LITERACY EXPERIENCE:
TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGICAL VIEW
OF LITERACIES THROUGH YOUTH
PARTICIPATORY PHOTOETHNOGRAPHY
AND ART-MAKING

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education—Doctor of Philosophy

2016

ABSTRACT

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The trajectory of literacy research has been one of expansion. In each theoretical iteration, established paradigms for what qualifies as "literate" have been rejected in favor of more generous and inclusive conceptions. In recent work scholars have moved toward considering literacies themselves as participants in social life. In this dissertation I argue that this move necessitates a commensurate change in the unit of analysis of research on literacies and the methodological and theoretical apparatus used to approach such research. The current units of analysis used in literacy research are too limiting for this new orientation, obscuring some of the participants in sets of literate relations. Drawing on work in human and cultural geography, I mobilize Non-Representational Theory in developing the concept of literacy experience as a new unit of analysis in literacy research. A literacy experience is an emergence of sense when people read and write the world through relationships with (im)material texts in everyday life. Thinking in terms of literacy experiences affords novel ways to account for the pre-conscious, emergent, and affective components of literacy, areas which have been difficult to account for using popular approaches to the study of literacies. Additionally, this theoretical paradigm offers a way of countenancing the myriad relations between things, objects, and bodies that participate in the doing/being of literacies.

Literacy experiences are demonstrated through the work of co-researcher youth, a group of suburban high school photography students, who studied their own engagement with text in their everyday lives through photoethnographic self-studies and art-making. Findings suggest that youth participate in complex sets of literate relations that are fractured across timescales; involve a wide variety of things, bodies, and objects; and result in the emergence of sense and affective intensities. These findings help to move the field of literacy studies towards an ontological view of literacies where literate sense-making is simply an element of being in the world.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my loving and supportive husband, Nathanael, who has been my safe harbor even during the roughest of storms, many of which we've endured while I've been undertaking this work. I would never have made it, generally, or finished this dissertation, specifically, without you. And, to our children: Beckett Mikel Madiba, whose presence and absence is so much a part of this project; and, to Luna and Lyra, who we never had the opportunity to meet…I miss you all, every day. I hope I've done our squad proud.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1 — ORIENTATIONS

Introduction

The ethnographic turn in research on literacy asked the field to consider the contexts

within which literacy practices occur rather than to think of reading and writing as autonomous

which was (and, in many ways, remains) the dominant framing (Goody & Watt, 1963). This turn

produced essential and iconic work (e.g. Scribner & Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984)

whose impact on the field's understanding of the social nature of literacy cannot be overstated.

It is now a near universal assumption within the academy that literacies occur within ecologies of

contexts. As Brandt and Clinton note, "[c]alling literacy a situated social practice has become

something of an orthodoxy in literacy research today", (2002, p. 337). And, yet, tracing these

contexts presents a bit of a "muddle" (Bateson, 1972, p. 3) as the evolution of communication

continually shifts the conceptual ground. The definitions of "situated", "social", and "practice"

have become increasingly malleable, complicating the notion of literacy as a product of contexts.

One idea that seems to have gained some purchase in recent years is that literacies are

participants in contexts rather than products of contexts (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 338). This

has been useful in opening up the possibility to follow the ways in which literacies participate in

and interact with contexts, which helps to account for the movement and flow of literacies as

they participate in social life. This move has opened up an expanded space for researchers to

consider all of the other things that might participate with literacies in everyday life. This work

enters into that expanded space by examining the ways that affect, people, objects, and the

influence of popular culture or, as one student researcher named it, the zeitgeist, work together in

the being and doing of literacies in the everyday life of a group of suburban teenagers. What

emerges is not only a "collage" (Fendler, 2013, p. 5) of the literate lives of four young people,

but also a meditation on how we approach the study of such lives. I argue that the current move towards considering literacies to be participants in social life necessitates a commensurate change in the unit of analysis of research on literacies and the methodological and theoretical apparatus used to approach such research.

Orienting (to) Literacy

To put it plainly, the way we orient ourselves to something has dramatic consequences for our relationship to/with said thing. Sarah Ahmed (2010) suggests:

> Orientations thus "matter" in both senses of the word "matter." First, orientations matter in the simple sense that orientations are significant and important. To be oriented in a certain way is how certain things come to be significant, come to be objects *for me*. … Orientations also matter in the second sense of being about physical or corporeal substance. Orientations shape the corporeal substance of bodies and whatever occupies space. Orientations affect how subjects and objects materialize or come to take shape in the way that they do. (p. 235)

How a researcher is oriented to literacy matters a great deal. This orientation dictates what subjects and objects are able to be seen and understood in the context of research and is therefore at the very heart of any study. In the following section, I will review the prevailing ways that the field has oriented itself to literacy from autonomous views of literacy to literacies as situated social practices and the latest move towards thinking of literacies as participants in contexts. I will consider the ways in which each orientation to/of literacy disciplines the research gaze and, to varying degrees, dictates what is able to be seen or accessed through research. I then argue that orienting to literacies as participants in social contexts requires a reorientation towards available units of analyses in the research of literacies to what I call *literacy experiences*.

I end by describing literacy experiences and gesture towards why they matter for those that have them and those that might study them.

Literacy Epochs: The landscape

  Literacy as autonomous. As a deeply problematic consequence of colonialism/imperialism, the prevailing definition of literacy has been the ability to read and write printed words. This definition of literacy is discouragingly and stubbornly sedimented in popular discourse and is likely to be the one given if a person-on-the-street was asked to describe literacy. On this framing, literacy is a cognitive technology made up of specific skills interpreting and creating written text. Social-evolutionists used these skills as a determining factor in what peoples, cultures, and countries were considered to be "civilized" as a tool to maintain and perpetuate hierarchical systems intent on elevating the few and dominating the many. This view of literacy, in the hands of the social-evolutionary project, made a perfect rationale—taking "true" learning to the "uncivilized"—for colonialism/imperialism that helped to obfuscate the actual goal of acquiring more power and money for the White upperclasses. And, since these imperialistic views of literacy began, they have continued to be a tool of subjugation across the globe where the ability to interpret and produce the printed word has stood as a tidy gatekeeper between those in power and those kept from power.

  Well into the twentieth century, arguments were still being made that literacy preceded "real" thinking—that literacy begat history and science, and, the general ability for rationality of any type. Goody and Watt (1963) suggested that there was a compelling argument to be made that there was a "causal connection between writing and logic" (p. 330). They argued that writing actually changed the way the brain works such that thinking became more organized and systematic. More than a decade later, Olson (1977) maintained this same thesis and made the

bold claim that, "[t]he faculty of language stands at the center of our conception of mankind; speech makes us human and literacy makes us civilized," (p. 257). Arguments that conflated civility with particular, discrete skills like reading and writing non-pictographic words were consistently dismantled and disproven, with Lévi-Strauss (1966) leading the charge from the field of anthropology and many following thereafter. However, reverberations of this attitude towards literacy are still felt acutely by many communities. Now that more people have access to building skills in reading and writing, there is a demand for that reading and writing to take particular forms. Despite the changing demographics of the U.S., the ability to read and write in English is the only literacy that some will affirm. And, certainly, the only English variant that "counts" is Dominant American English. These stances remain widespread in spite of overwhelming research that dispels them.

Research that is oriented towards this autonomous view of literacy necessarily has a very narrow scope. If literacy is made up of discrete acts of reading and writing printed words, than those acts are the only objects upon which research might be focused. Such research is limited and exclusive, having the ability to see and consider fewer people, events, practices, things, and experiences as participating in literacy.

Literacy as a situated social practice. As previously noted, ethnographic research done in the second half of the 20th century sought to dispel the myth of reading and writing as autonomous. Interdisciplinary work done in psychology, anthropology, and education began to pay close attention to the contexts in which reading, writing, and talk occurred, which helped to illuminate the social nature of literacy. This work has formed the basis for all sociocultural research on literacies produced since and has had such an dramatic impact on the study, teaching, and learning of literacies that it is virtually impossible to give it too much credit. "This

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pluralistic stance on literacy responds to, and resists, a still-dominant psychological perspective often assumed for purposes of schooling: that literacy is a singular, linear, developmental process similarly experienced by all individuals, as well as by all cultures progressing toward modernity," (Juzwik, et. al., in press).

      Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole. Scribner and Cole approached the study of literacy from the field of psychology. In their landmark study on the Vai people of Liberia (1981a), Scribner and Cole demonstrated that the Vai[1] mobilized different literacies and languages for different social purposes. The Vai were unique in that they regularly made use of three different written scripts in their everyday lives, one of which they created. Vai script had been in use for over 150 years at the time of Scribner and Cole's study. It was learned at home and in the community, with the Vai using it in day-to-day living. English was learned in state-sponsored schools and Arabic was learned for religious practices. The means of acquisition and the ways in which the scripts were used provided a rich research context to test autonomous theories about literacy. Scribner and Cole noted, "[t]he fact that literacy is acquired in this society without formal schooling and that literates and nonliterates [*sic*] share common material and social conditions allows for a more direct test of the relationship between literacy and thinking than is possible in our own society," (1981b, p.62). What Scribner and Cole discovered was that complex sociocultural domains play a large role in the ways that people communicate, and, in relation to the Vai specifically, with the ways that they learned and used various symbol systems. Scribner and Cole also discovered that there was no correlation between the Vai's success in cognitive tests and whether or not they could read or write particular scripts. Scribner and Cole's findings were ground-breaking at the time and they stated plainly, "we found no evidence of

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[1] It is worth noting that Scribner & Cole's sample is made up of almost entirely men as they found that it seemed women did not generally learn a script and, ultimately, they noted, "we can only report and not account for the male-restricted nature of schooling and literacy in Vai society," (1981a, p. 62).

marked differences in performance on logical and classificatory tasks between non-school

literates and nonliterates [*sic*]," (1981b, p. 66).

    Brian Street. Around the same time that Scribner and Cole were in Liberia, Brian Street

was conducting anthropological research in Iranian villages around the city of Mashad. Street

was interested in the notion, held by many in the city, that people in the villages were 'illiterate'

which stood in stark opposition to his experience of living in the villages and seeing an array of

what he understood to be literate behaviors. Villagers[2] variously learned Farsi, through public

schools and what Street called *school literacy*, and Arabic, learned through the study of the

Qur'an or *maktab literacy* as Street named it. He observed that, when the local economies grew

and commerce expanded beyond the borders of individual villages, Arabic was used for business

rather than Farsi. Street found that, "[t]hose with Qur'anic literacy had the status and authority

within the village to carry on these commercial practices, whilst those trained in the State school

were seen to be oriented outwards and lacked the integral relations to everyday village life that

underpinned the trust necessary for such transactions," (2013, p. 2). His research demonstrated

that literacy is always tied to ideologies and identities, occurring in complex, particular social

contexts. Literacy is never neutral and is always more than a discrete cognitive act. One might

have hypothesized that Mashad villagers would use Farsi for commercial endeavors as it was

connected already to state-sponsored activity. And, if literacy was nothing more than a set of

decontextualized tools or cognitive skills, then perhaps that is precisely what the villagers would

have done. However, public schooling was associated with modernization and, therefore, so was

Farsi; whereas maktab literacy and the use of Arabic grew out of religious learning and practice

extending back generations. When it came time for a language to be used for an emerging

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[2] Again, in the context of Street's study, an overwhelming majority of those that learned to recite, read, and/or write Arabic were men.

context, what Street named *commercial literacy*, Arabic naturally evolved as those that were taught the Qur'an were held in a higher regard than those taught in state schools. Thus, Arabic was used in commerce as lists were made, crates were labeled, and checks were written. And though not everyone in the villages learned to read and write Arabic, they did learn a wide variety of literacy skills and textual features through their business dealings. This led Street to consider literacy at the level of what he named *literacy practices* in order to account for literacy skills and interactions that were not strictly reading or writing symbols on a page. He found that though, "[t]he social group which shared perceptions and uses of literacy in the village may not have all exhibited comparable levels or kinds of skills but they did share a common ideology and a common understanding of the 'meanings' of that literacy," (1984, p. 176).

Shirley Brice Heath. Concurrently, Shirley Brice Heath was studying literacy in the Piedmont Carolinas in the United States in communities she named Trackton, Roadville, and "mainstreamers" (1984, p. 236) who live in town. Trackton was made up of working-class African-Americans, Roadville was comprised of working-class Whites; and townspeople were middle-class families of both races. Heath was interested in the ways that children from each of these communities both learned and made use of talk, reading, and writing. Her study attended to how literacies were acquired and used differently within and across race, socioeconomic status, sex, and age, in and between each community. Learning and using literacies was embedded in children's everyday lives and socialization into their families and communities. Each community had different values for and aims of using talk and texts which was reflected in children's literacy learning. As Heath studied the interactions between parents and children, she focused her attention on *literacy events* (1984, p. 386) where textual production or interpretation was a vital element. She found that, while all children learned and used literacies in their

communities, the kind of talk, reading, and writing reified in and through school mapped more directly onto that of the wealthier townspeople. Additionally, by comparing the communities to one another, Heath was able to demonstrate the complex way that indexes of difference layer and combine to produce rich contexts. In some instances, race seemed to be the common thread that produced similar events in different communities; in others, socioeconomic status produced the connection; in yet others, sex seemed to determine common events. These findings further illustrated the ways in which literacy is not autonomous and is woven together with and produced by social worlds.

Research conducted with a sociocultural orientation towards literacy has the potential for a much wider scope of inquiry. The work of Scribner and Cole, Street, and Heath provided the language for taking up literacy research with literacy events and/or literacy practices as units of analysis. Literacy events allow researchers to examine moments in which texts are involved in human sense-making enterprises and literacy practices allow researchers to examine the skills, abilities, and dispositions used in such events. Researchers can pursue depth and breadth of description with either events or practices with many ways to focus and/or pivot their gaze. One might examine a singular type of event in one context over a period of time (e.g. Hughes Elementary School children's recitation of double-dutch rhymes on the playground over the course of a school year) or a variety of events in one context over a period of time (e.g. All playground talk at Hughes Elementary School over the course of a school year). Or, one might examine an event or a variety of events across different contexts (e.g. children's recitation of double-dutch rhymes on playgrounds at 10 elementary schools in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles; or all playground talk at 10 elementary schools in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles). Similarly, a researcher could look closely at one practice (e.g. composing the text of

an Instagram post) in one or many places. Researchers might follow a particular young person to learn about a variety of events or practices that s/he participates in; or, a researcher might follow a particular practice to see where and when it happens, and with whom. There are countless ways to frame research questions around literacy events and literacy practices as evidenced by the vast majority of work conducted since orienting to literacy as a situated social practice. However, insofar as events are often bound by time and space; and, practices are bound to observable actions, there are things that researchers do not have access to in studies framed with these units of analysis.

Literacy as a participant in social worlds. For this reason, scholars have increasingly sought ways to orient to literacies as they occur in the flow of everyday life, within and between contexts, in order to gain access to that which had previously been difficult or impossible to see with sociocultural theories and methods. A shift towards conceptualizing literacies as *participants* in social worlds rather than simply *products* of social worlds has been particularly generative. This conceptualization has been useful in opening up the possibility to consider what things might come together, function, and break apart in the being and doing of literacies. As such, researchers have been able to map relations and interactions or trace things like affects, power, and agency between all of the participants in literacies. This helps to account for the movement and flow of literacies as they participate in social life whether in specific, liminal, or hybrid places. This move has also laid the groundwork for researchers to consider expanding their focus, beyond context and beyond the human subject, to what other things might participate with reading, writing, and language in the being and doing of literacy.

Bruno Latour. One productive line of inquiry has been through the use of Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (nicely packaged in the 2005 volume *Reassembling the Social*).

Latour provides the theoretical undergirding necessary for thinking of how a variety of things, what he calls *actants* participate in social life and the "associations" (2005, p. 5) that these actants have with one another. Brandt and Clinton (2002) suggest that Actor Network Theory might offer an approach to literacy studies that breaks out of an over-reliance on place-based understandings of contexts and the role contexts play in literacies. Using Latour, Brandt and Clinton (2002) call for deeper consideration of the objects that are a part of literacy practices rather than sole focus being placed on human agency (p. 346). They suggest that "[f]iguring out what things are doing with people in a setting becomes as important as figuring out what people are doing with things in a setting", (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 348). Tracing the actants, both humans and things, that are associated in a moment of reading, writing, or language use serves to break out of the confines of context alone and allows for the illumination of "literacy-in-action" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 349). Brandt and Clinton offer literacy-in-action as a new unit of analysis for literacy studies and ask us to reorient our research gaze to studying associations rather than seemingly stable, static events. Leander and Lovvorn (2006) join Brandt and Clinton by similarly using Latour and Actor Network Theory to forward the concept of "literacy networks" (p. 293). In their study, Leander and Lovvorn (2006) follow one young man, Brian, and trace his participation in school classrooms and at his home as he plays an online, multiplayer video game. By taking up the notion of a network, Leander and Lovvorn (2006) are able to trace the relationships and associations between Brian, his literacies, the physical and online spaces he inhabits, his various identities, and the textual objects he creates and encounters. This analysis allows them to consider how all of these actants join, function together, produce affects/effects, then break apart and reconfigure into new networks. Movement is built into the analysis and provides opportunities to account for Brian's literacy networks across very different

places. It also allows for attention to be paid to the objects involved in Brian's literacy network and the impact these objects have on him and his reading, writing, and language use.

  Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Another seemingly generative line of inquiry into thinking of literacy as a participant in social worlds has been through the use of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987/2005) concept of the *rhizome*. "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. …[T]he fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and…and…and…'" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2005, p. 25). This is set up as antithetical to the construction of a tree that grows in a linear way beginning with roots through to branches then to leaves. The rhizome is necessarily multiple, with no fixed "points or positions" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2005, p. 8) and many ways in, out, and through. "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains" (p. 17) in ways that are surprising and prize difference. Using the rhizome to understand the relationships within literacies makes visible the instability of categories when thinking about contexts, texts, and practices. Leander and Boldt (2012) undertake a rhizoanalysis to examine 10-year-old Lee's engagement with manga through reading, the movement of his body, conversations, enactments, and other improvisations. Through their study of Lee, Leander and Boldt (2012) assert that we should understand "literacy-related activity not as projected toward some textual end point but as living its life in the ongoing present, forming relations and connections…in often unexpected ways" (p. 26). Through this rhizoanalysis, we are able to see the way that unexpected things join up with Lee and his reading of manga to produce affects. For instance, at one point in Lee's reading he jumps up, searches his closet, and puts on a kimono that was part of his Halloween costume of a manga character which ends up causing some trouble when a friend shows up to play and must participate without a costume. It seems that "[t]he advantage to the kimono-

sword-fighter in confidence, intensity, and pleasure is self-evident to the boys," (Leander &

Boldt, 2012, p. 36). Lee's reading, the kimono, the swords, and the play all join together in this

literacy rhizome and produce complicated affects and felt emotions in the boys.

Research oriented towards literacy as a participant in social worlds allows researchers to

study relationships, interactions, and the non-cognitive domains of literacy that were previously

inaccessible, thus further broadening the scope of what can been seen in a study of literacies. As

this orientation to literacy privileges connections and interactions, new ways to approach

research have been suggested that similarly correspond. As noted above, Brandt and Clinton

(2002) suggested literacy-in-action as a new unit of analysis for studies that seek to map the

relationships that literacies have with other things, particularly when using Latour's Actor

Network Theory. Literacy-in-action would give researchers the ability to capture the movement

and flow of literacy as it occurs. Leander has played with units of analysis in his work, using

literacy networks as a new option in his study with Lovvorn (2006) and the rhizome in his study

with Boldt (2012). These units of analysis both offer the ability to capture the nature of

relationships between things in the being and doing of literacies, though the term *networks*

evokes images of machines and *rhizomes* are necessarily more organic. These units of analysis

are not necessarily mutually exclusive from those used in studies that have sociocultural

orientations to literacies. A researcher might study, to return to a previous example, Hughes

Elementary School's children reciting double-dutch rhymes on the playground; however, if this

researcher approached the project with an orientation towards literacy as a participant in social

worlds, she might employ methods that allow her to trace the ways that the rhymes participate

with moving bodies; the alternating opening and closing of the rope; the clip-CLAP sound of the

rope; the vocal rhythm of the rhyme; the current state of the relationship between the twirler and

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the jumper; the displacement of air as the rope cuts through space; the affective intensity produced through the whole scene as experienced by spectators, just to name a few. And, while units of analysis like literacy-in-action, literacy networks, and literacy rhizomes have provided researchers with greater theoretical purchase for studying literacy from a literacy-as-participant orientation, these are not wholly adequate for providing access to the full range of relationships and participants made possible by such an orientation.

Literacy Experience

Orienting to literacy as a participant in social worlds requires a commensurate evolution in the way that researchers orient to the study of the being and doing of literacies through units of analysis. Current units of analysis used in literacy research are too limiting for this new orientation and allow some of the participants in literacies to remain obscured. Though units of analysis are but one part of any research enterprise, they dramatically impact what theoretical and methodological apparatus might be mobilized and therefore lie at the very heart of any study. Therefore, if a unit of analysis does not provide adequate access to the phenomenon under consideration, then the potential power of the theory is diminished and the methods of data collection may be unnecessarily restrictive. As noted above, literacy events are too bound by space and time and literacy practices are too bound to observable happenings. Literacy-in-action certainly provides access to and accentuates the dynamic nature of literacies as they move in and through everyday life. And yet, this unit of analysis has the potential to exclude literacies and participants in literacies that might not be easily gerunded.[3] Likewise, making use of literacy networks or literacy rhizomes as units of analysis provide access to and accentuate the relationships between participants in literacies. However, these units of analysis make it challenging to map relations that are ephemeral, nonsensical, or fractured across different

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[3] I made up this word and though it is kind of awful, it seemed to me to say just what I wanted to say here.

timescales. This work offers a unit of analysis that is commensurate with an orientation towards literacy as a participant in social worlds and provides a more expansive grounding that allows new theories to exert their full power and a wide range of methods to be utilized in literacy research.

Defining literacy experience. I am conceptualizing literacy experience as an emergence of sense when people read and write the world through relationships with (im)material texts in everyday life. Though some of what I mean by the above will continue to be made clear as this work continues, I will make a start by providing a bit of explication about the definition. I ground literacy experience in the inheritance of Elliot Eisner's (1991) definition of literacy, "[b]ecause meaning is the core of literacy, we can (and I believe we ought to) conceive of literacy in terms broader than is customary. Literacy can be conceived of as the ability to decode or encode meaning in any of the social forms through which meaning is conveyed," (p. 120). Eisner helped to move the field beyond conceptions of literacy as only pertaining to the written word into the realm of interpreting meaning. He suggested that this meaning could exist is a variety of social forms and that literacy was the ability to create and understand these meanings. With the conceptualization of literacy experiences, much of Eisner's thinking about literacy remains with a few notable departures.

First, I relocate literacy to the realm of *sense* rather than in meaning. Sense encompasses meaning and can be used as a synonym for meaning. However, sense also encompasses something beyond and/or before meaning that can entail pre-conscious affective intensities as well as the sensual or thinking with the body. With literacy experiences, either definition of *sense* is thinkable and could be used to frame a study. I also foreground the notion of

emergence[4] to account for the ways that sense might take shape on pre- or sub-conscious levels.

Second, I shift from the notions of decoding and encoding to reading and writing. This might seem like a regression, but, I specifically suggest that it is reading and writing the *world* rather than simply the *word*. By this, I aim to highlight the idea that meaning does not exist, preformed and waiting out in the world to be discovered and decoded or encoded. Rather, meaning is created, read, and written through sets of relations[5]. These relations can occur across varying timescales of past/present/future as well as span any number of spaces and places that might be real, online, or imagined.

Third, I extend Eisner's multiplicity of meaning to a wide variety of texts, both material and immaterial. Considering that sense emerges through sets of relations, there is no way to predict what things, bodies, and objects[6] might take part in such sense-making relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to account for texts of all kinds when conceptualizing literacy experiences.

Finally, as more of an affirmation rather than a disjunction, just as Eisner extends literacy out into social worlds, I also place literacy experience in everyday life. This move opens up the possibility that everyone is somewhere in the process of *doing* literacies in the course of their everyday lives. It is this that suggests an ontological view of literacies, where being literate is simply a part of being human.

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[4] Emergence is dealt with in great detail in Chapter 2.
[5] The concept of meaning made in sets of relations is also discussed in Chapter 2.
[6] Again, things-bodies-objects are explained in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2 — COMING TO LANGUAGE ABOUT LITERACY EXPERIENCE: OR,

ON THEORY

Interlude 1 – As once the wingèd energy of delight

To work *with* Things in the indescribable
relationship is not too hard for us;
the pattern grows more intricate and subtle,
and being swept along is not enough.

Take your practiced powers and stretch them out
until they span the chasm between two
contradictions…

Rainer Maria Rilke

Introduction

Opening the unit of analysis for the study of literacies to literacy experiences allows

theoretical experimentation to create a broader conceptual and linguistic framework for

understanding the widely varying and ever shifting participants in the doing of literacies in

everyday life. For this study, I use Non-Representational Theory (NRT) as a filter through

which I develop concepts and find language to describe the literacy experiences that emerged

and were studied by the group of student researchers with whom I worked. NRT evolved in the

field of human geography in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s and has been gaining

traction in disciplines across the social sciences since.

As Non-Representational Theory is named as an antithesis, let me begin with a

clarification. NRT, as a theoretical project, is not interested in eradicating the representational or

suggesting that representation does not exist or is not, in its way, useful. As Dewsbury (2010)

suggests, "The representational is not the enemy," (p. 322). However, NRT proposes that the

representational is but one small player in humans' day-to-day existence. NRT would hold that

everything else, the non-representational or, as Lorimer (2005) prefers, the "more-than-

representational" (p. 84) actually makes up the larger part of everyday life. Lorimer (2005) goes on to sum up the "more-than" or the everything else thusly:

> The focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions. (p. 84)

How all of these things emerge, come together, function together, produce affective intensities[7], and break apart is at the heart of NRT work. This makes NRT particularly compelling as a filter through which to view literacy experiences. To focus my discussion of NRT, I will compress some of the core tenets of the theory[8] and present those ideas that are most useful to this work: diffused agency between things-bodies-objects, relationality, and emergence.

Thinking/Feeling with Marina

To be helpful and, I suppose, to be slightly contrary, I offer a heuristic for thinking through NRT in the form of one of Marina Abramović's performance art pieces. Perhaps herein lies what Dewsbury (2010) calls the "double-bind of representational and non-representational modes of thought" (p. 322): where I offer a representation to ensure the non-representational is simultaneously thinkable and sensuous. In any case, I believe thinking/feeling with Marina will be useful in helping to frame NRT. I also used this heuristic with the student researchers in the study as a way to talk about meaning so it seemed only appropriate to do the same here.

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[7] I will pause here, for a moment, to quickly define the term *affect* as it is a word that seems to be used in a variety of ways. Affect is often thought to be a synonym for something like emotion or feeling. For proponents of NRT, affect is a pre-conscious intensity experienced before or outside of the interpretation of these intensities through nesting/filtering them in/through culture, history, social worlds, politics, and spaces to be understood as emotions, thoughts, or feelings. In NRT, affects may be produced and circulated by all manner of things, not just human subjects.

[8] For a thoroughgoing discussion of the tenets of NRT, see the opening chapter of Nigel Thrift's (2008) *Non-Representational Theory: Space | politics | affect*, pp. 1-26.

In 2010 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York put on a retrospective of performance artist Marina Abramović's work titled *The Artist is Present*[9]. Young artists, under Abramović's tutelage, re-performed some of her most iconic work and Marina herself performed a new work for which the exhibit was named (see Figure 2.1). Throughout the entirety of the three months the exhibit ran, Abramović was physically present at MoMA during opening hours which amounted to something like 8 hours a day. During these hours, she sat in a chair in the center of the exhibit with an empty chair facing her. Anyone could sit silently in the chair across from Abramović for any length of time that s/he wished. Abramović would stare, expressionless, directly into the eyes of whoever was across from her. Some people sat for minutes, others for hours and many were brought to tears[10].

It is important to acknowledge the dramatic limitations of a photograph or even a video to convey all of what made up Abramović's piece. It is an act of the imagination to consider even some of the participants in the relations that made up the piece. However, the photograph at least is suggestive and may be used to prompt such imagination. Even these imaginaries will help to provide a means of focus in my discussion of NRT. As I move through a description of how NRT treats things-bodies-objects, relationality, and emergence, I will refer to Abramović's piece as a touchstone or, perhaps, a springboard for thinking with NRT.

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[9] To explore more about this exhibit beyond the photograph below, visit http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/marinaabramovic/index.html or to view the trailer for the documentary based on the exhibit, visit http://marinafilm.com/view-trailer

[10] As evidenced by the Marina Abramović Made Me Cry Tumblr (http://marinaabramovicmademecry.tumblr.com) populated with images taken from a photographer over Abramović's shoulder.

Figure 1: Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Andrew Russeth. Licensed under Creative Commons.

Things-Bodies-Objects

One of the essential features of NRT is the expansive way that it views the participants in everyday life. Thrift (2008) notes, NRT "has always given equal weight to the vast spillage of *things*" (p. 9, emphasis in original). As such, humans are not necessarily privileged as the center from which all meaningful relations emanate. Rather, humans are but one element in any given set of relations of which they are a part. NRT provides a grammar for making the other things that are participating in those relations visible by "positing that all things exist on the same epistemological plane" (Fendler, 2013, p. 2). In fact, many proponents of NRT even dissolve the distinction made between humanness and thingness. Thrift (2008) says, "I do not want to count the body as separate from the thing world," (p. 10). Doing so diminishes the powerful relations

between bodies and things that help to create and evolve them both. Bennett (2010) takes this notion a step further, suggesting that "human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other. One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world," (p.4).

Flattening the differences between the agential power of humans and things creates an opportunity to study the relations between all of the things participating in any given moment. And though attending to the thinghood of humans might seem to jeopardize the humanity of humans, it does not. Rather, it provokes the consideration of the non-cognitive dimensions of being a human and the way we often move, act, and adapt in the world without reflection. Consideration of these dimensions does not diminish the importance of the willful, thinking, planning, mindful, thoughtful ways that humans navigate the world. In fact, it provides new ways to look at what thinking entails. Using NRT as a filter, Carolan (2008) argues that "mind is body; consciousness is corporeal; thinking is sensuous," (p. 409). NRT, then, in a move that dissolves the Cartesian split between mind and body, attributes thinking to the movements and actions of the body wherein thinking is not relegated to one set of relations that must include particular mental states and intentionality. In this model, things-bodies-objects can enter into an infinite number of dynamic, thinking relations unbound by consciousness. So, as I inhale and exhale, my body is thinking through action, though I am not willfully choosing to breathe. As such, thinking "lies in the body, understood not as a fixed residence for 'mind' but as a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of," (Thrift, 2004, p. 90).

Similarly, considering the humanness of things and objects provides an opportunity to consider their power and how they might exert themselves in everyday relations. These things

may be tangible, material objects or they might be immaterial and even ephemeral things like a memory or a smell. NRT suggests that such objects and things (and a whole host of others, of course) can create affective intensities as a result of their relations with other things just as humans can. As Deleuze (1994) suggested, "something in the world forces us to think," (p. 154). Humans are pushed and pulled by the forces produced by/through all of the things with which they come into contact. If these objects and things are understood as possessing a sort of humanness, then these forces are more easily seen and therefore studied as a vital part of everyday relations.

Using Abramović's piece as a tool to think with, we might imagine some of the things-bodies-objects that are suggested in the photograph. These imaginings give rise to any number of questions that might be investigated through research and, I suggest, offer a much broader range of study than to simply focus on the relations between the humans[11]. Speaking of the humans, I would venture to say that most social scientists would immediately take note of Abramović, the man sitting across from her, and the crowd behind them. Those same scientists might also think about the context in which this is all taking place, both in terms of the literal room as well as the museum and the broader sociopolitical, historical context. In this photograph, the crowd does not seem particularly diverse across the spectrum of race, ethnicity, or age. Who goes to MoMA? For whom was this piece made? And while social scientists might think these and any number of other questions, NRT might suggest that all of those questions are actually present and active in the midst of the piece—exerting their weight on Abramović and everyone else, whether or not they are aware.

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[11] I am assuming that most educational researchers would focus on the relations between humans and, perhaps, the context(s) in which those humans might be.

NRT would also allow us to notice the table and chairs and wonder how they are impacting the piece? Those chairs seem a bit strange and, with close inspection, a cushion is visible under Marina—are their bodies uncomfortable and how might that discomfort impact their experience in this moment? Might the man get up more quickly because he is physically uncomfortable? Did someone make the chairs that way so that people would be disinclined to sit for too long? Also, the table[12] is creating a barrier between Abramović and the man. Does that distance impact the experience? Another material object in the photograph is the water bottle. When does she drink? Does she get up to use the restroom? And on we might go, considering all of the things in the room in how they are participating in this moment between Marina and the man: her dress, his glasses, each of their memories, their physical and emotional feelings, the temperature, the paint the walls, the tape on the floor creating a barrier around the exhibit, the smell in the room, the transportation used by each person to arrive, and so forth. Through NRT's treatment of things-bodies-objects, we are given the language to consider any of these participants in this moment. And though the number of participants is nigh unto infinite, we would be able to name and think with an astounding variety of some subset of all the possible participants in this moment. Depending upon our goals for the study, we might select those participants that are most heavily felt by whatever human we are working with; or, we might select those that most confound us; or, those we find most beautiful or moving. Regardless, NRT provides a grammar for considering any number of things through its radical equality between things, bodies, and objects.

Relations

Another core belief of NRT is that all meaning is made in relations between humans, things, objects, machines, the natural world, and so forth. Meaning does not exist *a priori*, out

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[12] It is worth noting that midway through the run of the show, Abramović had the table removed.

there in the world, waiting to be discovered by people but is created through things cyclically

coming together, functioning together, and breaking apart. As Anderson and Harrison (2010)

note:

> humans are envisioned in constant relations of modification and reciprocity with their
>
> environs, action being understood not as a one way street running from the actor to the
>
> acted upon, from the active to the passive or mind to matter, but as a relational
>
> phenomena incessantly looping back and regulating itself…put simply, all action is
>
> interaction. (p. 7)

Action is central to sense-making and highlights NRT's commitment to the dynamic nature of

relations between things-bodies-objects. Meaning is often contingent upon how long any set of

relations stay connected and function together. Relations are prone to change yet some operate

on longer timescales and appear to be quite stable. Still other relations function together for an

instant and appear ephemeral or even have the potential to join together and break apart before

they are consciously noticed.

In NRT all relations are viable and all relations have the potential to be important. In

other words, meaning might emerge or erupt from anywhere. It is impossible to know in

advance what might be produced through any given set of relations between various things.

"Rather everything takes-part and in taking-part, takes-place: everything happens, everything

acts," (Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 14). This is suggestive of the performative nature of

things-bodies-objects which is the root of the dynamic quality of relations. Every new relation

offers an opportunity for a new performance or presentation—a chance for everything to act.

Barad (2007) underscores this notion by stating, simply, "our knowledge-making practices are

social-material enactments," (p. 26). Understanding that these enactments, these relations, are

what make up our sense-making shifts our orientation towards thinking as well. Thinking, then,

becomes relational rather than definitional or, as Deleuze (2001) suggests, "the conjunction 'and'

dethrones the interiority of the verb 'is'," (p. 38).

To think with *and* invites experimentation. This experimental attitude gives researchers

the freedom to "take seriously whimsy, chance, inimitability, or freak occurrences as viable

candidates for analysis or modes of explanation," (Fendler, 2013, p. 9). What emerges or erupts

from relations is not always tidy nor is it wholly thinkable. That does not mean, however, that it

might not be a productive channel of inquiry[13]. As Anderson and Harrison (2010) note, "many

different things gather, not just deliberative humans but a diverse range of actors and forces,

some of which we know about, some not, and some of which may be just on the edge of

awareness," (p. 12). The experimental nature of relations is, necessarily, an opening up. This

opening is an explicit goal of NRT. Thrift (2008) aims "to produce a politics of opening the

event to more, more; more action, more imagination, more light," (p. 20).

To return to the example of Abramović's *The Artist is Present* as a heuristic to think

relations with, consider some of the aforementioned things-bodies-objects. NRT would suggest

that any of those things might enter into relation with one another. We do not have the

opportunity to physically observe what appears to be functioning together, nor can we speak to

any of the human beings that are a part of the exhibit at the moment reflected in the photograph.

If we did, we might have a starting point[14] for our exploration of some sets of relations that were

producing affect or meaning or, perhaps, new and different relations. Embracing NRT's call for

experimentation, we can imagine some of the possibilities for the relations that, at the very least,

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[13] In fact, there is precedent in in cultural anthropology for beginning an inquiry with the unthinkable through the notion of "rich points" (Agar, 1995, p. 31). I use this concept as a grounding principle for Chapter 4.

[14] Even if we were there, in the room, at the moment the photograph was taken, we would still have limitations on what sets of relations we would have access to "seeing".

produced some feelings (hence the crying people) and also, surely, some kind of affective intensities that had people sleeping outside the museum in a line to have the chance to sit opposite Marina. For instance, it is easy to imagine any number of sets of relations between Abramović, the crowd watching, the ambient noise, her unwavering and emotionless gaze, joining with every*thing* that a person brought with him/her into the chair.

We cannot know what prompted people to cry nor what moved so many people to go to the exhibit for a chance to sit in that chair. However, this piece of art was different than many others because there was no real potential to conceive of the notion that there was a *there* there. Abramović did not offer some kind of meaning that existed, dormant, in the piece simply waiting to be found out by the observer. Rather, she offered relationship—presence—for the meaning to emerge through interactions. *The Artist is Present* was dynamic, relational, and interactional which makes it an effective example of NRT's view of sense-making being dynamic, relational, and interactional.

Emergence

Emergence, though discussed here last, is perhaps the element most central to the NRT project. In fact, Thrift (2008) discusses the emergent as the first of his tenets, noting that "non-representational theory tries to capture the 'onflow' of everyday life" (p. 5) which values and centers lived experience at both conscious and "pre-conscious" (p. 6) levels. As such, NRT seeks to countenance the variety of registers in and through which we make meaning without privileging intentionality or consciousness; rather, it wants to equally consider that which occurs on the phenomenological periphery. If anything, NRT might pay closer attention to that which is pre-conscious and ephemeral due to the fact "that most of the time in most of our everyday lives there is a huge amount we do, a huge amount that we are involved in, that we *don't* think about

and that, when asked about, we may struggle to explain," (Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 7, emphasis in original). NRT suggests that we move through the world, experiencing emergent meanings that happen just outside of our conscious awareness and act, react, and adapt without necessarily cognitively processing anything. This is a fairly significant shift in the way that sense-making is construed in much social scientific research. The research gaze is often trained on those ways that humans engage the world with intention, will, and purpose. And while NRT does not suggest that humans do not interact with the world in those cognitive-based ways, it does suggest that there is quite a lot to account for in the non/pre-cognitive ways that humans interact with the world. It is also worth noting that these non/pre-cognitive aspects of human sense-making are not thought of as any less vital to living or inferior to cognition. Rather, NRT centers the emergent as "a poetics of the unthought…a well-structured pre-reflective world which, just because it lacks explicit articulation, is not therefore without grip," (Thrift, 2008, p. 16).

NRT, then, focuses on action and performance due to the fact that "so much ordinary action gives no advance notice of what it will become," (Lorimer, 2005, p. 84). I am reminded, here, of how often I have come to find myself standing in the middle of some room in my house and wondering, "what am I doing here?" My body has gotten up from where I was and moved to another location before my conscious mind actively attended to the fact that things were changing. Or, perhaps, those moments when something has been knocked off the table and before I am fully aware that it is falling, I have already caught it. "This roiling mass of nerve volleys prepare the body for action in such a way that intentions or decisions are made before the conscious self is even aware of them," (Thrift, 2008, p. 7). This is what Thrift (2008) refers to as *bare life*, "that small space of time between action and cognition," (p. 24).

Sometimes, this bare life can give rise to meaning that is created through action and interaction, where the pre-conscious becomes conscious. It may be that this conscious awareness is ephemeral and disappears as quickly as it appeared. Or, it may be that the awareness lingers and becomes an understanding or practice that appears more stable. Perhaps I part from established thought in NRT here, but I would argue that while some bare life is borne from "fragile and sometimes fleeting combinations of percepts, affects, and concepts," (McCormack, 2013, p. 4), bare life might also be the result of the mundane and routinized bits of everyday life. Or, as Latham (2003) terms it, "the accretion of embodied experience" that "has accumulated through straightforward usage," (p. 2001). In other words, it is possible for the space of time between action and cognition in bare life to lengthen in the practical doing of life that has become habitual[15]. Regardless of how bare life takes shape, it does, and emerges as affective intensities, action, and interaction. For this reason, NRT "emphasizes…the power of the precognitive as a performative technology for adaptive living, as an instrument of sensation, play, and imagination, and a life force fueling the excesses and the rituals of everyday living," (Vannini, 2015, p. 4).

Our final return to Abramović's *The Artist is Present* will require the greatest acts of imagination in order to think with NRT's notion of emergence. However, I think there are still some useful points that might be illustrative of emergence. One such point is to consider the length of time that each person sat in the chair opposite Abramović. The photographer who was taking pictures over Marina's shoulder was also documenting how long each person occupied the chair. As previously noted, the timing was incredibly idiosyncratic with some people sitting for only a few minutes and others sitting for hours. I wonder what moved people to get up? The

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[15] Maybe this phenomenon needs its own term as this type of interaction is more *post-cognitive* rather than pre-cognitive—where whatever is occurring has already be thought about enough and it now dwells in a place beyond cognition.

impetus to leave the chair, I'm certain, was the result of any number of things coming together in the moment. I'm certain, also, that for some people, their departure from the chair was an emergent action where their bodies started to move before they had an awareness as to why they were moving. Similarly, the photographs of the people in the chair show a wide variety of responses to the experience of sitting across from Abramović. Some people erupted in tears while others smiled or laughed. Some did all three. While some of these emotional reactions were certainly due to thoughts, feelings, and memories that the people were having, others, surely had reactions that came with no warning[16]. Some of the photos seem to show surprise alongside some other emotion that is registered on the person's face.

Another element of *The Artist is Present* that is suggestive of emergence is the actual photographs taken by the photographer, Marco Anelli. He took multiple photographs of each person that sat in the chair opposite Abramović. Something made him hit the shutter button on his camera at particular moments. Certainly, as a professional artist, there were some photographs he took due to generous lighting conditions, a compelling composition, and so forth. However, I am certain that some of the shots he took were simply the result of some emerging affective intensity that he experienced that moved him to hit the button without his explicit awareness as to why. The description of this situation will reappear in later chapters as this was a common occurrence for the students in this study.

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[16] Though I am confident this is the case, I may also be projecting. I did not see *The Artist is Present* and cannot speak to my reaction to/with that piece. However, I enjoy musical theatre and have, on more than one occasion, begun crying or laughing as the lights go down and the first swell of music fills the theater. Though it has happened multiple times, it is always a surprise to me because it seems as if the reaction comes out of nowhere. I'm reading the program and then suddenly tears are erupting from my eyes. I am never consciously aware that this is going to happen as it is always the product of my experience of some pre-conscious intensities produced through some relations between me, the space, the music, and any number of other things.

Conclusion

NRT is a useful filter through which to view literacy experiences. It offers a grammar that helps to describe all of the many participants in the everyday doing of literacies. Through NRT, more things, bodies, and objects are able to be seen, discussed, and studied as being a part of literacies. NRT also provides a foundation upon which to build a conceptualization of literacies as sets of relations rather than as simply events or practices. Finally, through acknowledging and centering the pre-conscious and emergent in everyday life, NRT provides necessary argumentation for the importance of the non-cognitive domains of literacy experiences and an ontological view of literacies.

CHAPTER 3 — GAINING ACCESS TO LITERACY EXPERIENCE: OR, ON METHODS

Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible. – Paul Klee

Interlude 2 - Excerpt from Fieldnotes

Lakeview High School

<u>3 September 2014</u>

2nd Period Photo B/C/D 8.53 am - 9.35am

It is the first day of school. I arrived early to make sure that I didn't hit traffic and to ensure that I'd have time to check in at the main office. The office had about half a dozen kids hanging around the desk of a kind-faced woman who appeared to be the point-person for lockers. One student begged for a locker on the first floor but was told that, "They're only giving first floor lockers to seniors who are free first period." Upon hearing the bad news, he sighed deeply and told his friend, "Let's bounce." Another student's locker just wouldn't open: "I tried...my teacher tried..." which gained him a knowing look from the kind-faced woman who called for backup to an unseen, yet assumed, locker wizard.

I was signed in and given a sticker to wear, noting me as a visitor. It was the brightest pink I've ever seen. Like…could-see-it-from-outer-space pink. Presumably, this was to convince people that I was approved to be here but, for today at least, I'm a stranger. I put the sticker on, trying to avoid tangling my hair in the adhesive, and this somehow made me feel nervous. Since I had been to the school before, I found my way to the Art corridor and to Ms. McCurry's room. The room was empty since McCurry had Graphic Design during first period and that class meets in the computer lab. I was happy that I had the room to myself for a little while as I could settle into the space a little bit. There were four large tables with painted metal

stools stacked on top. I took the stools down and put them around the tables. Something about this movement and the act of preparing the seats for the students reminded me of one of my daily routines as a teacher…so, I did the same thing. I walked around and stood for a moment by each stool, meditating on the young people who would sit there during the next class, holding them in my thoughts, and wishing peace for the student. While performing this ritual, I felt the nervousness dissolve and was more centered. The bell rang and the quiet was broken by typical high-school-hallway cacophony.

Class began with a brief introduction to the course & Ms. McCurry. She made a point to note that it was now an advanced class and told the students that, "you guys gotta' step it up." Ms. McCurry consistently referred to the students as artists. I found this intriguing…the students were already artists. Not students learning to be artists, but artists already. This identity framed much of the rest of the conversation. McCurry encouraged students to keep artistic journals and to constantly be aware of what they were seeing. "As artists, you realize that we live in a visual culture and that there are ideas all around you!" She suggested that they might like to use something like Pinterest to do this digitally. And, perhaps, to have a physical journal where students could cut out pictures and tape them in. She said, "if you see something in a magazine or a postcard and you like it, get it in there." Students could use these journals then, as Ms. McCurry said, "as inspiration for your projects."

Much to my surprise and, if I'm honest, chagrin, Ms. McCurry turned to me and asked me to introduce myself. I was not planning to do this on the first day and was totally unprepared to talk. I said a few words and had no idea what I actually said. And though I was uncertain about my words, I was fairly certain that I sounded like an idiot. Then I remembered that we

would all have lots of time together and no one would ever remember that I sounded dumb on the first day. That made me breathe a little easier.

Students introduced themselves and said what was the best thing about the summer for them. There were sophomores to seniors and they had summers that included, "visiting family", "going to New York City", "going to the Lake", "seeing One Direction", and "watching Netflix". Ms. McCurry had me do this too and I sounded like an idiot again, saying the best thing about my summer was going on vacation with my parents...loser. But, tomorrow is another day!

A Brief Commentary on Methodology

By paying close attention to the how things-bodies-objects enter into relations and produce emergent meaning and affective intensity, NRT helped to provide a grammar for all of the participants in the doing of literacies. The next challenge was in finding methods that helped to provide access to all of the participants in the doing of literacies. In this study, I used participant photography and art-making as ways to access and capture bodies, objects, and affects in moments of textual engagement.

On photography. Though photographs are inherently an attempt at representation, they can also open up a window to the non-representational. Through the mood, lighting, composition, and positioning of the subject, photographs can, at times, get closer to the experience of a person than might be possible with words alone. Photographs offer many layered registers for understanding or sensing the relations not only captured in the photograph but also those created with the photograph upon viewing. For this reason, it is particularly useful in exploring and studying literacy experiences.

As noted by visual anthropologist Marcus Banks, visual data brings two major advantages to qualitative research. First, it can "bypass language or add an additional channel of

understanding to language" (Banks, 2009) which can be particularly helpful when seeking to describe complex sets of relations like literacy experiences, and when working with young people. By allowing students to show me what their textual engagement looked like, rather than having to find the words to fully describe it, the possibilities of what students could communicate was expanded. Additionally, unbound by language, students had greater freedom to name a wide variety of things as texts and had the opportunity to capture their complicated ways of being and making meaning in the world.

Second, it provides "another route into accessing people's interior worlds" (Banks, 2009). If, in some ways, a camera functions as an "instrumental extension of our senses" (Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 7) then when we look at photographs taken by another person, we are given access, however limited, to understanding the ways in which s/he experiences the world. Through the content and framing of their photos, students offered a glimpse of the world through their eyes, which often communicated more about their lives than words were able to adequately describe. And though, as Sarah Pink suggests, "we can't experience other people's experiences", a photograph still "invites you to imagine the embodied experience" (2009) of the photographer and of the subject(s) in the image. As this was the foundational desire of this study—to see into the world of young people's literacy experiences—using visual data was essential to the project.

On art-making. To further expand the registers of our inquiry, the research team, who you are about to meet, decided to use art-making as an analytical and interpretive tool to study the photographs[17] produced through the study. Art was the ideal method for the final analysis in this study for three vital reasons. First, as the intention of this work is to question some of the orthodox ways of thinking about literacy it seemed like a coherent way forward to employ novel

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[17] In the following sections, there are thorough descriptions of the photographs and the art produced in the study.

methods to underscore the difference in a literacy experience approach. As Barone and Eisner (2012) suggest:

> Instead of contributing to the stability of prevailing assumptions about these phenomena by…reinforcing the conventional way of viewing them, the arts based researcher may *persuade* readers or percipients of the work (including the artist herself) to revisit the world from a different direction, seeing it through fresh eyes, and thereby calling into question a singular, orthodox point of view. (p. 16)

Second, approaching the analytical task to make sense in/with/through the photographs as an artistic, creative task offered the opportunity to slow down the relations. This slowing, then, created space for things-bodies-objects and different sets of relations to surface for/with the artist. When invited into an act of creation rather than just an act of observation, the research team was able to see and feel differently with the photographs. As Eisner notes, through art, "[w]e are given permission to slow down perception, to look hard, to savor the qualities that we try, under normal conditions, to treat so efficiently that we hardly notice they are there," (Eisner, 2002, p. 5). As the focus of this study was to notice those things that are often invisible, using art as a way to slow down and see was crucial.

Finally, art has a different relationship with thinking, action, feeling, and perceiving than other analytical methods such as talk or writing. While those other methods were used in the study, to be sure, employing art was a way to gain access to more sensual and embodied ways of thinking with the data. Elliot Eisner (2002) best captures this notion of art as a different way of knowing so I will quote him at length:

> Somatic knowledge, what is sometimes called embodied knowledge, is experienced in different locations. Some images resonate with our gut, others with our eyes, still others

with our fantasies; artists play with our imagination. Some visual images are essentially tactile experiences. Works of art can call upon both the ideational and any of the sensory resources we use to experience the world; the fact that an image is visual does not mean that the experience we have of it will be visual. All of us have synesthetic experiences. In a sense all these capacities for human experience are resources the artist can call upon in the crafting of the image. In the hands and mind of the artist they are avenues for communication. (p. 19)

So, through art, not only were the students able to consider ways to access the sensorium of potential viewers of their work, they also had to access their own senses to create the pieces. In this way, creating art as an analytic tool for thinking about literacy experiences was, itself, a literacy experience.

Therefore, through youth participatory photoethnography and art-making, in this study, I investigate the following questions:

- How does a group of suburban high school photography students visually represent their engagement with texts in their everyday lives?

- How does a focal group of students make sense of/in/with these photos through individual and group talk in PhotoLab?

- How does a focal group of students make sense of/in/with these photos through art-making in ArtLab?

Context

This study was conducted in the town of Lakeside, a large suburb of a mid-sized city in the Northeast. I selected Lakeside through happenstance, really. As my previous teaching experience had been in a big, urban school district, my initial plan was to do the study in a

similar setting. Using local contacts, I found an English teacher in the city that agreed to work with me on the project and pursued permission to work with her from the district. After a year of back and forth, the city school district told me that I could not conduct the study in their district as they did not have the resources to complete the necessary paperwork for a researcher from an out-of-state institution.

Having exhausted my contacts, I took some time to regroup. I realized that the project, as I envisioned it, might produce some different, generative data if conducted in a photography classroom rather than an English classroom. So, I researched some districts surrounding the city to see if any of them offered photography. I happened upon the website of Lakeside High School (LHS) and found my way to the webpage of the photography teacher, Ms. Lu McCurry. Her website has a quote by Paul Klee which appears as an epigraph of this chapter, "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible", and I knew that I had found a potential research partner. I contacted Lu who was immediately excited about working on the study with me. She sent a few emails and I had district approval to conduct the research within two weeks.

The research at LHS began during the 2014-2015 school year when there was a student body of 1,264 dispersed fairly equally across grades 9-12. The school population was not particularly diverse across racial and socioeconomic indexes of difference. Statistics reported on the district's website showed that 78% of students were white and 22% were students of color. Insofar as it is often perceived to stand as a proxy for socioeconomic status, 18% of students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. These demographics are common in the suburbs surrounding the city and it is worth noting that they are not particularly conducive to providing a look at a wide variety of student experiences. However, through careful selection of focal

students, I was able to create a research group that sought to represent as much racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity as was possible in the context of LHS.

Lakeside High School is home to a vibrant Art program that offers students courses in studio art, sculpture, painting, graphic design, and photography. Every student that graduates from LHS is required to take either Art or Music classes as a part of their academic program, so these courses have the benefit of remaining funded (for the most part)[18] and valued in the district. The study began in the context of Ms. Lu McCurry's Fall 2014 semester of Photo B/C/D, an advanced photography class that combines students that are technically in three different levels of Photo into one class. There were 23 students in the class, 22 of whom gave their assent, with corresponding parental consent, to participate in the study. 20 of the 22 participants were women, an imbalance that Ms. McCurry said was abnormal. LHS had one of the last remaining high school darkrooms[19] in the area, and the class was a mixed format class where students shot both film and digital photos. All film that the students shot was processed and developed by them in the classroom.

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[18] In the year of the study, a bond measure providing funding for Lakeside School District failed and cuts were made—some of them to the Art program—which offered fewer sections of advanced photography and sent Ms. McCurry to an elementary school in the afternoons to teach one section of fifth grade Art instead.

[19] Ms. McCurry made the decision to get rid of the darkroom and move to an all digital photography program. This decision was incredibly challenging and Ms. McCurry felt very conflicted about what she should do. We've kept in touch and she shared, in the Spring of 2016, that she has some regrets about the loss of the darkroom.

Figure 2: Photo B/C/D course, Lakeside High School, Fall 2014.

Research Design

Students' lived experiences and their unique perspectives can be lost in studies where the naming of literacies are left solely in the hands of the researcher. I follow Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) in seeking to conduct "critical research [which] holds the potential to reposition these young people as the subjects of their own research" in order to avoid "mak[ing] them the objects of our research gaze" (p. 106). And though Duncan-Andrade and Morrell are speaking, specifically, of working with youth of color who have been marginalized by systems and structures of inequality, their ethos of transgressing traditional research relationships is one that I share and had in mind as I designed this study. While some of the advanced photography

students at LHS did not suffer the same marginalization that Duncan-Andrade and Morrell's youth participants suffered, they are also put in positions where they must cede their power to adults, particularly in school. In order to avoid this, LHS Photo B/C/D students were centered as co-researchers throughout the project and served as the primary data collectors and data coders. This move to invite participants into the research process has a rich history in Participatory Action Research (PAR). However, "PAR has an explicit goal of 'action' or intervention into the problems being studied," (Irizarry & Brown, p. 64) which would seem to indicate that the study discussed here is not really utilizing PAR, *per se*, since there is no real social action at the center of the project. Even so, it does share the same belief that "local people possess expert knowledge about the conditions of their lives that outsiders cannot access on their own," (Irizarry & Brown, p. 64). As such, students were provided with tools that not only helped them to become researchers, but also allowed them to strengthen their literacies while creating artifacts of their literate lives. In this way, the project affirmed Appadurai's notion of "the right to research" whereby every person has "the right to the tools through which any citizen can systematically increase that stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings and to their claims as citizens," (2006, p. 168). I make no claim that this work is critical, nor do I suggest that these particular students viewed their participation in literacies to be vital to their survival in the ways that Appadurai argues. I do, however, want to suggest that my goal in inviting students into the research enterprise was intended to invert the research relationship by ceding my power as a researcher to the students, to some small extent. It was also a pedagogical move as I hoped to provide the students with research tools they could use to study themselves and their world.

The study moved through several phases that are outlined in Figure 3.
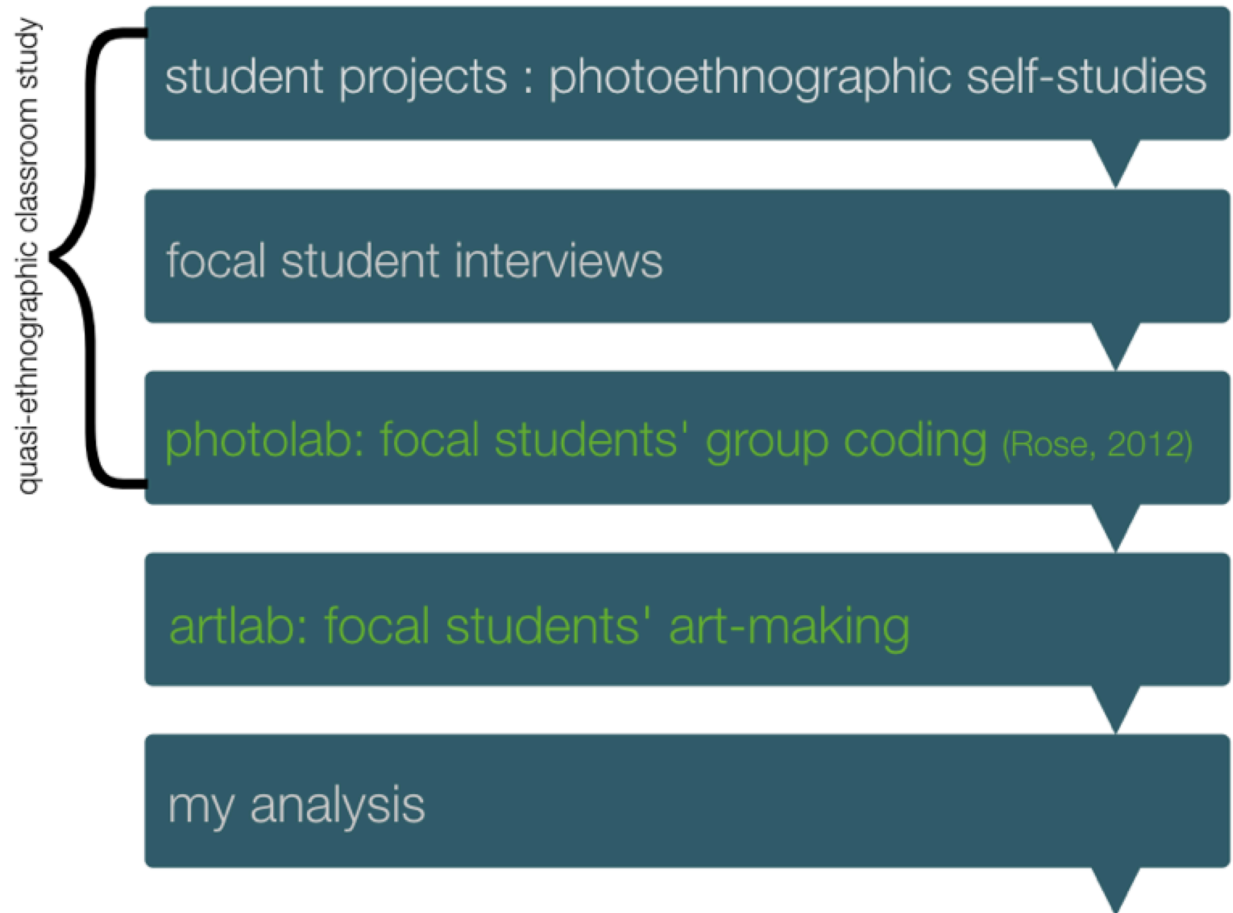
Figure 3: Summary of Methods—phases in green are those that generated a bulk of the data discussed in this work.

Ongoing quasi-ethnographic classroom study. I began the study as a quasi-ethnographic researcher in the Photo B/C/D course, acting as a participant-observer (Agar, 1996). I hoped that my presence in the class on a daily basis would help me to build rapport with students and would provide me with necessary background on the school, the course, Ms. McCurry, and the students. I attended nearly all of the class sessions from the time school began until the break for the winter holidays. In the classroom, there were days when I was primarily an observer and other days when I filled a role that was more like a teacher, particularly when

students were working on the projects[20] that I designed. I took daily fieldnotes, jotting down any events or talk that seemed relevant to the study or revealed something about the students, Ms. McCurry, or photography that I found interesting. On days that I was teaching and unable to take notes on events as they unfolded, I would make notes after class. I also audio recorded all of the classes that I taught and video recorded many of them as well. These records were not transcribed but were referenced, as needed, to recall details that may not have made it into the fieldnotes.

Phase 1: Students created the "Texts and Lives" photoethnographic self-studies. I created a photography project for Photo B/C/D and, after much discussion and collaboration with Ms. McCurry, we presented it to the students as the second project for the course in which they would complete a photo-essay on their everyday engagement with texts[21] of all kinds. The prompt for the project from the assignment sheet (see Appendix A) read: "Students will produce a photo-essay that will be a 'week in the life' where you document the moments in your everyday life when you are *reading* or *writing* a text." This project was a mixed photo format project with the final product including both film images and digital images. Students were to shoot at least one roll of film and print three images; and, shoot around 200 digital photos in order to select the top 30-50 images to include in a PowerPoint presentation. Images were to be captioned with the date, time, and location of the photograph along with the photographer's mood at the time. In the final products, these captions were very inconsistent and therefore did not provide much in the way of robust data as I was hoping. In the original assignment sheet,

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[20] In addition to the project at the heart of this study, I also designed a project for the students in which they were exploring the difference between self-portraits and selfies, as genres and as tools of identity expression; however, that is outside the scope of this proposal…apart from providing the photographs I've included of the focal students.
[21] At the beginning of the year, the principal chose "text" as a theme of LHS's professional development series for the school year. Teachers went to various sessions about pedagogical moves for helping students interpret texts of all kinds, including images. This was tremendously apropos and, I believe, helped to make my presence feel like an asset to the Art Department rather than a distraction.

students were also asked to write short artists' statements, but that requirement was cut towards the end of the project as there was simply no more time to complete it.

We began the project by discussing the word *text* and how it might be defined. I led the class in an exploration of the contours of the word—what kinds of things did they think were or were not texts—and had students work in small groups to generate their own definitions for *text* to end the day. The following are all of their responses:

- Something, whether a picture or group of words that describes an emotion, tells a story/describes a scene;

- A piece of Art that describes something or expresses a feeling, emotion, opinion, etc.;

- Something that conveys a bigger idea from a smaller idea;

- Conveying or communicating a certain/specific message;

- Used to convey meaning and/or be interpreted by the viewer;

- Words or images that communicate a story or specific message;

- A variety of things that convey a message or has an intention;

- Something made to communicate a story or message;

- Something…a picture or words that describe or communicate to the reader/observer.

Clearly, students had varied notions of what *text* might mean. Some students held more abstract or open ideas about what a text might do (e.g. "something that conveys a bigger idea from a smaller idea") while others were more traditional (e.g. "words or images that communicate a story or specific message"). Common through all of the definitions was that texts (somehow) communicate. And though each student's approach to the project was

idiosyncratic based upon their own, personal definition of *text*, this core concept of *text as communication* seemed fairly consistent and was represented in the photos the students produced.

After students were clear on the prompt for the project, they started to shoot their photographs. They spent about two weeks taking photographs for the project both during class time and at home, at their leisure. There were no parameters for what students should take photographs of or when they should take photographs. After students took their photographs, the class spent two weeks processing and printing their film, and putting together their PowerPoint photo essays. Students would alternate between working in the darkroom on their film and working in the computer lab on their digital photos. Working with film was an intensive process, described in much greater detail in chapter four, requiring students to roll the film onto spools, process the negatives, print contact sheets of the negatives, print enlargements, cut the photos, and mount the photos. Students' work with their digital images entailed them curating the hundreds of photos they took by selecting their favorite 30-50 for the slideshow; then, using Photoshop if they wanted to manipulate the images and then designing the PowerPoint through photo placement, cropping, adding text, using color, etc.

There was a mid-point critique about three weeks into the project where students shared their work-in-progress with one another and gave each other feedback about what was working and what wasn't working. After about 5 weeks, students completed a self-critique and reflection then shared their work with the class in a final critique. The final critique of students' work took place over three days. On the first day, film prints were posted up on rolling presentation boards and students took time to look at all the prints in order to have a full class discussion of the work. On the second day, the class went to the computer lab to view the PowerPoint presentations.

Each student opened their own presentation at their computer and then everyone got up and rotated around the room until they had viewed everyone's PowerPoint while jotting down notes. On the third and final day, we had a full class discussion on the digital projects and the work in general.

Phase 2: Focal student interviews. After the project was completed, I selected six students to interview one-on-one. The selection process was in no way an attempt to scientifically create a representative sample of the class or the school. Rather, the logic behind my selection of focal students was guided by my desire to have as heterogeneous a group as possible and to select students that seemed genuinely interested in the project through their comments in class, to me and Ms. McCurry, and what they wrote in their reflections at the end of the project. Students who wanted to continue to work with me in the study provided me with their mobile numbers and/or their email addresses. I used their preferred method of contact, which for five of the six was text, to arrange times for interviews. Interviews took place several weeks after the photo-essay project was completed due to scheduling constraints, and, in order to give students some space from the work so that when reviewing it, they might see it with fresh eyes. Four of the interviews took place in school during periods that students had free. Two of the interviews took place on the weekend at coffee shops in the community.

The interviews were active and semi-structured (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002), lasting between 60-90 minutes each. After conferring with Ms. McCurry about what the students seemed to be interested in during the class discussions about the work, I designed the interview protocol (see Appendix B) to focus on the students' approach to and experience of the photo-essay project. I also sought to understand what sense students might make with/of their own work after taking a break from it and seeing it again weeks later. I also hoped to get a sense of

how they understood their work as texts themselves and the different readings that different audiences might have of their work.

My initial intention was to also use these interviews as an opportunity to pivot students towards conducting a deeper photoethnographic study of themselves. I was imagining that students might discover something in their work for Photo B/C/D that they found interesting and that would be a good subject for more photographs. Some students had wonderful ideas of what they might do. For instance, Donovan, who you will meet in a moment, wanted to explore ideas of identity, a theme he thought ran through a lot of his work. However, many students did not have a firm idea of what they might like to explore and nearly all of the students mentioned the challenges of finding time to take a bunch of photographs that were outside of the requirements for their photo class. The students, did, however, express a desire to keep working together and seemed to really enjoy talking about their work and their lives. I began to formulate ideas about what it might look like to bring all six students together for group discussions. I realized that, since I had already asked students to be the primary researchers of themselves, that I could simply invite them into the next phase of the research with me. Five of the six students were able to begin what evolved into PhotoLab with one dropping out after two meetings. The remaining four students, pictured in Figure 4, participated in the entire project as it unfolded.

Figure 4: Focal participants' self-portraits at the start of the study, from left to right—Sylvia, 16, junior; Donovan, 17, senior; Mia, 17, senior; and Kate, 16 junior.

Phase 3: PhotoLab meetings to map and discuss the corpus of photographs. Once it was clear that the focal students preferred to do something other than take more photographs and were interested in collaborating, I invited them to meet me after school in the photo room to begin the next step in the research process. It was time for mapping. I printed out all of the photographs the six students I interviewed included in their photo-essays (approx. 225 total). I made the first step towards initial coding (Charmaz, 2006) by dividing the pictures into two groups: portraits and still lifes. I created these groups based on Kate & Donovan's comments during the project critique who, when asked if there were any patterns that emerged, both suggested that most students took photos that would fall in one of two categories: portrait (photos of people) or still life (photos of places, things, etc.). That seemed like a productive first division of the photos.

On the first day we met, I spread the portraits over several tables in the photo room so we could deal with only one group at a time. When the students arrived, I told them that our next task together was to try to make sense of the photos as a big group and explained my rationale for the first division. We talked about looking for patterns and about different "entry points" when thinking about how we might analyze the photographs. I provided them with a diagram from Gillian Rose (2012) that I adapted for our situation (see Figure 5) as a tool we might use to help us "code" or "map" the photographs.
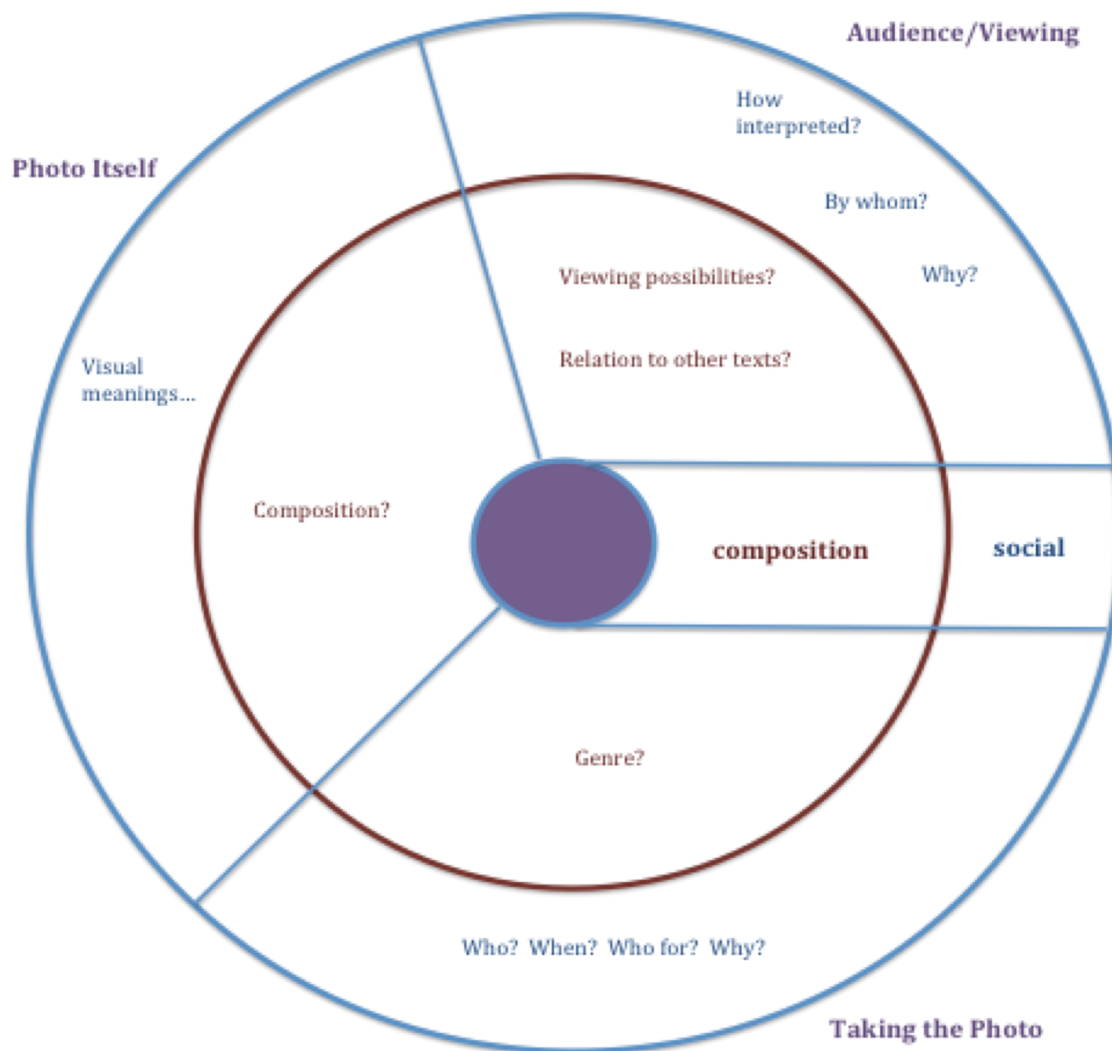
Figure 5: Interpreting Visual Data diagram, adapted (Rose, 2012, p. 21).

Rose (2012) suggests that in the interpretation of visual data, there are three "sites" to consider: the "site of production" which I adapted to the moment(s) of photo being taken; the "site of the image itself" which in our diagram was simply the actual photograph; and the "site of audiencing" which we talked about as the moment(s) of the photo being viewed (p. 21). Rose (2012) also proposes that each site has different aspects or, as she calls them "modalities," that can "contribute to a critical understanding of images" (p. 19). She names three, but for the purposes of PhotoLab, I offered only two: the compositional meaning and the social meaning. After we reviewed the Rose diagram, I told students that there was no wrong way to divide up the photos and that they would need to come up with categories together based on whatever logic made the most sense to them. I suggested that, if they got stuck, that they could come back to the Rose diagram to see if there was another way they could think about the photos. We spent one meeting with the students coding the portraits and another meeting with the students coding the still lifes.

Once the coding was complete, we continued to meet to discuss the work. For the first meeting, I prepared a loose protocol (see Appendix C), adapted from Jody Shipka (2011, p. 154-155), to help guide our conversation. The aims of this conversation were to talk our way into meaning with/about the photos, the project, the notions of text, and the lived experiences of these teenagers. We very quickly ended up off-script and the conversation spanned a wide variety of topics that I could never have predicted like the nature of art, the velocity of boredom, the growing pains that come as they seek to evolve out of racism and homophobia they see in themselves and those around them, and the trouble with the revolving door of style (that you might find an old picture of your granddad and think he is hot). The students wanted to continue to meet so we met for the remainder of the school year and into the summer, every few weeks,

for a total of eight meeting that lasted an average of about 2 hours each. Through these meetings, we decided that we wanted to do more with the photos than just discuss them. The students wanted to artistically explore the photographs in a way that would give viewers access to some of the ideas we had been discussing that might otherwise remain invisible.

Phase 4: ArtLab. To accomplish this goal, we had several meetings to plan our art-making endeavor. Inspired by the integrated imagework dissertation methodology of Maureen Michael (2015), who, through her own art-making method, interpreted images thusly, "I used the ways in which the images were made as forms of analysis, and I used the aesthetic content of the finished artefacts [*sic*] as a form of interpretation" (p. 71). We similarly decided to use the photographs the student-researchers took as the focus of individual art-making interpretation projects. Student researcher Kate described her process as a dissection, saying, "I felt like I was dissecting the layers that were already in the photo. Like, this is the way I see the photo but if I had to take it apart for somebody else, this is the way I would do it." Thus, in PhotoLab we analyzed the photos and in ArtLab we moved to interpret the photos through creating mixed-media art pieces.

The students each selected a few photos from the collection that spoke to them in some way to serve as the basis of their art pieces. We printed enlargements (12" x 18") and used a découpage technique to adhere the photographs to large pieces of wood (see Figure 6). Students then used sheets of transparency film to create literal layers to overlay the photograph. On the layers, or as some students termed them, slides, students chose to do a variety of techniques including line drawings, written annotations, and painting to interpret the sense they made of/with the photograph. We held several ArtLab days at my house where students came to work on their pieces. Mia & Kate also took their pieces home, with some of the supplies, to finish

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their work when they had time available to do so since their schedules did not permit them to attend all of the ArtLab days.

Figure 6: Mia découpaging one of her focal photographs onto a piece of wood.

To finish the pieces, we used a grommeting tool to create metal-enforced holes in the transparencies and then hammered small nails into the wood on the outer edges of the photographs and on the outer edges of the negative space above/next to the photographs. This allowed for an interactive experience for viewers, where they could choose to look at each transparency either in the negative space or overlaying the photograph. Transparencies could also be viewed individually or layered on top of one another in either location. So, while the students designed the transparencies as a way to interpret the photographs, any viewers of the art pieces could use those interpretive layers as tools to work with, against, or alongside the meaning they were making with the piece.

We finished up ArtLab with a dinner and presentation time at my house. Students brought their work and shared each piece with the group, telling us a bit about what they did and why they did it. We talked a bit about the evolution of the project and what it was like for the students to study themselves and to think so deeply about texts, photography, art, meaning, pop culture, and the lives of suburban teenagers.

Phase 5: My analysis. My analysis of the data was ongoing, iterative, and emergent throughout the project. And though I did follow some traditional methods for data analysis such as transcribing audio recordings of PhotoLab meetings and coding those transcripts, much of my analysis was guided by the affective intensities produced through my relationship with the data, my perceptions of students' relationships with the data, and the relations between different pieces of data with one another. Fendler (2013) captures the essence of this process when she notes, "theorization becomes a matter of collage and topography: the re-arrangement of items in such a way that the process and resulting product becomes educational, elucidating, pleasing, inspirational, and/or enlightening," (p.5). This work, then, is the product of one such collage of the data with the knowledge that there are likely countless other ways for all of the things produced in/through/with this project to be put together. The analysis is, therefore, partial and always will be so as there is no one *real* meaning surfaced in the relations between the students, texts in their lives, photographs, talk, art, and me.

However, for this particular collage of the work, my process of analysis might be understood as something like affective constant comparison. Throughout the research process, as various relational configurations came together and produced intensities, meanings, confusions, art, feelings, understandings, and so forth, I compared them to previous configurations and productions. Sometimes, these comparisons aligned or harmonized while

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other times they were more juxtaposed or dissonant. Perhaps MacLure (2010) describes this process best:

> One way to describe its beginnings would be as a kind of *glow*: some detail—a fieldnote fragment or video image—starts to glimmer, gathering our attention. Things both slow down and speed up at this point. On the one hand, the detail arrests the listless traverse of our attention across the surface of the screen or page that holds the data, intensifying our gaze and making us pause to burrow inside it, mining it for meaning. On the other hand, connections start to fire up: the conversation gets faster and more animated as we begin to recall other incidents and details in the project classrooms, our own childhood experiences, films or artwork that we have seen, articles that we have read. And, it is worth noting that there is an *affective* component (in the Deleuzian sense) to this emergence of the example. The shifting speeds and intensities of engagement with the example do not just prompt thought, but also generate sensations resonating in the body as well as the brain—frissons of excitement, energy, laughter, silliness. (p. 283, emphases in original)

This *glow* that MacLure speaks of is a result of the ways in which the researcher becomes entangled with the data through contact with participants, the material debris of research, the immaterial vibrations from data, as well as the accumulation of her lived (and perhaps imagined) experiences. My analysis then, as represented here, is one collection of the glowing for me. It must be acknowledged that this glow can be ephemeral and disappear as soon as I've committed it to paper. Revisiting the data in some imagined future would likely produce different glowing since neither the data nor I are static. Everything is always changing.

CHAPTER 4 — THE EMERGENCE OF LITERACY EXPERIENCE(S): VIGNETTES

OF DISCOVERY

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that

stands at the cradle of true art and true science.

— Albert Einstein

Introduction

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the concept of literacy experience emerged

through the early stages of the study. I present three vignettes that represent some of the "rich

points" (Agar, 1995, p.31) that occurred during my semester in Ms. McCurry's advanced

photography course both during the school day and during after school PhotoLab meetings with

the student research group. These rich points were moments where I, and often the students,

were brought up short and realized, as Agar notes, that our "assumptions about how the world

works, usually implicit and out of awareness, [we]re inadequate to understand something that

had happened," (1995, p.31). While Agar argues that ethnographic rich points occur in the

distance between the world of the researcher and the worlds of the researched, in the case of this

study, the rich points seemed to occur in the distance between what we as a research team were

experiencing and the conceptual and linguistic tools we had available to make sense of these

experiences. It was through these rich points, where concepts and language proved lacking, that

we made our way towards the necessity for literacy experience as an approach to investigating

the multiple registers of sense-making with texts. There is nothing particularly extraordinary

about these three rich points beyond their facility in demonstrating the breadth of challenges we

faced in the work and therefore, perhaps, some of the nuances of the utility of literacy experience

as a concept.

I present the three vignettes in chronological order to allow the opportunity for the reader to experience the accrual of (mis)understanding in a manner similar to me and the research team. First, I'll discuss my observations of the procedure by which students roll, process, and print film. This was one of the first rich points I experienced in the study as I watched the intensely detailed and multi-step activities that required complex relations between both the cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions of literacies in the photography classroom. Next, I'll consider the difficulties the research group faced as we worked through the coding of the corpus of photographs produced by the focal students in the photoethnographies. Though the students were able to come up with various logics to code the photographs, there were constant difficulties as many categories seemed either too restrictive or too permissive. Finally, I present some of the PhotoLab group conversation wherein the research group tried to talk our way into an understanding of what texts do and where meaning might exist and emerge. Though it may be a bit unorthodox, I will offer the transcript of the conversation itself as an argument for why literacy experience is a useful approach to the kind of sense-making the group was struggling to find the language to describe. The discussion is a clear demonstration of the research group's challenges in finding language and conceptual purchase around sense-making. Hearing the students' words and how they talked about meaning and affect is much more compelling than any attempt I might make to describe the talk. The conversation that the students and I had in the excerpt is, in itself, an analysis of sense in its various forms. In that way, perhaps it might be considered a piece of non-fictional theatre wherein the students and I are the characters, in a similar style of Anna Deavere Smith though, surely not as artfully done.

Film

As previously noted, LHS had one of the last remaining darkrooms in the city during the year I worked in the school. All photography students learned the entire process of developing film: rolling, which includes getting finished film out of the canisters and preparing the negatives; processing, which includes developing the negatives; and printing, which includes enlarging the negatives and printing them on photo paper. Rolling film and processing film took roughly one class period each to complete. Printing could take many days, depending on how many prints the student might be making and how many attempts it took to produce an acceptable print. It was a very complex process that required idiosyncratic skill sets, multiple literacies occurring simultaneously, an experimental attitude, and a lot of patience. Even so, for many of the Photo B/C/D students, this was their favorite part of any project.

The photoethnography project offered the first opportunity for me to observe this process as the previous classwork in the semester had only used digital photography. I was immediately taken by the rather complicated steps involved and all of the literacies the students had to mobilize to be successful. Success was hard won as there was potential for failure all along the way, some of which was impossible to remedy. With so many people, objects, things, feelings, spaces, and affects coming into relationship with one another, students' work with film was the first real moment in the study when I had a sense that I did not have a way to make sense of what I was seeing, nor did I have the language to fully describe it. To consider this rich point, I will make use of my field notes, research photos, and one video of the process in order to demonstrate the ways that students marshaled both cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions of literacies in their work with film.

Rolling.

Figure 7: left—Ms. McCurry's illustrated equipment list for rolling film; middle—tanks & reels used in rolling; right—close up of reels.

Excerpt from Fieldnotes, 20 October 2014

Students are rolling film today. This entails doing a series of steps in the pitch black darkroom

or sitting in the classroom with their hands in black, light-tight bags (see Figure 8)*, feeling their*

way through the steps. It is clearly a difficult and challenging task. People are grumbling

different comments:

"I can't feel if I'm doing it too tight..." Kate

"Feel for 3 & 4...those are the magic numbers!" Ms. McCurry

"I'm getting 2 on one side and 1 on the other!"

"I rolled it backwards so I had to redo it." Bronwyn

"3, 4, round?" Ms. McCurry to various students.

"Ow! This is literally cutting off my circulation (the bag). Ew...its all hot in here." Sylvia, as she

puts her hands in the black bag Kate was using in order to check Kate's film after Kate asked for

help.

"Samantha, have confidence in yourself! 3 & 4 & round! You're good." Ms. McCurry

Rolling film is exactly what it sounds like—one must roll the film around a metal reel in order for it to be developed. However, it is much more complicated than it may sound as the entire process must occur in total darkness. If the film is exposed to any light whatsoever, it will turn completely black, also known as getting *fogged*, as the light will saturate the film and wipe out all of the images previously photographed. Therefore, to roll film, students either went in a side room of the darkroom that was pitch-black, without even the aid of the low, red lights in the darkroom; or, what seemed the preferred method, they used really weird black bags that have sleeves with super tight elastic at the end that slide over their arms (see Figure 8). Students grabbed all of the supplies listed in Figure 7, and deposited them inside of one of the black bags along with their roll(s) of film. Then, they slid their arms into the sleeves, making absolutely sure that the elastic was tight around their arms—much to Sylvia's dismay in the excerpt from my fieldnotes, above, as she declared that the bag was, "literally cutting off my circulation." From that point on, they had to follow several steps with utmost precision using only their sense of touch.

Figure 8: Donovan rolling film with Elli on the left and Bronwyn on the right. Charlie is in the bottom-left foreground. They are all using the black bag method.

First, they had to open the plastic canister and remove the film. They had to keep track of the front end of the film and cut the corner off of it with the scissors before threading it onto the center of the reel. Then, they had to roll the film, gently, around the reel making sure to keep each roll smooth and perfectly circular. Students could check to see if they were successful by feeling the number of metal rings remaining on the reel (see Figure 7) and if there were 3 on one side and 4 on the other side, then their film went on the reel smoothly. If they got numbers other than 3 and 4, something went amiss—perhaps they rolled too tightly or the film got kinked or didn't go onto the reel straight—and they had to start over. Once the film was rolled correctly, they had to place the reel(s) into the canister and completely seal the canister. After the film was in the canister, it was safe. Students would then put their name on a piece of tape, affix it to the canister, and store the canisters until they could be processed the following day.

There was a certain charge in the air as students sat, arms in bags, staring into space with intense looks on their faces. Each student handled the task differently, with varying expressions of focus, nervousness, and confidence. No wonder, considering the skills that were required. A great deal of fine motor skills and dexterity was needed to open, cut, and roll the film. Students also needed to be able to imagine the spatial relationships between the film and the reel, reading whether or not the film was lying smoothly. And, all of these skills were coming together in a scenario where students were only able to use a singular sense. They had to *feel* whether they were proceeding correctly and if they had done the tasks correctly. It was very clear to me that this process was deeply uncomfortable for several students. There was a sense in which rolling film engaged students' cognitive machinery: reading the poster, gathering tools, following steps, cutting, rolling, and so forth. However, rolling film also engaged students' non-cognitive sense-making as well. Though students' ability to tactilely feel might be considered a kind of haptic or embodied literacy, what was to be made of the students' ability to feel the space in the darkness of the bag or to feel "confidence" as Ms. McCurry implored Samantha to do in the excerpt? Might those be examples of something like spatial literacy or emotional literacy? And, if so, what do they have to do with everything else that was going on? Observing the day of rolling film raised to the surface many of the questions that circulate through this study about how all of these *things* come into relationship and function together. This question was extended to the next day, as students processed their film.

Processing.

Figure 9: Processing film. Top—measuring chemicals and water; middle—Aria agitating her canister of film; bottom—the whole crowd watching clocks during an agitation rest.

students are processing film today. this involves adding water and chemicals to the big round tanks where they put their rolled film yesterday. students need to remember the order of the chemicals and how each must be used: with water or alone; at 70 degrees; for 6 or 8 minutes, etc. also students have to agitate the film for a certain amount of time and then let it rest. this results in a rhythmic set of movements where students shake the tanks, then bang them on the table, then let them sit on the table. students intuitively move out of one another's way as they are crowded around the sink in a tight circle. everyone is facing the clock in the room and a set of timers that ms. mccurry has on a counter. occasionally, ms. mccurry will shout out some directions for the next step, "remember agitate for the first 30 seconds then taptaptap then let it rest 30 seconds. then agitate 5 seconds, rest for 30." "agitate for 1 minute and then don't forget to recycle your fixer!" "don't worry you can't over-fix your film." students are listening to her because they sometimes respond, but they do not generally turn to face her or look at her directly while she speaks because they are all looking at the clock. they are all pretty quiet, not often talking to one another and they all look incredibly focused.

when someone touches aria's tank while it is 'resting' she reprimands them and says, "i've never had a roll of film turn out bad. if this one is, it is your fault and i'll be so mad." there is a seriousness about this process that is fascinating. students appear deeply committed to doing this process correctly. there are also quite a few students that make arrangement with ms. mccurry to come in to the classroom during another period of the day in order to process their film. this makes a lot of sense to me when i see how involved the process is and how little space there would be to maneuver if the entire class was processing their film at the same time. students also cooperate with one another. while bronwyn is washing her film in the sink with the

water running, mara asks, "do you mind if we set up the tub over here?" and bronwyn says, "sure," and grabs a big plastic bin and lets it fill up with water, putting her tank in it and letting mara put her tank in there also.

after she has washed the film, bronwyn comes over with her roll of film all spread out off of the wire roll and they are all totally black (OH SHIT!!! my stomach is instantly in knots). she says, "ms mccurry, mine are all black." ms. mccurry asks, "do you know what that means?" bronwyn says, "they got fogged?" ms. mccurry says, "yeah...they got fogged. they turn black when they somehow get exposed to light. do you know when that might have happened? i'm so sorry bronwyn." ms. mccurry tells bronwyn she will give her another roll of film and more time to take pictures. "i'm so sorry. do you want me to toss it so you don't have to?" (i'm totally gutted and it isn't my film! i nonchalantly look away when bronwyn throws the black strip of film that used to be 24 photographs into the trash.)

As with rolling film, processing film engages a wide array of domains in sense-making. Students were following steps, mixing chemicals, making calculations, and watching the clock. At the same time, they were moving their bodies in measured ways, shaking the canisters slowly and then tapping them, and navigating around other people (see video https://youtu.be/3P9K5qldId0). Bodies, objects, things, feelings, spaces, times, and affects were all entering into relationship with one another as students processed their rolls of film.

Throughout the process, there was mildly nervous tension at the front of the room, which was occasionally manifested in students' interactions with one another or the objects with which they were working. For instance, Aria chastised one of her classmates for touching her canister of film as it rested in between agitations—which seemed to have been named for just that moment. But, perhaps, never quite as clearly as when it seemed all the air went out of the room

and everyone went silent when Bronwyn opened her canister and held aloft her unfurling, totally black film.

There was something quite compelling about the movement of bodies and the passage of time that evoked choreographed dancing. And yet, there were so many layers of sense that accrued and were made in/through the students' dance. Their arm movement while agitating the canisters might have been one text, their following written directions might have been another text, their relationship to the result of the processing might have been yet another text. All of these layers existed simultaneously and were produced together through the interaction of reading, science, movement, being, and feeling. I was aware, for the second day in a row that I did not, exactly, have a clear way to talk about what I had observed. Which of these counted as a literacy practice or literacy event? Might they qualify as literacies-in-action or a literacy rhizome? If so, did I have the apparatus to consider them as all existing together and mutually constituent? Students' final stage of working with their film served to corroborate the questions that had already emerged and underlined my need for some new tools to think with regarding what I was observing in Photo B/C/D.

Printing.

Excerpt from Fieldnotes, 29 October 2014

today the class is split btwn photo b and c/d. b's are getting instruction from ms. mccurry on dodging/burning and filters[22]. c/d are in the darkroom printing images. i shadowed some students in the darkroom to see what the process was like to print. let me tell you, it is really dark in there. so much of what happens in the dark room is done by touch. students who use matte paper to print on have to just go by the feel of the paper & their own experience to know if

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[22] These are all techniques that can be used to add more or less light to the negative during printing.

they are printing on the reactive side[23] of the paper. this is why photo a students are only given glossy paper because it is easier to determine which side of the paper is the reactive side. to create test strips, students use small pieces of photo paper and test the exposure at 2 second intervals so that students can see what length of exposure will create the best print. most students count in their heads even though there are timers at each station. they determine which exposure is best by looking at what section of the test strip has the first true black color. all student show ms. mccurry their test strips so they don't get frustrated picking the wrong exposure and printing photos that aren't ideal and wasting paper. once they print something on the photo paper, they walk through a series of steps, soaking the photo paper in a series of 3 chemicals (developer, stop bath, and fixer). this is the quintessential image of processing film from movies and such: trays of chemicals, with paper dropped in, plastic edged tongs moving the paper in the trays until images appear. the paper is supposed to be in each chemical a certain amount of time. i'm standing near the trays of chemicals when mia, elli, and kate are over there working with images. i ask about what i observed them doing and if they were going by touch/feel. they said that knowing what side of the paper is reactive is determined through feel, experience, and a bit of rolling the dice. mia says "well, it is a 50/50 chance. i'm going to go with this side and hope for the best." the girls said that they count in their heads because the timers "are annoying" but also because, as kate notes: "if i messed up on the timing of the exposure, i can fix it by leaving it in (the developer) a little longer...so i sort of just go by what i see."

i'm taken by the way that students move around the darkroom. they weave between one another on their way from the enlarger stations to the "trough" station with all the chemicals (see Figure 10). there isn't a lot of talking. students appear quite focused on what they are

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[23] Only one side of photo paper is reactive and will actually produce a print of the negative when exposed to light. If you use the wrong side, you get nothing.

doing and seem to be pretty intent on what they are doing. occasionally they will chat with the person next to them or talk about where they are in the process, etc. but...by & large, they are quiet. there is, however, fairly constant movement and lots of action happening at any given time.

Figure 10: The darkroom. Top—enlarger stations where the negative is printed on paper; bottom—chemical 'trough' where the print is developed and fixed onto the paper.

Many of the same elements that were involved in the earlier stages of processing film were similarly a part of the final stage of printing the film. Students were working in the dark,

using chemicals, counting, and reading the space as they printed their photographs. Ms. McCurry shared and, much later, the research group affirmed that the work done by a photographer in the darkroom was the most difficult element of the artistic enterprise. Getting a good shot was certainly an important first step and required an artistic eye, but knowing how to treat the negative in the darkroom seemed to be what separated the truly gifted photographers from the pack. In the darkroom, it was possible to correct poor choices made at the time the photograph was taken. If the exposure was less than ideal or the lighting wasn't great, there were techniques that could be used in the darkroom to still produce a beautiful print. And though some of these techniques relied on some specific artistic and even, perhaps, scientific literacies— such as Kate's comments in the excerpt above about fixing errors in exposure time by leaving the print in the developer longer—there were some ways of working in the darkroom that relied on something akin to a gut instinct. There was some kind of non-cognitive maybe even subconscious, emergent sense about what should be done with the negative or print. On one of the printing days, Ms. McCurry had a quick conversation with Charlie that is illustrative:

> [Charlie exited the darkroom with a print to show Ms. McCurry.]

McCurry	How long is this? (How long did Charlie expose the negative to light in order to make the print?)
Charlie	11 seconds
McCurry	Can you do one more for me? I'll give you more paper at the end of the semester if you need it. Hmm…I'd hit this up at thirrrr…fourrrr…thiiirrrrrrteen seconds?
Charlie	Yeah. That is what I was thinking.

McCurry	So 13 seconds. Is that what you were thinking? How does that feel in your gut?
Charlie	Good.
McCurry	Okay! (Turning to Amanda) It's a guessing game. Kids want it to be a hard science, but it is art! It isn't a hard science.

Ms. McCurry was prompting Charlie to listen to her instinct and attend to that subconscious sense by asking, "how does that feel in your gut?" Charlie had the same instinct that Ms. McCurry had regarding how to treat the negative, but she was unsure of herself and sought corroboration. Students had varying relationships with their instincts and could be deeply uncomfortable like Charlie or much more in tune like Kate. I wondered if this instinct might count as a literacy practice or if it might be able to be mapped rhizomatically.

In the printing stage there was also a machine introduced—the enlarger[24], pictured in the top photograph in Figure 10—which added a layer of complexity to the enterprise. Kate mentioned that she always used the same enlarger, "I just know how to work this one best and I always get good prints so I don't want to jinx it and ruin my print by using another one." Many of the other students in the darkroom at the time said they did the same thing. Printing was such a tenuous process that students put their trust in established relationships they had with particular machines, equipment, and routines. They used the same enlarger every time or, as seen in the excerpt, they relied on their own counting rather than a timer to maximize their chances of success in creating a perfect print. When Kate spoke about 'her' enlarger, there was certainly the sense that she had learned how to work successfully with that particular machine but there was also a sense that the enlarger, albeit an inanimate object, wouldn't let her down. Kate's faith in

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[24] The enlarger is the machine used select the size of the print—how much to enlarge the image from the negative—and to expose the negative to light in order to produce said print.

that enlarger was partially technical but also partially relational. Kate's use of the enlarger as a tool in her process of composing the visual text of the photograph could certainly be construed as a literacy practice or event, but what to make of the relational dynamic between Kate and the enlarger? Was there something there that was a necessary element to consider in Kate's composing? If so, what language was available to discuss it? What theoretical apparatus might allow for this discussion to be sensible?

Conclusion. As students worked with their film through the process of rolling, processing, and printing it in the early stages of the study, I became aware that I did not have the tools to understand or discuss the full range of happenings I observed. All of the moments shared in the above vignette highlight this lack and demonstrate the questions that emerged as a result. Much in the same way that acts of creation took place in the darkroom as a result of earlier deficiencies, these early rich points in the study—the absence of sense and language— provided the opportunity to begin to create. In the vignettes that follow, I will discuss more of these rich points, more such absence, and the ways in which the research team and I began to work our way towards creating the tools we were discovering we needed.

Coding Photographs

As noted in Chapter 3, after the class completed their photoethnographies and I interviewed a group of focal students, I invited those students to work with me on the next phase of the research. It is nearly universal in qualitative empirical research design that after data is collected it is coded. While the concept of traditional coding is by-and-large unintelligible in a NRT approach to research, it is such a convention that I failed to see how I might proceed without doing something that was, at least, coding-adjacent. Via Gillian Rose (2012), I provided students with a heuristic for analyzing visual data which provided various entry points for

making sense of the photographs. Though the students very quickly abandoned Rose's

framework in favor of following their own logics, I can be heard in the early recordings

occasionally interjecting a, "I think Rose might call this a genre!" or "This seems like Rose's

visual meanings!" I so badly wanted to help the students find their way to meaningful coding

schemes that in moments of doubt, I circled back to the diagram. However, somewhere in the

course of our work over those days, I also abandoned Rose and gave in to the velocity of the

students' idiosyncratic approaches to organizing the photographs.

What emerged from these approaches was the understanding that any category the

students developed was terribly limited in any number of ways. This was not due to faults in

their logic or deficits in their knowledge, rather, it was clear that any sense made of/with the

photos was not stable. There were countless variables at play in the relations between the

students and the photographs that made their categorization incredibly difficult, made all the

more so given that this task was undertaken collectively, with all of the members of the research

group participating in the process together.

As previously discussed, I made the first distinction between *portraits* and *still lifes* as a

result of comments made by Donovan and Kate during the class critique of the

photoethnographies. I felt this was a productive first step and one that would help break up the

task into more palatable pieces rather than starting with all 225 photographs at once. However, I

realized later that this move had implications for what categories were available in the

subsequent coding. Mia let me know that she struggled a bit with the task because of my initial

cut, "I wouldn't have done it that way. I always see light first so I would've made the first

division based on that. Like, if it was inside and dark or outside and bright." From the outset,

then, the potential meanings the students made with the photographs were limited by the

portrait/still life distinction though there was nothing to suggest this distinction was better or more generative than any another might be. And yet, this same type of decision was continually made by the students as they coded the photographs. One person would make a suggestion which was negotiated, to varying degrees, and then the group committed to a particular course of action even though there was an awareness that there were many other courses of action available.
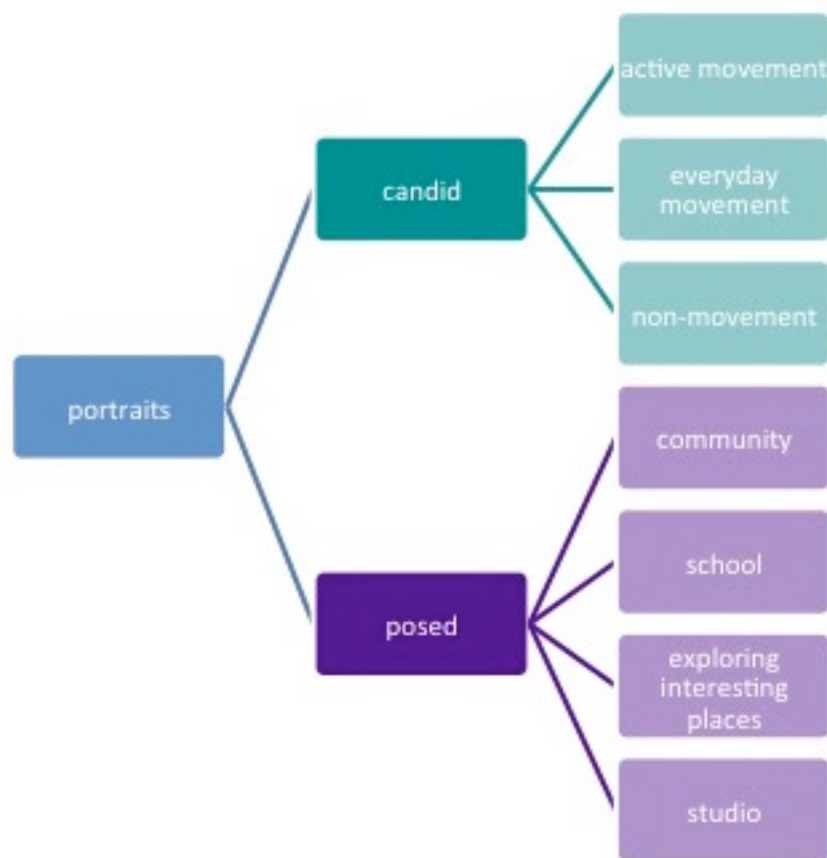
Figure 11: The coding scheme the students designed for the portrait photographs.

Mia, Sylvia, Donovan, and I tackled the portraits first, spreading them across several tables in the photo room at one of our afterschool PhotoLab meetings. As we looked at the photos, Donovan was trying to figure out how to approach the task, "I guess I'll just go off of whatever my head tells me to" and suggested "set-up versus candids? Or group pictures versus

singular?" Sylvia affirmed this suggestion by saying, "should we just start with, like, candids?" And then everyone started moving photographs into what ended up being the *posed* category and the *candid* category. However, fairly immediately we ran into some challenges with what, exactly, counted as *candid* as evidenced by the brief excerpts of the conversation below:

Mia	Would you say this is posed or candid?
Donovan	Posed. Seems like she is looking right into the camera.

….

Donovan	Is this candid? I can't tell. I mean two people [of the several in the photo] know [they are getting their picture taken] but…
Sylvia	Two people know…but still…
Donovan	You know what…just…I'm going to put it in candid.

….

Sylvia	Okay. Chloe is looking but I still think it's candid.
Donovan	Yeah. Candid.

….

Amanda	[holding up a photo of two sets of feet] What about this?
Mia	I think posed because of the angle.
Donovan	How can you not know someone's taking a picture of your feet like that?
Sylvia	Yeah. Posed.

The students and I found that our understandings of what a candid portrait was were being challenged by the content in some of the photographs. It was as if the meaning of *candid*

became destabilized in light of the number of photographs that fell into some sort of liminal space between candid and posed. Can a portrait remain candid even if the subject is looking in the direction of the camera? What if there are multiple subjects and some are looking and some aren't? Does candidness depend more on the awareness of the subject rather than the gaze of the subject? Is a portrait candid if that was the intention of the photographer? What if there is no face in the portrait so that the awareness and gaze of the subject are unknown? For every portrait about which we were certain it was candid, it seemed like there were an almost equal number about which we had doubts. When a group member voiced doubts or asked other group members for help, there was no noticeable logic applied to determining whether or not something should be considered candid or posed. Instead, the decision was always made on a case-by-case basis and seemed to largely depend on whatever feeling the students had at the time. Mia wondered about a photo being candid but Donovan considered it posed because the subject was looking at the camera. Later, Sylvia had questions about a photo where the subject is looking at the camera and she and Donovan decided that it was candid. The two photographs were relatively similar but different decisions were made about each—one went into the posed category and one went into the candid category.

After making the candid/posed distinction, the students then evaluated each category individually beginning with the posed photos (see Figure 11). In my stubborn commitment to Rose (2012), I reintroduced possible methods for analysis suggesting visual meanings or composition as entry points into the photos. In spite of my moves to bring overly tidy order to the proceedings, the students largely maintained their pattern of making coding decisions on the fly. As they began, Donovan noted one photo that stood out to him that looked like it was taken on a roadtrip. Sylvia commented that a lot of her project photos were of her friends in various

locations and then said, "going places…it was a lot of going places in general." We then started

noticing several photos that were taken in a car. The students proceeded to try to figure out if

being in the car counted as an interesting place if someone was on their way to an interesting

place. This conversation seemed rather casual but ended up being the decision about how to sort

the posed photographs—based upon the perceived location the photo was taken. It isn't clear

whether or not the students intended for this discussion to be a decision, but as they continued to

talk, they started moving around the table and moving photos based on the ideas they were

discussing. After continued negotiation, they decided upon community, school, exploring

interesting places, and studio as the categories for the posed photographs. These categories were

very idiosyncratic and would likely not apply to any other collection of posed photographs. The

community category evolved largely based on the fact that Mia worked at the YMCA and took

many photographs there; which was coupled with the small handful of shots taken at homes that

seemed too few in number to warrant their own category. The studio category was created for

just a few photographs taken by one student, Aria, that were the only high-concept studio shots

in the project and did not fit in any other category.

For the candid photos, the students suggested sorting the photos based upon the perceived

movement[25] of the subjects in the photos. The originality of this suggestion was noteworthy,

particularly since they had just finished sorting the posed photos based on the place the photo

was taken. Yet, with this new set of photos the students pursued a new line of thinking. As the

candid photos were selected as such on the basis of the subjects' apparent lack of knowledge of

the photo, they depicted a wider range of activities than the posed photos. This difference was a

fairly noticeable one and was seemingly compelling for the students. As we started thinking

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[25] It is worth mentioning that *movement* is one of the elements of design that all of the photo students have learned
about from Ms. McCurry.

about how to work with the concept of *movement*, Mia introduced an idea that proved confounding:

Mia	How about a category of, like, people taking pictures of people's backs?
Donovan	Oh! … Yeah. I see what you mean…
Mia	Because I see, like…
Sylvia	Yeah…there is a lot from behind. Here is this one…that one…(handing some photos of backs over to Mia)
Amanda	Then this is going to get hard because it this a moving person or is it a back? Because, it could be both…? (holding up a photo)
Sylvia	Yeah. Because I was just going to say that I have a moving back (holding out the moving back photo).

[everyone laughing]

Sylvia	Dibs on that band name!!! Dibs on that band name…
Donovan	Moving backs.
Sylvia	Active backs.
Donovan	Okay…let's do moving backs or whatever

[everyone begins placing photos of moving backs to one side]

Mia	These are all moving. (all of the *backs* photos)
Sylvia	I think they all are except that one of people sitting.
Donovan	Hmm…I don't know (what to do since now there is a

category of *backs* that only has one photo while *moving backs* has

acquired all the others).

Sylvia I don't know. I think maybe just movement.

Amanda I don't know. Maybe *backs* is taking us in a weird direction.

Then, I guess there is a question of if there is some movement, but

not…

Mia That's why I was saying *backs* because the movement is hard to

describe. I guess maybe it was just not seeing a face.

….

Amanda What about this one with the bike? (holding a close up of a bike's

handlebars with hands holding on to the bike and an iPhone

simultaneously) I can't tell if he's moving…but, does the bike

imply movement?

Sylvia (dramatic stage exhale)

Amanda I know!!! It is getting weird! Maybe we should just take a time

out.

Sylvia Seriously. I'm sweating. I'm getting so worked up right now

(smiling).

Though the idea of having a *backs* category was fully accepted due to the overwhelming number

of candid photos with backs in them, the team discovered that incorporating *backs* with the idea

of *movement* produced too many tangles to ultimately be useful.

However, eliminating *backs* and focusing solely on *movement* was not without its

difficulties. The students decided upon active movement, everyday movement, and non-

movement as the final categories. Though, there were still some photos that just didn't seem to fit any category or required making distinctions that felt arbitrary. For instance, Mia had taken a photograph of some of her young dance students as they were receiving instructions. The subjects appeared largely stationary, but it was clear that they were in the middle of a dance class. We all deferred to Mia who ended up splitting the difference and putting it in *everyday movement*. After this decision, Mia suggested that we actually create a continuum from active movement to semi-movement/everyday movement to non-movement to eliminate the need to make sharp distinctions. This would have allowed photos that were difficult to categorize to remain in gray areas that would be sanctioned through the continuum model. All the photos were already coded and were spread out on the table in some semblance of a continuum so this idea was not fully attended to or taken up by the research group at that time.

Three days later we met to code the still life photographs. This time, the group was larger with Kate and Mara joining Mia, Donovan, Sylvia, and I. The process of looking for patterns and creating categories continued much in the same way as it had during our work with the portraits. The absence of human bodies as the subjects of the photographs resulted in many of the coding distinctions centering on place-based categories, categories based on the subject of the photograph, as well as categories based on different photographic techniques like depth-of-field and lighting (see Figure 12). We engaged in similar negotiations and difficulties, but not nearly as many as we had encountered with the portraits. Without human subjects, it seemed as if there was less debate about what we were seeing. Instead, debates focused on the conceptual nuances of the categories. For instance, does school count as public or private…and, what about a specific classroom? These conceptual debates were usually resolved in the somewhat mysterious fashion observed previously wherein someone would make a point and others would

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just begin to act. One remarkable occurrence during the coding of the still lifes was that the idea

of a continuum was floated again, this time by Kate, and was taken up in earnest. Three of the

final seven categories made use of what the students ended up terming a *gradient* in which there

were not sharp distinctions made in the previous x versus y model but rather offered a spectrum

from x to y. In fact, in the *nature* category, the team created two simultaneous gradients with the

photos organized with brighter photos at the top through the darkest photos at the bottom; and,

with photos that had a specific object as the subject on the left through to photos with more broad

landscapes on the right. The team felt that the gradients allowed them the freedom to take

advantage of the liminal spaces between categories and, in the case of the *nature* photos, to

explore two different logics at once. It was not completely clear why this idea took root during

the still life coding session but not during the portrait coding session.
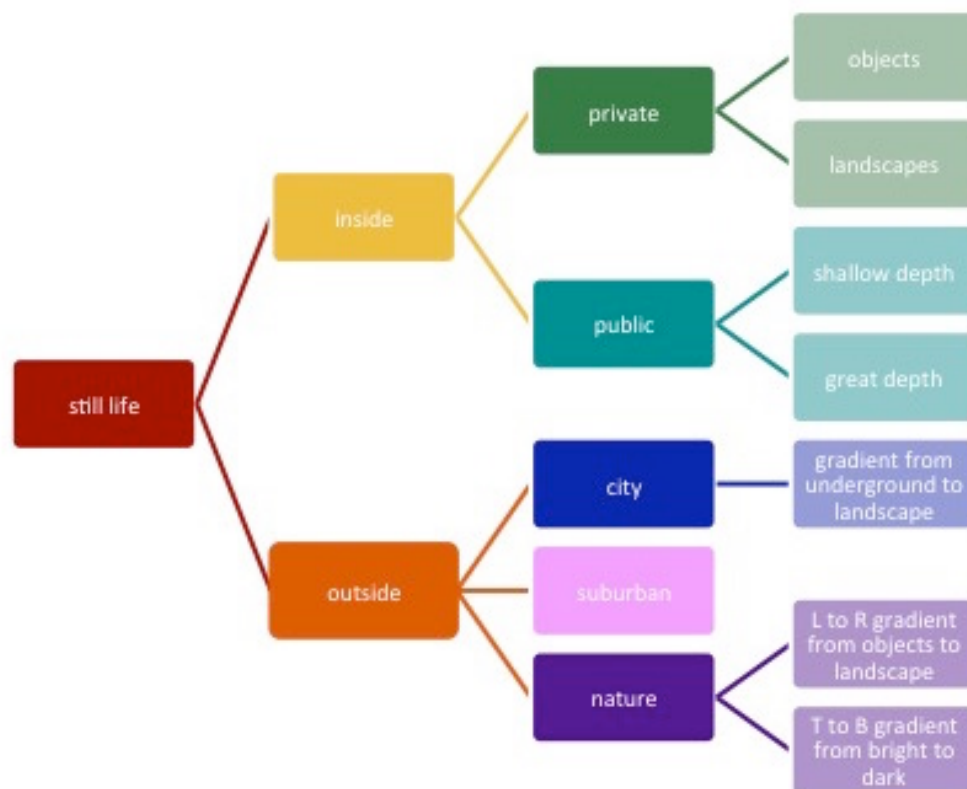
Figure 12: The coding scheme the students designed for the still life photographs**.**

Conclusion. There are various ways to construe the students' idiosyncratic categorization of the photos, all of which point to a complex, dynamic system of relations. The photographic text in question was obviously a key consideration in these relations. Any given photograph offered a set of possible codes and excluded others. Sometimes every member of the group had similar notions of what was possible and what was not. Other times, it was difficult for the group to decide what they were actually seeing and what it might mean.

This difficulty often seemed exacerbated by the exertion of time scales on the whole of the enterprise. Earlier decisions were brought to bear later on in the process, eliminating the ability to choose some categories that might be available had we done something differently. Though the group made a decision to eliminate the *backs* category, the subject came up again, several times, about how many backs we were seeing and what it might mean. In the end, we all wished there was a way to deal with *backs* that had somehow functioned better with the other categories. How, then, might I account for the ways time implicated students' sense-making with the photographs?

Another element that had implications for the students' coding choices were the social dynamics of the process. The social dynamics included the past, present, and the future as the social relationships between the members of the research group evolved. Mia was a bit softer spoken at this stage of the project and had less of a history with other members of the research group. Perhaps this was a factor in the group not fully attending to her suggestion to create a continuum. Whereas Kate was more gregarious and was friends with Sylvia which might have made it easier for her suggestion of a continuum to be heard and taken up. Yet these relationships were always changing. When we began, Kate and Sylvia were close but then Sylvia and Donovan became closer. Donovan and Mia both graduated before the project was

over which shifted them into roles as older and wiser college freshmen. Kate and Mia both worked for the YMCA and as activities increased in the summer so did the closeness of their relationship. As we wrapped up the project, Kate and Sylvia were still at LHS and were in a class together for building their art portfolios for college, which renewed the strength of their friendship. If the research team and I wanted to consider the social world as part of the context for the students' sense-making, how would we do it? Which social world? Or, maybe, when social world? Could these relations, which were constantly in flux, somehow be mapped even if they fractured across different timescales?

Finally, the coding of the photographs illuminated the ways that the students sometimes worked their way towards sense through talk and the movement of their bodies. Many times in the coding process a student would begin to talk about what s/he was seeing in the photographs and bodies would just start moving, acting on the talk as it was occurring. In acting out the talk, the group was thinking with our bodies. In our movements, we were testing the emerging sense of the categories. By moving the photographs around and moving ourselves around the tables to gain different vantage points, we were thinking our way to categories with our bodies. Were our bodies materializing the talk? Did the talk and the movement create one another? And, where did sense emerge?

Talking about Text

The following excerpt from one of the PhotoLab transcripts underscores the questions about the relationship between talk and emergent meaning that were discussed in the previous section. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the excerpt should be read as a demonstration of the way that the research group struggled with language to adequately account for the ways the sense emerges through sets of relations with texts.

Donovan	But the thing is as an artist you shouldn't listen to the viewer, I would think. It should be what is coming from you.
Sylvia	It's hard, though, when you're getting graded on it (laughter).
Kate	I think also -- sometimes we'll take pictures -- especially in a project like this -- I don't know if you guys were just talking about this -- not that the pictures would look boring but you would be like, "A backyard of somebody," but to somebody else that's their life and so I think --
Mara	How it has whole different meanings.
Kate	Yeah. [Ms. McCurry] kind of gives a perspective of someone who might not necessarily know the story behind it or whatever so if a picture looks kind of bland she can be like, "Alright well that's not really coming across," and then you can make your decision.
Amanda	So that's interesting -- the way you treat a subject matter -- there's ways to capture it that maybe can communicate deeper meaning to a stranger and there are ways to capture it that maybe wouldn't communicate that where you're like, "This is just a backyard?" I wonder if part of that is developing that artistic eye, you know?
Mara	I've always thought of it in a different, less glamorous way. You know when an English teacher reads a sentence like, "The sky was blue," and you're like, "Why do you think they use the color blue?" "Because the sky is blue." They look for meaning where it really isn't sometimes which is in some ways -- if you're like, "Oh, you're praising my picture and you

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found meaning in it, good for you, thank you for that," but then in other times it's like, "That really wasn't supposed to mean anything."

Sylvia   Some people overthink and --

Kate   It's like that with poems in English. The only reason I bring it up is because I know you're [Amanda] more of an English -- when we studied certain poems, I think English has literally has ruined some of my favorite -- because they analyze every single thing and even with creative writing -- I used to like "creative write" when I was younger and honestly I would just kind of write something because it was part of the story, you know, just going along. They will literally be like, "Why did they use a comma here, but not here?" and it's really -- I understand there's like syntax stuff, but it's -- sometimes I feel it's not there, you know -- sometimes it's just -- I took this and it ended up being cool.

Donovan   I agree but sometimes visual clues -- or just clues -- I'm thinking more movies right now -- like visual clues -- I know in like -- my favorite director is David Lynch so in all his movies like *Mulholland Drive* or whatever -- there are different visual clues you're supposed to pick up on that reveals deeper meaning or something. So -- I know it sounds stupid but sometimes when the lampshade is red or something -- it's like, "What does that matter," but sometimes that can mean something -- like that can mean something -- or tell the viewer something.

Kate   Have you ever seen the movie *Heathers*? I've read this article and it's probably just somebody being stupid --

Donovan	Wasn't that Winona Ryder?
Kate	I love her. But I read this entire article and I don't know if there was any truth in it or if somebody just over-analyzed this and found this, but here's a lot of red vs. blue in that movie and they wrote this entire thing about how it's about communism vs. the American being the blue and this kind of war that was going on and there are places where there's red and blue in the shot and it's like the conflict -- it was kind of crazy -- and of course I rewatched the movie and I was like, "Oh my god."
Amanda	So this is a weird question that I think is coming up -- so if we think about texts -- even if we go to thinking about friends as texts, or schools -- whatever -- all the different movies and things we are thinking about -- where is the meaning? Because you're talking about different people looking at the same thing and you're saying like, "I just took that picture" or whatever or you think about David Lynch and visual cues -- could you watch that film and have no idea about the visual cues and still interpret it or read it in one way? Do you see what I'm saying? So is the meaning with the artist, is the meaning in the text, and is the meaning with the person who views it?
Donovan	It's hard because from what I'm thinking now, right away is it's in the person who created it.
Mara	There are going to be cues that no one else is going to pick up except those certain people.

Donovan   Exactly. Exactly. So you're going to be the one -- someone will be like, "This was a happy picture," but you could be like, "No, I was totally miserable." Or "I hate this" you know?

Mara   See I kind of get that -- what you were first saying like can you get the meaning across. I get that when I read a lot. Our English teacher is like, "Oh, look at this word and the syntax and all that" and I'm like, "I just get this feel off of it that I didn't need to look into the words to see that." It's just kind of there.

Amanda   That's an interesting idea.

Kate   It makes me think of -- and no one has ever done this to me -- but in movies where the therapists show the blob and (laughter) but that --

Sylvia   What do you see? A man stabbing a woman (laughter).

Amanda   I see a humming bird so let me talk to you about that.

Donovan   So let me talk to you about that (laughter).

Kate   I think it's one of those questions that you can't really --- it can be anywhere; meaning can be anywhere. I mean -- it might be more prevalent in certain places in an image or in a whatever -- but --

Mara   Certain people might relate to it differently and interpret it differently. Like that backyard analogy. If it's your own backyard, you're going to have a different meaning, but if it's your friend's back yard, it's going to have a different meaning.

Amanda   Yeah. It's like when you [Kate] were describing to us on Thursday -- somebody's backyard – Charlie's backyard -- because it's a picture of a

	table and we're like, "It's a table," but you're like, "Wait -- and there's this ravine and there's a hot tub –" right -- there's different levels.
Mara	And it's a nice gulley, or whatever you were saying.
Amanda	Yeah. That's a nice gulley. But that's an interesting idea about feeling. I think you're getting at this a little bit too, Kate, when you're talking about poems -- the over-analyzing -- that sometimes maybe you can be like, "Oh this is about the Cold War," but on a first read maybe it's just more about some kind of -- I don't know --
Mara	Internal conflict or…
Amanda	I don't know. It's just a feeling you get.
Donovan	A connection.
Sylvia	Yeah. An initial vibe.
Mara	Sometimes it bugs me when you try to put things into words that don't need to be into words or shouldn't be put into words. Whereas you get that vibe and you don't want to describe it, you just feel it.
Amanda	You just feel it? So in those ways do you think that visual -- creating visual texts in those moments make it easier to communicate that vibe or that feeling than it would be if you had to write something down on paper?
Kate	Oh, God, yeah (laughter).
Amanda	Ms. Daniels liked that one (the Art Department chair who had just walked in the room and, upon hearing this exchange, started laughing).

Mara	It's really hard to put your feelings into words if you don't know what you're feeling, really. You feel that you don't want to explain it. It's just kind of there.
Kate	And not to be corny but that's really why I like photography --
Mara	You don't have to explain it really.
....	
Donovan	I totally agree with that. I can go on forever -- but not be able to communicate in words. I don't know if you [Amanda] remember but when we were talking about it at Wegmans or whatever [during our one-to-one interview after the photoethnography project] -- sometimes when you'd ask me what the meaning of a picture was that I took I'd just go on forever and I'd be like, "I really don't know" and I'm like, "I don't know. I just took this and somehow I just had a connection."
Sylvia	It was in the moment and it looked good so you snapped it and thought maybe it would come out.
Donovan	Wasn't there a word for that?
Amanda	Affect?
Donovan	Yeah. It just happened in the moment and I was just like, "There."
Amanda	Yeah. This is a word that I've started to really like as I've been thinking about the work that you guys have done is this idea of affect, which is exactly what you're talking about -- vibe is another good way to think about it -- it's like the core ingredients of what an emotion is, but before your brain or -- before you have time to process it -- it's just like that

feeling. When Mara and I were talking you were doing this a lot [making

a gesture with both hands simultaneously making circles in front of the

body]-- it's that kind of thing -- there's this -- it's before you have time to

process what's happening but it's that -- I wonder if that's the moment

when you decide to take a picture and when you don't? Like when you're

just taking candids and stuff. There's just something that moves you -- or

when you read a poem and you just read it and you think, "Oh," it's when

you have some kind of response to it and you might not be able to dissect

down to the nitty gritty.

Mara   You don't register right away, you're like, "I took this picture because it

felt," -- I don't know.

Donovan   You just get a feeling and then you're just there.

Mara   You don't even acknowledge it sometimes.

Amanda   Yeah.

Donovan   Yeah. You don't think in your head, you're not like, "I'm getting this

feeling right now," you just get that feeling and then do it and then after

you're like, "Oh."

Conclusion

Though it was not always clear at the time, the moments captured in these vignettes were

rich points that evolved to be the very heart of the study. The dynamic relations involved in

students' everyday literacies often confounded my ability to name what I was seeing using the

currently available formulations of literacies, as well as the theoretical and methodological tools

used to study them. As the research team found ourselves struggling to make sense of these

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relations, we were compelled to look for new tools to assist us. While the theoretical tools and

the pragmatic details of the methodological tools have previously been described, the following

chapter considers *how* the research group used those tools to deeply study the literacy

experiences captured in some of the photographs produced through the photoethnography

project.

CHAPTER 5 — THE EXPLORATION OF LITERACY EXPERIENCE(S):

PARTICIPANT ART-MAKING AS ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see.

There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest

can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible

that is hidden and the visible that is present.

— René Magritte

Introduction

As the epigraph by Magritte, above, suggests, this chapter will consider how Sylvia,

Donovan, Kate, and Mia sought to discover and account for the visible that remained hidden in

the images taken for the photoethnography project. After many weeks of discussion about the

corpus of photographs produced by the class, the research group decided that they wanted to

select a handful of photographs from the class projects that they found particularly compelling to

further study. Upon the failure of our vocabulary to account for what we learned in the process

of conducting the earlier stages of research, as demonstrated through the vignettes in the

previous chapter, we devised this art-making endeavor as a method for exploring the contours of

the literacy experiences depicted in/with the focal photographs. Once we could conceive of the

photographs as attempted representations of literacy experience that captured things that were

more-than-representational, art gave us a way to access or, in some instances, materialize some

of the participants in these literacy experiences. In an attempt to raise the various layers of

meaning that the group was seeing in and making with the images, we employed art-making as a

means of analysis. What emerges from this art-making and the talk the group did about the

artwork offers a look at complex literacy experiences which entail moving bodies, intense

relations, fractured timescales, unstable texts, and the students' implacable adaptation to the ever-shifting sense they made in/through/with the photographs they studied.

For the objects of their art-making analysis, both Donovan and Mia selected only their own photos to study while Sylvia and Kate selected their own photos as well as one photo each by another student. There were no specific parameters given for how the students might study the photographs through their art-making beyond a conversation we had in which we discussed the method. That conversation took place in a Starbucks and I shared with the students a small sample project I created using Maureen Michael's (2015) notion of "integrated imagework" (p. 70) as a starting point. The project that I completed utilized the same artistic techniques described in the ArtLab section of the chapter on methods, only on a much smaller (4" by 6") scale. For the transparencies, I used line drawings, painting, and written annotations in an attempt to materialize the meanings I was making in and with the photograph. I presented this as a sample of what we might do in order to study some of the photographs in-depth through art-making. The students really responded to the sample and fairly quickly decided to give the method a shot as our final analysis of the photographs. Though we discussed the fact that the students could do anything they wanted to do with the transparencies, or, as some of the students called them, slides, many of them took up the techniques that were in the sample I created. Therefore, most of the artwork that the students created with the photographs made use of line drawings, painting, and annotations. However, some of the students veered a bit from these more universal techniques by using texture, spray-paint, found materials, and eschewing annotations in order to highlight relations in idiosyncratic ways. Some of those choices were happenstance while others were part of what the students considered their individual style or aesthetic. It is also worth noting that Sylvia and Donovan completed their art pieces at my

house, together, during an art work-day we scheduled. Both Kate and Mia completed their art pieces on their own (after I delivered their requested materials to them) as their schedules did not permit them to come to the work-day. The fact that some students worked at the same time and others worked independently made their similarities and differences compelling.

To examine the students' art-making analyses, this chapter is organized to mirror the final meeting of ArtLab where each student presented their individual art pieces and the results of their analysis. So, the chapter unfolds in sections dedicated to each student and their work. Each section is multivocal with the focal student presenting their work, the other students discussing the work, my analytical voice, and my attempts at making-sense of what is produced by and through the relationship between these voices. It is also worth noting that the sections vary widely in length and in depth as each student's approach to the work, relative comfort and engagement in the conversation, and complexity of connection-building were in no way consistent.

Sylvia

Sylvia took a rather minimalist approach to her work in ArtLab. She elected to study two photographs, one of her own and one of Donovan's. For each work, she created two slides to overlay the photograph she was studying. These slides were done in a measured, modern style with Sylvia focusing her attention on a few meaningful details or ideas in the photograph. She did not attempt to capture everything that might be said or felt about the images, rather, she highlighted the relations that were the most salient to her at the time of the art-making.

Figure 13: Sylvia's subway tunnel art piece with the slides on top of the photo (left) and above the photo (right).

Three kids in the subway. The first piece that Sylvia created used one of her own photos as the subject of the work. It was a photograph of three young people sitting on a ledge in the defunct subway tunnels in Rochester. This location was a somewhat popular location for the students to take photos during the photoethnography project. In PhotoLab it was suggested that it was an obvious choice due to the copious amounts of graffiti in the tunnels which automatically insured thematic relevance with the "texts in lives" prompt for the project. Sylvia said that this was, in fact, the reason she had taken photos in the subway. She maintained, throughout the entirety of the project, that text was simply written words on a page and that she couldn't think of it any differently. And yet, she still raised relations that were not strictly alphabetic-based in her work and in her comments on her peers' work. This might appear to be an inconsistency in her view of text, however, Sylvia was perfectly comfortable holding both

ideas at the same time. When asked to provide a definition, she held to the traditional definition; but, when in conversation with the group about various facets of communication and other similar themes or in her creation of her artwork, she strayed far from this restrictive definition.

For the subway piece, each slide that Sylvia created to overlay the photograph was used primarily to demonstrate the relationship between her and the subjects in the photograph. On one slide there was a line drawing of all of the subjects in the photograph to highlight what was, to her, the most important element in the shot. Sylvia preferred this slide to be the first slide put on top of the photograph. She noted, "I like it when I put the outline one on first because then everyone is equal and then I put the thing that separates everyone." What separated everyone was the status of their relationship with Sylvia at the time that she did the art piece. Therefore, the next slide had textured, white "snow" surrounding each of the subjects on the outside of the group and a gold outline surrounding the subject in the middle. She said, "I put snow around people who I don't talk to anymore and then gold over Rose because I don't talk to her anymore [only because] she's in college." Kate responded to Sylvia's method for materializing relationships and attempted to explore the nuances of sense that were possible in the snow:

Kate	I think it's cool how the snow is around the people you don't talk to anymore because when I think of, like, snow, I think of being cold to someone or…
Sylvia	Yeah, it's a cold shoulder kind of thing.
Kate	Well also not to be morbid, but death…of the death of a friendship or something like that. And then gold is happy…

Amanda	I actually thought, before [Sylvia] said it was snow…I thought they were ashes, like it was burned to the ground and that they were sitting in a pile of ashes.
Sylvia	It has a similar meaning, so…

In this way, Sylvia searched for a visual metaphor to demonstrate the relations between her and the subjects in her photograph. At the outset of the project, they were all friends and were hanging out so she created a line drawing to communicate a unity between them; but, by the end, she was no longer friends with two of the people and used the snow and the gold to capture the rupture in the relationship. The slides might also be considered Sylvia's attempt to materialize the affective intensities that she experienced across different timescales in her relationships to the subjects in the photo and in her relationship to the photo itself.

It is also worth noting that Sylvia's intended meaning in the snow clearly communicated her feelings to both Kate and I, even though we all had different ideas about what we were seeing. To Sylvia, the snow evoked a cold shoulder while to Kate, it evoked a death of friendship. I didn't see snow at all, rather, ashes from a relationship that had burnt out. So, while the meaning largely maintained its stability through different viewings, the actual signifier of the meaning was somewhat unstable.

Donovan noted the serendipity regarding the composition of the photograph and began to tease out the implications:

Donovan	It's kind of funny how Rose is in the middle.
Sylvia	Yeah, that just worked out.
Donovan	If the gold person was on the left, it would be…
Sylvia	I would've done it differently if that was the case.

There is a sense that the past somehow cooperated or participated with a future reality through the composition of the photograph. In October, these three young people likely just sat down while they were exploring the tunnels, paying little to no attention to the order in which they sat. Yet, they somehow set up a perfectly symmetrical composition for Sylvia to create this beautifully balanced art piece in June. Even so, Sylvia noted that the composition of the photograph disciplined her choices as an artist and that a different composition—a different text—would have offered some other opportunities within the constraint of an imagined asymmetrical composition.

There was another moment that captured Sylvia's ambivalence about what *text* actually means. On the slide that had the snow and the gold line drawing, she made an annotation that made note of the words that were on the shirt of the guy on the left, "MY PASSION LIES IN MY OWN EARS". When she was describing the slide, Sylvia nonchalantly said, "then I just pulled out what his shirt said." Thinking that this might be another instance of Sylvia taking advantage of an element of the photograph which might underscore her relationships with the subjects, I asked her, "Why did you do that?" To which she replied, "because there was a neat little quote and text…this is life and text," and then moved on to the next element in the slide. She did not intend for the quote to carry any type of relational weight, though it could easily do so. Rather, she viewed the t-shirt as simply an instance where she could make note of the literal words that were present in the photograph. Sylvia also noted that she really liked the song that those lyrics were from and thought that was a "cool" element of the photo that they lyrics were present in it. I found it curious that she did not attempt to draw particular attention to the graffiti in the photograph. However, as previously noted, Sylvia's focus in this piece was to materialize relations confined to the human subjects in the photograph. When I noticed, verbally, to Sylvia

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that she did not highlight the graffiti she shared that she considered the graffiti to be part of the backdrop of the photograph more than the focal point and that what was most striking to her were the people in the picture and their relationships to her over time.

Figure 14: Sylvia's Wegmans art piece with the slides on top of the photo (left) and above the photo (right).

Wegmans' city. Sylvia's second art piece used one of Donovan's photographs from his photoethnography project. It is shot of an incredibly popular local grocery store, Wegmans. The architecture of the store itself has a very mid-century aesthetic and the lighting of the photo also evokes a certain 60's-advertisement-photo feeling, betrayed only by the types of cars in the parking lot. When I asked Sylvia why she chose this shot of Donovan's to work with in her art-making, she said, "it had a lot of open space I knew I could work on a lot for the project. And, honestly, I love Wegmans…this is actually my home Wegmans that I'm at every Sunday with

my mom." Her motivation for studying this photo was driven by the artistic opportunities that the composition offered her as well as a deep connection to the place—both Wegmans generally and this particular Wegmans specifically, as well as Rochester, the city her suburban town of Lakeside bordered. Sylvia's treatment of this photo is similar to her subway piece in that it is very focused and very stylistically modern. Her emphasis in this piece was to explore the idea of place and her relationship to/with her hometown, using Wegmans as an anchor.

Sylvia completed this piece at my house and when she finished it she told me that she wanted the slides to "look like a different picture" when viewed by themselves. On one slide, she used the negative space of the sky above the store to create a line drawing of an imagined city with the outline of the store and its windows to serve as a bridge. She also did line drawings of some of the cars from the parking lot, but only those that formed a straight line so that it "looked like a street". On the other slide, she used gold paint to create a sun, illuminate the windows in the city buildings, and to paint the Wegmans' sign.

Through her creation of an imagined city on the slides, Sylvia created an interesting juxtaposition between the urban and the virtually Platonic ideal of suburban life captured in Donovan's photograph. She told me that she wanted others that viewed the work to "be surprised" by the different visions of place that were offered by the slides and the photograph. It was important to her that an audience would be offered various ways to imagine the city and the urban/suburban (dis)junction through the different spaces and the way they were illuminated. When Sylvia presented this work to the group, she and Kate talked about these constructions of the real and imagined city:

Sylvia   And this is the lights of the city, showing two different perspectives of the same place.

Kate	I know that a lot of people are like, "Oh, Rochester is blah…" but this is so Rochester. I mean that in a really good way.
Sylvia	Wegmans is a huge part of my life; I love Wegmans.
Kate	Well, like, yeah…but even the city…that reminds me of the Kodak building.
Amanda	Me too.
Sylvia	I did that on purpose (said with sarcasm and followed by the group's laughter). This is Rochester's history.
Kate	So it looks very like…like you could tell it's somebody's hometown.

Though Sylvia did not intentionally draw the cityscape to match Rochester's skyline, the tallest building was evocative of the tallest building in Rochester, the Kodak Tower (see Figure 15 for reference). The city that Sylvia drew was, to her, simply a city of her imagining but the dominant structure in her imagined city is virtually identical to the dominant structure in her actual city. It may have been the case that the affective intensity produced through her connection of Wegmans to her home moved her to subconsciously draw the Kodak Tower in her imaginary cityscape. The weight of home, imbued in Wegmans, led to the real being blurred with the imagined as Sylvia drew her city.

Figure 15: A photograph of the Kodak Tower by Viktor Nagornyy. Licensed under Creative Commons.

Finally, Sylvia, as the first to present her work to the group, was the first person to suggest an idea that was taken up and spoken about by the other artists—that aesthetics is somehow independent of cognition. When she showed us the slide with the gold illuminations of the sun and the lights in the windows, I asked her what her motivation was for this move. She somewhat sheepishly responded:

Sylvia　　　　Yeah, it just shows…I'm going to be honest with you…I didn't have a

specific thought process but I just thought it added more light to the city.

Amanda	Was it just that you were kind of feeling it?
Sylvia	Yeah, I wanted it to look like it was lighting up. It didn't really look like that at the end in the windows because they are all kind of off but that's what I wanted it to look like. With the…like they were lighting up.
Mia	It makes it look pretty.
Amanda	It does. And I think it does look lit up, too.
Donovan	Yeah. The sun, I feel, matches the picture too. How, like, the photo is lit up. I mean, there's soft light about it so the sun kind of goes with it.

Sylvia noted that she didn't have a "specific thought process" but was just aiming for a specific aesthetic look. Mia affirmed this choice, saying that the lit up windows were pleasing and Donovan extended the conversation to the golden sun, suggesting that in adding it, Sylvia matched the original aesthetic of the photo. This move to separate aesthetic or artistic choices from "thinking" or other cognitive-based actions is one that is repeated by all of the artists and certainly warrants deeper consideration.

Donovan

Donovan elected to take a series of new photographs from which to select focal images for the ArtLab phase of the project. Though there were a handful of object-based or still life photos in Donovan's original photoethnographic self-study, a majority of his photos were portraits of friends. It was therefore no surprise when the new photos he took, including those he chose to be focal photographs in the art-making process, were all portraits. Donovan created four art pieces, all of which used his own photos. His work focused primarily on the human subjects in the photographs and his relationship to these subjects, both at the time the photograph was taken and at the time he was studying the photograph. In his talk about his artwork,

Donovan repeatedly referred to the people in the photographs and the various messages conveyed through their bodies. One idea that Donovan consistently invoked as being embedded in the portraits is *the zeitgeist*. This conceptualization of the zeitgeist was offered to the group by Donovan as a way of thinking about how the presence of cultural texts in/on bodies flowed powerfully through his (and other artists') portrait photographs. In addition to his relationships to the human subjects in the photos, these cultural texts were foregrounded in his coding of his focal photographs.

Donovan made use of the ubiquitous line drawing on his slides to highlight both people and objects he found to be important in the photographs. He liberally used paint in unique and evocative ways to gesture towards how he was reading the zeitgeist in the images. Donovan also wrote many verbal annotations on the slides to make notes, ask questions, add song lyrics, and convey his feelings about the subjects and settings of the photographs. In this way, Donovan sought to raise a wide variety of feelings and ideas that were part of his sense-making in/with/through the photographs in what seems to be his attempt at capturing everything that he deemed important.

Figure 16: Donovan's Jesus art piece with the slides on top of the photo (left) and above the photo (right).

The Jesus one. For the piece we took to calling The Jesus One, the reasons for which are outlined below, Donovan painted the board for the piece gold and created three slides for the photograph. One slide was painted gold, save for negative space he created so that the two human subjects in the photo might be seen when it was overlayed on the photo. The second slide was a line drawing of these human subjects and a few of the objects in the photo, like the central figure's flower crown and water bottle, as well as both girls' bags. The third slide had written annotations.

Donovan explained that, though he wasn't a religious person[26], he was "getting major

Jesus vibes" from this picture, hence the name of the piece that evolved. He suggested this was a

result of the warm, golden tone of the photograph and the way the figure at the center, his friend

Chloe, was lit by the sun, "it hits her right in the head and everything else just glows from it."

Add to that the crown of flowers on her head and Donovan was instantly put in mind of religious

iconography, particularly from the Renaissance. He said of his related art-making decisions:

> I spray painted this whole thing gold. Aesthetically, mostly. There really wasn't that
>
> much purpose. Except something is really religious about this to me. Chloe looks like
>
> Jesus. Sylvia looks like Judas. Like very Renaissance. Her crown looks like the crown
>
> of thorns.

Apart from his reading the photograph as religious, it is worth noting that Donovan, here,

tried to separate intentionality from aesthetics, suggesting that his artistic decisions were

different than well-thought-out cognitive decisions. The lighting, the flower crown, and the

composition acted together with/on Donovan such that he created his slides according to his

"vibes". And, even as he was declaring there was no purpose in his choice to paint one of the

slides and the whole board gold, he began to list reasons for his approach that might be construed

as a description of his purposeful choices. However, to him, painting "the whole thing gold"

seemed to be more about feeling, or, I might suggest, more about experiencing affective

intensities, than it was about cognition. He felt "major Jesus vibes" and just grabbed the gold

spray paint.

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[26] Donovan and I had discussed this earlier in the project when he shared a bit about his upbringing. His parents moved to the United States from Bosnia several years before his birth to flee all of the unrest in that region. He thought their experiences of living under dictatorships and seeing the harm caused by unyielding dogma led them to raise him in a way that appreciated difference in all its forms. This conversation was very present to me during his discussion of this piece, though neither he nor I brought it up at that time. This bit of his history, though, I see deeply impacting his sense-making with this particular piece.

In addition to the religious meaning that Donovan made of/with the photograph, he also noted several other cultural messages contained in the image which he largely raised through his verbal annotations. Speaking of Sylvia, the other subject in the photo:

Donovan　　So, she was giving me *Pulp Fiction* vibes because I always said that with her pink hair she reminds me of Mia…?

Sylvia　　That doesn't make sense[27].

Donovan　　I know. Mia Wallace! She reminds me of Mia Wallace so much. I don't know why. The pink hair doesn't make sense. I think it's just how it is cut?

For reasons he could not fully account for, he read Sylvia as a character from a film though, arguably, the actual resemblance between her and Mia Wallace was not particularly obvious. In this way, the relations between Sylvia and Mia Wallace were actually rather nonsensical, but still produced in Donovan a particular reading of the image as containing a cultural referent to/from *Pulp Fiction*.

Sylvia's pink hair was part of another element of the zeitgeist that Donovan coded in his focal photographs—fashion. He was very in tune with the ways that people were dressed and commented that fashion and/or personal aesthetic was another way that cultural texts are communicated through bodies. Though there was no formal system for noting when the sartorial aesthetic of a subject qualified for zeitgeist status, Donovan knew it when he saw it. One barometer he seemed to use was considering how the photograph might be viewed in ten or twenty years. If the style in the photograph was distinct enough that it might seem "weird" to a person in another time, then Donovan deemed it to be an indicator of the zeitgeist.

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[27] The character of Mia Wallace in *Pulp Fiction* has jet black hair.

In describing this piece, Donovan also referenced the notion of a Golden Age of life through his annotations. He noted this as he circled back to the gold paint he used on the wood and on one of the transparency layers, "Gold was a big color of [that] summer for me. Golden Age of my life is how I describe it. I guess I might have another Golden Age of my life…I don't know." The trope of the Golden Age of youth was present in all of the artwork that Donovan created. He incorporated gold paint in all of them. All of his pieces were made during the summer after he graduated from high school and before he went off to college and the force of that nostalgia streamed through the ways that he treated each of the photographs in his artwork. In this particular piece, there were several written annotations that sought to capture Donovan's nostalgia. It is worth noting that when Donovan presented this piece to the group and drew our attention to these types of annotations, he always verbally hedged as a means to somewhat distance himself from his own emotions, as evidenced in the following description he provided:

> Then I wrote, "The start of an exciting and one of the best summers," because I'm corny. (laughter) It was a really great summer. This summer was a big milestone in a lot of things because it's me starting college and the end of high school and me and Sylvia and Chloe basically just started becoming best friends during that time. Also it was a really stressful summer too because of work and dealing with college stuff and I'm like not being able to see those thots[28] anymore. (laughter) Oh I was corny, I wrote "My best friends; I miss them."

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[28] This is pronounced th/aw/t and is an acronym that means "that hoe over there". The word came out of the Chicago hip-hop scene with many suggesting that videographer Duan Gaines is the one who began its popular use on social media like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. As Donovan was an avid user of these platforms, my assumption is that this is where he learned the term, though that was never confirmed. Donovan was the only student in the study who used it as a word in his oral language and he did so, often, as a term of endearment, a move that inverted its generally understood meaning.

In front of the whole research group, he struggled to fully own his emotions around the nostalgia produced through his relationship with the photographs, but shared with the group the ways in which these photographs produced a lot of feelings for him.

Figure 17: Donovan's Lolita art piece with the slides on top of the photo (left) and above the photo (right).

Lolita. This piece was Donovan's favorite. The photo was a portrait of his friend Emma on an afternoon that they were sunbathing on her roof. He said that when he saw the first prints from this roll of film, that he knew that he would use this image for the project. Donovan called this the Lolita picture because there was something in it that evoked that story for him. He never fully described the exact nature or explanation for this impression, but, much like his response to the Jesus photo, he made a rather instant connection between the image and the character. He finished this piece at my house and told me a bit about it just after it was completed:

Donovan	It (the photo) reminded me of *Lolita* so much. Even though *Lolita* has, like, the grossest themes in the world, at the same time, it is kind of like, about innocence and youth and, I mean, disgusting, again, like, the sexual themes in it…
Amanda	…but it's an innocence, a loss of innocence…
Donovan	Exactly.

The connection was somewhat uncomfortable to Donovan due to the nature of *Lolita*'s distressing plot which entails the sexualization of a child and pedophilia. He struggled to explain the relationship between the photo and the book, making several asides to distance himself from the sexual themes in *Lolita* that he found troublesome. It is interesting to note that when Donovan presented this piece to the whole research group, he did not initiate the conversation about *Lolita* even though it was the strongest connection he made when he created the piece. The relationship between the photo and the book came up, instead, rather indirectly as he discussed some of his artistic choices on the slides.

Donovan's artistic choices on Lolita were somewhat unusual for him. On the first slide, he began with a line drawing of Emma which evolved into a fairly intricate painting. Donovan always said that he wasn't very good at "art…like, with my hands" like painting and drawing, saying he was far more confident about his photography skills. Yet in Lolita, his favorite piece, he did a very intensive painting. As noted above, Donovan was at my house when he created this piece and I observed his process, which I asked about when he was done, "How did the painting come to be? Why did you do it?" To which he replied, "I don't know… I just did my line drawing and thought, like, 'I don't know…let me just play around with this' and then, this came out! And I'm so happy!" The painting surprised Donovan, even while he was doing it. As

he reflected on the process, he kept trying to find his way to an explanation for the painting. Both when we spoke on the day he completed the piece and on the day he presented the piece to the whole research group, Donovan noted that the painting might have evolved out of his intention to make the photo look like images from *Lolita*. However, there was some slippage when it came to which image he was seeking to reference and the level of his certainty about his own intentions varied.

When we spoke on the day he completed the piece, he was noting that he was pleased with the style and the simplicity of the color scheme. Donovan said, "There's no real specific reason I picked out the color except red because Lolita. Maybe that's why I did it. I wanted to make it look more like the *Lolita* poster." Here he experiments with the idea that he was painting the photo to look like the poster for the *Lolita* film. He isn't fully certain that this is what he intended, but offers it as a possibility. When he presented the piece to the research group, the subject came up again when Sylvia asked him about his choice of colors:

Sylvia   Why did you make the sunglasses red when they weren't red?

Donovan   I know. Wait. Why?

Sylvia   I said I like that you did that.

Donovan   Yeah, me too. Because I was looking for the Lolita look. I was

              thinking—it reminds me—the picture of her reminds me of the *Lolita*

              movie…not the movie cover, but the book cover.

Here, Donovan spoke with much more confidence about his intention. He was no longer experimenting with the idea that the purpose of the painting was to gesture towards images of *Lolita*, rather, he cemented that idea as his intention. Yet instead of committing to drawing a connection between the photo and *Lolita* the film, as he did initially, he shifts to a connection

between the photo and the cover of the *Lolita* book. It seems that the relationship between the

photo and *Lolita* persisted over time, but the exact nature of this relationship was unstable.

Another unstable relation that Donovan noted was the relationship between this piece and

other works of art that might have served as inspiration for his approach. The day he completed

the piece, I mentioned that it reminded me of those ubiquitous paintings in the 80s by Thomas

Nagle[29]. Though he had never heard of Nagle and was not even alive in the 80s, he referenced

this in his presentation to the group. My personal connection, which in many ways would have

been nonsensical to him, became part of his connection to the piece too. However, he layered his

own meaning with mine:

Donovan	(to me) What is it called? What is it called again? Who is the artist who did these?
Amanda	Thomas Nagle
Donovan	Thomas Nagle
Amanda	But you got to it…you did that on your own.
Donovan	Yeah. TBH, because, when I saw Thomas Nagle's thing, I literally was like, "It's not exactly what I did but it definitely is…"
Kate	Reminiscent.
Donovan	Yes. Reminiscent.
Amanda	It evokes that.
Donovan	Yeah. Also, I was looking back at my Instagram and I think I was

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[29] I had to look up the artist as I couldn't remember his name, but certainly remembered the paintings.

actually subconsciously inspired by this one picture (see Figure 18) I saw

at the 6x6 show[30] and it was sort of like the same thing; I think it was

inspired by Thomas Nagle—is that his name?

Figure 18: A screen shot of Donovan's post on Instagram of the 6x6 piece he thought subconsciously inspired him.

At the time of Donovan's painting, he had no conscious awareness of why he was doing it. He

had just decided to "play around" and see what happened. During this play, however,

subconscious connections were being made and Donovan was acting upon them, unaware, until

he revisited his Instagram account at another time and for another purpose. Thus, the sense he

was making was fractured across several different timescales and across several different

persons. My connection to Nagle, Donovan's connection to the 6x6 artist, and the 6x6 artist's

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[30] The 6x6 show was a popular art show and local gallery fundraiser in the city. Anyone can submit a 6 inch by 6 inch art piece to the gallery and they will show it and sell it. Every piece is the same price and the artists are all anonymous until after the pieces have all been sold as the artists sign the back of their work. You may have bought a piece by a 4-year-old or a famous artist…you never know until it is all over.

imagined connection to Nagle all joined together to participate in the inspiration of Donovan's painting, but only after it was completed.

Kate

As previously noted, Kate completed her pieces independently. In some ways, she took a very different approach than the other artists. She did individual analyses on each photograph but also developed an overall theme, seeing the three pieces she created as a series. She titled this series *Viewing as Artist!* and created a title slide[31] on the first piece (see Figure 19). Kate signed her own name, which I've obscured to preserve her anonymity, and left a blank space to include the name of the photographer whose picture she analyzed in the first piece, Aria. To unify the series, Kate wrote the word *remember,* in gold, on a slide for each piece:

> I put *remember* on all of them just because it was representative of all of the memories
>
> that go into a picture that you take. When I was thinking about text in photos I was
>
> thinking about how even though I didn't take this picture, my theme was viewing a
>
> picture as the artist, even if, in this case, I'm not the artist necessarily. Everybody that

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[31] This title slide brought up a difficulty that we had run into a handful of times previously in the project: how can these young people take credit for their artwork in the context of a project where their identities have to be protected as part of IRB requirements?

Kate	This is the cover page for it and I'm going to have Aria sign this (too) because she took this picture and so I named my series *Viewing as Artist!* and…
Amanda	I love it.
Kate	…and so I used tape and I spray painted it off because gold was also like a reoccurring theme in mine.
Sylvia	Wait. You put your name on it?
Kate	Yeah. I'm going to do Aria (thinking Sylvia is calling into question her taking credit for Aria's photo).
Sylvia	Is that going to be an issue with the fake name thing?
Amanda	We'll figure it out. Don't worry.
Donovan	She'll Photoshop it (laughing).

And, as you can see in Figure 6, I did manipulate the image so Kate's real name is illegible. But, as a group, we wondered if that was actually useful to them or not. As young artists, they wanted people to know who they were and to see the work they did. Our compromise was that they signed the backs of their art pieces and that once the project website was live, though I would use their pseudonyms, they could direct anyone they wanted to the site and take credit for their work. This was one element of the research process that we all struggled to know how to find our way through together.

sees something sees it differently. So having that on each of the transparencies

represented all the different things associated with a picture.

Kate's invocation of *remember* was a cue to the those that might view her work to attend to all

that is immaterial and non-representational that accumulates in/through the material image

captured in the photograph itself. She suggested that, to an artist, an image is always more than

it is. At this, I imagined the image, speaking in the voice of Whitman, "I am large. I contain

multitudes," (1855, line 8, part 51). And yet, Kate was also careful to point out the importance

of individual vision—that the multitudes contained in the image have something to do with the

relationships forged between particular artists, art, and viewers across times and spaces.

Kate's work also differed from her peers in that none of her focal photographs were of

human subjects. This difference is noteworthy as every focal photograph used by every one of

her fellow researchers had a living subject (8 of humans, 1 of a dog). Kate, however, chose

various still life photos to analyze and therefore raised very different relations than were apparent

in the work of Sylvia, Donovan, and Mia. It was also apparent that there was a different

intensity to Kate's sense-making which was, perhaps, a product of her personality, her artistic

vision of *viewing*, her selection of still life photos, her independent art-making, and any variety

of other things that remain invisible to me and, possibly, her. This intensity will likely become

clear in the coming sub-sections that focus on Kate's work. I am diverging a bit from the

multivocality present in the other artists' sections with Kate's voice being more dominant here.

She had such a strong vision and presented it to the group with such clarity, it felt right to really

honor her story as she was so intentional in presenting it to us.

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Figure 19: Kate's factory art piece with the slides on top of the photo and the cover page on the side (top) and the plain photo (bottom).

Abandoned factory. As noted above, the photo of the abandoned factory was taken by Aria for her photoethnography project. Kate was friends with Aria and sat next to her in photo class so it was likely that she was able to see this photo even before Aria shared her project with the class. Kate was drawn to working with this photo because she loved abandoned buildings, though, it was important to her for us to understand that her love was somehow special or different:

> I love abandoned buildings and not the way that every 16-year-old loves abandoned
>
> buildings, so I feel like there's so—and obviously this isn't, like, a very individual
>
> thought—but I think there's so much mystery to them and especially because buildings
>
> like this a lot of times you can break into them pretty easily and they are accessible so
>
> you can explore. I just love abandoned buildings. Just the reason—I'm sure a lot of
>
> people go into, like, Terrance Tower because it's like, "Oh my god, I'm going to break
>
> into this building and it's an insane asylum and it's so creepy." But, for me, it's that
>
> there's a story and it's so cool to look at it and imagine what was there.

The still life photograph of the abandoned factory, for Kate, offered a mystery made all the more compelling because she did not get to physically explore it. She knew that the factory was "where they made the World War II boats" but that was the extent of her knowledge. The photograph was her only experience of the factory and she used her art-making as an opportunity to experiment with possible stories and imagined histories of the place.

Kate created only one slide in addition to the cover page on which she included all of her annotations. This slide was made up of single-word provocations, including the *remember* that ties all of the pieces together, as well as a difficult-to-see circle around one of the objects in the photo, a chair against the wall in the background. Kate's choice of words was playful and she

made use of irony, juxtaposition, and metaphor in an attempt to materialize the mystery of the factory's history. On the two big, circular objects in the foreground of the photograph she wrote *thirst* on one and *clean* (with the word split to look like it was written repeatedly around the circumference) on the other. Kate imagined that these objects were "wash basins" or "vintage things where you stepped on the bottom and the water came out." So, she chose those words "because it's kind of like this irony thing because obviously they are trashed and this is bone dry." By drawing attention to the current state of the basins by labeling them with words noting the opposite, Kate raised both the possible history of the basins being clean and providing water as well as imbuing them with a kind of longing for the usefulness and vitality of their past life.

Kate also wrote *splash* along the wall on the right side of the photograph. She offered a detailed explanation for this choice:

> I put *splash* on this low wall tile thing for a couple of reasons. First, I think it goes with the water theme that I had here with the faucets and then also this reminded me of a backsplash in a kitchen. And then, the colors on the tiles—you can tell they used to be really vibrant and I thought it was interesting because I was thinking about when they were building this building for the first time and how everything based on the other pictures that she (Aria) had of this building…you can tell that initially when they were made, they were kind of boring, whatever, and that I saw that—I felt like when they put in these tiles it was like a splash of color, "Oh my god, like, this is so bright and so fun". Yellow and red tiles…and now it's literally trash. I thought it was funny that it was this little colorful thing that was supposed to be whatever and now it's a sad building.

Kate made use of multiple meanings of the word *splash* as she connected them to the tiled wall in the factory. *Splash* provided a coherence to her commentary on the wash basins by similarly

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evoking water. She then connected the colored tiles in the factory to her own life and her experience with the familiar, mundane backsplash in kitchens she has been in. Though Kate didn't specifically mention it, I wondered if this connection was also produced through her focus on elements that evoke water in the photo since backsplashes are thus named because they are the area behind a sink that might get wet due to splashing water. Kate moved on to discuss the idea that the tiles might have offered the designers of the building an opportunity to incorporate a "splash of color" into an otherwise monotone space. She created a story in which the yellow and red tiles offer brightness and fun. And, while this is a lovely imagined history, it is likely not a realistic one. The scarcity of resources during the interwar period combined with the somber nature of manufacturing war ships and the often difficult conditions of factory work lead me to believe that the choice of those tiles had little to do with brightness. I imagine an alternative history in which yellow and red tiles were the cheapest ones available and thus purchased based on their economy rather than their whimsy. However, Kate's story of a "splash of color" history offered a compelling juxtaposition not only to the present condition of the space but also to what one might assume to be the "real" story behind the tiles.

The last word Kate wrote was *why* on the ceiling and connected this to the circle she drew around the chair in the back of the photo. These annotations served as placeholders for all of the questions that Kate had about this room, the factory, and abandoned buildings in general:

> *Kate*   This I just put *why* on the ceiling because when I see buildings like this—
> what happened here? So many questions. Who was the last person to be
> in this building that worked here or that when this was a real thing? Then
> I circled, you can't really see it, but I circled this chair in the background
> because it was like—why is there a chair there?

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Sylvia	Is it a nice chair? Is it put together?
Kate	No, it's just a metal chair and especially since I wasn't there, it's like, was that chair from when this building was a thing? Did somebody bring a chair into this building? How come all this is falling apart and there' this chair here? Why is that there?
Donovan	Symbolism from corporate America (sarcastically).
Kate	(laughing) Yeah.
Donovan	Deep.
Amanda	So deep.

With one word and one object, Kate suggested the myriad questions she had that arose from the factory and other buildings like it. To her, they were deeply affective spaces. Kate made sense of/with this space by bringing into relationship herself, the room, the objects in the room as they are, the objects in the room as she imagined them to be in the past, the people who used this space, the people who designed this space, and the stories embedded in all of these things.

Donovan suggested another idea that the photo produced for/with him that immediately connected for Kate:

Donovan	The thing that was cool was the concept of how nature always reclaims. How everything is growing back in.
Kate	Especially with mold and moss and stuff. That's what I love. This sounds kind of off topic, but my entire life I've always known that the way I want to be buried is that once I was listening to this radio show and they were talking about how there's this place in England where people can be buried where it's just their body and they are put with all of these—not

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preservatives, but natural…like the way they are curated after they die—

you are just put in the ground. You're not in a coffin and not in anything.

I like the idea of being put into the earth. That's what it reminds me of

when I see abandoned buildings. It also reminds me of *Avatar* when they

put them in the vines, or, how people are buried with their guitars and

stuff…like, how they are in their home.

Donovan's comment provided Kate with an opportunity to talk her way to other feelings and

ideas that were produced in/through her relationship to abandoned buildings. The wildness of

nature reclaiming previously developed spaces evoked in Kate an imagined future of her own

death and burial. This future existed, for Kate, alongside the imagined past and stories of the

building "when it was a real thing" as well as evoking the cultural referent of the film *Avatar*,

another imagined future, centuries hence, on an alien planet. Despite the disparate time scales,

all of these imaginings existed in the present with Kate as she was making sense of/with Aria's

photo.

Figure 20: Kate's bedroom art piece with the slides on top of the photo (left) and above the photo (right).

Bedroom. One of the photographs that Kate included in her photoethnography project was a picture of her bedroom at the time. She noted that the room looked a bit messy and that was her motivation for studying the photo, saying,

> Someone just looks at this picture and it's just a messy room so I literally went through
> and I analyzed the crap out of it to say, *this isn't just a messy room*! Like, all of these
> things have all of these…meanings.

It was very important for Kate that someone looking at this photograph would have an opportunity to understand her experience of viewing it as the artist, and as the young woman who lived in the midst of all of these *things* and the sense she made with/through them. This was the only piece that Kate heavily annotated; and, the piece that she shared the most about as she

talked the research group through the annotations. This piece also produced an intensity in the room we were all in when Kate shared it. As she told stories about various objects in her room, it was like there was some kind of affective transfer…that her talk brought the affective pull of the objects in her room into my living room. It was quite extraordinary and is difficult to capture in words. However, I will make liberal use of the transcript in this section so that the reader might have the opportunity to enter into the experience of listening to Kate describing her old bedroom.

Kate created two slides for this piece. The first was full of the aforementioned annotations of objects in the room made up primarily of labels that either described the object, Kate's feelings about the object, or a memory associated with the object. Kate painted the second slide and included the gold *remember*, however, on this piece, she included a question mark so that it read *remember?*. She decided that she would walk us through the slide with all of the annotations first.

Much of what Kate raised through her annotations had to do with the affective weight accrued in the material objects in her life. She drew our attention to the pair of pants in the foreground of the photo which were outlined by little lines and the annotation "I lost these pants". Kate said:

> I lose everything and it's a very frustrating thing for me because I don't…I get really
>
> frustrated with the fact that I lose everything. My parents and my family will see it as me
>
> being irresponsible and it's just that I put things down and I never find them again. So,
>
> these pants…this is the last time I ever saw these pants.

The lost pants, simply through their absence, were an index for Kate of her struggles with her identity and with the growing pains of becoming an adult. Losing things produced a lot of

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frustration for her, yet, she still always lost things. She did not want to be irresponsible, or, at least, she did not want to appear irresponsible but it seemed as if she could not help but losing things. Sometimes, she was not the one at fault for losing things. Kate told us that the purse in the foreground of the photo was stolen out of her mom's car, though she didn't know why. She labeled it with what it typically contained, the debris of living—"paychecks, food, trash". Kate was confounded by why someone would steal her "crappy ass purse because they literally left other things in the car and they took the purse. What are you doing? There was $10 in it. I don't know what they wanted. But they left my calculator…it was in the middle of the street! I was like, 'you could've sold that'." And then there were the things that Kate "lost" on purpose. She drew our attention to a tiny sliver of pattern at the bottom of the photo which were another pair of pants that she didn't have anymore because she got rid of them:

> there's this little inkling of these pants that I used to own that never fit. I got them from Archimage and I held onto them for like…do you have pieces of clothing that you hold onto for so long because you think, "I'm going to wear this; I'm going to make it work", because you bought it and you're like, "I'm going to use it."

When Kate shared this, it seemed that these pants were offered as a counterpoint or juxtaposition to the pants that had been lost. Some things she may lose track of…but other things, she held on to quite tightly. In fact, she suggested that perhaps she sometimes held on too tightly to some of the objects in her life.

Kate spoke of her snow globe collection that was in a drawer on the floor in the background of the photo "because they can't fit anywhere". She was going to move past this annotation quickly, but Mia, who was often silent, interrupted her:

> *Mia*   What are the snow globes of?

Kate	I have snow globes from everything. I have a couple from when I was baptized, when I went to Disney World, different family vacations. My friends went through a phase where they all got me snow globes because they knew I was collecting them.
Mia	I have one from every state. Either I went there or my dad does business trips.
Kate	I kind of wish I could still collect them but there's nowhere I can put them.

Mia joining Kate in her love of snow globes revealed the desire she had to keep collecting them and perhaps explained why she had held on to the ones she had. She actually liked them but there was simply no room for them. Similarly, Kate shared her love for the ugly chair in the photo that she labeled "I can't let go". Kate share that she had drug that chair into every room she had since sixth grade, no matter how small the room was, to save it from her mom's desire to either get rid of it or get it reupholstered. Kate said, "I'm so protective of this chair for no reason." When I asked if there was a specific memory tied to the chair or what her relationship to the chair was, Kate shared, "It reminds me of the apartment and there's so little that I have left from that apartment and it was this whole different part of my life and so it just reminds me of my childhood." For Kate, the chair had an affective pull as it was a material artifact from her remembered childhood. I, like Kate, am the child of divorced parents and felt deeply moved as she shared this comment, even though she said it quickly and then, in the same breath, moved on to the next annotation, "…reminds me of my childhood. (beat) I wrote that I can hear the football games…" There was an element of longing and loss that was entangled in the relationship between Kate, the chair, the apartment of her childhood, and Kate's memories of a time in her

life of which "there's so little…left". This chair was, for Kate, a way to keep something of her childhood, of another life, present with her in a new place and time by sustaining her relationship with the chair and all the meaning it had accrued. The intensity of this relationship, though, seemed too great for Kate to bear in that moment. She moved on quickly, talking about football games, incense, shitty see-through curtains, and her cat who she "gave a little thought bubble and wrote 'over it' because my cat is a bitch". And though running through this list of annotations lightened some the heaviness in the air after Kate's comments about the chair, it did not last long as some of the same subjects returned when she discussed what was seemingly the most innocuous element of the room—the paint on the walls:

> Here, I wrote *I remember who painted these walls* because my mom's ex-boyfriend, her boyfriend at the time, painted my room for me. And, I have a lot of negative memories associated with him so, like, it was always really weird that he had painted this room. And it's weird looking back on it now because I actually painted this over with Daniel (Kate's former boyfriend). And it was really emotional for me, like, painting it over because he's (Kate's mom's ex) not alive any more…so it was really weird to be painting over it. So, like, looking at this picture, not only is this not my room anymore but…it's just…like, it's kind of eerie to me. Looking at it. So I wrote that on there because something so small made me feel weird about it.

At this point there was a very heavy feeling in the room that somehow even seems palpable when listening to the transcript. The research group was silent for a second and then conversation picked up quickly with a question from Sylvia that evolved into what might be described as comic relief, offering a break from the intensity in the room:

> *Sylvia*   Did you write about that or no?

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Kate	Well, I wrote, *I remember who painted these walls* and then…
Donovan	That sounds like a song.
Sylvia	It does. So mysterious.
Amanda	That's a perfect start to a poem or song lyrics or…
Kate	Yeah.
Donovan	I can see The Fray singing that…(everyone laughing)
Sylvia	(overlapping; singing) …I remember who painted these walls…

(everyone laughing)

Kate	And on that note, this is going to make it sound like I'm trying to be so emo about my old room but I put…
Donovan	This is pretty emo…
Sylvia	I'm the expert. EmoGirl123 on Snapchat, that's me. I would give this 8 out of 10 emo points
Kate	Emo points (laughing)…
Amanda	That's good though! There's nothing wrong with that!
Sylvia	I already broke my iPhone screen already.
Kate	You did not.
Sylvia	Yeah, I did.
Kate	And so it felt like I put the *remember* on here again because this one really resonated with the theme…

This conversation seemed to serve as a way to create some relief from the affective intensities

and strong feelings produced through Kate's story about the paint. It is Kate herself that makes

the first move away from the seriousness of the conversation by preemptively hedging about the

"emo" nature of her next comment. This break opens up a space for some joking that metabolizes some of the energy produced through the intensity while also avoiding talk of real feelings. When I suggest that there is nothing wrong with real feelings, Sylvia shifts the conversation completely to a totally new subject without skipping a beat by talking about breaking her new phone. Perhaps because she was able to have some respite from the intensity, Kate launched back into the comments that she thought might make her sound "so emo" about her old room with the "And so…". She shared with us about the second slide and what she had painted:

> And, just because there are so many weird or negative or nostalgic things, I put gray paint which… And so, I put…they're up here to make it look like the sky. And, more emo lyrics that aren't lyrics, I put *I felt like the dark clouds were following* and I was going to put *me* but I didn't have room. Because every time I look at this room or I remember the feeling of being in this room, it just felt like…like, I feel like when I moved rooms it was a new chapter or something. So, it was weird that I associate this room with my weird eighth grade, early high school whatever. So, it just feels like there are dark clouds in this room. So, I put them there.

The painting of the clouds, then, was Kate's attempt to materialize the affective intensity that she herself experienced when she was in her old room. Language failed to capture the essence of what Kate hoped to communicate as she invoked her memory and her feelings in the annotations. As she was talking about the piece, the best she could do with her language was to use the word *weird* which she did quite often. *Weird* could not quite contain all the sense and affective intensities that Kate was trying to convey and so she painted the clouds as a way to try to better demonstrate what *weird* was actually like for her. Kate hoped that the clouds could help viewers

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of the work more fully understand how the objects in her room are loaded with affective intensity and produce for her feelings of frustration, love, nostalgia, melancholy, sadness, confusion, and loss. So much so that she said, "the clouds I felt like they had to be touching something because it's like clouds all over everything".

Mia

Like Kate, Mia completed her art pieces independently so her presentation of them to the research group was the first opportunity that any of us had to see them and engage with them. Both photographs discussed here are similarly framed and very technically proficient portraits. Mia selected portraits of "people that are important" to her and used art-making as a way to enhance the aesthetics of the photographs and to explore her own process of seeing. It also seemed that through the art-making process, Mia was working through an exploration of her relationship to/with the subjects of the photograph. She made no comments to this effect, however, some of her artistic choices certainly provoked questions about her intentions for the work.

Figure 21: Mia's Rosie art piece with the slides on top of the photo (left) and above the photo (right).

Rosie. "So, this is my child," Mia said by way of introduction to her first piece. She told us that she views the dog, Rosie, as her baby which is why she said that she chose photos of "people" who were important to her. Mia also shared with us the story of how Rosie got her name:

Mia	I had this stuffed dog since I was four and I named her *Rosie* because my sister got her from her ex-boyfriend on Valentine's Day…so now it's her ex but then it was her boyfriend. The next day they had an argument so I took this stuffed dog and it smelled like roses so I wanted to call her Rosie
Sylvia	That's adorable.

Mia	And I still have that stuffed animal in my room. So three years ago—no, it was two years ago—for my 16th birthday, my parents surprised me with her because my other dog passed away.
Sylvia	Does it look like the stuffed animal?
Mia	It did when her ears were flipped like puppy ears.
Amanda	Puppy ears?
Mia	I was like, "What should we name it?" and they were like, "Rosie" and I (group laughter) because they remembered…but then my mom was like, "It just came to me. I don't know why I thought of Rosie." And I said, "my stuffed animal." And she was like, "Right!"
Amanda	Interesting that it was in there…
Mia	…but she couldn't remember why.

When Mia looked at this portrait of Rosie, she saw not only her "baby" but also all the accumulated memories connected with her dog—an old stuffed animal, an old love of her sister's, and the distinct smell of roses. These reverberations across time were powerful not only for Mia, but also for Mia's mother who, without conscious awareness, connected the new puppy to the 12-year-old stuffed animal and suggested the same name. In the piece Mia created, both her story and her mother's story were layered together to provide the group with what Mia called "the background". She thought that Rosie's origin story was significant for our viewing of the piece. It helped to set up the ways in which Rosie was "important" to Mia and also demonstrated how, in this piece, the meaning that Mia made with/in the piece was fractured across different

timescales and dispersed through both her and her mother's memory as well as various objects like her sister's 2001 Valentine's roses and stuffed animal.

Mia created two slides for her study of Rosie. The first was a line drawing of the dog which Sylvia complemented by saying, "I feel like you're the first one to do the outline successfully on the dog picture." As was the case with all of the artists, Mia used the line drawing as a way of highlighting the subject of the photo. Interestingly, since Mia's photographs were rather close-up portraits, the subject of the photo was fairly obvious. Yet, she still completed a line drawing. The second slide was used to highlight and balance the colors that were present in the photograph as well as to add some texture. The first color to come up was the gold which ended up being in every artists' work:

Sylvia	Why did you pick gold?
Kate	Why did any of us pick gold?
Mia	For the grass lit up…I didn't want to pick yellow because I think yellow is a really ugly color.
Amanda	Yeah…it wouldn't come out good.
Mia	And I think gold kind of works because it makes her stand out more in the picture.
Amanda	The way the lighting is…
Sylvia	…It looks like sunlight…
Kate	She looks very, "When will my husband return from war?" I love it.
Mia	And she's normally not like this. So many people—I posted this picture on Facebook and so many people are like, "That's not her,"

because in any other pictures—if I showed you guys the bloopers,

she's like dying on the floor…

Kate   She looks very majestic.

[brief conversation about dogs sneezing]

Mia   So I used gold just because it reminded me how she looks like a

queen.

Mia described using the gold to draw attention to the original lighting of the photo, with the sun illuminating the grass behind Rosie, as well as to make a statement about the way Rosie looked regal. This "majestic" look, for Mia, was a complete anomaly to typical Rosie and stood in sharp juxtaposition to the usual "dying on the floor" look of Rosie. Using the gold paint was a way for Mia to materialize Rosie's queenly aura while working with the palette provided by the original photograph.

Similarly, Mia also painted the sky blue, the trees green, and the remainder of the grass green. She also used a green, textured powder to add dimension to the grass. She noted that "grass is a part of my life" and "in every single picture there's grass", so she used various methods in her art pieces for bringing dimensionality to the grass. In each art piece, she studied the grass with different mediums—the green powder, green paint, green Sharpie outlines, and, in one of her pieces, blades of real grass. This exploration of the textures of landscapes, particularly in the Rosie piece, evoked van Gogh to me. He used an earthy palette and used brushstroke techniques to study the textural qualities of landscapes (see Figure 22 for an

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example) which was similar to the painted slide in Mia's study of Rosie.
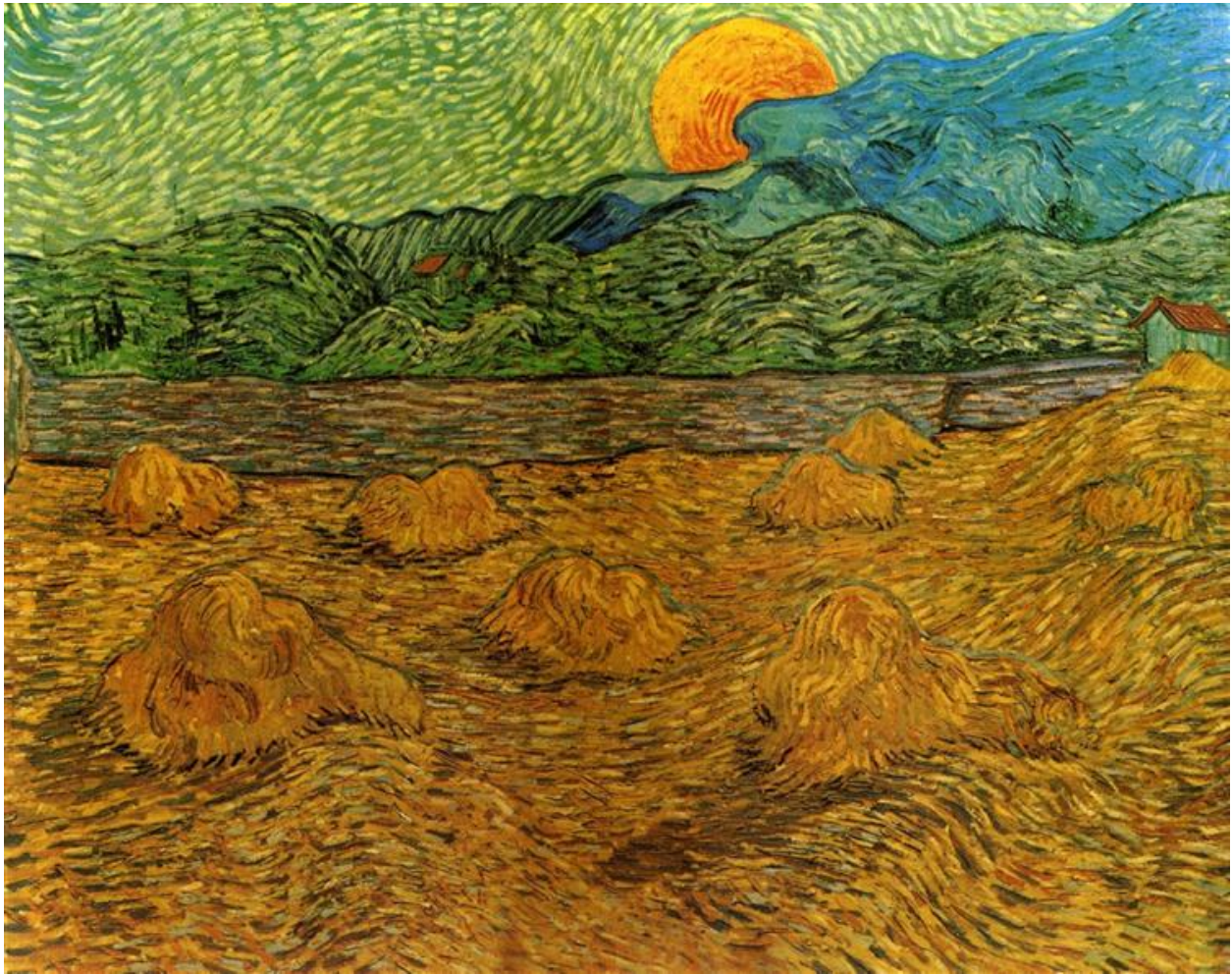
Figure 22: Vincent van Gogh's Evening Landscape with Rising Moon, 1889.

Mia also highlighted the white circle she painted and added white powder to (the same as the aforementioned "snow" that was used by Sylvia) over Rosie's eye. As she described her choice to create this textured, opaque eye on the slide, Mia talked about one of the key concepts in art, *balance*, and also gestured toward the notion that aesthetics is separate from cognition—an idea that circulated throughout the artists' sharing of their work.

Sylvia	Where does the white part go?
Mia	Over her eye. Why? I don't know. I felt like it.
Donovan	I just felt like it.

Sylvia	Spot on. Leave it. (helping Mia get the slide placed correctly)
Mia	It goes over her eye, I swear (getting the slide into place). So, I was really going to put the black (in the middle for an iris) but I started to but all the white just started going down (the black paint made the texture run off) so I was like, "Nevermind."
Donovan	Nevermind! Whatever…(laughing)
Mia	It's fine. People will get it. It's her eye. So why I did it—I felt like it. I felt like there was not enough white. I know she has a lot of white here (on her chest) but not up here (on her face); I don't know. I just felt like it needed it.

 Mia was seeking to create balance between the amount of white on Rosie by adding white to the painted slide…yet she wasn't convinced. "I don't know. I just felt like it," she said to end the discussion. She was seeking to enhance the aesthetics of the photograph and, in the end, didn't know if there was an explanation for the choice beyond the movement of her own desires. Looking at the photograph, it actually had lovely balance, as the white on Rosie's chest was balanced by the light color of the over-exposed house that was unfocused in the background. However, Mia still sought to draw attention to Rosie's eye…even if she didn't exactly know why. She felt it, so she did it. This is another example of the artists setting up aesthetic choices as distinct from cognitive or rational decision-making.

Figure 23: Mia's Anton art piece with the slides on top of the photo (left) and above the photo (right).

Anton. Another of Mia's art pieces was a photo strikingly similar to the one of Rosie. It was a portrait of her friend Anton. Mia created three slides for her photograph of Anton. The first slide was a line drawing, including intensive detail on his hair. Mia painted the second slide, painting the grass, Anton's shirt, and Anton's lips. The third slide added texture to the grass with the green grass powder used previously.

Kate also knew Anton and there was some debate over what this photo of Anton actually showed:

Kate	That's not Anton either.
Sylvia	Is that your boyfriend or just your friend?
Mia	My best guy friend.

Kate	That's so not Anton, either.
Mia	What do you mean?
Kate	Because he's never—he looks very deep and…
Mia	But this is how I view him. This is how he really is with me. Then, that's another thing—so many people are like, "That's so not her (Rosie, in the previous piece)," and I'm like, "It is," just like how you just said that about him like it's so not him…
Kate	I picture him like a dingus. He's so…
Mia	…what?...
Kate	…dingus is not a bad thing.

Mia and Kate could not agree on whether or not this photo showed Anton as "he really is" or if it

showed something very different than Anton's normal state of being a "dingus". Though Kate

never got a chance to explain what a dingus was, it was easy to infer that this photo that showed

Anton as being deep in thought was the opposite of how she viewed him. To Mia, Anton was

thoughtful. To Kate, Anton was goofy. Mia saw this portrait as a representation of Anton, while

Kate saw this photo as a funny, antithetical portrait of Anton. This suggested that Anton, as a

person, and Mia's representation of Anton were both unstable. Neither Anton nor his

photograph were static but, rather, were performed and interpreted differently depending on the

vantage point of the audience. Mia affirmed this by saying, "this is how he really is *with me*"

suggesting that she was aware that there was no singular version of Anton. Something about her

relationship with him gave her access to an Anton that could be serious and contemplative, rather

than an Anton that is just a "dingus"…whatever that might be. When Mia shared this, there was

a tone in her voice that intimated that she was aware that her relationship with Anton was different than others' relationship with him and that she was happy with that situation.

Mia used art-making as a way to study that relationship and to study Anton as she knew him. Unlike the other artists before her, Mia described her interaction with Anton at the time she took the photograph. In fact, Mia used the photo to instigate a conversation with Anton in that moment:

> I just always take pictures of people. They'll be looking one way and I'll be like "ch, ch, ch" (picture-taking sound) and always in their face. So, with this one, I can't remember what he was thinking about but I know that he was just looking down. The way I was feeling—in my head I was just staring at him and "I wonder what he was thinking," and I just pulled out the little camera in my sleeve (laughter) and then I took a picture. … So after I took it, I was like, "Hey." And he was like, "What, what?" And I was like, "Look at this." And he was like, "Wow. I look so depressed." And I was like, "Yeah. Why? Explain." I zoom into his face and I was like, "Why are your lips red and what were you thinking?" I analyzed the picture right in front of him.

Mia was studying Anton as a text, both at the time of taking the photograph as well as in/through her art-making. Interestingly, she invited Anton into the process of her study of him, inquiring what he was thinking about and why his lips were red. This exchange revealed much about the ways that Mia was studying her relationship with Anton and the relative intimacy involved in it.

The research group took note of Anton's red lips. When Mia put the painted slide over the photograph, it was the first thing that was discussed:

> *Sylvia*   You put lipstick on him?

Mia	See. That's why I didn't want it to look like lipstick but his lips always look red.
Sylvia	You could be like also making a gender role statement.
Donovan	That's true.
Sylvia	I'm not kidding.
Amanda	Look when the slides are stacked it's not as—
Sylvia	No, now it doesn't.
Donovan	Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[Another topic sprouts up in the midst of this discussion, but we returned to it in a minute.]

Amanda	I'm interested in those red lips. I wonder if there's a subconscious thing going on there.
Donovan	Freud.
Mia	They are the first thing I see when I see him is his eyes and then his lips. Of course no one ever believes me but it's really hard to capture his eyes in pictures because his eyes are actually—how do I say it—it has gray, blue, green…

The group was all trying to figure out the meaning of the red lips. Sylvia explored the idea that

Mia was trying to challenge gender norms, but Mia was clear that she didn't intend for the red

paint on Anton's lips to be read as lipstick. When Mia rearranged the slides and stacked them all

together, the redness of the lips became less pronounced which underscored her intention. With

Sylvia's idea ruled out, I decided to pursue an answer from Mia about why she had painted

Anton's lips red by thinking out loud, "I'm interested in those red lips. I wonder if there's a

subconscious thing going on there." Donovan caught on to the image that I had and said, simply,

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"Freud" as a way to suggest that the red lips communicated desire of one sort or another. Though Mia did not specifically respond to this prompt, she, whether consciously or not, seemed to affirm this suspicion by saying that whenever she saw Anton, the first thing she saw was his lips. This was a very compelling and in fact a unique moment in the project as the research group sought to uncover Mia's emerging, yet seemingly unconscious, sense-making of her relationship with Anton through her artwork. It felt, at the time, as if we were seeing something in her work that she did not fully see herself. Taken one way, Mia could read Anton but was not yet to a place where she could fully read the relationship between Mia and Anton. Taken another way, as an insider in the relationship, Mia saw clearly and was simply highlighting what she sees as one of Anton's dominant features and it was the group that was reading the image incorrectly by bringing Freud or the notion of desire to our experience of the artwork. Or, perhaps, the red lips and what they might have meant are simply another instance of the instability of representation and both readings are simultaneously true and false.

Just as she had done in her study of Rosie, Mia used the color palette in the original photograph as the basis for her treatment of the photo. In her painting and in her use of the green grass powder, Mia hoped to add to or elevate the colors already present in the picture. She specifically talked about her hard work to get the right color blue for Anton's shirt:

> *Mia*　　　　It took me a while to create the blue to match his shirt; a lot of mixing.
>
> *Amanda*　　Mixing that stuff (the ink used to paint the slides) is a pain in the ass, too.
>
> *Mia*　　　　It looked like a potion. The white was so—like I can't even—like marble. It looked like I was making a potion. I was doing this and

my mom walks in and is like, "What are you doing? I thought you

were painting." I was like, "Making a potion."

Mia's story of trying to get the right shade of blue was an opportunity to consider what it was

like to mix colors and offered another instance that might be viewed as a literacy experience. To

mix inks or paints required the ability to read the colors, to know the science behind the color

wheel, to be able to see the colors clearly, to use gut instinct for knowing how much of each

color to use, to know how to fix mistakes, and, sometimes, to know when a "potion" is beyond

all help and should be scrapped.

Conclusion

Discussion. Using art to study the photographs provided opportunities to consider some

of the participants in the students' everyday lived literacy experiences. Art, as a research

method, offered the research team access to elements of their literacy experiences that were

otherwise difficult to raise. Making, through art, allowed Sylvia, Donovan, Kate, and Mia to

study sets of relations "in" the photographs while participating in sets of relations with the

photographs. Though each artist's work is compelling to consider individually, it is also

worthwhile to consider all of the students' artwork as a collection. When viewed in sum, several

themes emerge.

Non-cognitive domains of literacies. Perhaps the most prevalent set of ideas circulating

through the artwork are those related to the non-cognitive dimensions of sense-making and the

artists' attempts to materialize these affective intensities in a variety of ways. Students

repeatedly used a variety of techniques to highlight relations in their engagement with texts that

were not represented or, at least from the perspective of the artists, not represented clearly

enough in the photographs alone. Color offered the artists one method for materializing the

affective relations that they experienced in/through the photographs. Sylvia used textured white snow in an attempt to communicate the loss of her relationship with two of the subjects in her photograph while using gold paint to communicate her continued love for the other subject. Donovan liberally used the color gold to evoke the influences of Renaissance and religious iconography that he felt strongly streamed through his photograph. Kate painted clouds in her room in an attempt to materialize the affective intensities produced through her relation to her old bedroom. In all three of these examples, the artists used color as a metaphorical shorthand to connote a more complex set of relationships.

These relationships were often at the very core of the sense the artists were making of their original photographs and the intensities that they experienced in their everyday engagement with texts. Yet, much of this intensity was invisible to viewers of the photographs. While many of the artists' original photographs successfully communicated particular moods through the framing or treatment of the subjects, like Mia's *Rosie* photograph, or through lighting, like Kate's *Bedroom* photograph, there were still reservoirs of intensity that were left unexpressed or unexplored. Art-making provided an opportunity for the artists to layer their literacy experiences in order to materialize the unexpressed or unexplored intensities. Since literacy experiences have the ability to stretch across fractured timescales, it might be said that the artists are participating in a variety of literacy experiences which occur in both short and long timescales, several of which might be happening concurrently (see Figure 24). Orienting to the team's engagement with texts through the lens of literacy experience, makes all of these relations thinkable.
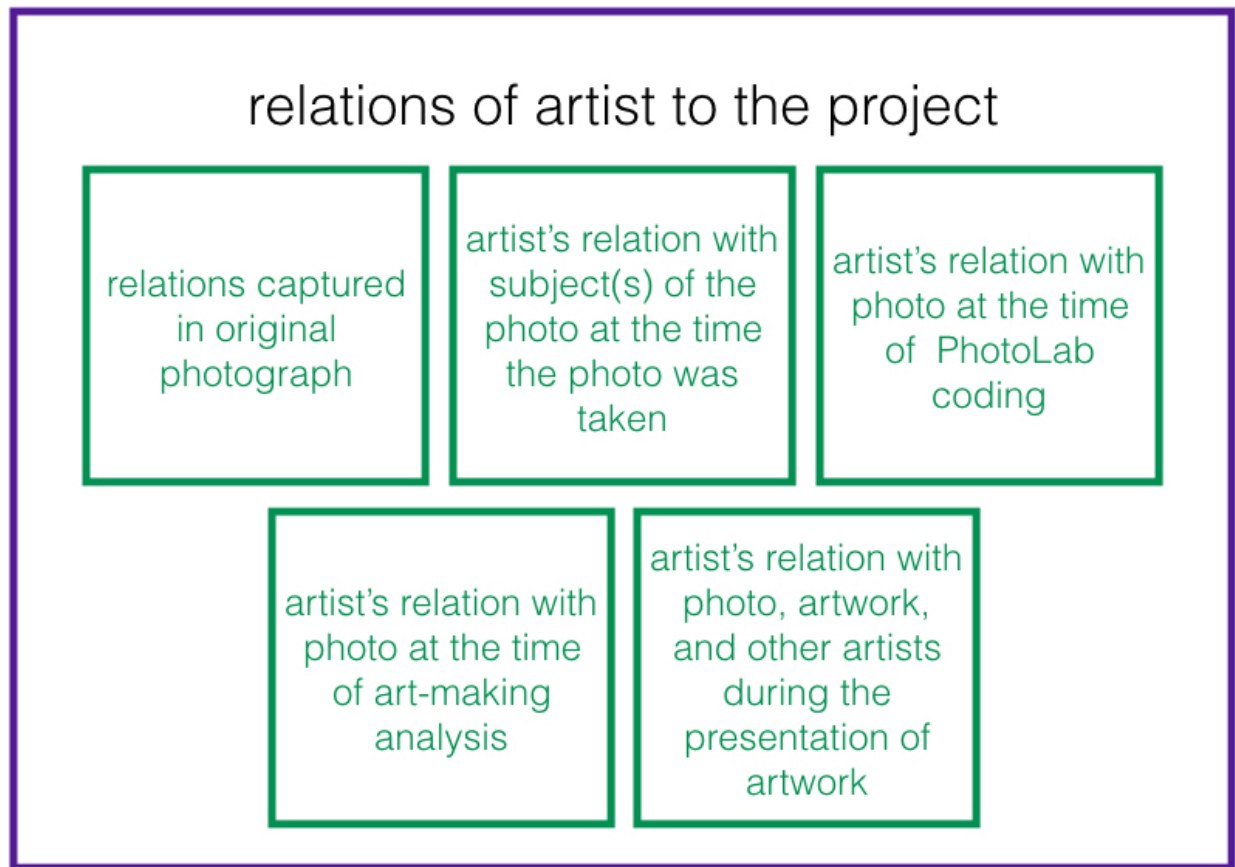
Figure 24: A selection of possible literacy experiences had by each artist.
Each green box is an experience that might connect with another green box and all green boxes might unite to produce the purple box.

As previously noted, another compelling conversation that was woven throughout the artists' presentation of their work focused on the nuances of aesthetic choices. In one way or another, each artist suggested that aesthetics was somehow non-cognitive or, at the very least, existing at the margins of consciousness. When asked about why a particular artistic choice was made, the students frequently had responses like, "I had no specific thought process"; "I did it aesthetically"; "I just felt it" and similar. For the artists, aesthetic sense was different than making a decision. The words they chose to describe the process of making art were more closely linked to something more akin to instinct, or, as it was referred to in some of our conversations, an *eye*. This artistic eye was able to see the best choices for colors, lines, balance,

and other elements of design for the artwork in the space just at the periphery of the students'

conscious awareness. They did not experience this process as thinking or decision-making.

However, it could be argued that their art education had accrued and accumulated in such a way

that these aesthetic choices did not feel like choices at all because they happened quickly and

seemingly automatically.

      Relations. Another theme that recurred throughout the conversation was the centrality of

relationships between the artists and other youth. Most of the photographs the team chose to

study in their artwork had humans as the main subject matter in the picture. Moreover, many of

the artists selected these portraits in order to study the relationships they had with the subjects.

These relations were not stable but shifted over time as the project evolved. Sylvia lost

friendships and had to find a way to materialize that loss. Donovan took a picture of his friend

that turned into a picture of an imagined Lolita that required a layer of paint to emerge. Mia's

portrait of Anton became not just Mia's study of Anton and the relationship she had with him,

but also provoked Kate to study Mia's Anton and compare him to some other Anton that was

more familiar. Even in their attempts to study and make visible the relations between the

subjects in the photos, the artists, and the viewers, the students demonstrated that their

interpersonal connections were dynamic.

      If we recall from Chapter 2, Anderson & Harrison suggested that "all action is

interaction," (2010, p. 7). The relationships that the artists had with the subjects in their

photographs and with each other were in a constant state of change as a result of their ongoing

interactions. Therefore, there was never a static relationship that was sitting "out there" and

waiting to be studied. Rather, the artists were always engaged in "modification and reciprocity"

(Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 7) of the relations they entered into with the subjects of their

photos as they emerged. It is wholly possible to consider the myriad of relations and the shifting

ground upon which people came together and broke apart through the lens of literacy experience.

 Places and objects. Artists also drew particular attention to evocative places and objects

in/through their artwork. Sylvia experiments with the idea of place by creating a piece where a

suburban reality is juxtaposed with an imagined cityscape. And yet, though it is a city of her

imagining it also bears striking resemblance to the real city her suburb borders. Kate

contemplates her draw to abandoned buildings by layering imagined pasts over the present in her

treatment of Aria's photo. Students' consideration of place and the many layers of sense made in

and through place demonstrate the intensities that can be produced through the relationship

between a person and a place. Perhaps the most compelling example is Kate's work with the

photograph of her room. In that work, Kate further dissects place by examining all of the

individual objects in the room. This dissection urges the viewer to consider how objects can act

as affective conduits[32] which produce intensities from all of the meaning that accrues and

accumulates on/in them over time.

 This demonstrates the ways that things can exert great power when they enter into

relationship with humans. As we learned from Deleuze in Chapter 2, "something in the world

forces us to think," (1994, p. 154). Though humans occupy a privileged place in the

photographs, the artwork, and the project in general, it is worth noting how often the artists

specifically reference the other things that move them to think or to feel. Conceptualizing these

relations as a part of literacy experience allow these things are able to be seen, considered, and

studied as part of the artists' sense-making processes.

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[32] I owe this notion of affective conduits to Bessie Dernikos who shared her idea of teachers as affective conduits
with me at the Affect Working Group at LRA in December 2015.

Time. Finally, the issue of time is frequently raised in the discussion of the artwork. All of the artists dealt with time in different ways in their work, yet, there was some element of how the past, present, and future somehow exist together within the plane of their pieces. This harkens back to Fendler's idea, introduced in Chapter 2, that "all things exist on the same epistemological plane," (2013, p. 2) in NRT. In fact, the way time is experimented with in students' artwork might serve as an argument that all *times* similarly exist on the same plane when viewing literacies through a NRT filter.

For instance, timescales were unstable as Donovan talked about his inspiration for the Lolita piece. His painting was an emergent surprise to him and just "came out" as he played with his line drawing. Yet, he realized he saw a painting with similar qualities at an art show many weeks earlier. In both of her pieces, Kate moves between past and present, memory and imagination as she makes sense of the relationships in two very different spaces. With the abandoned factory Kate excavates the ruins for clues of the building's past. In her bedroom, she documents all the clues found in objects and affects to construct her memories of her past. For Mia, her dog Rosie was named as a result of her mother's subconscious connection to a treasured stuffed animal, long forgotten. Her mom wasn't aware of it at the time, but she was bringing the past into the present in her suggestion of *Rosie* for the new puppy's name.

Implications. The students' artwork demonstrates that there were many participants in their sense-making with texts in their everyday lives. In every case, without exception, there was some facet of their sense-making that entailed them materializing some idea, affect, force, memory, or relation that would have otherwise been invisible to someone viewing the moment or the representation of the moment captured in a photograph. These unseen participants in literacies are not easily considered through many of the traditional conceptualizations of sense-

making. There do not seem to be adequate theories in the canon of literacy research to provide the language necessary to describe all of these participants; nor are there adequate methods in systematic use that provide sufficient access to these participants. The current movement in the field of literacy studies, of which this work is a part, that is thinking about literacies as sets of relations and interactions holds great promise for providing the language and methods required to consider literacies in a more holistic way.

CHAPTER 6 — AN ENDING MEDITATION

Interlude 3 – Art Makes It All Ok

Figure 25: Sylvia modeling the shirt she designed for LHS's ArtsFest 2016.

Art makes it all ok. A bold claim, to be sure, but I suppose no one thinks that *all* means ALL. Nevertheless, I think several of the photography students at LHS would affirm the sentiment. It is the end of the 2015-2016 school year and Mia and Donovan are each finishing up their first year of college. Mia is studying to be a nurse and Donovan is a double major in photography and advertising. Sylvia and Kate are graduating from LHS in a few weeks. Sylvia just won the Heart for Art award and is heading to college in the fall to major in art. Kate is also on her way to college in the fall and is going to a prestigious art school. Art makes it all ok.

Recap and Refocus

I began this work with a look at the major epochs in literacy studies and teased out the limitations of popular orientations to the field. I argued that *literacy experience* offers a more expansive orientation to literacies that accounts for the ways in which sense emerges through complex sets of relations with texts of all kinds in everyday life. I then shared non-representational theory as a grounding for the concept of literacy experiences, providing a grammar for the ways in which things-bodies-objects come together in sets of relations from which sense and affective intensities might emerge. Next, I discussed the details of my work with the students of LHS and the methods through which I sought to gain access to their literacy experiences.

After that foundation-building, I presented two chapters that demonstrated literacy experiences in the everyday lives of the Photo B/C/D students at LHS, generally, and Mia, Donovan, Kate, and Sylvia, specifically. First, in Chapter 4, I presented three vignettes that highlighted how the notion of literacy experiences emerged in the first half of the study. Observing students working with film, coding the corpus of photographs produced through the photoethnography projects, and talking about meaning made it clear that current orientations to literacies did not provide adequate language to describe the sense-making relations created in/through/with the students' work. Then, in Chapter 5, I described the ways that the four focal students above studied and experimented with their own literacy experiences through making art and talking. This exploration served a dual purpose: it showcased some of the literacy experiences of Sylvia, Donovan, Kate, and Mia; and, it demonstrated that art-making was, at least in this case, a successful method for materializing some of the sense-making relations that emerged as the students studied their photographs.

Therefore, with this particular collage of data and argumentation drawing to a close, I start this final chapter with a meditation on what the field of literacy studies might learn with/from this work and the four student researchers and why literacy experience is important. Then, I discuss some of the challenges and limitations of *literacy experience* before I end with a brief conclusion.

How Literacy Experience Matters

As I've demonstrated, literacy emerges through sets of sense-making relations as people read and write the world through their engagement with texts of all kinds in their everyday lives. Studying these engagements, through the unit of literacy experiences, provides the opportunity to attend to a wide variety of things that are not easily countenanced through available units of analysis. Though the details of literacy experiences have been thoroughly discussed in all that precedes this, there are several features that are particularly useful and worth revisiting.

Embodied or emerging sense. First, literacy experience allows for the study of varying levels of sense-making from that which occurs on the phenomenological periphery, just outside of conscious awareness but perhaps felt or perceived through affective intensities, to more concrete, cognitive understanding. This move to locating literacy in *sense* takes seriously the dissolution of the division between mind and body by accepting the ways that body thinks with/through movement. Conceptualizing the body as thinking is of vital import to literacy educators. Much of learning in school is predicated upon Cartesian dualism with the mind being the focus of attention, developed through instruction in a variety of subjects. The body, as a potential participant in learning, is largely ignored apart from recess and the occasional gym class when budgets allow. However, viewing the body as a participant in learning all subjects opens up opportunities for educators to develop more holistic pedagogies and curricula.

Being attuned to the ways that bodies know and think allows teachers to create spaces where students can find their "muchness" (Thiel, 2015, p. 41). Thiel argues that muchness is "an embodied intellectual fullness that manifests through an internal compulsion to be engaged in an activity that one has a particular affinity for or curiosity about, unstopped by challenges or frustrations," (2015, p. 41). Thinking bodies can engage, react, respond, and create if given the space to do so. Sense can sometimes emerge in/through/with the body before or outside of conscious awareness.

The thinking body, pursuing emergent muchness, was seen in previous chapters as students rolled film, navigated their way through the darkroom, and began moving photographs around while coding. The notion of emergence or pre-conscious sense, importantly, makes room for sense that erupts from relations that are fleeting, ephemeral, or novel as well as relations that are mundane, routine, or habitual, all of which might take place beyond conscious awareness. Emergent sense was illustrated in previous chapters as students talked their way through the idea of meaning as well as the countless times they offered, "I don't know", "I just did it", "I just felt it" as explanations for artistic choices.

This construction of emergent sense, embodied sense, or muchness goes beyond the notion of didactic or 'hands-on' learning styles which generally use the body to gain access to the mind. The thinking body is one and the same as the mind and can demonstrate embodied literacies, or, as Thiel's theory of muchness terms it, "embodied intellectual fullness" (2015, p. 41) before or outside of conscious awareness. If educators are attuned to the thinking body, this sense can be observed, noticed, joined, and responded to in the context of literacy learning. In Chapter 4, we witnessed Lu, attending to Charlie's emerging sense about how long to expose a print, asking her, "What does your gut tell you?" Lu was observing Charlie's ambivalence and

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prompting her to look to her body, her guts, to access her embodied sense and move towards muchness in her printing.

Conversely, by not attending to the thinking body, teachers can unknowingly curtail students' learning or even do harm. Stephanie Jones (2013) perfectly illustrates these negative outcomes by reporting on a lesson she does with undergraduate students on round robin reading. She provides a challenging article for students to read, tells them they'll have some questions to answer at the end, and once they start reading she begins to call on them randomly to read paragraphs. Jones shares the way that this "activates" something old and "dormant" in the students' bodies, with may of them "report[ing] sweating, feeling hot, noticing their heart rate speed up, shaking legs, and fearing humiliation and being perceived as incompetent," (2013, p. 527). In short, the students freak out a bit. Their bodies know and react in observable ways to being asked to perform a task before they are able to process what is going on in the lesson. What's more, Jones notes that "few reported being able to understand the printed text on which the activity was supposed to be focused," (2013, p. 527). The sense of stress and anxiety that emerged in students' bodies overshadowed any other sense that might have been made with the article. Similarly, when I try to force the students to code the photos based on Rose's diagram (2012) in Chapter 4, I unwittingly derail their thinking bodies until they ignore me. Their bodies move and they start passing photos around in ways that don't abide by Rose's logic but that, in the end, are meaningful to the students in far more interesting ways. Thankfully, our relationship allowed them to ignore me and follow the emerging sense they were making, otherwise they (and I) would surely have learned less about their literacies.

Things/Bodies/Objects. Second, literacy experiences provide a way to consider all of the participants in the doing of literacies. Though literacy experiences are interested in sets of

relations that include a human being, that human being is not necessarily privileged as the center from which all sense might emanate. For this reason, a wide variety of things, bodies, and objects are able to be considered for the roles that they might play in any given set of literate relations. As students developed their film, we could look at any number of the sets of relations between things: the black bag, reels, film scissor, darkness, fine motor skills, patience, and circulation cut-off-ness; or, Kate and her enlarger; or, Charlie, her counting, her swishing the photo with the tongs, her gut instinct, and her indecision. There are countless ways that sets of relations might be studied through literacy experiences.

There are also countless ways that attending to the wide variety of participants in students' literacies is useful to educators. Perhaps Shipka (2016) says it best:

Highlighting the various texts, tools, strategies, practices, and participants—*both human and nonhuman*—that play a role in supporting, facilitating, altering, and at times even thwarting or forbidding the production of a focal text, product, or performance allows us to move beyond human-centered or human-centric notions of agency, effect, and collaboration. (p. 253, emphasis in original)

Moving beyond the human can provide a more nuanced understanding of how young people are engaging with and creating texts of all kinds in their everyday lives in and out of school. Objects and things exert force. They have the ability to promote or inhibit learning. Opening up literacies to include both the material and immaterial things participating with the human gives access to relations that might otherwise not be observable by educators. Without a theoretical foundation that allowed the participation of objects in Kate's literacies, the artwork she created from the photograph of her bedroom would not be pedagogically meaningful in the same ways

that it was to me and to Lu. Put simply, considering the objects and things that participate in literacies

> alerts us to the different resources children draw on as they create meanings in classrooms and the things that get in the way. In doing so, it can help identify possibilities to recognise [sic] the very personal ways in which tests—and the practices and artefacts [sic] associated with them—may be significant to children. (Burnett, 2015, p. 528)

Finally, literacy experiences are able to contain fractured timescales. For instance, it is possible, through the lens of literacy experiences, to attend to the ways that the past, present, and imagined futures might enter into relationship as texts and/or with texts in a way that produces sense or affect for someone. Literacy experiences impacted by fractured timescales were most clearly seen in the students' art-making as they studied photographs of their engagement with texts. For instance, as Sylvia studied the relations among herself and the subjects in her *Three Kids* photo, she had to contend with differences between the past and the present. Similarly, Donovan wrestled with various timescales in his *Jesus* piece as he studied his relationship to friends in the past and present Golden Age of his life, while simultaneously imagining a future that might be similarly golden, or, perhaps, even more golden.

As Kate Pahl notes, "[p]ossible futures exist within the present. These imagined futures are guided by how that present is framed and understood," (2016, p. 155). Teachers can play a central role in helping students to frame and understand their pasts, presents, and futures as they interact in/through/with literacy experiences. Teachers can attend to the way that texts students are engaging/creating evoke various constructions of past/present/future worlds and past/present/future selves for the students and join them in the ways that they are framing and

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imagining the world. Further, understanding the ways that the past, present, and future are present in all moments helps to underscore the notion that "curriculum is not a static thing, but rather a dynamic event that *happens*. Curriculum is a constant becoming," (Masny & Waterhouse, 2011, p. 287, emphasis in original). If teachers embrace how timescales are unstable and fracture in the midst of dynamic sense-making relations, then curriculum itself might become dynamic as well, attuned to the various ways that students are engaging texts.

Though there are certainly more ways that the concept of *literacy experiences* is different from other units of analysis in literacy studies, it is these three features that are most obviously borne out in the data of this study. It also seems that these three features best account for the gaps in previous units of analysis used to study literacy as a participant in social worlds. In this way, it is these three key features that demonstrate *how* literacy experience matters.

Why Literacy Experience Matters

Perhaps the most important result of conceptualizing literacy experience as an emergence of sense when people read and write the world through sets of relationships is that it moves the field towards an ontological view of literacy which views literacy as an inherent part of being. By locating literacy in sense-making, everyone can be understood as in the process of being and becoming literate. Therefore, a person who tells a story orally or another person who tells a story with illustrations might be considered no less literate than a person who writes a story with words on a page. Similarly, it may be the case that another person is resistant to telling a story and refuses to do so. This person would also be able to be seen as literate, with the sense-making product of her/his relations being resistance. Each of these people used different skills in the set of relations that produced their stories or, their resistance to storytelling, but each of these people can still be considered literate. This opening move seeks to reclaim the word

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literacy from the racist, sexist, imperialists who use(d) it as a tool of exclusion and subjugation. Rather, it focuses attention on the ways that people are already being and becoming literate and suggests that literacy is a part of *being*.[33] As such, an ontological view of literacy mitigates the creation of binary subject positions that might be an unfortunate product of approaching literacy events and literacy practices—one either participates in the event or not and either uses practices or not—by offering a spectrum of being literate through everyday literacy experiences. This difference is a tremendously important reorientation that moves the field towards studying the sets of relations students are a part of rather than discrete sets of skills students can or cannot do.

Challenges and Limitations of Literacy Experience

There are ways in which the concept of *literacy experience* presents challenges for literacy studies. Literacy experience, in its very nature, lives in the constantly shifting sands of everyday moments. Things come into relationship with one another and then break apart in ways that are often unexpected, unpredictable, and idiosyncratic. For this reason, the Common Core State Standards and other similar technologies of standardization cannot peacefully coexist with the notion of literacy experience. Public schools increasingly operate almost solely on ideals like predictability, determinism, and scalability which are incommensurate with ideas like emerging sense and studying relations. As such, with the current systems and structures that undergird the teaching and learning of literacy, any move away from standardization is counter-cultural. Considering the ways in which an expansive theoretical move like the one I've argued for here, towards an ontological view of literacies and the concept of *literacy experience*, might relate with or against standardization is a generative opportunity for further research.

Additionally, many may find it confounding to consider an approach to literacy which, in any way, de-centers the human subject and re-locates meaning to the flow of life and the expanse

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[33] A tip of the hat, here, to Robert Yagelski (2009) and his notion of writing as a way of being (pp. 7-8).

of things in the world. Surely much is gained by positioning the human participants in literacies as being powerful decision-makers. The myriad benefits of this approach are easily seen in the prolific and foundational research that has been produced as a result of the shift to viewing literacies as situated social practices due to the essential work of scholars discussed in Chapter 1. These benefits have been seen both politically and socially, with positive impacts on curriculum and instruction that has improved the lives of countless teachers and children. For this reason, and, I'm certain others, de-centering the human in research might seem counterproductive and, perhaps, slightly dangerous. However, taking up a literacy experiences approach to the study of literacies does not strip humans of their power in sense-making relations. Rather, it provides a way to see what else might be participating in and exerting power on the same moment. It gives researchers the ability to consider the non-cognitive and (im)material things that are participating in literacies with the human. In this way, it tells a different research story than one that centers the human. Insofar as selecting methods and theories determine the type of story a researcher hopes to tell, using literacy experience as the unit of analysis in the study of literacies potentially offers another genre in which we might write and think about literacies.

Finally, I have been personally challenged through my attempts to find a suitable word or phrase to describe the phenomenon that I term here as literacy experience. From the moment that I discovered the idea emerging from the data, I have used *literacy experience* as a placeholder term. *Experience* is, in many ways, an ideal descriptor as it is able to contain emergent sense, powerful things, and fractured timescales. It is also, in other ways, a terrible term due to the historical uses of *experience* in educational research. *Experience*, for many, evokes either Dewey and his work in progressive schooling as well as aesthetics; or, the methodological tradition of phenomenology. These connotations of *experience* are powerful and

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abundant among educational researchers which make using the term in such a different way, as I do in this work, fairly problematic. For this reason, I have been experimenting with different terms but, as yet, have not found a satisfactory replacement for the placeholder of *literacy experience*. Therefore, in this work, the term remains even as I am actively seeking to replace it.

Conclusion

One thing that stuck with me throughout the study was how lucky they all were to have the opportunity to have a thriving art department at LHS. Though Lakeside was not a particularly affluent suburb, the district has continued to see the value of the arts at a moment in time when few districts do. Similarly, the big city school district has a middle and high school that is dedicated to the study of the arts with programs in visual arts, theatre, music, and writing. I have continually wondered what has sustained the commitment to the arts in this area and if there is any way that it might be replicated in other cities. Why have we allowed the arts to be decimated in our schools?

While I may not be able to whole-heartedly agree with Sylvia that Art Makes It All Ok, I have seen firsthand that art helps. It helps a lot of things. Lu McCurry, the Fall 2014 students of Photo B/C/D, and, most of all, Donovan, Kate, Mia, and Sylvia taught me about many of the ways that art helps. Art creates so many opportunities for students to participate in complex literacy experiences. Art taps into the subconscious, the non-cognitive, feelings, and affects in ways that other school subjects do not. Art also prompts the thinking body and diffuses sense into the senses rather than relegate thinking uniquely in the consciously available 10% of the brain. Art also helps students develop sensitivities and intuitions that are more open to emerging sense than many of the other ways that school trains students to think and to know.

CHAPTER 7 — POSTSCRIPT: AN ENGAGEMENT WITH LITERACY EXPERIENCES THROUGH RESEARCHER ART-MAKING

After I completed a draft of this manuscript, I set about on an artistic response to the project and my writing about the project. I decided that I wanted to discomfort and disorient myself in a way similar to students' feelings at the beginning of our work together. As I am very comfortable with the type of photography project the students conducted, I chose to undertake an artistic task I haven't done since I was in middle school—a painting. I decided to paint a portrait of Sylvia, Donovan, Mia, and Kate using the mash-up of their self-portraits from Chapter 3 (see Figure 26) as a reference.
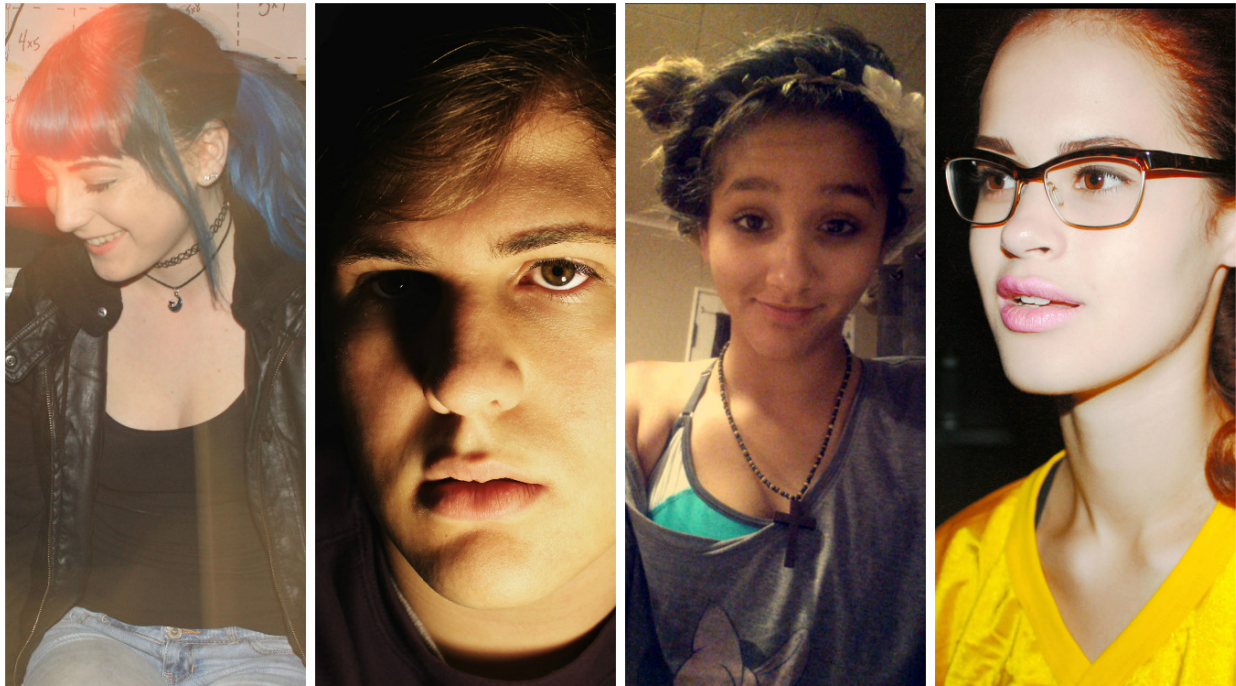

Figure 26: Reference image for painting.

In keeping with the theme of this study, I decided that my portrait should make an attempt to experiment with the idea of representation. I knew that I did not want to paint a traditional portrait of the students and, to be frank, I did not have the skills to do so with any

amount of success. I did a bit of research on abstract art and the techniques used by foundational

artists in the movement such as Jackson Pollack, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, and Jean-

Michel Basquiat as well as current abstract artists like Fiona Rae and Matthew Collings and his

partner Emma Biggs. This work led me to think about the representational work that color and

the relationships between colors might do in portraiture: through arranging colors and shapes in

specific relations, portraits emerge. I wondered what might be produced if I intentionally used

color and shape to reimagine the portrait. What would happen if I sought to represent the colors

of the reference photo without representing the various shapes and contours of the students'

faces? To answer this question, I decided to use PhotoShop to dramatically pixelate the

reference photo, reducing it to simple blocks of color (see Figure 27).

Figure 27: The students' selfies after being pixelated in PhotoShop.

As I pixelated the portrait, when this iteration emerged, I gasped. This was exactly what

I was hoping to achieve as I found it simple, beautiful, and squarely in the realm of a portrait. I

could pick out Sylvia's jeans, Donovan's eye, Mia's tank top, and Kate's lipstick. And yet, it was also an interesting study of color and the relationships of colors to one another. It was a portrait and also not a portrait. In short, I loved it.

I set about preparing the canvas. This was a fairly detailed job of calculating the size of the squares of the grid and then measuring and drawing the guidelines. I decided to use acrylic paints as they tend to be a bit more forgiving than oils for novice painters. I wanted to further challenge myself so I decided to mix all of the colors from primaries (red, blue, and yellow), black, and white. This proved to be an incredibly painstaking and time-consuming process. However difficult, mixing colors was an amazing way to study color. I had to repeatedly study individual squares in the reference image to figure out what I was really seeing in each color. For instance, for each shade of gray I had to determine how light or dark it was and then if it was a warm gray or cool gray. If warm, were the undertones more red, orange, or yellow? If it was cool, was it more blue, green, or purple? Another difficulty was trying to imagine what the color would look like when it was dry, as acrylic paints typically dry a shade or two darker than they appear when first applied. It took hours to just paint a few squares. Sometimes I'd nail the color and think it was perfect. Other times I mixed and mixed yet remained unsatisfied with the result and frustrated by the amount of painted I wasted on a color that was all wrong. In the end, I decided that I would deviate from my original plan to mix only from primary colors and purchased a few different shades of blue, purple, and yellow to make things a bit easier. This helped me to more quickly mix a wider variety of shades.

As I painted, I continually checked the reference images—both the original selfies photograph and the pixelated image. I had a strong desire to get the representation "right", even while intentionally obscuring the representation. As I was painting, I wondered if getting the

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portrait "right" was a possibility with this pixelated approach. Was it possible for me to paint more or less accurately? Though I'm not certain I arrived at any decisive conclusion, I did finish the painting feeling as if I created an accurate portrait of the students (see Figure 28). Yet, it seemed to me that the portrait seemed accurate only if it was viewed in relationship to the original reference photo of the students' selfies. As such, colors alone were able to gesture towards representation of the students' portraits when in relationship with a strong point of reference. If the painting was viewed without a reference photo, I am not certain if the viewer would know that it was intended to be a portrait, nor would they necessarily be able to pick out specific features of the students. Perhaps the viewer would consider the painting to be a study of color with no aims at all towards representation.

Creating this painting was an incredibly valuable part of the research process. Painting allowed me to study the ideas in this work through a vastly different mode. It also positioned me as a novice which provided a different point of access to the ideas than I had through the traditional research methods used earlier in the study.
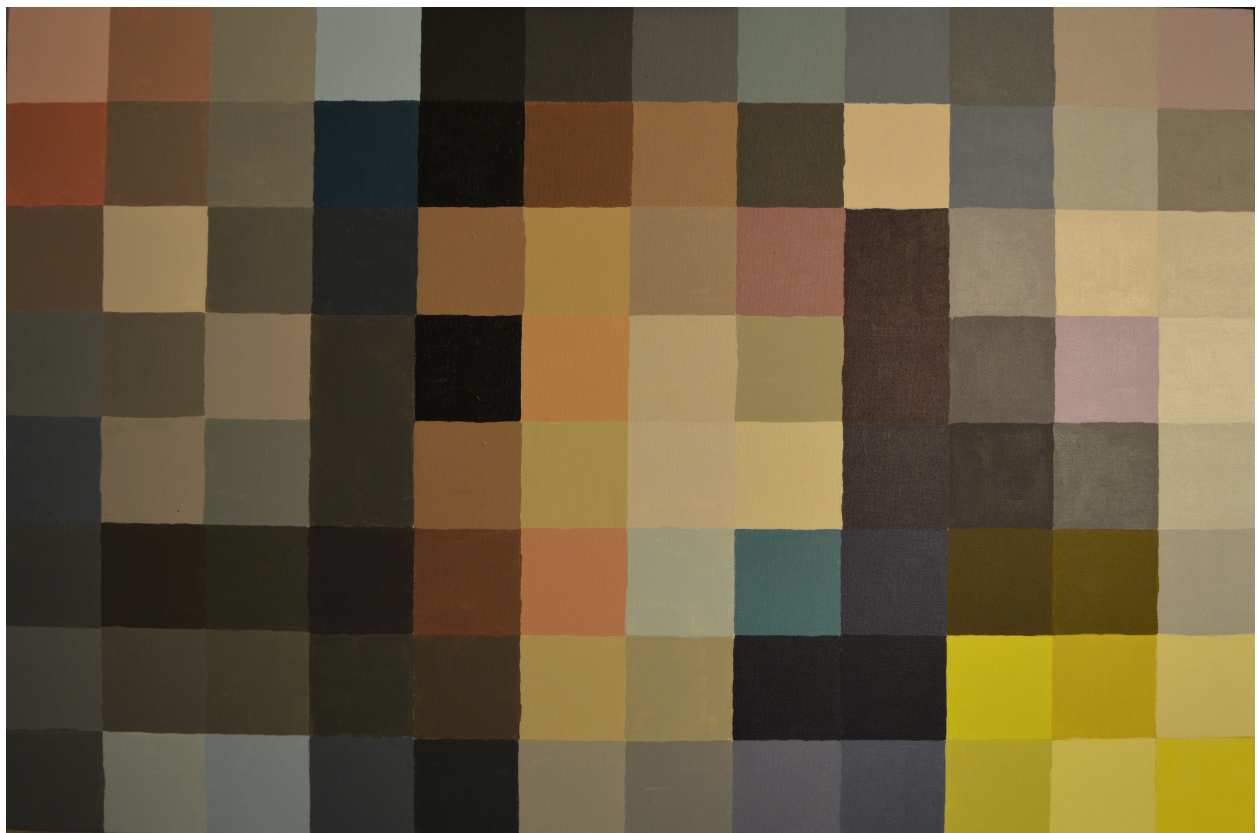
Figure 28: Sylvia, Donovan, Mia, & Kate Selfie Pixel Portrait by Amanda Smith.
24"x36" acrylic on canvas

EPILOGUE — A GRIEF OBSERVED[34]

And grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging

about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling.

— C.S. Lewis

It was a Saturday night in July when I got the text from Lu. I had just hung out with her the day before and was meeting up with Kate, Donovan, and Mia the next day. It was my weekend of saying, once again, thank you and, for the first time, goodbye. My dissertation was successfully defended and I was moving thousands of miles away to start a new job. The kids and I were meeting at our Starbucks. We were sad Sylvia was on vacation and couldn't join us. But, we were excited to see each other, catch up, and for the students to get their artwork back. I was nervous. I'm not great at goodbyes. I didn't know if I'd be able to tell them all how important they are to me. If I could say how grateful I was for their presence in my life. If I could adequately describe how life-giving working with them had been for me during a personally tumultuous time. If I could invent the words to say that they were like my children, my siblings, my students, and my teachers—and that I loved them.

Lu's text was the kind of text that no one ever wants to get. It said something like, "call me when you get this. i have tragic news." I got that strange, indescribable feeling that accompanies fear…like my body was suddenly hollow and my stomach was replaced with a vice. I called Lu and she told me that our beloved Kate died on Friday night. We were shocked and sad and angry together. The next day I had to tell Donovan, Mia, and Sylvia. We were shocked and sad and angry together. We are all still trying to process our grief and figure out

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[34] I take this title from the book by C.S. Lewis, from which the epigraph is taken.

how to make sense of a world not only without Kate in it, but deprived of all of her wisdom, art, beauty, and humor.

I hope that this work, insofar as it is able to capture a fraction of the woman Kate was, stands as a wholly inadequate tribute to her and her brilliance. The world, whether it knows it or not, is not quite as bright without Kate in it. Rest easy, sweet girl.

Figure 29: Kate.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: TEXTS & LIVES ASSIGNMENT SHEET

LAKEVIEW HIGH SCHOOL

texts & lives photographic self-study project
photo b/c/d

Lu McCurry, Lakeview High School
Amanda Smith, Michigan State University

October 2014

TEXTS & LIVES PHOTOGRAPHIC SELF-STUDY PROJECT

introduction

The intention for this project is to provide you with an opportunity to create a photo-essay that documents your interaction with and creation of a wide variety of texts in your everyday lives. Too often, adults make assumptions about what the life of young people is like...what they can/cannot do, what they spend their time thinking about, and what kinds of things they do/do not care about. With the ever-expanding field of possibilities created by new technologies, young people are encountering and creating texts in ways that are both inventive and, sometimes, rebellious. And though it may be done in ways that adults don't always see or value, young people are reading and writing more than ever before. This project creates a space for you to do a photographic self-study, to explore and document the textual engagement in your life as you experience it. It also serves as a vehicle for you to consider the role of documentary photography in the arts and in our culture both socially and politically.

product

Students will produce a photo-essay that will be a "week in the life" where you document the moments in your everyday life when you are *reading* or *writing* a text.

- Your essay will take the form of a PowerPoint photo essay with 30-50 digital photos and 3 printed film images.
    - To create your digital essay, you should take between 120 & 200 pictures.
    - To create your film images, you should take 1 roll of film.
    - You should be sure to create a notes file in your phone or have a notebook handy while you shoot because for each photo you need to write down the date, time, location of photo, and your mood/feeling at that time (which can be one word or a little drawing).
- Each photo should have a short caption and the date/time/location/mood noted.
- Each photo essay will also be accompanied by an artist's statement of approximately 300 words

national core arts standards addressed

- Connecting - VA:Cn10.1.HSIII: Synthesize knowledge of social, cultural, historical, and personal life with art-making approaches to create meaningful works of art or design.

- Creating - VA:Cr1.2.HSI: Shape an artistic investigation of an aspect of present-day life using a contemporary practice of art or design.

- Presenting - VA:Pr4.1.HSII: Analyze, seclect, and critique personal artwork for a collection or portfolio presentation.

- Responding - VA:Re8.1.HSI: Interpret an artwork or collection of works, supported by relevant and sufficient evidence found in the work and its various contexts

project outline

1. Students explore samples of documentary photography, photo-essays, photographic self-studies
   - Lewis Hine: http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos/#documents
   - Kurt Simonson: http://www.kurtsimonson.com/northwoods-journals#/i/0
   - Amanda's study of texts in a K-8 progressive school
2. Students shoot for approximately a week in school & out of school, making sure to closely document the date, time, & location of each photograph they take and their mood/feelings at that time.
3. Students review & analyze their photographs in order to select those to include in their photo-essay.
4. Students develop film and print 3 images
5. Students write captions for all photos included in the photo-essay.
6. Students write their artist statements.
7. Gallery walk so that students can view the work of their classmates.
   - Students are paired up to more closely study one person's work. Partner feedback sessions with evaluation form
8. Whole class conversation about the essays.
   - Themes?
   - Patterns?
   - Differences?
   - What did you learn about yourself?
   - What did you learn about classmates?
   - What might your teachers learn?
   - What might your parents learn?
   - ...?
9. Follow-up: interviews with Amanda & Amanda mapping the class' photos

continuing on...

After the whole-class project, Amanda is hoping that a handful of students might agree to carry on their work with her. We will be using your initial photo-essay as a springboard into a more in-depth examination of their everyday lives using documentary photography.

APPENDIX B: POST-PROJECT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FOCAL STUDENTS

Interview Questions for Students Post-Project:

• Tell me about your approach to the project.

• How were thinking about "text" as you began the project and as you were taking photos?

• Walk me through your process of taking this photo from before taking it through photoshop/processing.

• What patterns do you notice in your photo series?

• Talk to me about the places you took your photos. Why did you choose these places? What other places might you have chosen?

• What things did you find yourself drawn to taking pictures of?

• Did you find that you encountered particular kinds of texts more than others? Why do you think that is?

• Did you notice any connections between the kinds of texts and your emotion/mood/reaction to them?

• Did anything surprise you or was anything unexpected?

• If your best friend saw your photo series, what would s/he notice? Your parents?

• Imagine your series is shown at a gallery, what do you think people could learn about you

• through your photos? What could they learn about texts? Young people in general?

• What is the name of your English teacher? What would s/he learn from this photo series?

***If you were to continue this project, what would you be interested in investigating further?

APPENDIX C: PHOTOLAB POST-CODING DISCUSSION PROTOCOL

Reading Social Texts (adapted from Jody Shipka, 2011, p. 154-155)

- What do you think is the *story* of these groups of texts?

- What might a stranger learn about the texts young people encounter in their everyday lives through looking at these groups of photos?

- Is anything missing? Are there texts that you think "should" be represented here that you encounter in your everyday life that don't appear in these photos? Why do you think they are missing?

- What is the text? Could the text be other than it is? In other words, could it be made out of other materials and have the same impact?

- What "work" does the text do? What needs does the text fulfill? How is the text "supposed" to be (or "normally") used? Consider design.

- What aspects of the text helped you identify it as a certain type of text? If there is any variation between "like" texts, what does each text have to have in common in order for us to group it as a "type"?

- Who, specifically, might have access to the text? In other words, what does one have to have, own or use in order to even come in contact with the text?

- Is the text necessary or can we live without it? How would life be different if the text did not exist? If the text is not necessary, what needs/wants does it capitalize on to create a space for itself?

- How does one read the text?

- Who/what produces the text? Does it have co-authors or co-producers? How many people might be involved in the production, distribution, and reception of the text?

- Does the text expect a response from readers? If so, how would you classify that response: emotional, intellectual, behavioral, other? Does one write on the text, save/collect the text? Pay extra for the text? Is the text socially valued? Seen as a nuisance? Saved or disposed of?

- What does the existence of the text say about the values of the culture that produces it? What are the conditions (economic, historical, cultural, technological) that make this text possible? Is the text expressly associated with the US? With this moment in history? Would people living in other places or at other times have had use for such a text?

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