p. 188). This matters because that echoing or reverberating is needed to continue the dialogue; without it, the words fall flat, dead on the page. This is not to say that transcripts are not useful or that methods that analyze the information they hold are not valid. But rather in hermeneutic phenomenology, the transcript becomes another text and like all texts, is read with the same sort of dialogic negotiation of meaning I will describe momentarily. Amy Anderson (2008) writes of the discomfort of reading transcripts in this way, a discomfort I share in re-reading/re-writing the words of my participants. But Anderson also notes that the move to read transcripts as stories that speak to and against other stories allows for richer inquiry.

Luce-Kapler's answer to allow for the echo in working with transcripts was to transpose the transcripts into poetry. My solution is to incorporate passages of narrative text, *event memories*, into my use of transcripts. These are amalgamations of my

memory of the moment, my journal notes taken at the time and my thinking as I transcribed and re-read the conversations and are indicated by italicized text. Although imperfect, I hope they allow for some insight into the way I hear the transcripts; that initial hearing and subsequent re-hearings are the beginning of my interpretation and are themselves a part of my data set.

Reflecting on Essential Themes

Another prior assumption that I had to recognize and resist was the way I had categorized my inquiry during the planning stages of this project; *Reading Dialogue, Reader Identity,* and *Reading Pedagogy* emerged early in my studies as ways to organize the theory about reading that interested me. But in exploring the experience of my students in this project, I had to step back from those categories and allow for other possible ways to organize and make sense of the experience.

Van Manen describes themes in hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry as "knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus experienced as meaningful wholes" (p. 90). As I began working with and organizing the data into the piece you are reading now, several moments in my understanding of *not a reader* emerged around which I could "spin my web" to make sense of the experience of *not a reader*. I have named these moments spirals to indicate their connection to the reading process I will describe later.

The spiral, Chapter 3, "Not a Reader – Revealing Readers," draws on my interest in Bakhtin's dialogism and explores how my students' activity began to challenge established definitions of *not a reader*. Thinking more broadly about how we acquire and use language allowed me to better articulate why teaching reading necessarily

involves dialogue. Chapter 4 explores "Not a Reader – Reading the World."   Since my

days as a classroom teacher, I have felt strongly that the way students see themselves as

readers/students/scholars and the way they are seen by teachers and the school have

important implications for the way they will approach school, including the activity of

reading. Socio-cultural theories of identity and in particular the idea of the figured world

gave me language to *read* why the way we teach and the environments in which we teach

matter to the way students come to understand the activity of reading.   I also saw in this

moment the ways my students do reach past the artificial divide between the classroom

and the lived world to bring experience to their readings. "Not a Reader-Talking Back,"

the moment of chapter 5, offers a way to think about the act of teaching reading. As a

teacher, I often felt I lacked a framework to put into action the instincts I had about why

reading mattered and how to communicate that to students. Borrowing from the work of

Robert Scholes (1985, 1989) and ideas common to reader response theory, I offer an

interpretation of the experience, the participants' and mine, of reading during this project,

most importantly the moments when they took the texts and *did something*; they talked

back.

The Art of Writing and Rewriting

Van Manen emphasizes the centrality of writing and re-writing to

phenomenological inquiry; it is the process of re-visiting and re-questioning that leads to

a description and interpretation of experience. This follows Heidegger's hermeneutic

circle, the cycling back and forth between parts and the whole within a cultural, social,

and historical context to generate a more complete understanding. In a sense, writing is

the method of hermeneutic phenomenology; as Van Manen writes,

Writing fixes thought on paper. It externalizes what in some sense is internal; it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world. As we stare at the paper, and stare at what we have written, our objectified thinking now stares back at us. Thus writing creates the reflective cognitive stance that generally characterizes the theoretic attitude in the social sciences. (p. 125)

Writing is an act of creation; we reach around us for the threads of language, working to fix them together in some sensible form. The labor of writing, and re-writing, allows us to better understand what it is we hoped to write about. I do much of my writing in my head, testing out this word and that phrase, rearranging, editing. Even as we read new texts or are immersed in field work, we are writing, working to give shape and sense. Committing to paper means asserting something. Will it be the right something? The re-visiting must answer that question; we must remain open to revision. As a student I struggled to find the discipline for re-writing. As a teacher, I was always a bit unsure how to relate to my students the necessity and reward of the process. Thinking of writing as dialogue, as a spiraling in and out of various texts including my own in progress, made re-writing make sense. For that reason hermeneutic phenomenology, writing as a research method, made sense.

For this project, the writing process began almost as soon as I began my graduate studies. In writing about and re-writing about the theories of reading and identity that appear in this work, I began to sort through and revise my understanding of them. Even as my sessions with the students were occurring, I was beginning to write on that data – mentally as it occurred, in notes on my papers used in the sessions, and on the transcripts themselves as I transcribed. Beginning to put this dissertation together as a cohesive document was an overwhelming moment of writing at first. I began by re-visiting all that I had written before – notes, transcripts, prior papers – and then free wrote a few sections

– such as the autobiographical section in this chapter. Returning to my transcripts, I began to find the places that seemed to stick to the moments I outlined above. Chapters emerged, were edited, rearranged, cut, and finally spun into the document you have now.

Writing Within the Project

The process of writing and re-writing as dialogue parallels the idea of dialogue in reading. Reading and writing are, of course, reciprocal activities and it is difficult to imagine engaging one without the other. Although I would argue (and hope to demonstrate in this dissertation) that oral "writing" can function similarly to committing words to the page, I began this project interested in the way the physicality of response, creating a written text of meaning making, might change the reading processes.

September 18 – Event Memory:

No luck so far in getting more than a few superficial notes as we read. Talking is a different story. But it's as though the kids who talk and the kids who try to write are two different sets of people. Their speech is animated; their writing stilted. I open our session, "My mission is to get y'all to write." "That's going to be hard to get me to do" I'm told. Their resistance seems partly rooted in the sense that writing doesn't accomplish anything "I felt like I wrote my story for no reason," says Micah. "They didn't even check it. I don't even like writing."

"But how is writing different than talking?" I keep pushing this question hoping for some sort of answer. "It's gotta make sense in writing. It's gotta flow." Others note that writing has to fit certain guidelines – length, grammar, spelling, and so on. My assurances that none of that matters for what we are doing here don't seem to matter. But we talk. Words flow.

My original intent for this project was to have the students create Reader's Scrapbooks where they would engage in this literal writing on the texts, an idea adapted from the work of David Bleich (1978) and Dennis Sumara (2002). We would then re-visit those responses with the hopes of not only reaching a better understanding of the text but also of gaining insight into the way that understanding is created in the exchange between text and reader.   Bleich's subjective epistemology integrates the study of response and interpretation through examining previously written essay responses; the analysis is of both the base text and of the texts readers write in response to their reading. The physicality of this act is important both in creating a text/document that can stand along side the original text as equally legitimate and in being able to see the evolution of one's meaning making process. It makes visible the spirals of reading and re-reading, writing and re-writing.

Sumara also suggests this sort of physical engagement with the text as a means to greater textual awareness. Such a physical rendition of the reading process – literally writing one's thoughts and responses in the margins of the text – forces readers to be attentive not only to the detail of the text as in close reading, but also to the way their experiences inform their understanding and their understanding later informs their experiences.   Sumara takes the idea of what he calls the Commonplace Book from Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. In the novel, the title character carries with him a copy of Herodotus's *The Histories*; over the course of many years and multiple readings the book's pages have become filled with various notes about the text but also about the reader's reactions, feeling, experiences that occurred during the various readings of both the original text and the reader's annotations from previous readings. The physical

object, the book, becomes a record of experience and an artifact of meaning creation. It is in the interpretation of both text and the layers of intertext response that a "productive interpretive site for readers" (p. 34) occurs.

My attempts to sell this process to my students were not particularly well received; as James put it "the thing I don't like is that you read and then you have to write." Their hesitance with writing stood in contrast to the way that they were generally eager to speak. I wondered if perhaps the difference lay in the immediacy of the dialogue; if dialogue is what makes the thinking behind writing possible, maybe not being able to see the dialogue in writing was keeping James, Andre, and Micah from writing. Or maybe they were simply feeling the same sort of discomfort I have felt in thinking about committing my stories to paper. I encouraged them to "talk to the text" but even that was not convincing. I failed to see at first the importance of this resistance to the overall story of being *not a reader*, that they were choosing to engage in a medium they found more relevant and valuable than what I was asking of them in creating the scrapbooks.

Ultimately I decided to engage in an oral dialogue instead of a written one (a decision explored in chapter 4), often playing the role of page as they "wrote" and "re-wrote" responses to the texts we read. I still feel that the sort of writing to or on the text suggested by Bleich and Sumara would be a productive activity. Given more time, I think James, Micah, and Andre would have developed the confidence to engage in written dialogue with the text. The moment of letting go of the privileging of written work in meaning making was another moment in which my assumptions about the reading process were challenged and revised.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation

Van Manen argues that hermeneutic phenomenology is a philosophy of action, particularly in a pedagogic context. What's the point of all this thinking about and writing about if there is no doing about? The focus of this inquiry – the experience of meaning making in reading – is of interest to me personally and pedagogically. I want to understand on one level because I enjoy reading and am fascinated by how it works. But I am also driven by the desire to teach and the need to understand in order to teach better. I considered dissertation projects that would have had me explore more deeply theory or literature or my own autobiography as a teacher/reader or even to observe others teaching. But what was most compelling was the blending of those interests with my own teaching, to better understand what I did and what I could do.

Carson and Sumara (1997) call for a view of action research that allows for individual, reflective inquiry in addition to the traditional conception of action research as a collaborative effort. As an investigation of lived experience, this project fits their conception of action research as a "lived practice:"

> It is thus that the knowledge produced through action research is never merely knowledge about something. Action research knowledge is not considered apart from the historically, politically, culturally, and socially effected conditions of its production. The knowledge that is produced through action research is always knowledge about one's self and one's relations to particular communities. (p. xviii)

This definition echoes my interests in the moments described above; my inquiry, although individual, is oriented towards action. Chapter 5, the penultimate moment of this dissertation, explores the way this work might move towards a collaborative action between teachers and students and texts, the way we engaged in dialogue that resulted in *doing something with texts*.

Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole

Writing is messy work.   The ubiquitous word processor has somewhat removed us from the physicality of revisions, from having to literally cut and paste our way to organized thoughts.   Sometimes in re-reading my own writing, I am confused by turns of phrase and left wondering just what point I was trying to make. Other times, I stray down what seems to be an interesting path only to realize I've gone so far off course I seem to be writing another paper altogether.

Van Manen writes, "It is easy to get so buried in writing that one no longer knows where to go, what to do next, and how to get out of the hole that one has dug" (p. 33). For this reason, we have to pause often, remind ourselves of the question, and move forward again. In reorienting throughout the writing of this dissertation, I have sometimes found it necessary to abandon precious phrases and to reword challenged assumptions, tasks that have challenged me as a writer and researcher. In writing about his own dissertation process, Chris Osmond notes that our writing is never complete but at some point must end:

> What is left is the synchronic residue of a diachronic process, as ultimately incomplete an evocation of the actual experience as a photograph of a waterfall; a process frozen in a moment, proofread, and bound between covers to be judged an adequate approximation of what was learned. But, like the waterfall, it could have looked different. And it does not diminish the effort to admit as much; rather, it praises the waterfall. (p. 154)

Faced with the gruesome multiplicity of language and experience, we must choose a perspective, commit words to paper, acknowledging that finished does not mean complete. Here I offer my interpretation and understanding of the experience of meaning making in reading, as read through theory; my field work with Micah, Andre, and James; and my own experiences.

SPIRAL THREE

NOT A READER – REVEALING READERS

"An *n* number of possible languages makes use of the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol *library* admits of the correct definition *ubiquitous and everlasting system of hexagonal galleries*, but *library* is *bread* or *pyramid* or anything else, and the seven words which define it possess another value. You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?" –Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel" (1956/1962), p.87

D-O-G Means Dog

In "The Library of Babel" Jorge Luis Borges (1956/1962) imagines a library of

innumerable volumes, books written using every possible combination of letters,

resulting in a vast quantity of incomprehensible texts but also in "everything which can

be expressed, in all languages" (p.83). The narrator describes multiple ways his fellow

librarians have dealt with the overwhelming number of texts and their various attempts to

extract meaning from chaos.   In one "wild region" however,

> librarians repudiate the vain superstitious custom of seeking any sense in books and compare it to looking for meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines of one's hands….They admit that the inventors of writing imitated the twenty-five natural symbols, but they maintain that this application is accidental and that books in themselves mean nothing. This opinion – we shall see – is not altogether false. p.81

"The Library of Babel" can be read as a thoughtful metaphor for the infinity of

the universe: "*The Library is a sphere whose consummate center is any hexagon, and*

whose circumference is inaccessible" (p. 80, italics original); there is no "correct" center,

no key to meaning. The quest of the librarians to find meaning is not unlike our own

attempts to organize our experience into coherence. The Library's books are all that we

encounter; some remain incomprehensible or nonsensical noise, some we can begin to organize but cannot quite decipher, and every once in a while, we find a bit that makes sense. But as our narrator remarks, the librarians of the "wild region" have a point; it could be that the books themselves mean nothing. If that is the case, where does meaning come from?

January 23 – Event Memory and Transcript:

It's our second meeting after an extended holiday break. James will not be back for a few more weeks so today it's just Micah, Andre, and I. We've been returning to some of the conversations we had at the start of the project; now that we are comfortable with one another and in the habit of talking together, our conversations are much more fruitful. I've just asked them if they'd be able to read a text written in German:

Micah: You said German?

Meredith: Yeah, or whatever language.

Micah: I wouldn't call it reading because I don't know how to read it, so I would just be looking at it.

Andre: You don't read German? *he says with mock incredulity*

Micah: No. *with a tone of "um…duh.."*

Meredith: 'Cause you are saying you could read it why?

Andre: Because I'm Russian! *we all laugh*

Meredith: But seriously, are you saying that you could make the sounds?

Andre: You could like figure it out.

Meredith: Like how the words sound?

Andre: Yeah.

Meredith: And that's reading for you?

Andre: A little bit yes.

Meredith: A little bit? What else is the other bit?

Andre: It's reading…it's all the way reading.

Meredith: Well, what does that mean?

Andre: *turning to Micah who is looking at his phone under the table -* Can you get off of Twitter sir? *again with a mocking tone, this time of authority*

Meredith: I know you are reading over there, which is fantastic.

Andre: Definitely not reading.

Micah: What you call it then? *again the "um…duh…" tone*

Andre: You not reading everything. You are looking for a particular thing.

Meredith: Y'all have raised an interesting difference in your opinion.

They engage in a good-natured banter about responding to text messages and who is right in this debate. Over the course of the program, Micah and Andre have developed an easy friendship and often tease with one another in this fashion. I point out to them that they are representing two sides of the reading debate that I've been thinking about in my project – is reading a skill of calling words off of the page or is it making some sense of the words?

I came to this inquiry with the assumption that part of what makes us human is an innate understanding of how language works, but that as *not a readers* the students in this group might need that ability pointed out to them. As this conversation played out on that January day, I could not help but be amazed that these two young men, both claiming to be (as conversations I will share throughout these chapters illustrate) and named *not a reader*, were engaging in the very same debate that I was writing about in this

dissertation; they could already articulate far more about language than I anticipated. Is reading about decoding, extracting something particular from texts? Or is it about making meaning from the words, doing something with them? This spiral explores those questions through my students' words, through theory, and through my own experiences. I return now to the conversation on January 23:

After some "I'm right!" "No, I'm right" back and forth:

> Micah: When you go to the store to buy you an outfit, how do you know what store you walking in to? Don't you got to read the sign?

> Andre: No, you don't have to read the sign. I see a horse. Guess what? That means it's Ralph Lauren. If I see a moose…

I interject to ask Andre what he is doing, a question that remains unanswered. But Micah picks up my question, insisting that Andre is reading – either the tag or the logo – to know what brand he's buying. Since we've landed on reading symbols, I decide to ask them what words do:

> Meredith: (holding up a piece of paper with "DOG" written on it) Ok, so what does that do?

> Micah: It tells me dog.

> Andre: Dog…

> Meredith: Ok

> Andre: …and if you read it backwards it's God! *Laughs*

> Meredith: It does…but why does that mean dog? It's just lines on the page.

> Andre: Because the D-O is duh and the guh.

> Micah: I don't know why. I just learned in school that D-O-G was dog.

> Meredith: You just learned in school?

> Andre: …duh-aw-guh…the o is short

> Meredith: So you learned like phonics?

Micah: aw-guh…

Meredith: Let's say you'd never heard of a dog before…

Andre: Must live under a rock…

Meredith: …but knew how to sound out words so you knew that the word said dog so you could call it dog…would you be able to read it?

Andre: Yeah, 'cause you could sound out…if you knew how to sound out….duh aw guh.

Meredith: Does that count as reading do you think?

Micah & Andre: Yeah.

The question of why d-o-g means *furry four-legged animal frequently kept as a pet* is not unlike Borges' narrator's assertion that depending on your language, library might mean *ubiquitous and everlasting system of hexagonal galleries* but just as easily *bread* or *pyramid*. Certainly both Micah and Andre have known what dogs are for most of their lives. Andre in particular has spoken fondly of dogs on several occasions and confessed an emotional attachment to them. Even so, their initial response to the question "What does D-O-G mean?" was to demonstrate their ability to call the word, to sound it out phonetically, an ability they both identified as reading at this moment in the conversation. Even Micah who moments earlier had argued that reading was more than just calling words (with his assertion that sounding out a German text would not be reading it) was willing to accept word-calling as reading in this case. Also interesting was the fact that this particular conversation occurred after we had spent months together reading and discussing meaning making; reimagining how reading works is not a simple task.

After a bit more conversation over how one makes meaning of d-o-g and whether

or not a speaker of another language could read d-o-g, the following exchange occurred:

Meredith: But how do you know what dog means?

Micah: Because we learned it. They told you what dog means…ever since they told me…

Andre: We know what a dog is.

Meredith: But how do you know?

Andre: An animal…I don't know.

Micah: I know what dog is because somebody taught me what it was.

Meredith: But…

Andre: 'Cause we saw a picture and then it had a dog under it and we was like "ok, since that picture is right over that word, it must mean that that picture is a dog" …and then we all got treats. (laughs)

Meredith: Kinda what I'm asking…but deeper than that. How do you know what a dog is? Like not even thinking about the word…how do you know what a dog is?

Andre: 'Cause it's common sense. We grew up…I don't know…

Micah: That's confusing.

Andre: …kindergarten happened…we learned at daycare.

Meredith: Outside of school and reading, how do you know what a dog is?

Micah: I wouldn't know what it was outside of school.

Meredith: Not talking about the word…just the idea…dog…how do you know the idea of dog?

Andre: 'Cause we probably all had one at one point in time.

Meredith: Ok, because you have seen a dog…that's what I'm getting at.

Micah: oooohhh

Andre: That took forever. I should have said that before. I had that in my head before…should just say "we seen it" but I was like "no, that wouldn't be the word."

Andre's final statement is a perfect example of the perception that meaning making (and by extension narrative skills and literacy) is something that happens in school; meaning is institutionalized and confined to something text does and readers find. In his mind, the "correct" answer to "how do you know what d-o-g means" had to have something to do with school: "kindergarten happened…we learned at daycare," calling d-o-g phonetically, or seeing a picture with the word written under it. Micah's assertion "I wouldn't know what it was outside of school" places the meaning of d-o-g firmly in the letters on the page; without knowledge of phonics and the ability to call the word, would he not know what a dog was?   Or are the librarians from the "wild region" correct that d-o-g has no inherent meaning?

Moments after this exchange, Micah and Andre demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the way meaning develops through social usage that conflicts with their earlier instance on tying meaning to school and text. I had asked them to think about the two definitions they had given about what reading was and who they thought would best be able to read their twitter feed:

Micah: You might look at my twitter and be like "what do that mean?"

Meredith: And you would know? Why? At least better than I?

Micah: Because I seen it before. Like that word ratchet …and you was like "what's that?"

A month or so earlier, Andre described something as being "ratchet" in a conversation we were having. At first, I thought he was saying "wretched" as it did fit the context – but it seemed like an unusual word choice. Then I thought he was talking about tools for

some reason, but that did not fit the context. Finally, after he'd used it a few times, I

confessed "I have no idea what you mean by ratchet!" The guys thought this was pretty

funny since for them it was such an obvious word. So here Micah mimics my "what the

heck is that?"

Meredith: Yeah…exactly! If you saw that, you'd know exactly what that meant.

Micah: But ratchet means two different things. Some people call ratchet guns, as in another word for guns, and other people call ratchet as in ghetto.

Andre: As in a ratchet chick.

Meredith: See, if I hear ratchet, I think like ratchet… like a wrench. *Laughter*

Andre: But no...hold on…if you talking about a gun because some people be like…"I got that wrench. I got that tool."

Micah: No…who says that?

Andre: If you say you got that tool you mean you got that burner…you got that gun…you got that ratchet.

Micah: If I went up to DC, I wouldn't be understanding what they saying. *Andre previously lived in DC*
….

Meredith: Why does it matter to think of reading that way?

Micah: Because if you just read the words…sometimes it don't like…the word ratchet…you probably read it as something else. If I'm like "I got a ratchet" you probably be like "oh he got a wrench or something," but I probably would really be saying something like "I got a ratchet" like "I got a gun."

As Borges's narrator asks, "You who read me, are you sure you understand my

language?"

In this exchange, and elsewhere in our conversations, Micah and Andre show a

sophisticated understanding, often offered spontaneously, of the way that words mean

differently in different contexts and the role individuals – speakers, listeners, readers,

writers – play in creating that meaning. My experience gives me the meaning of *wrench* or *tool* for *ratchet*; theirs gives the multiple meanings of *trashy* and *gun*. They also note the nuances of meaning that come with different social contexts such as Micah's statement that he would not understand the language used on the streets of D.C. where he has never lived. The meanings of *ratchet, wrench, tool, burner* Micah and Andre use above are certainly not the meanings they would have learned in school or that might be found in a conventional dictionary. Instead, they are meanings developed in social contexts through dialogue between individuals in those contexts. Like the books in Borges's library, the word *ratchet* means nothing on its own; the way we use it gives it meaning. To discover that meaning, I or Micah or Andre must use what we know of the social context; we cannot receive its meaning passively.

Bakhtin's Sociolinguistics

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1935/1981) sociolinguistics, in particular the notion of heteroglossia, offers one way to understand the dialogic nature of texts and of the world; it also complicates being *not a reader*. Language is stratified, not only by different dialects or other "formal linguistic markers," but more importantly by "languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, 'professional' and 'generic' languages, languages of generations and so forth" (p. 272). Each of these languages "are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values" (p. 291-2). The language we use changes the meaning of what is said. As a result, no speech can be considered outside its context nor can meaning making occur as a finite event; all

discourse, including the act of reading, is necessarily dialogic, a point illustrated by the multiple meanings/usages of *ratchet* in the exchange above.

As Micah, James, Andre, and I move through a heteroglossic world, we are bombarded by different possibilities of meaning, different ways to understand the world. Every object, every word carries a history of meaning, all the utterances around it that have come before. I understand *ratchet* first as *tool* because my father had a ratchet set that I recall playing with as a child. An entry in the Urban Dictionary[8] suggests that *ratchet* as in *trashy* came from a mispronunciation of *wretched* and it still carries that connotation. No language is neutral but is instead entangled in socio-historical context; using *ratchet* as a way to comment on someone's appearance marks someone as a particular type of person.

Memory, both personal and collective, is key to negotiating these meanings (which is why afflictions that impact our memory quite literally change who we are). Bakhtin argues that this constant encounter between possible meanings is what allows us to become: "Consciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of *having to choose a language*. With each literary-verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself within it, it chooses, in other words, a 'language'" (p. 295, original emphasis). Although Bakhtin speaks of consciousness instead of identity, he does make clear that who we are is intricately connected with the social nature of language. In claiming words, a language, as our own, we situate ourselves in relation to others. Micah and Andre's use of *ratchet* is one signal of their claim to a particular social group; Micah's observation that he

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[8] http://www.urbandictionary.com

wouldn't understand much of the slang used in Washington, D.C. is a further example of the stratification of language across social contexts.

Claiming a language, and in turn defining our place, is inherently social because the languages we must choose from come from others; as Bakhtin reminds us in a rather cheeky parenthetical, we do not get our words from a dictionary. Instead, a word "exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own...Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of others" (p. 294). In engaging in dialogue with the possibilities, we can claim both the word and our selves: "It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (p. 293).

Bakhtin further argues that an individual's becoming is born out of a struggle between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. As its name suggests, authoritative discourse imposes language on a person, leaving no room for re-scripting or appropriation; *ratchet* holds simply the dictionary definition of *tool* or *wrench*. Internally persuasive discourse, in contrast, allows for play and the creation of new meanings. Words are assimilated but they are also reworked in new and creative ways, generating new possibility; *ratchet* becomes a different sort of tool referring to a firearm. These processes play out not just for individual words, but for language as a whole. If authoritative discourse remains dominant for us, our identities are prescribed; internally persuasive discourses offer us the opportunity to improvise our own identities

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by choosing how we might use our words.   The struggles between authoritative and multiple internally persuasive discourses are always ongoing; like language, our identities are fluid.

Reader's Scrapbooks: An Attempt to Make Dialogue Visible

When we read a text, we draw from a myriad of possible languages – suggested by our experience, the text, those around us, and so on - to carve out our own meaning. What we select and what we discard all influence the meaning that evolves (and continues to evolve as the text is revisited) and ultimately feed into our process of becoming. A reading pedagogy that allows for one "right" meaning functions much like an authoritative discourse, limiting our students' ability to play with language, and by extension, their ability to play with meaning and identity. A reading pedagogy that encourages critical reading and holds students accountable for the meanings they make functions like an internally persuasive discourse; it nurtures facility with language, encourages experimentation, but also requires thoughtful appropriation of the words of others.   Our readings are critical when we recognize the dialogic nature of language, the history that words carry, and use that history as part of our meaning making. Reading becomes a dialogic act when we recognize that our new configuration of language, language drawn from others and reshaped by us, is again a part of the social world, available for others to critique and use.

In my teaching, I had seen students do the interesting sorts of things with language that Micah and Andre do in the moments above. But I never felt able to translate that to reading, to things one does with texts. The dialogue of meaning making happened almost accidentally and was rarely if ever named. I wondered if naming it would make a

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difference. As I imagined the pedagogy I would use in this project, something that made tangible the reading process seemed ideal. Inspired by Sumara's (2002) Commonplace book (described in the previous chapter), I proposed creating Reader's Scrapbooks (changing Sumara's term to one I felt would resonate more with the students as an object they are familiar with), as concrete records of each student's reading and meaning making experience. I wanted to be able to say "Look! See what you are doing!? Own it!" Each week we would read a central text, a short story or a poem or even a piece of music or a film clip. Around that we would add our thoughts, questions, annotations, and even other texts that we drew connections to through our reading. I had visions of notebooks bursting with *stuff*; we'd be able to see the labor we had put in. Maybe this was the thing I needed to be able to show Blake five years before.

During our first meeting I presented each student with an empty binder, noting that we would soon be filling them up with the texts we would read but also our responses to those texts. The skepticism was heavy. A logical starting point seemed to be to add our names on the front, to mark them as our own. I passed out markers and card stock. Only Sierra thought to embellish her name with small hearts and flourishes. After the initial conversation about reading around images I related in the previous chapter, I passed out copies of Stevie Smith's "Not Waving but Drowning" (1972). I had decided that poetry would be a good starting space; short and compact, a poem could offer us lots of space for reading and re-reading without being overwhelming in its length. In retrospect, this was a bit of a strange choice as poetry has always been the genre I have felt least at home with. Lacking a strong connection to any particular poem and still working off the assumption that any text would work, I polled my friends on Facebook, asking for

suggestions of what they might use (giving only the criteria that I wanted something that would work well with a group of high school aged students who didn't see themselves as readers). "Not Waving but Drowning" was suggested by a friend who is a poet and teaches community college literature and writing courses in Oregon. Her advice seemed as sound as any so there we started.

September 11 – Event Memory and Transcript

> Nobody heard him, the dead man,
> But still he lay moaning:
> I was much further out than you thought
> And not waving but drowning.
>
> Poor chap, he always loved larking
> And now he's dead
> It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
> They said.
>
> Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
> (Still the dead one lay moaning)
> I was much too far out all my life
> And not waving but drowning.

"So just read it through, write down anything that pops into your head whether it seems to matter or not." There's silence for a few minutes. Then:

James: I'm not getting this poem at all.

Meredith: That's ok. There's no expectation that you get anything the first time you read it.

Micah: I think I've got something.

Meredith: Great! Just write down anything.

Steven: I'm going to try to write something.

Meredith: It can be anything – what you are thinking, what you think it's about….

James: A man can't swim.

Meredith: Ok, put that down.

James: That's kinda hard to believe.

Meredith: Put that down. Whatever pops in your head. Don't be shy!

James: The dead man. But he's still like…I mean…

He trails off; they read silently again. A few minutes later, it's clear they are looking to me to do something. And no one is writing. I get a bit worried…but it is still early in the game so we'll keep trying.

Meredith: So what did you do to make sense of this?

Sierra: You just have to read it and try imagine what's going on in your head.

Steven: There's a man calling for help or something.

I ask the "teacher" question. And I get the expected answer. Now, they start talking over each other, getting a bit more interested trying to sort out the action of the poem.

Sierra: He was drowning and he was trying to get help. Because it say right here "still he lay moaning."

Andre: F' that! Nobody helping him.

Micah: A man is dying and nobody heard him. He was drowning, too far out.

Steven: He was old.

Sierra: Yeah, he was kinda old.

Meredith: Why do you say that?

Steven: Because he…I don't know. It say his heart gave away.

Sierra: If you drowning, if I'm drowning my heart going to give away if ain't nobody diving in to help me.

There's lots of chatter about what they would do if they were drowning and no one came to help them.

None of this made it to their papers. Nor did any of the half hour conversation that followed. Instead, they had written only a few words here and there "A man who can't swim," "drowning in cold water," "a man calling for help." I meant it when I encouraged them that those were fine places to start; after all, understanding the action of the poem got us started here. But on their pages there were no questions – "there's a man calling for help or something." – no reactions – "F' that!" – no attempts to interpret (or mis-interpret) – "He was old…it say his heart gave away." – no questioning of assumptions – "If I'm drowning…" Why not?

Our conversation around the rest of the poem continued in a similarly lively vein. I suppose talking over one another is not the best manners, but as a teacher it always makes me feel as though there is so much excitement about or eagerness to speak that the words just spill over. I do not think anyone was particularly taken by the poem; I wasn't really either although I was initially drawn to the potential to explore how the language worked. Perhaps then the biggest failure was that I was overly focused on revealing some big mystery about how the poem "worked" instead of allowing them to organically explore and make of it what they would. I found myself wrestling with my assumption that getting them to see the way the poem was put together technically was important. I spent a lot of time asking the sorts of questions I'd wanted them to ask of the text themselves ("What do you think is happening here? Who is speaking? How does this matter?"), attempting to model verbally the sort of conversation with text I wanted them to feel confident enough to engage in on their own. But perhaps I was leading too hard. Despite my heavy-handedness, they were doing something with the text. I had imagined

a dialogue between text and reader; instead we engaged in dialogue with each other revolving around and speaking to the text.

Like Bakhtin, Paulo Freire (1970/2006) argued for the centrality of dialogue to human existence: "To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it...no one can say a true word alone - nor can she say it *for* another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p. 88, original emphasis). Although Freire also does not use the term identity, he is clearly referring to the process of becoming: "If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings" (p. 88). We become ourselves by claiming the word for ourselves, a process facilitated and mediated by interaction with others. Freire emphasized the fact that this naming of the world cannot occur through a simple exchange or the depositing of meaning from one person to another; becoming can only occur through praxis.

I had wanted the scrapbooks to be a mechanism for naming the world, a form of praxis, a way to challenge being *not a reader*. I do think such an activity has powerful pedagogical potential and hope to explore it further. But what I had missed in imagining this project was the value of oral dialogue. In fact, my initial plans did not even call for audio taping (a change the wisdom of my committee pushed for). For all my interest in language and dialogue and despite my insistence that reading is necessarily dialogic, I had forgotten to consider dialogue in its purest form. Thankfully, my students reminded me.

What Counts as Reading?

If self is grounded in language and dialogue, narrative, constructing meaning through story, is a fundamental human activity. Narrative requires dialogue, dialogue between individual reader and text and between text, an individual reader and other readers (and by extension with society and culture at large). Later, I will examine more closely the nature of these dialogues that lead to meaning making. But first what is reading?

Earlier I wrote that this spiral of my inquiry focused on exploring the conflicting views of reading raised by my scholarly inquiry and echoed by Micah and Andre in our conversation: Is reading about decoding text and calling words or is about sense making? This same question is reflected in the difference in the written and oral responses the students had on our first day together (a difference that did not change as our project progressed). I wondered what they were thinking when writing their responses. Almost without exception I could see what they had written as answers to a multiple choice test question, the same sorts of questions they would face on the GED and the same sorts of questions I had myself been guilty of writing as a teacher. Where these written for my benefit? Were they writing what they expected I wanted them to say? What do such questions say about reading? And what alternatives to those questions exist?

To further explore these two visions of reading, I return now to the January 23rd conversation with Micah and Andre I shared a portion of earlier.   Twitter had come up frequently in our conversations about what counted as reading. With its 140 character limit, Twitter does cause us to re-imagine what we might count as a text. As they were

both avid Tweeters, I was curious as to what Micah and Andre made of Twitter – are

Tweets texts? Is Twitter reading?

January 23 - Transcript:

Micah: Yeah, I read the stuff on Twitter.

Andre: Technically that's not reading.

Meredith: Why is that not reading?

Micah: That is…

Andre: Technically.

Micah: (laughing) Oh my god…he just said it's not reading…

Meredith: Why?

Andre: 'Cause…it's like Twitter.

Micah: It's reading. You gotta read what they say. How you going to understand what they saying?

Andre: Ok…nevermind.

Meredith: Well…what's the difference?

Andre: 'Cause when I think of reading I think of like…

Micah: Reading something big like books or something?

Andre: Yeah…like a book or a magazine.
. . .

Meredith: You say Twitter is reading because you have to read the words?

Micah: You have to read what they saying. Look at all these words (has phone). How do you know what they talking about?

One vision of reading marks it as a technical skill that occurs within certain

parameters, school for example. The other argues that reading is a social process that

occurs in social contexts, like Micah's desire to "know what they talking about" when

reading his Twitter feed. The former might be characterized as "information mining;" the latter as "experiential reading." For a moment, I would like to step out of the experience of the project to consider what the way we teach reading in schools, the curriculum approach that we take (specifically the Common Core State Standards), says about reading. Although this project took place outside of the formal bounds of schooling, being *not a reader* was shaped by reading in schools (as I will explore more fully in the next chapter).

Information vs. Experience: Two Possibilities for Reading

In the dystopic future of Ray Bradbury's (1951/2001) *Fahrenheit 451*, there is no shortage of information. The world is full of Mildred Montags who spend their days consuming information; immersed in room-size, personalized television shows and serenaded by the constant hum in their ear buds, they experience incessant input.   And yet something is missing. Guy Montag comes to believe that something exists in books, and struggles to find meaning in the few illegal texts he has squirreled away. But as former English professor Faber tells him, it is not the books that hold the key: "'Books were only one type of receptacle where we stored a lot of things we were afraid we might forget. There is nothing magical in them, at all. The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us'" (p. 111). Montag's mistake was to believe that meaning existed as something finite in the text – the sort of written responses the students had to "Not Waving But Drowning" - when in fact, as Faber tells him, meaning making is a far more complex process than simply decoding the words on a page and finding knowledge contained within.

Faber explains three things are needed for the type of meaning making Montag so

desperately seeks: quality of detail, the leisure to digest it, and "the right to carry out actions based on the interaction of the first two" (p. 113).   This is the sort of experience I'd hope to create in the project - interesting texts, time for reading and re-reading, and the opportunity to create something from the process (the Scrapbooks). Like Montag, we live in a world increasingly full of information; we are bombarded by texts. Despite this abundance, it is less common that we encounter texts with a richness of detail, or that we read with a critical eye the detail that is there to be had. We become impatient for the "truth" a text has to offer, instead of wrestling with it as Faber suggests we must; this is the dilemma facing students who want to read a text and "get it," students who have been led to believe that reading is a process of knowledge extraction. I think this explains James's "I don't get this poem at all" uttered after only a few minutes of reading. In fact, he did get something, and he got much more when he gave himself time to chew on the text, but that chewing takes patience and an environment that allows for missteps (and in fact encourages risk taking). Faber's third point suggests two things: reading is a process, not an instantaneous revelation, and as a process, its effects extend far beyond the moment in which we encounter words on the page. Reading is both shaped by and shapes our experience in the world.

Throughout history, the ability to read and create text has been valued as a marker of intelligence and sophistication. Rightly or wrongly, civilizations are judged on the presence or absence of written communication and the complexity of the texts they produce. Literacy has been denied groups in the past as a means of subjugation or brought to them as a path to liberation. Instruction in reading and the study of literature has long formed the basis of formal education systems; the two go hand-in-hand as the

way in which one is taught to read influences her later reading and handling of literature, the type of literacy that develops. In its oldest use, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (2012) to be "literate" means to be "educated, instructed, learned." It is then unsurprising that the American education system clearly places great emphasis on "literacy;" it is tested in every age group and a required subject for every year of schooling.

The question for educators is how to define literacy: Are we consumers of information or creators of knowledge attentive to experience?   In his essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin (1937/2007) explores this tension between experience (represented by storytelling) and information. Benjamin laments the death of our storytelling ability and notes that we are becoming increasingly ill at ease with hearing stories and less adept at creating them: "It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences" (p. 83).   For Benjamin, experience is the basis of all story, both as its source material and as the thing that makes it worth telling again and again; story is not only a record of experience but also a way for others to become a part of that experience and for new experience to be created, a web that connects us across time and space.

Information, however, eliminates the shared record of experience that story offers; its value does not extend beyond the moment in which it is encountered.   While both story and information can convey "extraordinary things," information does not require the engagement of the reader in making meaning: "the prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself'" (p. 89).   In describing the work of storyteller Leskov (the subject of the essay) Benjamin says, "The most extraordinary things, marvelous things,

are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks" (p. 89). Story relies on experience, both of the teller and the listener/reader, to create meaning, and that meaning is never fixed. Information aims to relay a specific meaning, the "truth" of the matter, with no need for interpretation. The reader of story is active; the reader of information, passive.

Bakhtin (1935/1981) argues that a "passive understanding of meaning is no understanding at all, it is only the abstract aspect of meaning" (p. 281). If students learn to read for information only, a passive understanding, they never learn to "do" anything with the words they read. Only through response to the text, a dialogue with it, can meaning making occur. For Bakhtin, this dialogic process of acquiring and "doing" something with the words of others is the way in which an individual achieves consciousness. This dialogic process of evaluation and response to text was exactly the sort of meaning making process that Montag desired, but like many in the modern world, he was hampered by the "truth" claim of information that assaulted him at every turn. James, Andre, and Micah are not unlike Montag; they are faced with an overwhelming amount of information and have an innate desire to "do something" (as evidenced by the enthusiasm they brought to our conversations). Schools have the potential to empower students to act; they also have the power to render them merely passive consumers of information.

Defining Literacy in School Contexts

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects is the latest initiative of the accountability and standards movement in education. Released in 2010 along with CCSS for Mathematics, the CCSS for English Language Arts and Literacy frames literacy as a task which "require[s] that students systematically acquire knowledge in literature and other disciplines through reading, writing, speaking, and listening" ("Frequently Asked Questions," 2012, Content and Quality of the Standards section). This systematic acquisition is outlined in a 66-page document and 3 appendices that include specific benchmarks for each grade level to mark progress towards "college and career readiness." Given that 45 states have adopted the CCSS as of early 2013 and that assessments based on CCSS are set to replace state accountability assessment as early as 2014[9], it is fair to say the CCSS will have a sizable impact on the way the activities of reading and writing are defined in schools.

The College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading Grades 6-12 give some indication of what the CCSS definition of reading looks like:

Key Ideas and Details
1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure
4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze

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[9]from http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states; retrieved January 2013

how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas
7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity
10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.   (National Governors Association, p. 35)

All of these are fine skills for students to have, and as we will see in the next chapter, they are precursors to the more difficult work of textual study. But without exception they frame the text as the source of meaning, or more accurately as the source of information. Each standard is something students *do to* a text, not something they *do with* a text as part of a dialogic process. There is no mention of context, no mention of student response, no mention of connections to the social world. Texts are framed as objects of mechanical study. The final standard – "Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts *independently* and proficiently" (emphasis mine) – seems utterly incompatible with a socio-cultural understanding of the reading process. Having read the full CCSS, I am aware that the *independent* here is born out of a research based concern that many students leave high school without the ability to read fluently; Micah, Andre, and James are among this number. But an (perhaps) unintended consequence of such language is that it disregards the fact that we never read independently, nor should we – recalling Bakhtin's words, "language is not a neutral medium."

The standards allow for no dialogue in reading, not between reader and reader and not between reader and text. A sidebar on the "range and content of student reading" that accompanies the anchor standards above reads:

> To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students' own thinking and writing. Along with high-quality contemporary works, these texts should be chosen from among seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare. Through wide and deep reading of literature and literary nonfiction of steadily increasing sophistication, students gain a reservoir of literary and cultural knowledge, references, and images; the ability to evaluate intricate arguments; and the capacity to surmount the challenges posed by complex texts. (p.35)

What is troubling is the implication that this statement, and language elsewhere in the CCSS, makes about the nature of what it means to be literate and why it is that we place such importance on the study of literature throughout the secondary school years. As Alan Block (1995) argues, the way we teach students to read is of critical importance: "reading instruction becomes curriculum. The way one is taught to read becomes the purpose and manner of reading: the technique becomes the thing. And the pedagogy makes possible what is readable, and what may happen when reading is practiced" (p. 5). The way we define literacy and the way we teach it largely determines whether or not the next generation learns to be Mildreds mining text for information or the something more Montag hoped to become.

Even the language "college and career ready" suggests that reading is about acquisition of information for a specific purpose. Nothing is said of the simple joy of reading or of the fact that reading texts is an extension of our innate drive to read the world. Instead of a source for inspiration and a site of dialogue, texts that matter are from

a certain "high-quality" cannon, sources of information that somehow equip students to meet the world without any consideration of the fact that students already live in the world and that life brings to the text meaning just as the text brings meaning to that life. As Block notes, this view of reading becomes how we teach students to read and how they come to view reading, in our classrooms and beyond the school walls.   The introduction to the English Language Arts Standards bluntly states "the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century" (p.3). Andre's belief that Twitter does not count as reading is symptomatic of such a definition. James Gee (2008) describes such a definition as one that "rips literacy out of its sociocultural contexts and treats it as an asocial cognitive skill with little or nothing to do with human relationships. It cloaks literacy's connections to power, to social identity, and to ideologies, often in the service of privileging certain types of literacy and certain types of people" (p. 67). It is this view of literacy that builds the artificial divide between our classroom activity and students' experiences in the world.

As Block's assertion that reading instruction becomes curriculum suggests, the way we define literacy has clear political implications. Block traces the schism in reading instruction (and by extension the purpose of the study of literature) back to the early twentieth century.   Educators in the progressive movement, such as John Dewey, and later proponents of whole-language instruction espoused the belief that reading is an organically developed process that can be used to create knowledge.   The more mainstream understanding of reading treated it as a distinct set of skills that could be taught to children so that they could unlock the knowledge contained within texts. This latter conception was supported by the advent of disciplines such as cognitive psychology

and educational measurement that sought to quantify learning and provide scientific evidence to support pedagogical practices.   In his history of secondary English pedagogy, Arthur Applebee (1974) draws similar conclusions about the impact of "scientific" thinking on the teaching reading; because reading came to be seen as a quantifiable, easily measurable set of skills, talk about reading at the secondary level became limited to remedial courses.   Unlike the progressive notion that learning to read was essentially a lifelong process because the reader would always be confronted with new texts, the skills based approach assumed that reading ability had a fixed endpoint or outcome.

The idea that reading is still primarily viewed as a finite set of skills (at least by those writing much of English curriculum) is apparent in the language of the CCSS with its checklist of standards to be mastered at each level. The real emphasis in these standards is placed on skill building for knowledge retrieval from texts, what I have called information mining. The way we test and measure literacy is further evidence of the primacy of this view of reading; tests of reading comprehension measure not the process by which a student makes meaning of a text and what is created through that process, but rather the student's ability to apply specific skills of decoding to find the "correct" answer to a particular question of comprehension (suggesting that knowledge is static and contained within the text). Certainly this could be attributed in part to the weakness of standardized testing formats, but the weight given to such tests and their results says much about what sort of literacy (and by extension, what sort of literature study) is valued by our education system.

The Myth of Literacy

In his discussion of the "myth of literacy" (the idea that literacy is what civilizes us), Gee (2008) writes of Plato's insistence that text always be dialogic but at the same time that the voice behind the text be privileged (lest some ignoble individual get the wrong idea about the text's meaning). "Plato's dilemma," as Gee names this quandary, is the fact that literacy can function both as a means of personal liberation and as a means of social control. And there really is no easy way out: "Literacy always comes with a perspective on interpretation that is ultimately political" (p. 64). Plato's solution was to give the meaning making power to the state, an authoritarian move. Like Plato, Freire acknowledged that literacy is inherently political, but sought a pedagogy that would focus on the libratory potential of literacy. The same tension drives the "reading for experience" vs. "reading for information" debate. There is always the question of whether the reader's meaning making is "right," whether by the standards of the institution (like the school) or a well-intentioned teacher.

Although Gee suggests there is no solution to Plato's dilemma, he does offer that being explicit about the political implications of literacy instruction moves in the right direction:

> In the end, we might say that, contrary to the literacy myth, nothing follows from literacy or schooling. Much follows, however, from what comes with literacy and schooling, what literacy and schooling come wrapped up in, namely the attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs (at once social, cultural, and political) that always accompany literacy and schooling…A text, whether written on paper, or on the soul (Plato), or on the world (Freire), is a loaded weapon. The person, the educator, who hands over the gun hand over the bullets (the perspective) and must own up to the consequences. There is no way out of having an opinion, an ideology, and a strong one, as did Plato, as does Freire. Literacy education is not for the timid. (p. 64-65)

At the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag joins a group of wandering exiles, each of

whom has incorporated a portion of banned/burned text into his memory.   This could be read as a rather literal version of Benjamin's notion of storytelling; stories do not exist for one person nor are they written by one person, rather they grow and evolve over time through communal engagement and the sharing of experience. Benjamin expressed concern about the novel as a literary form because its physicality, the fact that novels are printed on pages meant to be read by individuals, threatens the communal creation of meaning and the primacy of experience.   If we resist seeing the text as a vessel of knowledge to be extracted through the proper application of skills, we are doing well. But we must also remind ourselves and our students that it is not enough to simply dialogue with the text; we must also acknowledge the social/communal construction of text and language and share our responses and discoveries with each other.   With Plato's dilemma, the myth of literacy, in mind, I return to the phenomenon of *not a reader* and the readings my students and I engaged in this project. Could I let go of my own readings enough to allow the students' readings to emerge? Or would I, despite my best intentions, reinforce *not a reader* through an (unintentional) authoritarian pedagogy?

Reading Socially

When I asked Andre, Micah, and James about their early encounters with reading they all responded with enthusiasm with memories of *Green Eggs and Ham*, "little books with big words," and *Captain Underpants*; this sort of simple joy, "good memories" of reading, seemed absent from their later accounts of reading in school. If you have ever spent much time around a small child, you likely know that he enjoys both the endless repetition of a story and the verbal articulation of all the other "stuff" that happens when we read: the excited voice, the discussion of images and ideas that go beyond the words

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on the page, the emotional reactions, the relation of prior readings and experiences to the current reading, and so on. The way a young child engages with a text is a more transparent version of the way we engage with texts as mature readers. We never just see the words on the page; there is a much more complex mental, emotional, and psychological process occurring as we read.   We do not suddenly lose this natural tendency to engage with texts when we turn school aged, but something about the way literacy and literature are addressed in schools, frequently has the effect of stifling it. Sumara (2002) explains that while literary texts are generally read as "open" outside of school settings, pedagogical practices within classrooms such as asking students to identify the main conflict or a character's tragic flaw (perhaps as an answer on a test that is either right or wrong), can easily cause the text to become "closed." On the one hand we encourage students to respond personally to a text (to read for experience), while at the same time implying that elements of the text are fixed in meaning (to read for information) - the same sort of mixed signal sent by the language of the CCSS, which claims to teach meaning making yet presents as information mining, and the instruments (standardized tests) we use to measure students' literacy.

I have experienced this sort of schizophrenic tension between open and closed readings as both a student and a teacher. Throughout this project I struggled to reign in my "teacher instinct" to point to the minutiae of each text as we read it. Although this tendency comes out of a place of excitement about how literature works - I want others to see the metaphor I see and the way it helps me make meaning - it risks narrowing what is possible to read.   Early in the project, the students and I read Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" (1978) together. What follows is part of our discussion of the second stanza:

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

September 17 – Event Memory and Transcript:

Meredith: If you don't understand anything about what she's saying, what should you do first?

Here I go again with leading questions, still assuming there's some magic technique that I need to teach in order for this thing to work.   And they oblige with the "correct" sort of answers.

Micah: Ask a question.

Meredith: What could you ask?

Steven: What are you talking about?

Micah: What do she mean by?

James: What kind of state was she in when she wrote this?

Steven: Oil wells?

Meredith: What does she mean by that?

Steven: So she walking like she's an oil machine?

James: Slowly. (laughs)

Meredith: If you had oil wells pumping in your living room…

Andre: slippery

Steven: That's what I'm saying she's walking.

Micah: She walking like she's scared.

Steven: She's sliding or something.

Meredith: If you owned a bunch…

Andre: You'd be rich.

Micah: She walking like she that junk.

Andre: She got money.

Meredith: She says I walk like I have…

Andre: No she broke.

Steven: She broke.

Meredith: She might be but she…

Steven: She got it.

Meredith: Yup, keep asking those questions!

There's always something slightly cringe worthy about listening to your own voice on tape; "Do I really sound like that?" In transcribing some of my tapes, in re-reading those moments, I found more than my voice a bother; "Did I really just say that??" In our discussions, I tried to play a reflective role, simply tossing the students' questions and comments back to them; I wanted to believe that I was merely the paper capturing and transmitting their commentary. But, of course, I'm not paper, and it is foolish to think that I could somehow set aside my own reactions as a reader or my instincts as a teacher. Sometimes, I slipped from simply being another reader at the table over into *telling*, a position complicated by my position as teacher. By virtue of my *teacherness* my readings potentially carried more weight; in this situation there were no grades at stake, which mitigated the *teacherness* effect to some degree. Even so, the way I spoke about the texts and presented my readings at times was leading at best.

My use of "should" in the first line here is an example how I took on an authoritarian voice at times in our dialogues. "Should" implies there's one way to approach our reading task here. I also ignore the comments about walking as though the

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floor was slippery, walking scared. While that may not be the "best" reading, it was the first reading that several students had. Another possibility for this conversation would have been for us to interrogate that response: "Does it make sense that she'd be walking as though she was afraid of falling? What does that image suggest?" And so on. Instead, I give them an obvious push down the path to my reading "If you owned a bunch…" It is harder, although ultimately more rewarding, to sit back and wait for students to come to those bits of text on their own; harder still to accept that they may take things in another direction completely.

I also fell victim in my teaching to what Robert Scholes (1985) describes as the problem of "teaching literature:" "When we say we "teach literature," instead of saying we teach reading, or interpretation, or criticism, we are saying that we expound the wisdom and truth of our texts, that we are in fact priests and priestesses in the service of a secular scripture: 'the best that has been though and said' - provided it has been said indirectly, through an aesthetic medium" (p. 12).   Scholes argues that literature became a sort of "secular scripture" for a society turning away from religion as a source of moral guidance, an observation shared by Terry Eagleton (2008) in his essay "The Rise of English." If we look to literature for some sort of "truth" or knowledge about how the world works, we contribute to the sort of information mining and displacement of agency described by critics of a reading as skills approach to literacy. Students are led to believe, even by well-intentioned teachers, that the "right" answer is somewhere there on the page of the "sacred" text; texts become closed.

Part of our problem is the way we approach the classification of literature. Scholes notes that we are guilty of talking about literature in dichotomous ways that

make it difficult for students to see themselves as producers of meaning. First, there is the division between "literature" and "non-literature;" such classifications give almost mythic qualities to "literature" that create a barrier between student and text. Consider again the CCSS's call for students to read "works of exceptional craft" and the mindset that leads students to believe that reading only happens with "big books." We also divide texts between producers, those who write, and consumers, those who read, instead of embracing the interrelationship between reading and writing and the dialogic process of meaning making. Finally, we create unnecessary demarcations between the "real" world and the "academic" making it difficult for students to transfer important skills from one realm to the other. These sorts of divisions lead to the closed text/open text dilemma and its related problems that I experienced throughout my teaching and even during the course of this project. For Scholes, the solution is to "stop 'teaching literature' and start 'studying texts'" (p. 16).

One possible remedy to both the problem of the authoritarian voice of *teacherness* and the tendency to see texts as secular scripture is to change the texts we bring to the classroom for study. Like many teachers, I have difficulty relinquishing control of my classroom. It's a feeling that runs counter to almost everything I believe about what makes classrooms work, and still, it's hard to shake. My committee urged me to have the students bring their own texts, pointing out that this move was more true to my claim to plant meaning making power in the hands of students; I agree this would be the ideal. Figuring out how to make this work was another thing all together. I did have the freedom not granted to most classroom teachers to not worry about content, or language, or whether or not "it would be on the test." Even so, my invitation – "So, what texts do

y'all want to bring in to read" – did not get much response. Maybe, as the above Twitter conversation suggests, there was still uncertainty about what would count. Maybe it was an access issue: "I don't have any books at the house," James told me. When I asked them what they might like to read, I got mostly vague answers that still seemed to be dressed in "this is what she wants to hear:"

September 19 - Transcript:

Sierra: Autobiographies. I like stories about people.

Andre: Hitler stuff. WWII. History is good.

Steven: What about Langston Hughes – ain't that his name?

Meredith: You like Langston Hughes?

Steven: Nah, I mean I guess he's ok. He's black, right?

I felt both frustration and a slight sense of panic. So should we do something historical? Was an African-American author more likely to resonate? Maybe starting with something really personal like favorite song lyrics would be an in. If we couldn't find "the text," the one that would move us into the really good stuff, could we get anywhere at all? There was way too much Meredith telling in the first week of tapes and not enough space for dialogue.

The next chapter will move to explore how we addressed this problem, how we tried to find our answer to Plato's dilemma and began to read the world instead of reading merely for information. The scrapbooks were never officially abandoned, but they drifted out of our focus, replaced with the little black recorder in the center of the table. Classrooms are social spaces, a fact that I began to see as key to emphasizing that the task of meaning making is not an individual one, but something that occurs in dialogue with

others. To read the world, we needed to acknowledge that we were in the world, not in some isolated classroom space disconnected from it all. In her memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi (2004) recounts her creation of a secret reading club for women during the Iran-Iraq war. She remembers her students coming to her "house in a disembodied state of suspension, bringing with them to my living room their secrets, their pains and their gifts" (p. 58); Micah, Andre, James, and I entered our room similarly entangled.

As a social activity, reading has implications for our ability to act within society; as Madeleine Grumet (1999) describes it, "Rituals of reading are analogs for the social structure within which we develop selves and society. Through the interpretation of text, reading permits communications that may also significantly change social structure . . . It's not just people who change, knowledge does also" (p. 151).   For Louise Rosenblatt (1995), proper literary exploration can capitalize on the openness and vulnerability of adolescence to make students more engaged with their communities and the world beyond.   Students do not need to read about only those like them; engagement with fiction allows them to enter unfamiliar worlds and relate to unfamiliar characters. In participating in the experience of others through fiction, students develop a better sense of community in their own lives. Rosenblatt believes in the "power of literature to develop social imagination" (p. 179), an ability that allows students to imagine the implications of actions in the world and presumably become better actors and neighbors.

This brings us back to Freire and his idea that knowledge is created through dialogue in communities: "Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without

communication there can be no true education" (p. 92-3). Critical thinking is not my

favorite phrase; it is overused in education to the point of becoming meaningless. But I

do appreciate Freire's use here; the critical is the constant reflection and revision of

thought. As we dialogue in classrooms around literature, we must actively adjust our

thought process as we go. That is what allows us to create meaning, both in the text and

in the world.

SPIRAL FOUR

NOT A READER – READING THE WORLD

"I suppose she chose me because she knew my name; as I read the alphabet a faint line appeared between her eyebrows, and after making me read most of *My First Reader* and the stock-market quotations from *The Mobile Register* aloud, she discovered that I was literate and looked at me with more than faint distaste. Miss Caroline told me to tell my father not to teach me any more, it would interfere with my reading…

I mumbled that I was sorry and retired meditating upon my crime. I never deliberately learned to read, but somehow I had been wallowing illicitly in the daily papers. In the long hours of church – was it then I learned? I could not remember not being able to read hymns. Now that I was compelled to think about it, reading was something that just came to me, as learning to fasten the seat of my union suit without looking, or achieving two bows from a snarl of shoelaces. I could not remember when the lines above Atticus's moving finger separated into words, but I had stared at them all the evenings in my memory, listening to the news of the day, Bills to Be Enacted into Laws, the diaries of Lorenzo Dow – anything Atticus happened to be reading when I crawled into his lap every night. Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing." – Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960/1982)*,* p. 17-18

Like Scout, I don't really remember how I came to learn to read although I know

it was something that happened before I started school.   Fortunately I never had a Miss

Caroline who tried to correct my reading ability; I enjoyed reading in any context and

never much differentiated between school reading and not-school reading, nor could I

imagine not reading any more than I could imagine not breathing.   One of the most

difficult adjustments I had to make as a novice teacher was understanding that not all

students, in fact only a small minority of my students, viewed reading this way.   For

most, there was very clearly "reading that happened in school" and "activities involving

texts outside of schools that may or may not be reading."   Instead of a natural practice of

engagement that threads into all aspects of life, reading for many students is bounded

sharply by the structure of school or even by a single classroom or unit. What would it mean then for a *not a reader* to read the world, that is to erase the artificial divide we often create between reading in school and our experiences and activity in the world?

I had begun the first day with the group by asking them what they thought reading was, what sorts of things they read, what reading was like in school and so on. As getting-to-know-you conversations often are, the talk was halting at first. Even so within the first 5 minutes, James had made a number of statements that would be variously echoed throughout the project by all the participants:

"I can read well, but I don't like reading."

"Teachers make stuff difficult." – *in response to my question about why reading was different in schools*

"We do word problems in math class." – *in response to my question about what reading activities they had done so far in the program*

"I don't read."

"I don't see why reading is so big."

"I read tweets."

"I don't read things I'm not interested in."

What does all of this say about reading? On the one hand, James acknowledges that reading is something that happens outside of English class and outside of school – doing math problems and reading Twitter. On the other, he expresses a dislike of reading and a belief that school reading is somehow different. Through his statements "I don't like reading" and "I don't read," James claims an identity of *not a reader*, this in spite of the fact he claims he "can read well." Just being able to read does not make one *a reader* then. So what does? Maybe an identity of *reader* means, as Scout suggests, that one

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engages in the activity of reading with the same ease and instinct with which one breathes. But, as I hope to show, James and his fellow participants all demonstrated the ability to do *reader* things; that is they interpreted, critiqued and otherwise engaged with texts in the world with natural ease, and yet they didn't see themselves as readers. This spiral of inquiry explores this contradiction; through it, I hope to better understand the experience of those students who label themselves or are labeled *not a reader* and imagine ways to provide space in classroom to re-imagine that identity.

Identity Matters: Socio-Cultural Theories of Identity and Reading

September 24 – Event Memory and Transcript:

Now that we have worked together for a few weeks, I feel it's a better time to talk to the students about what they find interesting about reading, what their experiences of reading in schools were and so on. Sierra and Steven have left us at this point.

> Meredith: So when you read stuff in English class in high school, did y'all read stuff in class?
>
> Andre: Yeah.
>
> Meredith: Or did you read stuff at home? Were you supposed to read stuff at home?
>
> Micah: I'm not a home reader.
>
> Meredith: Well as a class, did the class read stuff together in class?
>
> James: My little sister is always reading. Constantly she reads.
>
> Andre: Girls like to read.
>
> Micah: Yeah, I know a girl that read for fun, like she just sits there and might not do nothing in class but she just sits there and read.
>
> Andre: Girls read more than guys.
>
> Meredith: Why do you say girls like to read?

Micah: I don't know. They might like it better. I know a whole lot of girls that reads. One she be a homebody and reads.

Andre: Guys, they gonna find something to do.

Meredith: Do you know any guys that read?

There's some muttering and snickering. I get the sense that maybe guys reading is a "not cool" thing? So I ask.

Meredith: What do you want to say about that? I can tell you have something to say about that.

James: I don't hang around dudes that much.

Andre: I've only got like 3 bros.

Meredith: You don't remember any guys in school who read? Might not have been friends with?

Andre-I remember this one dude, he was a punk, he read.

Meredith: He was a punk, because he read?

Andre: No, he was just like a punk, like naturally, think he was born a punk, and he just so happened to read.

Micah: My uncle used to read, but he was in jail so he didn't have no choice but to read.

Andre: Oh, yeah yeah.

Micah: When he got out he was still reading.

James: That's all you do in jail is read. That's all I did when I was in jail. I just read.

Micah: He got out of jail and he still read books. He didn't read all the time, like once in a while. It kinda scared me a little bit because I ain't never seen him read before.

At this point they start talking over each other about various experiences they've had in jail. James is the only one who has served a sentence but both Micah and Andre have at least spent a night in the county jail.

Meredith: It scared you?

Micah: It was unusual. They go in jail and come back out reading books, and that's scary to me, like "when did you start reading books?!"

Meredith: Why is it scary to read though?

Micah: It's not scary. Just weird.

In this conversation and in others, Andre, Micah, and James not only claim they are *not a readers* but that reading is something a particular sort of person does. Here they frame reading as a passive activity enjoyed by girls who are happy to just "sit there and read;" boys, will "always find something to do." Only when they are in the passive position of "punk" or behind bars, is reading something that males chose to do. Although they are not overtly negative about reading, reading by choice is something seen as atypical, even "weird;" being a reader is not an identity they seem to value.

Andre, James, and Micah's attitude towards reading here is reminiscent of the stance towards the mental work of school taken by "the lads" in Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor* (1977). The lads reject the investment in schoolwork made by the "ear'oles," a group they see as weak for their unwillingness to engage in "manly" sorts of jobs requiring physical labor. Micah, Andre, and James ascribe a similar passivity to reading in this exchange: it is something done by girls who are willing to sit at home, by "punks" (boys perhaps not unlike the "ear'oles"), and only by men when they are behind bars and literally have nothing else to do. According to Willis, the lads' rejection of the mental labor of school and their formation of a counter-culture is what ultimately makes it

impossible for them to have anything other than working class jobs. In choosing to reject school, the lads choose manual work. Could a similar process be at play in a *not a reader's* decision to reject a reader identity?

I've been interested in reader identity since my time as a classroom teacher. So many of the resistant behaviors students engaged in – not doing reading homework, refusing to participate in class, etc – seemed tied to their claim to be *not a reader*. Blake is the perfect example of this. When I watched her at lunch with friends, in the halls between classes, and even in my classroom when reading was not front and center, she was confident and loquacious, and certainly skilled in engaging in dialogue. Yet when it came to reading activities, she pushed back: "That's not me. I'm not a reader." Based on my experience teaching students like Blake, I assumed *not a readers* likely had some level of difficulty with decoding or reading fluency and that this led them to be less willing participants in class (perhaps due to embarrassment or simply because the effort was more than they were willing to put in). What was happening that caused them to resist engaging with literature and the activities of the English classroom? Why was someone like Blake who was so skilled at "reading" the social scene of the cafeteria, reluctant to apply those same thought processes to reading texts?

Understanding something about how students develop identities as *not a reader* was necessary for me to be able to understand why there was such a division in their minds (and often in the minds of teachers, like Miss Caroline, and schools) between the activity required for reading in school and the activity required for reading the world. Furthermore, if as Bakhtin and Freire suggest, identity is essentially connected to our use of language in social contexts, the language possibilities available to students make

different identities possible. Does the way we teaching reading in schools limit the possible identities available to students?

Describing identity in any context, much less a school, is a complex task; the term is understood differently by different disciplines and even by theorists within the same discipline. Socio-cultural theories of identity are a useful lens for examining identity in the context of schools and the social process of reading because they are interested in the way social structures influence identity and the way identity is performed in those structures. In their examination of literacy-and-identity studies, Elizabeth Moje and Allan Luke (2009) explain that even among those who agree that identity is a social construct, there is considerable variation in how "identity as a social construct" is defined. They do find, however, that talk around "identity as a social construct" generally includes three key assumptions: identity is a social, not an individual construction; identity is a fluid, plural entity; and identity is dependent on recognition by others. "Social" has been taken to mean that identities are connected to group memberships, developed through social interaction, tied to stories around social interaction, dependent on others recognition of an individual, or always performed for others. The "fluid" or "plural" nature of identity is understood variously as identities being literally always in flux, as changing to incorporate new experiences over time, as different enactments of self in various contexts, as a "core" with multiple angles for various situations, as fragmented manifestations of an inner self, or as produced over time as individuals negotiate changing social structures. However "social" and "fluid" are defined, identities are seen "as situated in and mediated by social interaction and, more importantly, by relations of power" (p. 419); identity depends on how the individual is

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recognized within a particular social context. To put this in Bakhtinian terms, an individual's identity is dependent on the language she chooses within a particular social setting; the options available to her are delineated by the words of others within that context.

James Gee's (2008) socio-linguistic theory of identity highlights the dependency of identity on recognition by others. Gee argues that in the past, authoritarian institutions such as the state or religion played a large role in identity formation; however, in contemporary times, these traditional authorities and institutions no longer have the same impact on identity because their dominance in society is diminished. Schools are one example of authoritarian institutions capable of imposing authoritative discourses on students, but because students also encounter other possible identities in the homes, communities, and other social encounters, they have a larger range of identities to choose from and more agency in choosing them.   In my classroom, Blake was recognized as a *poor student*; in her circle of friends she was seen as a *leader*. Through the adoption of appropriate Discourses, individuals make a claim to be recognized as a particular type of person by others in their social world. Gee defines Discourses as "distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading *coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities" (p. 155, original emphasis). Gee emphasizes that both language and action are a part of Discourses, moving beyond Bakhtin's suggestion that the selection of a language is the basis of consciousness (or rather expanding the definition of what one might mean by language). Like Bakhtin, Gee

argues that the language for understanding the Discourses available to us can only come through dialogue with others. In the excerpt above, Andre, Micah, and James are claiming an identity outside the Discourse of reading. As we will see in a moment, they recognize the sorts of language and behaviors that define the Discourse of reading and at times even appropriate them.

Gee (2001) acknowledges there is no one "best" definition of identity but offers one useful possibility as "Being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context. . . all people have multiple identities connected not to their 'internal states' but to their performances in society" (p. 99).   He expands this by outlining four ways in which one can be a "certain kind of person:" the nature-identity (N-Identities), the institution-identity (I-Identities), discourse-identity (D-Identities), and affinity-identity (A-Identities). As an example, Andre's N-Identity would include those things given to him by nature such as the fact that he is male. His I-Identity, imposed on him by institutions such as schools or the justice system, might label him a "troublemaker." The D-Identity comes through his interactions with others in social spaces, the fact that he is seen as having a good sense of humor for example. Finally, his A-Identity comes from shared experiences with groups he chooses to associate with such as "business associates" (as he terms them).

While all four types of identity overlap in various ways, looking at them separately gives interesting insights into the various ways identity can be socially constructed through performance - an individual's enactment of a particular type - and recognition - others acknowledgment of the success or failure of that performance. Gee suggests that a "core identity" that holds across contexts is also possible. This core identity is not a static

thing but rather evolves as an individual moves through and interacts with various Discourses.

The participants in this study have been recognized by others – teachers, classmates, the school, etc - as being *not a reader*; within the social space of school, they have performed this identity in various ways – refusal to participate, difficulty with assignments, low test scores, failing grades, leaving high school. I had hoped the scrapbooks, as a dialogic activity, would be a way for the students to take up the Discourse of *reader*, to "talk like a reader" and "act like a reader." As we moved away from the idea of the scrapbooks, I struggled to find a different way to open up the Discourse of *reader* or to at least complicate the Discourse of *not a reader*.

Another poem suggested to me in my informal Facebook poll was Tupac Shakur's "In the Depths of Solitude." What I loved most about this suggestion is that it came from a student, Alan, I taught in my first year as a teacher, a student who like James, Andre, and Micah did not really see himself as a reader or a kid who did school. One of the things I recall most vividly about Alan was how impressed I was with the first essay he wrote for my class. Here was a kid who was intermittent at best with getting his work done, writing what I thought was one of the most interesting essays in the class. I actually don't even remember what the assignment was now. What I do remember[10] is what Alan said to me when I returned his paper with my enthusiastic comments and an "A" - he questioned it. "Really, you think it was good?" "Well, I really enjoyed reading it. I think you made some great points, just nicely done." "Huh," he replied. "I've never had that happen before. Usually I get told I just didn't do the assignment right." Alan

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[10] This conversation was some 10 years ago so I don't recall the exact words we exchanged. However, I think this is a fair representation of what occurred.

was certainly not a perfect student; he had his share of missing work and discipline problems, even with me, but he never missed another writing assignment.

My first thought after that exchange was "Uh, oh. Have I just committed some horrible first year teacher error and screwed up how I graded these papers?" I quickly regained my idealistic confidence; it *was* an interesting paper and it was well written. No, it was not perfect. Yes, it had spelling errors and probably some grammar mistakes. But it had personality, and it did something, and for that it stood out from the stack. I was proud of him for writing it, and it deserved that "A." What this event suggests to me is that it is possible to open up the Discourse of student or writer or reader. As I wrote earlier about the CCSS and will write in a moment about how we use texts in classrooms, schools frequently have rigid, nearly impermeable barriers that define what counts as *reader*. As Nafisi found with her students in Tehran, students come to us entangled in the world; we cannot brush off the web of experience at the door. Perhaps then, those connections can widen the chinks in the barrier and open up our classroom spaces.

The Figured World of English Class

Gee's core identity is not unlike what Dorothy Holland (2010) calls an "intimate identity," "an emotionally charged sense of oneself as an actor in a cultural world" (p. 5). Intimate identities are part of "history in person," an interaction between "intimate terrain" and "spaces of local contentious practice." Individuals thus are exposed to and may form senses of themselves in relation to the "local identities," produced and performed in these spaces, including ones influenced by "sociohistorical identities," which have formed over a larger expanse of time in institutionalized structures and struggles (Holland, 2010; Holland & Lave, 2001; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain,

1998). This framework is useful in exploring the ways in which identity is shaped both by local practice, such as that of a classroom, and by larger social forces, such as the institution of schooling.

Holland, et. al. (1998) expand this theory of identity, drawing on Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism as well as Vygotsky's theories of human development, and Pierre Bourdieu's social theory. They see identity as developing in the space of interaction between intimate or personal terrain and the collective space of cultural forms and social relations. The work in this project is attentive to all aspects of this interaction; personal terrain through the students' responses and the collective space of our group discussions.

The concept of a figured world is useful in understanding better how individuals both come to inhabit identity roles, such as *reader* or *not a reader*, and act through them within those figured worlds. As "a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland, et. al, 1998, p. 52), a figured world provides context for words and actions.   Each individual encounters and functions within multiple figured worlds, sometimes even simultaneously, as a result of the heteroglossic nature of social life.   Participation in a figured world could be read as adopting (or resisting) a particular Discourse. An individual's status within that figured world is dependent on how well she enacts that Discourse.

Reading in school functions as a figured world: There is a teacher who leads discussion and students who participate (or resist participating); books are read; discussions are had; papers are written; tests are taken; grades are given. Particular skills of interpretation and communication are valued and characteristics of cooperation,

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respect, and creativity are encouraged.   Like most students, Andre, James, and Micah understand how the figured world of reading in school works and what sorts of behaviors were expected and valued in that figured world.

January 23 – Event Memory and Transcript

I've asked Micah and Andre to write about an experience they had reading in school. At first they say they don't remember what they read in school. Then Micah recalls books he read during silent sustained reading (SSR) time. SSR is a district wide initiative that is taken up variously by different schools but generally involves students self-selecting a book, reading silently for a set amount of time and then writing a brief journal entry (often a summary and some short statement of personal response).

> Micah: I remember when they used to…do you remember SSR? I used to read then. I used to read those big ole Harry Potter books and I used to read…um…I forgot…I think it was the Twilight…I think I read Twilight books before.
>
> Andre: You read that in elementary school?
>
> Micah: Nah, in middle school.
>
> Meredith: You could talk about why you read those.
>
> Micah: I only read them because everyone else was reading them, so I was like "I'm going to read them too."
>
> Andre: You was a copy cat.
>
> Micah: They was big books. I wanted to see if I could read them. I wanted to seem like I was smart, 'cause I wanted to read a big book.
>
> Andre: So you was faking? *He is teasing a little here.*
>
> Micah: No, I was reading it.
>
> Meredith: You said you really read it. Did you like them?

Micah: I read it cause they was like "it's interesting…it's interesting," and then the second reason why I read it was because it was big. They said it was interesting. It was big. I wanted to seem like I was smart.

Meredith: Did you agree?

Micah: It was alright…the Harry Potter…hmmm…Twilight one…it was alright.

"It was alright" is the sort of answer one gives when you don't want to offend but didn't care for the item in question; from his tone and expression during this conversation and the fact he avoids directly answering my "did you like them" question, I'd guess that Micah was not particularly taken by Harry Potter. Earlier in the project, Micah spoke excitedly about reading the Bluford series during SSR, a set of books focused on the lives of students at the fictional Bluford High. Interestingly, the Bluford series books didn't qualify as texts that could be read seriously, or at least as ones that were a challenge, because of their length. As Micah and Andre argue here, long stories are difficult simply because they are long:

September 24 - Transcript:

Micah: And shorter stories. I can't be doing no 5-page stories.

Meredith: Five pages is your limit?

Andre: I'm not talking about little pages. I'm talking about pages this big.

Meredith: Why is shorter better? What's wrong with long?

Andre: Take it down to the point.

Micah: Yeah, I got a short term memory. By the time I get to the end of the story…

Andre: I'd be like…what did I just read??

Micah's decision to read Harry Potter was driven by what he understood as valued in the figured world of reading and not necessarily by his own interest in or connection to

the text; in selecting a particular text, he was working to be recognized as a particular sort of student. "I wanted to seem smart" is repeated twice as justification for choosing Harry Potter. The fact that the Harry Potter books were "big" and that "everyone else was reading them" signal to Micah that reading them will help him "seem smart" (note that he doesn't claim to *be* smart; this is all about appearances). Although there is little difference in the sophistication of Harry Potter and the Bluford series, Harry Potter becomes more valuable because of its greater length and the fact it is more widely read by all students.

I encountered the sort of resistance to long texts that Micah and Andre express here often with my high school students. The story was the same with Micah, James, and Andre. The first thing they did with any text I handed them was to flip through to see how many pages it was. Length more than any other quality seemed to designate a text as "hard" or "easy." For someone who is *not a reader* this could just be an act of self-preservation; if one doesn't read fluently, the time and effort a longer texts requires may feel like too much of a burden or overly intimidating. Maybe this resistance signals a distrust of what a text asks of us, an avoidance of the commitment required to "get lost in" a text. Whatever the case, length of text carried meaning for James, Andre, and Micah, and their response to the physical text was connected to being *not a reader*.

Harry Potter and other texts act as cultural artifacts within the figured world of reading. Holland, et. al. explain that figured worlds work because of the human ability to use symbols to imagine and explore "as if" scenarios, to play with possibilities, as described by Vygotsky (1978). Cultural artifacts are the symbols that allow this play to occur; they function as a "means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively

developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful" (Holland, et. al., 1998, p. 61).   Like the meaning of words within different languages of heteroglossia, cultural artifacts have meaning because that meaning has been collectively agreed to and reinforced through action. They mean differently (or not at all) in different figured worlds.   Within the figured world of high school reading, certain qualities of texts – even something as arbitrary as the number of pages a book has – carry particular meanings and confer particular identities on those who use them.

Texts function not just as cultural artifacts for students but for teachers and the larger structure of schooling as well. I remember a heated debate between 8th and 9th grade teachers at a district curriculum meeting in my former district. At issue was whether or not *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the sole property of the 9th grade curriculum or whether the 8th grade teachers might also teach it without stepping on toes. Remarkably (or perhaps not) not one person suggested that the students might actually benefit from re-reading the text, from examining it anew. Instead, the text was an object that functioned in a very specific way – as the anchor of the novel portion of the 9th grade curriculum. As a result, reading within this context also became constrained. No longer was it about the experience of meaning making, the revisiting of response to critique and grow, but instead it was about performing particular tasks in particular ways.

The way texts are treated as sacred objects intended to be studied instead of interacted with is also demonstrated in the common prohibition on writing in textbooks in high school classrooms. Sumara (2002) argues that writing in texts is an essential way to engage in the meaning making process; he also notes that students are almost universally afraid to do this. Who wouldn't be when fines are given for "damaged" books?

James and Micah demonstrate this detached view of reading in the following

exchange:

September 24 – Transcript:

Meredith: When you get something…what do you do when you first get a text?

Micah: I read the title.

Meredith: Ok, what does the title do?

Micah: Give you a hint about what it's about.

Meredith: You are scanning for who's in it, where it's taking place that sort of thing? What do you do E?

James: Read.

Meredith: What do you read?

James: It.

Meredith: So you just go straight to it and read the whole thing, not looking for anything in particular?

James: Just read it to get it over with.

Meredith: How do you figure out if it's something you are interested in reading?

James: I don't pay attention to it; I just read it.

Micah: Yeah, if I ain't got no choice I probably just read it, even if I'm not interested in it.

When I asked this question, I was trying to figure out what made Micah, James, and

Andre interested in a text. I was also interested in how they approached a text, how they

started to read. Their answers are perfectly acceptable within the figured world of high

school reading; when you get a text you look at the title, make predictions based on that,

and so on. Note that I, too, play into this with my affirmation "You are scanning for

who's in it…" During this exchange, James gets a bit exasperated with me, as though

I'm asking the most obvious question to which there can be no other answer. His

statement "I don't pay attention to it; I just read it" illustrates exactly the flaw in this

construction of reading. How does one read without attention? Reading for James, and

for many students and well-intentioned teachers, becomes about completing a particular

set of activities on a text, not about being attentive to and engaging with a text. Micah's

final statement suggests that this often happens without the interested or even willing

participation of students. Competence in these tasks within the space of local practice of

the classroom contributes to a student's identity as *reader*; struggling with these tasks, or

refusing to complete them, constructs one as *not a reader*.

Students are well aware of how the figured world of high school reading operates and

of how one comes to be seen as a particular type of student within that figured world.

Just as Micah expressed a desire to "seem smart" by selecting longer books to read,

Andre explains here how he avoided being "joked on" while reading aloud in class:

March 13 - Transcript:

Meredith: What did y'all think when you read out loud in class?

Andre: I would just skip. It was easy 'cause you would like know which one you was going to read so I'd like skip everybody reading and read mines so I could be real smooth with mines. 'Cause like we used to joke on the ones that would like make mistakes. It was hilarious. So I was in the back usually you know, reading mines like four or five times and then when it got to me, I'd read it and be done.

Meredith: So you'd just practice yours. So you weren't really listening to what everybody else was reading?

Andre: I mean, no. Cause the book came on tape. If I really wanted to listen to it I'd go get the little CD disc and listen to it.

I would argue there is merit to reading aloud as a group activity. But as Andre

describes it here, this practice was less about making sense of a text and more about

avoiding embarrassment when one didn't read well; he does not want to be seen as someone who is "stupid." Once again the reader identity is associated with proficiency in a very particular sort of technical skill – calling words in this case. Micah's desire to read big books and Andre's rehearsal of his lines are both examples of how they understood the importance of recognition and wished to position themselves in certain ways within the figured world of reading. Like Scout, they learned to play by the rules of the classroom context in which they find themselves.

These "not a reader" identities move beyond the figured world of high school reading as well, in part because of socio-historical forces such as standardized testing and curriculum standards.   Micah, Andre, and James were in this program to improve their "reading" skills so that they could pass the GED. Recall the language of the CCSS that suggests repeatedly that students do things to texts; texts are framed as objects of student detached from the world. As examples (from the Anchor Standards for Reading grades 6-12):

> 1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
>
> 5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
>
> 10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. (National Governors Association, p. 35)

Each of these posits the text as something to be examined by a particular set of procedures in a particular way. Reading within the figured world of high school reading becomes a much narrower activity than what I argue for here. Because this definition of reading and in turn what makes a reader comes from the state, a force outside the

immediate figured world, the *not a reader* identity is developed in socio-historical struggles: it is a socio-historical identity imposed on students in the space of local practice. The way they respond to this imposition demonstrates its effects on their intimate and locally performed identities.

"And Then You Have to Write"

I began this project with a sense that writing was the key to helping students see themselves as meaning makers, and maybe it is one way to get there. What I failed to consider fully was the way the students' identities as *not a reader* might also mean *not a writer*; after all writing is the reciprocal activity to reading. As such, it is also a part of this figured world. Scholes (1985) reminds us that as complementary activities, writing and reading are not complete without the other: "The last thing I do when I write a text is to read it, and the act that completes my response to a text I am reading is my written response to it. Moreover, my writing is unfinished until it is read by others as well, whose response may become known to me, engendering new textualities" (p. 20-21). This was not the view held by Andre, James, and Micah who saw writing as an even more tedious task than reading. More importantly, their experience with writing on texts in school was not one in which the writing functioned as a way to generate response and meaning.

September 24 – Event Memory and Transcript:

It is our second week together and I've just asked them to talk more about how they feel about reading.

James: The thing I don't like is that you read and then you have to write.

Meredith: Well, why is that though?

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Micah: Summarize.

Andre: Yeah.

James: If you read it, why write when it's all in the book? I mean, you know what we going to write. It's in the book.

He sounds exasperated, like they are being asked to do the most ridiculous and obvious thing ever. I can't imagine that they've never been asked to at least write some sort of personal response journal or essay to a text so I press further.

Meredith: Is it? What are you asked to write?

Micah: You write…when you write you supposed to use your own words.

Meredith: Ok, if you were just summarizing it, what's the point of that?

Micah: So you can make sure you know what the story about.

Andre: They know that you read it.

Meredith: So sort of a test?

James: I'm pretty sure you read it so why do I have to write?

He is talking to his past teacher here, again exasperated. They seem to be framing writing about texts as some sort of test, something the teacher does to "check up on you" to make sure you aren't being off task.

Meredith: Well, is there…were you ever asked to write about it for other reasons, other than summarizing it?

Micah: No.

James: No.

Meredith: Did you ever get asked like what you thought about something? Write a response?

James: Wait, oh, she said write about what you think it's going to be like, before you read it.

Meredith: So predicting?

James: Write what you think about and then when you read it and it matches, see did you think what it was going to be like, did it match your answer.

Micah: Did it do what you think was true or something like that.

Meredith: So predicting what you think is going to happen, and then were you right. Why do you think she asked you to do that?

James: Too much. She asked way too much.

As the conversation occurred, my first thought that James was expressing once again what so many students do – that the amount of work simply wasn't worth his time. Upon listening again, I think that he means a bit differently, that it's not the amount so much as that the work seemed to have no purpose.

March 13 – Event Memory and Transcript:

This is from a conversation in which we had returned to some of the "interview" type questions I asked at the start of the project.

Meredith: And then did y'all like talk about the books that you read?

Andre: Yeah, we had to like write a paper. That was not cool.

James: We had a journal we had to write.

Meredith: Why was it not cool?

Andre: Because it was boring. 'Cause like, she would make us write like basically exactly what we just got done reading. And I didn't see a point in that. It was like "look, we just read it. Why do we have to write about it?"

Meredith: Like you were just writing a summary you mean?

Andre: Yeah, and that was stupid. We just read it. You just heard us read it. How about you summarize yourself?

There's definitely hostility in his voice here towards the ghost of the teacher past.

James: That's what I told my teacher.

Usually James, Andre, and Micah took a "it was what it was" or even a bemused sort of tone in describing their classroom experiences. But on occasion, when talking about something they were forced to do, particularly something they found unimportant or even pointless, they expressed frustration and even anger. In these two conversations, one from the start of the project and one near the end, all three report being assigned to summarize. All three suggest that such an activity was nonsensical. "What's the point?" That is a valid question. Possibly this anger is not simply about the mundane task they've been given, but also at what it implies about their identity and intelligence as students. Perhaps their teachers' requests for summaries were merely pre-cursors to some other sort of writing task. But perhaps they were, in fact, the only sort of writing task they were expected to do (the fact that they are the only type of writing task Micah, Andre, and James remember with clarity suggests this may be the case); in seeing a room full of students identified as *not a reader*, maybe their teachers assumed such an assignment was all they were capable of.

As a second year teacher, I was assigned my first group of "regular" seniors, having had all college prep the year before. My mentor teacher, in what I can only hope he saw as a helpful gesture, instructed me to "just keep them busy, worksheets and stuff, so you won't have any discipline problems out of them." Needless to say, I did not take his advice. Still that moment has stuck with me as a sign of the way we all are guilty of making assumptions about what students can do and would be interested in doing; if we offer our students only watered down assignments and do not allow them the pleasure of wrestling with difficult work, how can we expect anything other than anger and resentment? Assigning students particular sorts of tasks is a way to recognize them as a

particular sort of student, in this case as *not a reader*. The anger Micah, Andre, and James have in remembering this sorts of tasks suggests that they are both aware of and resent this recognition.

Interestingly though, when I asked James, Micah, and Andre to write about texts in what I thought was an open-ended way, almost without exception they wrote summary type responses. Maybe this was because they were still functioning in the figured world of school reading in which that is what one does first after reading. Or maybe what I thought was an open invitation to write really communicated a limited expectation. I suspect that Micah, James, and Andre were too nice (or that we were too new to each other) to tell me what they really thought of my scrapbook idea. From their perspective, I may have appeared to be "another one of those teachers asking us to write stupid stuff." Maybe then their lack of writing then was a silent resistance.

Power and the Denial of Dialgoue

I began this spiral of inquiry wondering how we might bridge the divide between what is seen as school reading and students' lived experiences in the world. This is a question complicated by the fact that students' identities in school, the Discourses that they take up in that space, may not correspond to those outside of the classroom. The activities in the figured space of reading in school work to position students in particular ways; for Micah, James, and Andre that was as *not a reader*. But as I hope the bits of dialogue I have included here have shown, Micah, James, and Andre were hardly passive. They were insightful, funny, exasperating, and charming. They tolerated my bumbling through and sometimes abrupt course changes. And every day, they talked.

January 23 – Event Memory and Transcript:

I ask Micah and Andre to write about their earliest memories of reading either in or out

of school. As they always do, they talk instead:

>   Andre: Like how little? When do you start reading? I think in kindergarten?

>   Micah: I remember in 1st grade…I was in the 1st grade and they used to try to make reading those little books with the big words.

>   Andre: Those little skinny books…like paperbacks

They get a bit more animated with this memory. When I've asked before about what they

enjoyed reading in school they talked with the same nostalgia about Captain Underpants

and Dr. Suess.

>   Micah: Like 5 pages in there - *He laughs.*

>   Andre: Yeah…"Jim had a cat. Jim's cat ran down the hill."

>   Meredith: Did you like that …not like that?

>   Micah: I don't know. I never paid attention to it.

>   Meredith: That's ok too. You can say that.

Again I'm trying to encourage them to write, not very successfully as they each get about

a sentence on paper.

>   M-I just read it just to read it because they made me read it. *He trails off laughing.*

>   Holland, et. al. characterize figured worlds as structured around power and

privilege. The figured world of English class is no exception; students are generally

subordinate to teachers (who are in turn subordinate to administrators, the district, and the

state). Even within this small group that pretended to not be a classroom but sometimes

was, I pushed my agenda on the group. Privileges are associated with particular

behaviors within the figured world. For example, students who perform well on tests or assignments are often treated more congenially by their teachers while students who do not are treated more harshly. Micah once told me that I was different from other teachers he had had; "Maybe if you'd been my teacher, I would have stayed in class more." I would hardly claim that I'm some sort of fabulous teacher. What I suspect was the case is that the more loosely defined classroom space we created in the project redefined what behaviors were acceptable or even desired. Had we been in a space that required grades, for example, would Micah have felt the same way? Would I have been able to ignore his lack of writing and credit the other ways he participated? Teachers, too, are subject to the rules of the figured world.

James, Micah, and Andre all characterized reading as something they were "made to do" in school. Their response to this power dynamic was to take up an oppositional stance and to variously refuse to participate in the activity of reading:

September 24 –Event Memory and Transcript:

It's still fairly early in the project and I'm trying to figure out what might be a good text to read, what would be engaging and interesting for the group. I've asked them how they determine if something is interesting and worth reading:

James: If we are forced to read it we'll read it.

Micah: See, I'm going to tell you the difference between reading in high school…them teacher be forcing you to read. If I'm forced to read, I'm not going to read it.

Andre: Yeah, definitely…or if you ask me to read it, I'll read it…don't demand…"you read it."

Micah: Yeah, don't try to make me read it. If you try to make me read it, I'm not going to read.

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Andre: Don't try to demand me to read this stuff.

Meredith: Do you feel like your teachers always…just demanded?

James: They try to force you to do stuff.

They all sound annoyed and even a bit angry.

Micah: Yeah, they all up in there, "hey…read this read this read this," and then you look away they be like, "look at the paper," and you be like "really?"

Andre: "Why you not reading?"

James: Get out of my face.

Now they get more angry, thinking back on how their teachers forced reading on them.

Meredith: So then is part of the thing you didn't like not so much the text, but the experience around it?

Andre: Yeah, mostly.

James: See, I didn't mind reading but you walk around to everybody and see everybody reading and then you just stand there and wait until I read…I'm not going to read…ever. You just look over me…I'm not going to read at all.

As James, Andre, and Micah describe it here, reading in their classrooms was not an opportunity to engage in dialogue either with texts or with each other. Their anger at being denied an opportunity to speak, to do anything other than repeat what the text said through writing a summary (as they described earlier), to read any other way than how the teacher demanded, is clear. Andre says "if you ask me to read, I'll read it," noting a stark difference in asking – an invitation to participate, to engage in dialogue – and demanding mono-directional production of pseudo-meaning. In demanding reading, in demanding a particular sort of response (summary writing), the teacher was imposing an authoritarian discourse on the students, prohibiting them from selecting their own words. Recall Bakhtin's description of how we become through language: "Consciousness finds

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itself inevitably facing the necessity of *having to choose a language*. With each literary-verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself within it, it chooses, in other words, a 'language'" (p. 295, original emphasis). Micah, James, and Andre felt the absence of this choice. Even though they did not name it as dialogue or articulate the absence of their voice in the classroom, their anger is clearly directed at the experience of reading and not the texts. It is not reading that is the problem; it is the absence of dialogue and a denial of language that angers them.

As the conversations I have shared here demonstrate, James, Micah, and Andre do navigate the complex landscape of social language use. And they reject passivity. Willis's lads create a counterculture based on "having a laff," and spend much of their school days finding ways to break rules and get away with it; rejecting the mental labor of school also means resisting the authority and obedience (the passivity) they see as going along with it. Similarly, Micah, Andre, and James all reported getting in trouble in school (in fact, all of them had left school at least in part due to behavior issues) and all reported having mediocre academic performances. In describing the difference between two district schools he had attended, Micah noted that at School A (one with a reputation for discipline issues) there was always something happening that was worth showing up for. School B he described as boring: "You ain't got no choice but to do your work there" (October 9). When I asked him if he had done well at School B, he thought for a moment and then replied that he supposed it was probably better for his grades but he still would still choose to attend School A as it was "more fun." Like the lads, Micah has an

awareness of how the system works, but values "doing his own thing" over conforming to school expectations, even at the expense of academic success.

James's statement above – "See, I didn't mind reading but you walk around to everybody and see everybody reading and then you just stand there and wait until I read…I'm not going to read…ever." – illustrates his conscious refusal to obey and conform. I had expected to hear the students say that they didn't like reading. But I had not expected to hear them suggest that it was the conditions around reading, the coercive nature of the task, that was the most problematic for them. Refusing to engage in reading, adopting the *not a reader* identity then is less about reading and more about claiming agency in the face of a system demanding conformity. Just as Willis's lads did not wish to be recognized as "ear'oles," passive and feminized, Andre, Micah, and James, resist being recognized as *readers* if it means passive acceptance of the dictates of the teacher or school. Interestingly, they also resisted being seen as "not smart;" Micah's selection of long books and Andre's rehearsal of his reading are evidence that they wanted their peers to see them in a particular way.

Micah's comments about the difference in the two schools he attended offer one possible explanation of what may be happening here. All three students remarked on several occasions that they missed the social aspects of school. All three also noted that their academic work frequently seemed "pointless." In James, Micah, and Andre's experience, school was either "real world," as in connected to their social experiences and allowing them to engage in dialogue, or it was isolated and irrelevant; there was a divide between the two. When reading clicked as an activity of interest, like with the Bluford series or "Headline: Incident No. 1113," it seemed to be because they saw those

texts as real and connected to their social world and lived experience.   These texts began

to bridge the divide and bring James, Andre, and Micah into reading the world by giving

a space for dialogue in our reading and classrooms. I had tried to create this sort of space

in my teaching with students like Blake but always seemed to fall short.   Although I

valued students' experiences and reactions, I was missing a key understanding about

reading and what makes dialogue around texts possible.

<div align="center">**"It Just Has to Be Interesting to Me"**</div>

Every time I asked the students what they wanted to read during our time

together, I got some variation of "I don't know. It just has to be interesting to me."

September 24 - Transcript:

> Micah: I think if school had more books that I was interested in I'd probably read
> more.

> Andre: Yeah, I would definitely have graduated from high school if they had
> more books that I would have liked, and more subjects.

When I pressed for some guidelines of what "interesting" was or how they knew they

"liked" a text, I got something like "You know, something that makes you want to keep

reading." I suppose that's actually a pretty fair answer; what I find interesting you may

find dull and vice versa. Interest is a rather nebulous thing. But the "me" part seemed

particularly important; maybe it's just the narcissism of adolescence, but I think that we

all have a need to find the personal in what we read.

One set of texts that all the students deemed "interesting" was the Bluford Series,

a set of 20 young-adult novels set in an urban high school. The novels deal with topics

such as teen pregnancy, gang violence, bullying, teen romance, and so on.   All of the

students reported having read several of these books; they spoke enthusiastically about

them: "They are just real stories, something you can believe. About people like us."

Books like the Bluford Series blur the divide between school reading and the world; for

some, they may not even "count" as school reading. Ultimately we decided not to read

one of the Bluford books together, primarily because attendance was sometimes spotty,

and it would be difficult for someone to jump back in the conversation about a novel if

they missed a session or two. But fortunately, about this same time, we stumbled upon

another idea that took us in an equally interesting direction.

I related earlier my discovery of the non-fiction narrative "Headline: Incident No.

1113." In tandem with reading that narrative and a series of related texts, we decided (or

more fairly I suggested, once again imposing on the group) to write our own narratives,

stories about Durham. Both "Headline: Incident No. 1113" and the "Durham Stories"

idea grew out of the conversations we had been having around other texts. Multiple

times we drifted into discussions of the local schools, neighborhood rivalries, street

violence.   Lest we fall into some stereotype about urban kids, I should emphasize that the

Durham Stories idea was also driven by James's tales about his infant daughter, Andre's

weakness for Cookout and his stories about his young niece, and Micah's ability to know

a little something about everyone and every place that came up.   The idea was to create a

more robust, multi-dimensional portrait of their lives and the places they lived, to flesh

out the often one-sided story. Durham Stories was intended to be an opportunity for them

to write back to all the other stories floating around in the world.

"Headline: Incident No. 1113" and related texts were to serve as a model of how

different texts can speak to each other in the way that our Durham Stories might.   It was

also a model of a text in the world. Here were things that we had talked about at length,

in a narrative. It would be impossible to ignore, or so I hoped. The day I brought in copies, we were alternating computer use (for story writing) and reading. Andre, who took any opportunity to avoid writing, volunteered to read first. Normally, any silent reading time was quickly interrupted by a surreptitious check of Twitter or a request to discuss aloud. But this time, Andre read intently, for 11 pages. When our time ran out for the day, he said, "You know, this is pretty good." That was a first. It seemed we had finally stumbled on something interesting.

Inviting Presence

Most secondary school classroom focus exclusively on finding meaning. And certainly meaning is important; this project was born out of a belief that meaning making is an essential human activity. In this moment of my inquiry, I realized that I had collapsed the emotional/sensory experience of reading into meaning making; to bridge the divide between classroom and world, they need to be acknowledged as separate. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) names this emotional/sensory aspect of reading as presence; he argues that modern humanities scholarship has lost sight of the value of presence with our almost exclusive emphasis on interpretation. Presence is about spatial relations, tangibility and "things in the world;" it comes to us through our senses.   The other side of this dichotomy is meaning – the attempt to see beyond the physical, to interpret. Gumbrecht writes that presence and meaning necessarily always occur together; the tension between the two makes the other possible. "Rather than having to think, always and endlessly, what else there could be, we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin" (p. 106).

Gumbrecht speculates that the weight of each dimension will not be equal in every aesthetic experience. In reading texts, meaning has primacy. In listening to music, presence dominates. There are spaces we see presence in reading: the physicality of the pages, crisp or worn, the scribbles in the margins, the closeness of the font or the lack of white space, the turning of pages. We also find presence in what Gumbrecht calls "moments of intensity," a sort of visceral often inexplicable physical-emotional response. Often when I read, I find myself drawn to a particular phrase or passage, without even really "getting" what it means; it just feels powerful or interesting or right.

This sort of moment is not unrelated to the sort of emotional response that can serve as the entry to interpretation as I will explore in the next chapter. What I find helpful about Gumbrecht's explanation is that we *need* both meaning *and* presence. "Moments of intensity" are important as a gateway to meaning making. But they are also important because they happen, because they excite us and because they sometimes remain unexplained. Although I was not able to name it at the time, it was precisely this sort of moment that I sought in my work with Andre, Micah, and James. We did interpretive work that lacked it, and it felt flat, not quite right.

But we also did work that had the spark. This first happened serendipitously, which is appropriate I suppose. When I first suggested our "Durham stories" project, Andre suggested that pictures would be easier. I suggested a website to Micah and Andre (James was absent that day) that cataloged historical photographs of various neighborhoods along with brief histories of those places. Micah and Andre were transfixed (as was I). "Get out! Did you know Bragtown had a Benz dealership? I mean really?!" What happened in this moment was a sudden epiphany – not a meaning making

moment at first although it led to that later – but a sort of gut reaction to the historical scope and change of the place. I knew it had happened because Andre's tone changed, the way he approached the task was different; suddenly instead of this inert thing, the text was alive, something he could engage in dialogue.

Micah, James, and Andre said over and over again that things needed to be "interesting" for them to read them.   That's what presence does; it grounds us in the work of reading, makes it something we can touch and "get into." We had more of these moments. "Headline: Incident No. 1113" was a successful text because it allowed for presence as did "In the City." There is not a magic text or set of guidelines for selecting texts that would allow presence to happen. What I think allowed for our success here was to find texts that were grounded in the students' lived experiences. And not just in a superficial sense of "these are about people like us," but in a way that invites their participation and requires dialogue. It was this sort of work that opened up space for James, Micah, and Andre to assert a different identity, to challenge what it meant to be *not a reader*. Through this dialogue, they also began to speak back against texts, making a move towards agency.

SPIRAL FIVE

NOT A READER – TALKING BACK

> Bastian looked at the book.
> 'I wonder,' he said to himself, 'what's in a book while it's closed. Oh, I know it's full of letters printed on paper, but all the same, something must be happening, because as soon as I open it, there's a whole story with people I don't know yet and all kinds of adventures and deeds and battles. And sometimes there are storms at sea, or it takes you to strange cities and countries. All of those things are somehow shut up in a book. Of course you have to read it to find out. But it's already there, that's the funny thing. I just wish I knew how it could be.'
> Suddenly an almost festive mood came over him.
> He settled himself, picked up the book, opened it to the first page, and began to read.
>
> --Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story"* (1984), p. 14

As a child I harbored secret fantasies that one day I would be swept away by a story. Perhaps I was inspired by my love for Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1984) in which the young Bastian falls deeper and deeper into the story of Fantastica until he quite literally becomes a part of it and it a part of him. I was fond of writing myself into stories, imagining what role I might play, not that of any existing character usually, but of some new person existing in yet unwritten chapters; a good book was one that provided plenty of fodder for these imaginings, just enough material to get me started and plenty of wide open space in which to ramble. Even now as an adult I find the most pleasure in those narratives that grant me a moment to scamper off into another existence, creating a world at the junction of my mind and the words on the page.

In his essay *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin (1937/2007) writes "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn

makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (p. 87). Benjamin goes on to express a measure of distrust in the novel as a true form of storytelling, citing its "essential dependence on the book" and its essentially solitary creation. While I appreciate Benjamin's distinction and share his concerns about the demise of storytelling in the age of information, I find the novel, as well as other narrative forms written and oral, capable of the same sort of experience sharing. As Bastian reads of the plight of the Childlike Empress, the encroaching Nothing and the travails of brave Atreyu, they quite literally become his experience, and he finds himself in the midst of the story. While most of us do not have such a literal encounter with the experiences relayed in narrative, narrative still serves a profound and vital role in our existence as social beings; it allows us to both share our own experiences and receive the experiences of others. It is this interaction that seemed a potential site for meaning making and fertile ground for exploration.

I wrote in my last chapter of how I saw James, Micah, and Andre beginning to read the world in their engagement in texts; the artificial divide between reading as defined in the figured world of school and their experience in the world began to break down. I also saw that the moments when this divide became most fluid were those in which the students engaged not just in trying to figure out what the text said or what it meant, but when they felt some other sort of connection – a sense of presence – as well. In those moments, as I hope to demonstrate in this spiral, I saw them begin to talk back to texts and to see the power of their own textual production. One element of the scrapbook idea that I retained at least in part was the idea that re-reading mattered. Although I often did ask the students to jot down some question or thought that occurred to them as they

read, our re-reading process became less formal than I had initially imagined it. Typically, they would read silently first and then we would re-read together. This was a messy process; it often involved jumping around in the text, frequent tangential conversations, and still too much fishing on my part. But it was also a lively one.

It is hard to say with certainty whether or not Andre, James, and Micah felt the work we did was engaging. While we all had off days, for the most part our discussions were quick and interesting, which I take as a good sign. One day in February, I brought in Liam O'Flaherty's short story "The Sniper." It was a departure from the work we had been doing but I had observed one of my student teachers teaching it the week before and was curious what Micah, James, and Andre would make of it. The story is set during the Irish Civil War and ends rather ambiguously with the sniper's realization that he has gunned down his brother. His blood brother? Brother in arms? Countryman? As the theme of brotherhood had come up in our conversations, I thought it might generate interesting conversation.

For some reason that day, another young man in the literacy program was working in our room when we got there. I wasn't quite sure what to do with him so I just left him working over to the side while we begin. After Andre, Micah, and James read through the first time, we started talking. Our visitor started listening in, and then chiming in. Finally, he asked if he could get a copy of the story to look at, too. Unfortunately, I can't include any of the dialogue from that day since the young man was not officially a part of my study group. But more important than anything specific that was said was what happened; four young men, *not a readers*, sat around a table and talked about a story. A few times, our visitor got up to go only to drift back to our table

several minutes later. And that I take as a sign that what we were doing was interesting, at least in that moment. Our reading experience may not have been as dramatic as Bastian's, but it was happening.

Reading in Time and Space

Reading in the world requires changing the mono-directional, one-time-off, paradigm of reading that is typical of most schools. As I teacher, I was certainly guilty of not being attentive to the importance of reading across both time and space. Scholes (1989) describes reading as dialectical; it is a creative process that takes place in time and involves "always, at once, the effort to comprehend and the effort to incorporate" (p. 9). Scholes uses the physics of centripetal and centrifugal forces as a metaphor for the way we engage with text. Centripetal forces draw us into the text and ask us to use critical skills to root around for the intention or meaning of the text. Centrifugal forces push us outward from the text asking us to use creative skills to generate new meaning and new possibilities that engage our experience and the world.

In my first chapter, I introduced Rosenblatt's (1995) description of reading as a "constructive, selective process over time in a particular context. The relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed" (p.26).   The movement in both space and time suggested by this definition is like Scholes's. The relation of reader and text is transactive because both text and reader actively participate and change through the process. While certainly the physical words on the page of the text do not change (although perhaps they are added to by the reader's notations), no reader would find the

text to be exactly the same at the end of a reading as at the beginning; the act of reading the text forever alters it for us. As Scholes notes, we are never the same reader twice.

Even the centrifugal/centripetal metaphor, says Scholes, doesn't adequately capture the complexity of reading. But, it is a useful way to represent the fact that reading requires us to both look inward to the text and outward to the world. Somewhere, in the to-and-fro spiral, the back and forth between the two (and it is always a back and forth as reading necessarily takes place in the dimension of time), meaning making occurs. Possibilities are generated, tried on, and discarded as new possibilities emerge. Because reading is a temporal process, there is never a "finished" reading, only the movement towards a more complete one given the circumstances and experiences of the reader. Readings are always contextual in time and space.

What follows is the story of a reading of the poem "In the City" (2012) across time and space. I described earlier my use of the italicized text interspersed in transcripts, an "event memory," to relay my thoughts and analysis both as the event occurred and as I transcribed and considered the data. I want to emphasize that these italicized sections are my experience of the event and my attempt to make sense of it. They are not an attempt to assign intent to James, Andre, and Micah's words.

"In the City" Part I: Response as a Gateway to Meaning Making

December 17 – Event Memory and Transcript:

I've brought the poem "In the City" by George Yamazawa Jr. in for the students to read. We've talked a lot about violence among youth and we've been working on writing narratives about life in our town, so I thought this might strike a chord…and it did…although not exactly how I anticipated it would...

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At first only Andre is reading the poem as Micah and James work on writing their

narratives. I've asked that they all read the poem individually and respond in writing

and then we will talk about it together. "I gotta do all this by myself? This is a lot of

words!" I offer to help him get started.

We start the first stanza:

This war on terrorism is making it dangerous for us to leave this country…
But where I'm from
It's dangerous for some to leave their own doorsteps   ("In the City," lines 1-3)

Andre reads aloud, haltingly, stumbling over some of the words. "I'm not sure about

that. You think people are really afraid to leave their houses?" He is skeptical. We

pause mid-stanza.

Andre: I was surprised he used the terrorist thing.

Meredith: Why is that?

Andre: 'Cause, it's kinda extreme.

Meredith: So what point is he trying to make?

Andre: That it's bad, like it's a war. Like, terrorists is as bad as it is over here. I don't know. But I think that's kinda extreme. Terrorists, they got like people blowing their ownself up. We don't have that.

…

Meredith: Are there situations where people could unexpectedly be killed?

Andre: I don't know. I haven't heard any in Durham. I don't really know too many people who have got killed for like no reason. Most people that get shot get shot for a reason. We might not know that reason but it's like a reason.

The poem "In the City" appears in a collection of essays, poems and short stories

about life in Durham. The back of the book notes, "Durham has turned its gritty side into

a badge of honor," a claim much of the collection reflects, although some pieces – like

"In the City" – use a more critical lens. As a white, middle-class Durham-ite, I'd like to think that I do live in a progressive, diverse community, and I'd consider myself a part of the progressive element. Honestly though, I think this book was written for someone like me and not for Andre, Micah, and James who see "gritty" as more of a reality and less of a hip literary inspiration. Although the perspectives included in the book are varied and the writers diverse, they trend to the hipster crowd and not the hip-hop crowd. "In the City," a spoken word piece, is the next to last in the collection and the only one that explicitly focuses on the issue of youth violence.

At the time we began working with "In the City," our group had been meeting together for over 3 months. Many times our conversations had turned to urban violence as it was a topic both familiar and of interest to the students. James, Micah, and Andre all left school at least in part because of their involvement in delinquency. All of them had a story about being "locked up" (although only James had actually been sentenced to do time) and all had witnessed at least one shooting.   They also talked frequently about neighborhood rivalries; although the term "gang" was never really used, it was clear that all of the students were either members of or friendly with "a fraternity" as Andre put it. Our personal narrative project (I had asked each student to write a story about a memory of life in his neighborhood) and our work with "Headline: Incident No. 1113" built on these conversations and were intended to connect the groups' experiences and interests to the texts we were working with. As a text that combined these two strands – our city and youth violence – "In the City" seemed to me like it would be fertile grounds for exploration.

We worked with "In the City" over the course of several weeks (interrupted in part by the holiday break). Our readings then took place in time, both in terms of occurring across multiple days and by re-reading lines as we went along. Our readings were also contextualized by the conversations we had prior to and during our work with the poem as well as by our individual experiences outside the class. Our spiral of meaning making occurred on a small scale, as in Andre's initial interpretation of the opening lines above, and on a larger one as we revisited the poem over the next few months through direct study and more casual references in other conversations.

Andre's initial comments on the opening lines demonstrate the pull and push of centripetal and centrifugal forces in reading. His definition of terrorism as "bad" and "like a war" and his interpretive move to see the comparison between the violence of terrorism and the violence of the city pull him inward to the poem. But in the same moment he is drawn outward into his own experience "it's kinda extreme" and "we don't have that." The separation I'm making here is artificial; one cannot occur without the other. The following example further illustrates this. Andre stumbles a bit reading "hijacking" and comes back to confirm his definition of it. As he does this he is at once examining what happens within the poem – the comparison being made and its purpose – and connecting to his experience outside the poem – how he would represent the violence in our town and if that matches his understanding of the severity of a hijacking.

Also important to this process is the way Andre reads. The missteps and hesitations in his reading matter, not because I'm interested in his fluency with decoding, but because it illustrates that our readings are necessarily imperfect. Even those of us who are fluent readers still stumble as we read; it is in the stumbles that we spiral back,

are pulled in and pushed out. I had hoped the scrapbooks would capture these stumbles and demonstrate their place in the meaning making process. Here, Andre is talking it out; his reading is literally interrupted by the verbalization of his thoughts about what he's reading, everything from how words are pronounced, to what they mean, to his evaluation of what he is reading. The result is a snapshot of this reading moment.

December 17 – Event Memory and Transcript:

Andre reads aloud again, still haltingly. I am struck by the way the confidence leaves his voice when he reads and how his cadence changes so dramatically. The same thing happens when he writes, like the kid who writes and the kid who speaks are not the same person. The words are not his own…yet. That comes later as he starts to talk about what he's read.

> This violence
> Is seeping through the seams of our screen doors
> And hijacking the comfort of our own homes…
> In Durham.   ("In the City," line 4-7)

Or as we read it…

> Meredith: This violence…
>
> Andre: (reading hesitantly) is seeping through the seams of what's that screen doors
>
> Meredith: screen doors, yeah
>
> Andre: Ok, what is a screen door?
>
> Meredith: Like a screen door on a house
>
> Andre: Oh, like one of them old houses?
>
> Meredith: Yeah, like a screen where the air comes through.

Andre: Oh, ok. And hijacking (stumbles) the …what's that…comfort of our own homes, in Durham. Yeah, that's kinda extreme. Isn't hijacking like taking something like something big?
….

Meredith: Why do you think he's choosing to use that word?

Andre: He's trying to make Durham seem bad. 'Cause...I don't know what part of Durham he's from that he is seeing all this but I definitely have not seen none of this.

Meredith: Ok, you would disagree then the level to which he is saying this violence is more extreme than your experience?

Andre: Yes, definitely.

At this point Micah, who has been sitting over to the side writing, chimes in. Andre asks

him if he agrees that things are not "this bad."

Micah: I would say that's extreme.

Meredith: He's saying the violence would make people feel unsafe in their homes?

Micah: It ain't to that point.

Andre: We don't have people running around blowing each other up.

I remind Micah and Andre of a story I had told them a few weeks prior. While I was out

canvassing for the presidential election last fall, I was stopped by a woman driving by

who expressed concern that I was walking around in a "bad neighborhood" (her words).

She did not live there but attended a nearby church. She tried to get me to take her

pepper spray and left with saying "I would hate to see anything happen to you." I was

really bothered by this incident – the creepy way she stalked me down as I was walking,

her assumptions about who I was and who the residents of the neighborhood were, and

what I perceived as her pitting an "us against them" simply because like her I was white

and the residents of the neighborhood were largely black and Latino. Maybe she was

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just well-intentioned. Still, I thought the experience raised an interesting point about

perceptions of and dynamics in our city. The first time I told Andre, Micah, and James

the story, they responded "Well, that's whack!" and agreed that unless one was involved

in "business" one didn't need to worry about walking through any particular

neighborhood in the middle of the day.

Andre: Because she read this. This is what happened. She read this. Yeah, she read this and she was like "oh man!"

Meredith: No she was saying that it's because her church is there and they've had to cancel their meetings because of violence in the neighborhood. That was her claim.

Andre: If I didn't know nothing about Durham, I'd be like "whoa, they are killing people. They're like Iraq down there."

Meredith: But y'all have made statements like "you wouldn't want to drive through there."

Andre: Yeah, in the night time.

Meredith: You said you wouldn't drive in [x-ville] at nighttime and you and Micah got in a big argument about how he said "I used to walk through there. I live by there."

Andre: But me personally I don't mess with that side. But because I'm from [y-ville] I don't mess with it.

Meredith: Does your risk increase by going into some place that's not your area, whatever that place may be?

Andre: For me personally?

Meredith: Yeah.

Andre: Uh, yeah. But I wouldn't say…

Meredith: Does that relate to what he's saying in any way?

Andre: Definitely not. It's two different reasons. 'Cause he's making it seem like being in Durham "it's like Iraq. Oh, you're scared to leave your doorstep. Oh, hijacking house. Oh, Jesus help us save us." (*he uses a mocking tone*).

Meredith: How would you explain the difference?

Andre: Ok, he's making it seem like a normal day in Durham you can get hijacked, it is like a war zone, your life is in danger. I'm saying because of who I am and who my cousin is and who we associate ourselves with is the reason I decide certain places in Durham not to go, not that I can't go, I decide not to 'cause I don't wanna to start nothing and I don't want no one to get hurt, I don't want that on my conscience. So I decide to go places I can go and feel comfortable in and safe and happy. Yeah, it's two different reasons.

Meredith: Ok, good explanation.

Andre: I definitely feel like he's blowing this, he's taking this to a whole 'nother extreme.

Although classroom texts are frequently read independently, we often discuss them, at least in part, as a group. What we are not always attentive to, however, are the roots of our differences in readings. Despite my best intentions of being open minded and welcoming of students' various responses to texts, I still had a preconceived idea of how Andre would read this text that was based in part on the group's prior discussions of how they did not go into certain parts of town because of who they were. The fact that *I* picked the text because *I* thought it would be of interest, limited the range of responses that I was truly open to; you can see in the above and what will follow how I still hold on to what I thought the reading was even as Andre reads differently. I also had my own initial reading of the text colored by my own experiences (including the encounter while canvassing described above) that I brought to this conversation. I read the text as accurately affirming that violence is a problem in our town and saw the comparison to a war-zone as a poetic device being used to make the point. Andre suggests that the poet exaggerates the risk, making the "extreme" comparison to a war-zone. In a later exchange, I ask Andre if it is possible the poet was not being literal in making the war-

zone comparison; he still felt the language made the amount of violence seem far more extreme and common than it is in reality.

In this exchange, Andre and I are negotiating our reading of the text; our spirals intersect and change course. This interaction – between Andre, me, and the text – results in a more nuanced reading for both of us. Andre references his choice and agency as he critiques the assumption of the poem that Durham is a dangerous place. "I decide certain places in Durham not to go, not that I can't go, I decide not to 'cause I don't wanna start nothing and I don't want no one to get hurt, I don't want that on my conscience." His reading challenges mine, and in turn my understanding of violence in our town as I had not considered the role of choice in the way Andre discusses it. This is an element that he continues to raise as we read and re-read the poem, as I will show momentarily. As my questions challenge his reading through our discussions, he becomes increasingly confident in defending his reading and begins to talk back more fluently against the implications of the text.

Andre's comments, "because of who I am…who we associate ourselves with…I decide certain places in Durham not to go…" firmly assert his identification as a certain type of person in certain contexts. He echoes here the same sort of understanding of Discourse and the importance of context demonstrated in the conversation about *ratchet* I shared in chapter 3. In staking a claim against the text, in choosing his language (as Bakhtin might say), Andre claims an identity and names himself as an actor. His tone at this point in the conversation reflects the confidence of this claim, and the confidence he has in his critique of the text, a confidence that was lacking as we began reading the poem.

As we worked through the text, we continued to refine our readings and construct meaning from the text and our experiences. This is not a tidy process. When James joined our conversation, it was to say of the poet "I would want to stab him he makes me so angry." Certainly that is an emotional response but not one that would be welcome in most classrooms.   And while it does call on James's personal feelings and experiences, it does not connect to the text or the world in a way that neat or comfortable. Andre's half-joking response to James, "Man, why you always talking about stabbing people and shit. Do I need to be worried about sitting here with you?" echoed my own discomfort with the intensity of James's response.   But uncomfortable or not, it is a place to start. Andre and I both questioned the intensity of James's response: "What are you trying to say?" In spiraling back to the text and then back through his experience, James was able to better articulate his frustration: "He's writing this to get it out, to make people understand. But then again he's saying all bad stuff about Durham. And Durham's not all bad." His initial response, although disconcerting to me, was still a point of entry that allowed him to engage with the text.

The relation between reader and text, has long been a subject of study. Theorists gathered under the loose umbrella of reader-response theory - such as Louise Rosenblatt (1995), Wolfgang Iser (1978), Norman Holland (1989), David Bleich (1978), and Dennis Sumara (2002) share a belief that the text does not contain the "true" meaning any more than the reader alone does. Rather, there is an interplay between text and reader, an interplay that occurs in a web of experiences and other texts. The experience of reading begins with a response.   For many readers, and adolescents are no exception, that response is typically an emotional one; like James's it may even be extreme or irrational.

A sophisticated reader is able to take that emotional response and build on it, to question its relevance, and to return the response back to the text continuing the back and forth of meaning making. Part of reading instruction then should focus on helping students see the need for rereading texts and re-visiting responses.

David Bleich (1978) describes students' emotional reactions to a text as a starting point for a deeper meaning making process. He argues that much of the enjoyment of an aesthetic experience (including reading) comes from our visceral responses; in turn, those responses motivate our desire to create knowledge for ourselves and our communities. The joy, anguish, anger, frustration, excitement, or curiosity that a student feels when she reads a text is the door into interpretation and critique. As the moment with James above illustrates, to simply have the response is not enough; doing something with that response is the critical component of meaning making. The meaning of the poem isn't "This guy sucks and makes me really angry." But that response starts a conversation with the text; "Why am I so angry? What does my experience tell me about this situation? Why this word and that phrase?" and so on.

"In the City" Part II: A Framework for Textual Study

How do we move beyond superficial emotional response to a text? I find the method of textual study Scholes outlines in *Textual Power* (1985) an interesting framework for examining what happened during our group readings in this project. Scholes describes three textual competencies: reading, interpretation, and criticism. These are not competencies in the sense of "mastery" or testable endpoint, nor a checklist of sub-skills to be acquired. Rather, they are interrelated ways of approaching and considering texts that all readers engage in, skills that we never stop developing. Scholes

notes our task as teachers is not to reveal meanings of texts to students, but rather to "show them the codes upon which all textual production depends, and to encourage their own textual production" (p. 25). To do this, students must produce texts – either written or oral - within the text (reading), upon the text (interpretation), and against the text (criticism). While I am addressing each competency Scholes describes separately here, it is important to note that they occur concurrently and interdependently in practice.

Scholes describes the first competency, reading[11], as the primarily unconscious way we process text, the way we use cultural and textual codes to make sense of the story. This is typically the sort of "reading" that happens in high school classrooms and is tested on standardized tests; it is the move James, Micah, and Andre made in writing the summary type statements in response to texts. The second competency, interpretation asks us to move beyond the events of the narrative to thematize the text, to draw connections to and read through larger cultural texts. In practice, this activity is difficult to separate from that of reading; if reading is the centripetal activity, interpretation is the centrifugal one. In exploring these issues, readers write upon the text, making meaning by looking out to the world and reading through their experience.

Critique is the competency most often neglected in classroom readings. It moves us to producing meaning against the text, arguing with the themes or even the codes from which a text is constructed. Scholes argues this critique should occur "from some viewpoint beyond the merely personal - and the merely literary" (p. 23); again, neither the reader nor the text has the answer alone. This conception of critique asks readers to be thoughtful about their responses; why do they feel about the text the way they feel?

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[11] Scholes is using reading here to define a much more narrow activity than I have used it elsewhere in this dissertation.

To write against does not have to mean in opposition to, but rather is an acknowledgement of the reader's values; readers must be able to claim meaning generated in interaction with text and the world instead of simply looking to the text for the "right" answer. In my last chapter I considered that we might provide students space for agency in their work with texts; critique requires agency as it requires the reader to take responsibility for his reading.

Scholes sees criticism as "a way of discovering how to choose, how to take some measure of responsibility for ourselves and for our world. Criticism is our last best chance to loosen the bonds of the textual powers in which we find ourselves enmeshed" (p.73). This is a step that readers in school settings are often reluctant to take, particularly those who have met with failure: Why risk being wrong once again? And it is one that teachers, myself included, often fear to encourage. What if someone has completely off the wall ideas? What if my own reading of a text is challenged? But in the act of writing against, in staking and defending a claim to meaning, readers become empowered to act and obligated to act.

Alan Block (1995) describes reading as an ethical act: "Reading, my transaction with the text, creates myself and my world - it is ethical in that I must take responsibility for it, and it is ontological in that I created myself and the world in the transaction" (p.120).   When I first encountered this in Block's *Occupied Reading*, my reaction was one of presence more than meaning; it clicked for me without fully being comprehensible.   What I think Block is getting at is that when we allow for a reading that *does something,* that *creates meaning* we give agency to those who read. There is a certain danger in this; as I noted above, for students there is the risk of being wrong and

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for teachers there is a risk in relinquishing control. The meanings that we create become

our responsibility. If we are going to send those ideas into the world, we have to be

prepared to defend them, prepared to acknowledge their failures, and prepared to revise

them as our experience changes. I feel the weight of this responsibility in writing this

dissertation. What if I'm *getting it wrong*? What if my creation is like Frankenstein's

monster and goes horribly awry? But with risk comes reward; my reading, my creation,

adds to the gossamer filaments of language and understanding Bakhtin imagined

surrounding us.

What follows is a rereading of the middle section of "In the City" through Scholes's

framework with a particular attention to critique. I am artificially noting each of the three

competencies Scholes describes in turn to show how repeated spirals, re-readings of a

text, lead to more sophisticated meaning making. My voice in this episode functions to

ask the students to re-read their prior responses, in the way that I had hoped they would

do in their written work. Or more accurately that was my goal; at times I fall into the old

habits of imposing my agenda. For this interpretive moment, I have chosen to include

my reading literally between the lines. Again the italicized text – event memories -

represents my re-readings of this experience as it happened, during my transcription, and

in the writing of this chapter; these event memories represent only my thoughts, feelings,

and interpretations and not those of my participants.

January 23 – Event Memory and Transcript:

Because of the holiday break, over a month passed before we were able to come

back to "In the City." On this day, only Micah and Andre were present; it's also a little

odd because we've been moved to another room. A large conference table sits in the

middle of a light filled space; the sun is almost blinding. Certainly these are swankier

quarters than our normal space.

When I suggest that we revisit the poem which we had never fully discussed,

Micah and Andre were at first reluctant. "Didn't we already do that?" "Well, yes, but we

didn't really finish it," I argue. "I want to know what else you think about it." I try once

again to convince them to write out their thoughts as they are reading with the promise

we will talk together after we've all gone through it once; even months after we've

abandoned them, I find it hard to let go of the scrapbook idea. For a few minutes we

read silently.

Andre: Can we read this as a group?

It's a polite request with an undercurrent of "pretty please with sugar and cream on

top."

Meredith: Why do you want to read as a group?

Because I just can't let the idea of writing go – and yet I miss the signals – "We want

dialogue! With people! Not paper!"

Andre: Because it makes it seem like it's less than what it is.

I think he literally means less work, but what an interesting turn of phrase, "less than

what it is." And yet it will become more than what it is.

I have a hard time saying no to enthusiastic requests, so we read together. We pick

up with the middle section of the poem. The bolded statement jumps off the page. "In the

City" is a spoken word poem - I consider for a moment pointing this out and asking why

this matters and what the purpose of the bolding might be. But I wait and ultimately let it

go. My own interests as a reader extend to the mechanics of texts, but this isn't just my

reading. So I wait.

Gang violence has risen more than fifty percent in the last twenty years.

This conflict reminds me of poetry—
The way the violence turns faces to violets when family members bleed roses
In the City of Bulls…
It's no wonder why my boys get caught up in beef
Not everyone can shoot hoops or rip beats
There's limited food and everyone needs to eat
And the only changes we ever see are in the seasons
As grades fall
And hearts turn cold, guns get took out
Triggers spring back
And make barrels hotter than summer cook-outs but don't get this mixed with
no picnic
'Cause this is no walk in the park,
You see this is more like passing through an army base
Where soldiers train year-round for a war against themselves
But there are no medals or honor,
These teens would rather squeeze metal for honor and die clutching their flags
While bleeding their true colors ("In the City," lines 14-32, emphasis original)

Spiral One

> Micah: That is so true! It seem like everybody in Durham either want to rap or do
> some other junk. It seem like everyone want to rap.   Why do everybody think
> they going to grow up to be a rapper? I don't know why.

An emotional response. Micah's voice is excited but also dismissive of "everybody" who

thinks they can rap.

> Andre: 'Cause their mama said they can rap, "My mama said I can rap!"

Andre picks up this dismissive-ness, giving a whiney falsetto to the wannabe rapper in his

imagination.

> Micah: It seem like a lot of people I know what to grow up to be a rapper. Like
> are you serious?!

They talk for a few minutes about how unlikely it is that someone would actually end up as a successful rapper and debate whether or not a rapper needs to have a criminal record to be legitimate, given the subject matter they rap about. Although we've read the entire section printed above, both Micah and Andre fixate at first on the one detail about those who want to "rip beats." It's something familiar, easily interpreted. And it's the thing that begins to bridge between text and experience, allowing for the next move.

Spiral Two

> Andre: Some people don't want to be rappers and some people don't want to be basketball players. Like I know some people who want to be chefs.
>
> Micah: But the percentage…
>
> Andre: Yeah, it's a high percentage of people.
>
> Meredith: Look what he says though. Is he saying that everyone wants to be that? Or something else?

A leading question. I find it hard to be patient enough to allow the students to come to these questions on their own.

> Micah: Not everyone…it says not everyone can hoop…I mean can shoot hoops or rap beats …

He reads a little, mumbling to himself.

> Andre: Ok, so he's saying not everyone can do that.
>
> Meredith: Yeah, but what's he say right before that?

Andre also reads aloud, half to himself and half to us.

> Micah: It's no wonder why…my boys get caught up in beefs.
>
> Meredith: Because why?
>
> Micah: 'Cause not everyone can shoot hoops or rap beats.
>
> Meredith: uh huh…

Micah: So he's saying like the people who do rap, there's a lot of people that hates because they don't know how to rap so they start to beefing.

Andre: Indeed that is true.

They begin to measure their experience against the claims of the text.

Meredith: Ok, but look at this whole thing …

Again I'm impatient! I re-read…

Meredith:
    It's no wonder why my boys get caught up in beef
    Not everyone can shoot hoops or rip beats
    There's limited food and everyone needs to eat

Andre: First of all, I don't know what part of Durham he's thinking of. He's making Durham seem so terrible.

This is the same concern that Andre had raised prior to the holidays; he feels the poet's description is unfair. Here he isn't particularly angry, more dismissive like "who is this crazy fool?"

Meredith: But wait a second now…is he really talking about literally no food? We had this conversation before.

I'm reminding Andre of our conversation prior to the holidays. Right at the end of our session we arrived at this point. His initial reading was that the poet was literally claiming there weren't enough food sources in Durham. I had started to challenge that, but we'd never reached any sort of agreement about what we thought was going on. I had pushed for a reading that saw poverty and the despair it caused as a problem and a source of violence in neighborhoods. Andre was skeptical of this interpretation.

Andre: No, he mean money wise. Niggers are broke.

Micah: Like you know how people be like "they eatin'" mean they got money.

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Earlier in the morning, Andre had used the slang "bread" in talking about money, specifically in reference to selling drugs; he had used the term similarly in conversations on other days. On this reading of the poem, both he and Micah made that particular connection here. In what follows, their reading of "limited money" and my reading of "limited money" are not exactly the same.

> Meredith: Ok, so he's talking about money, and not necessarily that everyone is out starving on the street but people want what?
>
> Andre: Money.

Duh! Didn't we just say that? I'm reminded of their earlier annoyance at teachers who asked for the obvious – "You summarize it; we just read it!"

> Micah: People wants to eat out of silver spoons, well golden spoons sometime.
>
> Meredith: Yeah, meaning…
>
> Andre: People want the good things, a lot of things in life.

Here our readings begin to diverge again. I was reading "lack of money" as "not enough to survive; barely scraping by." Micah and Andre are reading it as "people want nice things, "golden spoons." My mistake is to be too caught up in my own reading at the moment to see that we are drawing a difference.

> Meredith: Alright, so why does this lead to people getting caught up in beefs? Because they want money?
>
> Micah: 'Cause some people haters.
>
> Andre: 'Cause with money come problems. With money come people trying to get at you. They trying to start things.
>
> Micah: Or steal your money.
>
> Andre: Or steal your money.
>
> Micah: Find a way to bring you down where they at or something.

They bring in jealousy. Something I hadn't considered as I was still thinking about the

survival perspective.

> Andre: Indeed. Like that's how I got in trouble. That's how I got kicked out of school matter of fact.

> Micah: That's how all my beefs start.

We come back to the personal. Andre and Micah are reading this poem as it is "someone

like them." I am reading it as it is "someone like Andre and Micah." The danger for me

is that I fetishize their experience; the danger for them is that they don't consider other

possible meanings beyond their own experience. Our interpretations are on the surface,

the same – violence is the result of people wanting more money. The next spiral reveals

that this is only a superficial similarity.

Spiral Three

> Meredith: So what's his point in this little section right here then? Go back and look at what he's saying then. You are doing what I was talking about a minute ago. How do you know when dog is dog? You know what? The same thing right? The line "not everyone can shoot hoops or rip beats"…immediately you thought about why are all these people..why is it everybody tries to do that? And then you think about why is it people are trying to do that?

> Andre: They think it's fast money.

> Meredith: They think it's fast money? So why does that connect to them getting caught up in beefs?

I'm asking this rhetorically but really I don't "get" their answer, yet.

> Micah: 'Cause everyone trying to do the same thing and a lot of people not made for it.

> Meredith: Ok, but also…

> Andre: Or it could mean…that um…the people that are doing have problems with other people because they are hatin' on them.

Meredith: Ok…could be…so we've got…there are all these different possibilities of what he could be talking about, so you have to figure out what we think the best one is. If "there's limited food and everyone needs to eat"…and you've said that you think probably means what?

Andre: It mean money. People need money.

Meredith: Ok, people need money…so…"they shootin hoops and ripping beats." That's the fast track to money. Not everybody can do that, so what's another fast track to money?

Andre: Drug money.

Meredith: Which does what?

Andre: Buy you what you want.

Meredith: But connecting back to what he is saying though..

Andre: No, I'm joking!

Meredith: No, I think you are on to it!

I get too caught up in leading to my answer and miss what's really going on…

Micah: He was singing a song.

They laugh.

Andre: It's called drug money…"It can buy you what you want."

Meredith: Alright, but it connects back…what does this say?

Micah: Either that or drugs…selling drugs.

Meredith: But how does that connect to the words in here…'cause he doesn't use the word drugs right there.

Andre: Ok, he says…"everyone needs to eat and the only thing that changes."

Meredith: Even back before that.

Andre: Ok.

He reads a few lines under his breath.

Meredith: How so?

Andre: Caught up in beefs…

Meredith: Yeah, how does that relate to what you said about drug money?

Andre: 'Cause you beef!

Again with the "duh!?" tone.

Micah: Some people sell drugs and they have a lot of money, and other people that don't have money still be hatin'.

Andre: And because you got territory…and you got to fight for it…

Micah: And you got connections…and some people don't have all of that.

Meredith: So then what is he saying in just those three lines there? In those right there…that little bit…how would you say in one word his point is…what's he saying about Durham?

Andre: Durham's about beef…I'm guessing.

Micah: It is.

Meredith: So there are beefs in Durham.

Andre: People getting money…some people are gettin' money…and a lot of haters…people hate on people.

Meredith: So the conflict in Durham is caused by people wanting fast money?

Andre: Money…cause they hungry.

He starts to pick up the language of the poem here in using "hungry" – talking with the text.

Micah: Money taking over.

Meredith: Ok, does that seem like a fair statement or no?

I'm intentionally inviting their critique.

Micah: Yeah, money taking over.

Andre: Um…I don't know…I would say yes and no because…

Meredith: Ok…

Now I get a little excited – they have a critique! Or rather, I finally realize that they have had a critique all along. I just wasn't listening carefully enough before to hear it.

Micah: It's a certain limit.

Andre: Because in Durham…you don't have a lot of people that's willing to like go after someone to get their money. You have people that talk about it, but they crazy.

Micah: You must not met the right people yet.

Andre: But there's a limit of them. I'm not saying they not out there. I'm definitely not saying that. There people out there…there's a dude out there trying to rob me and my cousin.

Meredith: So you think that everybody who gets involved in let's say drugs in some fashion intends for it to lead to going after somebody…or being gone after?

I'm still reading this as the violence is something that happens to people, that people turn

to selling drugs because they have limited choices for income and that leads them into

trouble. Andre and Micah read it differently. They give agency to those the poem is

talking about – and themselves – people choose to sell drugs because it's easy money and

allows them to buy things (but luxury things, not necessities as I had imagined).

Andre: When you sell drugs that's what…well it depends how much drugs you sell. If you sell like nickel bags, ain't no body going to try to rob you.

Meredith: Do you think though that everybody who ends up going down that path…

Andre: Going down that path.

Meredith: …intends for it to lead to being in a beef with somebody?

Andre: Yeah, that's what you signed up for.

Meredith: Are you saying people know that when they start…

Andre: Yeah.

Meredith: …doing that they are going to end up there?

Andre: Yeah.

Meredith: Or are there people like…

Micah: Some people might try to steal your money or find a way to bring you down.

Meredith: Ok.

Micah: It seem like people in Durham hate to see you make money.

By the end of this exchange, I had to reconsider my reading of the poem based on Micah and Andre's critique of both the poem itself and my reading of it. They saw the poet as having the same reading I did – people get caught up in selling drugs and don't intend to get sucked into the violence that so often accompanies it – a reading of the situation they were critical of. For them, the element of choice was clear; if you chose to become involved in selling drugs, you are "signing up" for beefs, knowingly taking on that risk. At this point Andre and Micah talk about a mutual acquaintance and his family's involvement in selling drugs. Andre mentions, causally, that his association with this family and his own relatives' activities had gotten him in several tight spots.

In questioning the text, critiquing the text, and doing so in a way that engaged the world, Andre not only challenged his claim of being not a reader but also turned this moment into a dialogue with and about text instead a disassociated and passive reading. Instead of teacher/expert and student/novice begin we talk about the text as equal readers. Although my leading "teacher" questions indicate that we haven't fully broken the power dynamic of teacher/student. I begin to question my own meaning making in the same way I have been asking them to do because of their readings of the text.

Andre: Ok, but going back to the first page, I don't like the way he's making it seem like Durham's just a war zone. First of all, it's only 3 people…

Meredith: Dude! You just said you about got kidnapped!

Andre: Yeah, but I almost got kidnapped like 3 or 4 different times like from elementary to like middle school.

Meredith: Because that happens all the time?!

Andre: No, it's because my uncle sells a lot of drugs. In my life it happens all the time.

Our roles have almost reversed here as Andre becomes expert with the "best" interpretation and I don't quite "get" it. His tone is assertive and confident. Mine becomes less so.

Meredith: But here's my point…from my perspective that kinda goes along with what he's saying. No not in the sense of you step out of your door and there are bullets flying…

Andre: Yeah, but he still trying to make it seem like Durham is a real bad place. Durham?!

He says this with a tone of "really, Durham, bad? That's crazy talk!"

Meredith: You're comparing it to where?

Andre: I'm comparing it to like…New York , Philly, DC…or even Baltimore and Baltimore's not that big.

Meredith: You are saying it's small potatoes.

Andre: Yeah, in Durham I can only think of like 2 or 3 people that have enough money to make Durham turn into like Iraq or something.

Unfortunately, at this point we run out of time. Although I would have liked to return to the rest of the poem, we didn't meet again for two weeks. By then, the momentum was gone so we moved on to other texts.   Still, this conversation illustrates an important point. Andre – *not a reader* – talks back to a text, and to my "expert" reading, confidently and in a way that challenges what was established and creates

something new. In this moment, three readers began to negotiate meaning through dialogue with each other, their experience in the world, and the text.

Another Perspective on Talking Back

The Durham Stories idea was a bit of a haphazard one. I had imagined it as a way for James, Micah, and Andre to share their perspective about a place of importance to them. Through creating a narrative, I thought they might understand something more about reading, too. James responded the most strongly to the task; despite claiming to not like writing, he seemed to enjoy the process and would type furiously for five or ten minutes before stopping, re-reading, deleting, and writing again. I want to share a portion of his process here and an excerpt of his narrative as he left it on our last day, because I think it illustrates both the value of a performative space in helping students to see the role of dialogue in meaning making and the possibility of the space where presence and meaning co-exist.

October 17 Event Memory and James's Writing:

We begin with the vague idea that we are going to write something about our neighborhoods or the experience of living in Durham. We are using computers; I'm hoping that typing will get us past some of the reluctance we've had so far in our writing. James, Micah, and Andre all worry about whether or not they are saying things the "right" way, if their grammar is ok, if they have written enough. I assure them that none of this matters; "just get something out!" As there are only two computers in the room where we normally meet, someone will need to work in another room. James volunteers to go. When I come to check on him a few minutes after getting Andre and Micah started, he already has written several paragraphs. When I start reading over his shoulder, he

immediately stops typing "I don't really know how to write. I mean, I'm not sure what

I'm saying." I'm confused because he has already written quite a bit in a short amount

of time. No, it's not fantastic, but it's a solid start[12].

> Well my neighborhood is not like my old neighborhood because there is no one that I have to hang with so in that case I just stay in the house and talk to my girlfriend all day until I get off of house arrest then I can go see her anytime and anyday that I want to. That is the only similar thing between my old neighborhood and my current neighborhood. **When I was in my old neighborhood I didn't have any of these problems that I have in my current neighborhood** I didn't have the **PIGS** called on me and I say that really strongly.
> My neighbor she called the PIGS on me because she thought I was one of the suspects that was involved in the incedent that happend but I had no part in what had happend between those boys she saw me run so she thought it was me that was driving the car and to add to that she said that I had on a white shirt and I didn't have on a shirt at all, and at that I didn't have on any shoes. The reason I was running is because I didn't have on any shoes another thing is I was running from checking my mail box.
> It was about at least 12 to 15 PIGS on my street and about 7 of them came inside my house for what find absolutly nothing and one of them said "if a little child picks up the gun and shoots himself/herself he is going to pin me with murder". I told him you are going to look really stupid when you come to find out that it wasn't me.
> My neighborhood things can happen but not interesting things because doesn't anybody really do anything that is really interesting. When you are in my neighborhood you wouldn't want to stay there because there is not anything to do at all day long but just sit around and look at one another and that can be very boring.
> My old neighborhood there was plenty to do because I had a lot of friends there and my girlfriend was there so I could see her anytime I wanted and be with her everyday at anytime I wanted to. Some examples of the things I use to do in my old neighborhood is we use to play with fire we burned things, and we also had cookouts for birthdays of holidays or just because. Now we don't do that anymore but it really doesn't matter anymore.

This isn't all James wrote on that first day but it's enough to give you an idea. I

had told the students before we started that one of the reasons we were going to write was

to turn the tables on the reading process; reading and writing are reciprocals and they

needed to see the other side. They knew that I would be reading their texts and

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[12] I am reproducing here James's work as he left it, including the errors in grammar and spelling.

questioning them in the way that we had been working on reading and questioning other texts. After reading the first part of what James had written, I started asking him what it was that he felt was important about what he was trying to say. Was this a criticism of policing practices in Durham? A lament of the loss of neighborliness? A critique of his own behaviors? A love song about his girlfriend?

Through our back and forth James decided that what was most important about what he had written so far was the fact that his new neighborhood was not his old neighborhood. I didn't yet appreciate the significance of that; I'm not entirely sure that James did either. Before he left for the day, he tacked this paragraph on at the end:

> This is what happend to my old neighborhood is it was knocked to every apartment the whole park where my friends and I grew up like when I seen that man when he was doing that I think I seen him have a little smirk on his face that is what made me want to stab him in his throat. He destroyed my neighborhood with a big ass wrecking ball and he didn't feel any sympathy when he was doing it so I said fuck you punk ass redneck. At that they didn't even remodeld it, it is just an empty lot now.

Before he left that day I asked James if he wanted to write more about his old neighborhood, if that was the story that he thought was interesting to tell. At first he was enthusiastic about the idea; I was guilty of pushing him in that direction. Then suddenly he got rather quiet and was visibly upset, "I don't want to talk about it no more." I backed off.

After Andre and Micah left for the day, I apologized to James. I felt I had crossed the line in terms of pushing too hard about something that was clearly a sensitive topic. Just because I thought it would make a good story did not mean that it needed to be told. "Nah, it's ok," James told me. "I can write about it." I was a little worried he was saying this just to appease me and assured him that he could write about whatever he wanted.

But I also felt obligated to tell him what I found compelling about his story as a reader. "It's about something that happened to you, something you feel strongly about. And I think that matters. I totally respect if you don't want to talk about it further though." "Do you really think it's interesting?" "Absolutely! And it matters. People should know that story, if you want to tell it. I mean, I've no idea about such a thing happening. And obviously it's really important to you." I mentioned to him that if he was interested, this was the sort of thing that others could read to, perhaps a local paper might take up this story, or even the website we'd been reading that had histories of various Durham neighborhoods.

The next week, October 24, we worked on writing again. James returned to his neighborhood story and started writing about his old neighborhood. I asked him if he was sure; he said he was. He seemed relaxed and confident about his decision; I decided I had pushed enough and would let him take things where he wanted from here. I'm including what James wrote that day in its entirety, not because I think it is the perfect narrative (once again I have left his grammar and spelling unchanged), but because I found it a powerful reminder of our innate drive to share story, to share experience. It also challenges what *not a reader* means, what students who carry that label by choice or imposition are actually able to do with language.

> The way my story is going to begin is I am going to write about my childhood and how it was destroyed and other things as well. My childhood was destroyed because of the rearing down of my neighborhood where everything happen since I was a little boy, my feelings about this was not so good because that neighborhood was very important to me and what I did in that neighborhood my friends,family, and other people that lived in those apartments had to move out I guess because it was because there wasn't many people living in the apartments but now no one gets to live there anymore because it isn't anything there anymore. One day when I came home my mom told my family and me that we had to move but I didn't know for what reason but again I didn't ask why we had

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to move I didn't want to leave my neighborhood because that was the best place to be and I had friends to play with everyday and that had to change because those apartments were destroyed.

The apartments were not in a straight line like in the suburbs they were like a connect the dots puzzle or a maze they were all brick as a little kid the apartments were like hotels but not as big which I called " the funnest place ever". When my grandmother use to wash clothes we always used to say "watch out below" then drop the clothes over the short wall that was at the top of the stairs we had fun saying that. Another memory that makes this place so special to me is when I was seven I got burned on my right leg. The girl that I liked she had came to my rescue and she was pretty I wanted to kiss her the way she was looking made the pain go away just a little but then again it was still burning. We were all crying because we never seen a burning flesh except on the television and my grandmother put neosporin on it's a gel like substance, then I went to sleep because all of the crying made me sleepy.

When I seen the apartments being destroyed I thought they were going to make it something better out of it to myself I was thinking what the fuck are you doing to these apartments but I really didn't have the heart to say those words. Now I couldn't see my friends everyday anymore also my aunt and her two children lived there as well so we don't see each other as well as we use to before. The fun I use to have in that neighborhood my friends my sister and I we use to go the park and play I use to play basketball there. Those bulldozers and other machines were so loud standing there watching your neighborhood being destroyed and knowing you can't do anything about it just the sights makes me angry all of my life I never thought I would ever see anything like that ever happening to a place where I loved to stay and play everyday.

Being a little boy knowing that that is your childhood place and to see it being destroyed in front of you can really take a toll on you like where am I going to live where I can have as much fun as I do here. Now everytime I ride past there I get angry because I can't see how my childhood place looks like now that I don't live there but I can't do that because there is nothing there to look and not even the park where I use to play at is not there anymore. Now I've gotten older it still hurts. Now the reason that this happened I don't really know and I don't think I will ever know what I think about that happening that is bullshit at least it could have been something nice built there.

There only building that is there is the school building and it is still in tact and the school isn't open anymore they have a new building it has become a middle school which use to be an elementary school which I use to go to until I had moved because of the destroying of the apartments. I had one of the best teachers ever he was a great teacher because he understood me and he taught me where I could understand the lesson that he was teaching,My sister also had him as well. my sister and I use to go every morning before we went to school she was a very

nice lady may she rest in peace. I would build something there if I could build something there because I care about my community and people in my community and it will be someplace where someone could also live. People wouldn't be homeless they would had somewhere to live. I mean shelter's are good for people too but I think people should have a home of their own so they won't have to be separated from their children. I never had to be separated from my mom because we had a home of our own to live in that is what made me feel sad for those people didn't have a home of their own, but then again people that lived in those apartments had a home of their as well.

As James worked on his narrative, I asked him simply "What do you want to say?" and listened as he talked through it. His confidence in his ability to "say something interesting" faltered from time to time; my acting as a sounding board seemed to enable him to keep going. The words were all his own. When I asked him about his story, James told me "I don't have a childhood. I really don't have a childhood." I worried a bit in sharing James's story that I would turn him into a victim, make him an object of pity. What I saw in his words was just the opposite. In writing of his memories, James reclaimed happy moments. He expressed his anger and even hatred towards those who were responsible. And he acknowledged that the event is one that he still carries with him – both the good and the bad. Just as Andre staked a claim to meaning and talked back against "In the City," James through his narrative moves to become an actor, someone who can be angry but who also can choose to reclaim what was taken from him. It is this sort of opportunity to critique, to talk back, against texts and the world that reading and writing can provide.

SPRIAL SIX

NOT A READER – LOOKING FORWARD

"Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world...this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from out reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* it or *rewriting* it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process." --Paulo Freire, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987)*,* p.35

I never really reached a stopping point in my work with James, Andre, and Micah - just a moment where it seemed time to say good-bye (at least to our formal work together). We had other stories to share, other texts to read together, but, as always seems to be the case in teaching, time loomed over us. Although they spoke positively of our time together and expressed a bit of sadness that I wouldn't be coming back, I have no real way of knowing if this work has changed how they see themselves as readers. But I would like to think that it at least planted a seed that asks them to question what it means to be *not a reader,* just as I have questioned it through writing this dissertation.

One of the reasons I selected the spiral as the motif for arranging this work and as a way to think about reading is that it conveys the possibility of endless expansion. At some point our readings conclude, just as this dissertation must now, but there is never an ultimate end point. We can always return to the work, or perhaps someone else will take it up as we earlier took up the works of others. The other element that drew me to the spiral was the sense of motion and action. Freire (1987) refers to "dynamic movement"

(p. 35); we do something when we read but that doing is not just repeating what came before. It's creating something new, "transforming it by means of conscious, practical work" (p. 35).

I like practical work. I was drawn to the field of education because requires practical work with real students in real classroom while offering the opportunity to engage theory and research. I came to this inquiry with assumptions about what *not a readers* might need to see themselves as meaning makers, to read with agency. Through the practical work with Micah, Andre, and James, the missteps and moments of serendipity, those assumptions were challenged. I had to rethink my notions about what texts we should read with students and why. If we want students to read the world, those texts that acknowledge the complexity and relevance of the experiences of those students are most valuable. I also found myself in the awkward position of realizing that I was in many ways just as guilty as the curriculum I critique of defining what should happen in reading and how it should happen. Letting go of the scrapbooks and venturing into a less charted territory of oral language forced me to relinquish control in a more conscious way than I had been able to do as a teacher prior to this experience.

In order to look forward to where this work may take me next, I must first look back through the spirals of this phenomenological inquiry. In selecting hermeneutic phenomenology as my research method, I had to engage in the same sort of work of observation, reflection, and meaning making that we ask of ourselves in reading. Every time I return to a text I have read previously, I see it anew; there are always moments that become clearer, moments that alter my previous understandings, and moments that I

simply missed in prior readings. The moments of this inquiry into reading as *not a reader* were much the same.

I began with assumptions that I had brought with me from my prior work as a teacher, my own experience reading, and my study of literacy theory. I thought that making a tangible record of the meaning making process, the scrapbooks, was the process that could change how these students saw reading and help them to see the dialogue between text and reader that occurs in meaning making. Implicit in that assumption are further assumptions about why (or even if) the students saw themselves as *not a readers* in the first place, what barriers stood between the students and texts, and what exactly my role as teacher/mentor/researcher in this project should be.   I also assumed that I could remove the student/teacher dynamic from this project by setting it outside of a formal high school classroom, that I could engineer an environment where my experience as a reader and scholar would not overshadow or influence the readings of the students.

In the first moments of the project, the first and second spirals, I had to begin to acknowledge those assumptions, my prior experiences, and the theories I found interesting in trying to understand the phenomena of reading as *not a reader*. The third spiral was the moment in which I had to bracket my assumptions about these students and recognize the *not a readers*, James, Andre, and Micah, as they presented themselves in this project. Instead of the hypothetical students I had imagined in constructing the project, there were three individuals, all with different ideas, experiences, struggles, and talents. These three real individuals did not take up the scrapbooks as I had hoped. I had imagined the scrapbooks as a way to make the meaning making process tangible, thinking that doing so was the key to transforming *not a readers* into *readers*. But in this

moment I was forced to acknowledge that the scrapbook idea was in some ways imposing on the students in the very way I critique other aspects of curriculum of imposing on students. I had wanted dialogue to be central to this inquiry; it turned out that it was, just not in the written form I had anticipated.

The fourth spiral then was the moment in which I acknowledged the potential of my own pedagogical moves to impose an identity on Micah, James, and Andre instead of allowing them the space to choose their own. I had some notion that agency and experience were important, but not a sense of what those might look like for a *not a reader*. I also found in this spiral the value of presence, the visceral response we have to things; presence is that "it's just interesting" moment that we finally found with the texts "Headline: Incident No. 1113" and "In the City" and our Durham Stories project. If we want to bridge the divide between classroom and world, we must be attentive to the role of presence and find the texts that resonate with the readers in our classroom. In doing so, we also allow space to re-imagine the *not a reader* identity.

In writing the fifth spiral, I think I finally felt comfortable with my phenomenological project, in the same moment that James, Andre, and Micah variously made moves towards talking back against the texts we were working with. The goal of phenomenological inquiry is to grasp the quality of a phenomenon that has eluded the researcher. When the students were finally engaged, their interest and responses focused my attention on what mattered to them and what they brought to reading. Andre responded most strongly to our oral conversations about "In the City" while James most fully latched on to writing as a way to claim a counter-narrative in his story about the destruction of his neighborhood. Micah worked equally with both the written and oral

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texts, pushing back against his own self-identification as a "guy who doesn't talk much."

This work required me to let go and take a risk as much as it required my participants to

do so. When I first wrote the sections of the chapter where the transcript is interspersed

with my event memories, I wondered if it was "right" to write it that way. As Andre did

in his initial reading of "In the City," I hesitated. But as I wrote, my confidence in my

method grew, just as Andre's critique grew more assertive in our discussion of "In the

City." We both found our voices in a moment of presence that allowed meaning making

to happen.

I wrote earlier that this is a dissertation ultimately about curriculum.   In making

this claim, I am revealing the way my own understanding of what curriculum is has

evolved over my work as a teacher, my time as a graduate student, and even my work on

this project. Just as we often create a monologic view of reading, we often reduce

curriculum to "that thing in the binder over there," the document given to us by some

authority (the claim made by the Common Core State Standards). I've said before when

teaching a course that "I'm creating my own curriculum;" in fact, I began this project

with the idea of doing just that. But I am not so sure even that statement is much better

than what something like the Common Core State Standards offers.   Curriculum is the

what we teach – the thing – but it is also the experience of the classroom and the

engagement with the world. It is both meaning and presence.

At the start of this project, I was convinced that the "what," the texts we use, did

not matter so much, that any text would allow for the sort of engagement with texts that

allow readers to make meaning. I also had a particular idea about how to accomplish

this, the scrapbook projects. My work with James, Micah, and Andrew has caused me to

shift my understanding of how the "what" matters. It is true that we can find some

meaning in most any text. But it is presence that makes the difference between

superficial meaning making and the deeper work that engages experience and the world.

Without presence, reading as experience cannot happen. Rosenblatt's (1995) emphasis

on the importance of student response indicates just how key our emotional, visceral

reactions are in making sense of text.

If we see teaching and reading and curriculum as "practical work" we have to find

a way to cross the artificial barrier erected between the lived experience of the world and

the closed space of classroom reading. If we reduce reading or curriculum to something

done in classrooms and ignore our entanglements in language and experience, we create a

hollow artifact that gives little joy and requires little attention. Micah, James, and Andre

are *not a readers* and yet they engaged in dynamic movement around texts. The

contradiction between being *not a reader* and *doing dynamic movement*, then is more

about how we present the activity of reading and do or do not provide space for students

to create meaning and take responsibility for their creations.

Is there way to channel the energy students bring to classrooms and to restructure

how we frame reading to allow for different expressions of agency? If it is not reading

that is the problem but rather the way that we teach reading, how could we provide

students space for more meaningful engagement? Holland, et. al. (1998) locate agency in

play: "Play is also the medium of mastery, indeed of creation, of ourselves as human

actors. Without the capacity to formulate other social scenes in imagination, there can be

little force to a sense of self, little agency" (p. 236). They also argue that all of us

function in multiple figured worlds; these worlds are always with us meaning that our

actions from within one figured world are never fully determined. There is room for play. Another assumption that I brought to this inquiry was that all reading offers space for play. What I discovered through the failure of the scrapbooks is that for play to be possible, reading has to take place in the world of the reader's lived experience; it cannot be coerced.

One of the many joys that I have had as a parent is watching my children discover reading. Callum, who is four, is just beginning to recognize and read words, to make the connections between lines on a page and his language; of course, he has long had his favorite stories memorized and can "read" along with them. Eleanor, who is newly two, is currently taken with the ritual of certain books, always naming the same pictures and asking the same questions of her favorites. I am struck by the fact that at both stages, reading is very much physical and performative. If embodied and expressive responses to text still survive in elementary and middle schools, we seem to lose both opportunities by the high school years.

Earlier, I described the way texts function as cultural artifacts in the figured world of reading. Here, I would like to offer a slightly different way texts might function as cultural artifacts, the sort of move I hoped to make with "Headline: Incident No. 1113" and Durham Stories. If we were to see texts this way in schools, as representations of lived experience, as dynamic objects to engage rather than inert objects to decipher, it might begin to change the way we think about the activity of reading in that space. I also wonder if returning physicality and performance to our work with language in schools could be a way to make apparent the centrality of dialogue to our reading and our writing. These are questions I hope to explore further as my work continues.

While I recognize and celebrate the students' responses to texts that have specific reference to their lived experience, I want to consider how they might find access to texts which are not situated in the time and space that they call home. Azar Nafisi (2004), an Iranian college professor, describes arming herself with her "trusty *Gatsby*" and several other familiar texts as "security blankets" as she faced her first day of teaching at the University of Tehran during the Iranian revolution. Later, those texts and others would help her ride out bombing raids during the Iran/Iraq war. Part of her motivation for forming a secret reading group for women in the midst of a chaotic and troubling time, was a belief that she could share the experience of literature with her students and that literature had importance beyond aesthetic appreciation: "Fiction was not a panacea, but it did offer us a critical way of appraising and grasping the world – not just our world but that other world that had become the object of our desires" (p. 282). Her attachment to the objects themselves represented that desire.

Throughout this study I wondered – and asked – if James, Andre, and Micah ever felt this sort of connection to the object of a book. They all said they had not: "I don't keep books at the house," James told me. Research tells us that children who grow up in text rich homes are better readers. Does "better" mean faster and more fluent with decoding? Less hesitant to interpret and critique texts? More willing to share responses and to re-visit those responses? However we frame it, something about having a relationship with books matters in how we come to interact with them.
How do we nurture this sort of relationship with texts in schools when, as I have suggested above, texts are often seen as inert objects instead of living, evolving ones that

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change with each reading? I think the answer may lie at the intersection of play and presence, a place where agency may also get its start.

Fatemeh Keshavarz (2007) critiques Nafisi for not including the rich Persian literary tradition in her memoir or in her wartime reading group, and classes her memoir as part of the "New Orientalist narrative" that offers only an incomplete picture of Iranian life and literature. Why does Nafisi rely on her "trusty Gatsby" and why have the women in her group read Nabokov? There are many explanations; perhaps it was deliberate or perhaps it simply grew out of her professional life as a professor and scholar of English language literature. Whatever the case, this oddity does raise an interesting question that has hovered at the edges of my thinking about reading and this project: How do we reconcile the potential for play and escape through literature with our need for connection to our personal experience in order to make meaning? Was Nabokov appealing to Nafisi and the women of her reading circle because it allowed them to imagine completely different circumstances? How did it (or not) connect to their own experiences? Would the literature of the familiar have had a different effect?

In her essay "The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of" (2006) Nafisi writes:

We do not read in order to turn great works of fiction into simplistic replicas of our own realities, we read for the pure, sensual, and unadulterated pleasure of reading. And if we do so, our reward is the discovery of many hidden layers within these works that do not merely reflect reality but reveal a spectrum of truths, thus intrinsically going against the grain of totalitarian mindsets. (p.7)

This "unadulterated pleasure" is not unlike Gumbrecht's (2004) sense of presence, our visceral reaction to a text. In turning to works less familiar, to those that challenge what

we find comfortable and know well, we are also afforded the opportunity to see the world as multi-faceted. The pleasure we find in reading facilitates our exploration of these new possibilities. I mentioned earlier that I began this project with the idea that it would not matter what texts we used, that the exotic would do just as nicely as the familiar; I hoped that as Nafisi's students did, my students would become adapt at exploring new possibilities through fiction. I quickly discovered that the text did matter in this project. But why?

Unlike James, Micah, and Andre, the women in Nafisi's reading group were all *readers*. Many had been or still were university students and all were interested in literature. As *readers* who already understood and enjoyed the space for play that texts offer, the "exotic" was more accessible. For James, Micah, and Andre, the experience of reading was new; grounding that experience in texts of the familiar made the transition to exploring and engaging in dialogue with texts more natural. Given more time, I'm confident that James, Micah, and Andre would have gained the confidence to find play in less familiar textual worlds.

Another contrast raised by Nafisi's story is the difference in our public and private reading lives. Nafisi writes of both, her own personal moments of reading as well as the public, communal conversations of the reading group. In classrooms we frequently ask students to read independently and share with the group, often without consideration to the private territory readings may tread upon. In my small circle in this project, we were able to find some common ground between private and public; James's decision to share his story is a notable example. The difference in how we read for ourselves versus

how we read with others deserves more careful consideration as we consider what a reading curriculum should look like.

Although he doesn't name presence and meaning, I think Benjamin's concern in "The Storyteller" (2007) is akin to the point Gumbrecht (2004) makes about the artificial separation of presence and meaning we often make in our modern thinking. Storytelling, which Benjamin argues is becoming lost in the novel, relies on experience, which is both collective and practical. A story "does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (p. 93-94). This echoes, too, my aim in this work and my reasons for choosing hermeneutic phenomenology; although I am interested in interpretation, it is an interpretation that recognizes that it is read through the interpreter's experience and the lived experience of the thing itself.

The first storytellers relied on orality and repetition, ironically the very things that are so often neglected in high school classrooms. We do read aloud, but as Andre's story about rehearsing his lines instead of listening to his classmate's shows us, we seldom give true attention to the performance of the text. And certainly there is little room for re-reading in curricula that value breadth of coverage over depth. In imagining this project, I too was guilty of neglecting the value of oral performance. And although I was interested in dialogue, I failed to consider the most obvious way to incorporate dialogue – oral conversation. What I discovered in working with James, Micah, and Andre is that if we want students to write, we must first hear them speak. If we want them to talk to the text, we must teach them to talk to each other. And if we want them to interpret, we must

teach them to listen. The thing that makes all of this possible is the spark of experience, the moment of intensity – presence.

In her chapter "Bodyreading," Grumet (1988) writes of reading as "an act that is oriented toward what the subject can do in the world. Bodyreading is strung between the poles of our actual situation, crowded as it is with our own intentions, assumptions, and positions, and the possibilities that texts point to" (p. 130). She suggests art as the catalyst for this: "Because art forms express knowledge about feeling, they provide a bridge between public and private readings. Because aesthetic activity requires the making of things, comprehension is made palpable and accessible to the perception and response of other readers" (p. 148). I think the key to this is the "making of things," once again that grounding in lived experience and a connection to the physical world.   Also important is the ability of the things made to be shared, to be seen by their authors and others as texts in their own right, texts that respond to and critique and in turn generate response and critique. The dialogue continues.

My initial idea of having Andre, Micah, and James create a tangible record of their reading experiences was designed to do this. But there are other ways as well. For James, the "making of things" happened most fully in his narrative about his neighborhood. For Andre, the dialogue around "In the City" allowed him to assert a position based on his own experience in the world and reaction to a text. Both activities engaged presence and allowed for play, which in turn gave Andre and James space to talk back to the world.

I hope this dissertation offers one possibility of how we might re-present the activity of reading and provide space for *doing* with literature. In revising my own

understanding of *not a reader*, I add to our understanding of why students do and do not engage in the work of school reading and more importantly, provide examples of how they use language in powerful ways. I will continue to explore these questions in other contexts.

Van Manen suggests that "To *do* hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal" (p. 18).   What I have offered here is my reading of this experience, meaning made from tangling with moments of experience, theory, and personal reflection. This dissertation ends here but the work it engages continues. Even as it is read by you and discussed by us, layers are added.

I began this dissertation with a moment of dismay; I would like to end with a moment of hopeful possibility. Students are interesting. Their thoughts, their experiences - all of it adds to the vibrant dialogue possible in classrooms. Texts provide fertile ground for dialogue and exchange, for production and presence.   I am grateful to Andre, Micah, and James, and to all my students who have come before them, for reminding me that ultimately what matters in curriculum and in reading are the lives and experiences they engage and the possibilities they create.

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