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**Identity (Re)Constructions and Early College Literacies:  
Urban-Schooled Latino/as and the Figured World of the University**

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**Identity (Re)Constructions and Early College Literacies:  
Urban-Schooled Latino/as and the Figured World of the University**

**by**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to:

My husband Bill, for being my reality check, my support, and a loving partner.

My parents John and Jean, Cheryl and Joe, for raising me to believe in myself.

My sister Jen, for being the person who can always make me laugh.

Monique, Manuel, Alex, Aurelio, and Idalia for having the courage to share your stories.

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**Identity (Re)Constructions and Early College Literacies:  
Urban-Schooled Latino/as and the Figured World of the University**

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Holly Hungerford-Kresser, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2008

Supervisors: Jo Worthy and Lisa Cary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the connections between identities and literacies for a group of students entering the university while highlighting their adolescent literacy experiences as urban-schooled Latino/as. This year-long qualitative research study utilized case study research methods (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1994, 1995), along with the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1984), and the critical analytical tools of Fairclough's (1995) levels of discourse, and Curriculum Spaces Research Theory (Cary, 2006). Data collection included focus group interviews, along with individual interviews, digitally recorded and transcribed in their entirety, as well as occasional observations, participants' class syllabi, written work, and personal online communication with the researcher. A theory of identities in practice (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain, 1998) coupled with a broad definition of literacies (Gee, 2000-2001; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995, 2003)



were utilized as frameworks for viewing the university as a figured world where literacies serve as mediating tools for the negotiation of identities (Holland, et al., 1998; Holquist, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). At the same time, a discussion of discourses (Cary, 2006; Foucault, 1977; Usher & Edwards, 1994) and academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998) offered a window into a discussion of power within institutions.

Findings suggest that these students experienced a continuous redefinition of self, due in large part to exposure to White, middle to upper class students who were not a part of their urban school experience. Additionally, as students learned to participate in the academic community of the university, they noted a growing disconnect with family and friends, even though their education was taking place less than six miles from where they attended high school. Learning these new literacies, both academic and otherwise, appeared to cause participants to reevaluate their former identities and their positions in and around various figured worlds. These case studies offer insight into the literacy experiences of Latino/a students in both secondary and post-secondary schools. This research encourages identity work as a means of exploring the individuality of experience of students who are traditionally under-served in our nation's secondary and post-secondary institutions.

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marked

Never write with pencil,  
m'ija.  
It is for those  
who would  
erase.  
Make your mark proud  
and open,  
Brave,  
                    beauty folded into  
                    its imperfection,  
Like a piece of turquoise  
                    marked.

Never write  
with pencil,  
m'ija.  
Write with ink  
or mud,  
or berries grown in  
gardens never owned,  
or, sometimes,  
if necessary,  
blood. (Tafolla, 2001, p. 93)

## **CHAPTER 1: *IMPORTANCE OF STUDY***

This dissertation study focuses on connections between identity constructions and literacy negotiations of a group of Latino/a students who were urban-schooled and inclined to pursue more formal education after high school. These students' struggles and subsequent success in high school coupled with their experiences at university offer important information to educators—classroom teachers, college professors, and pre-

service teachers alike. At the same time, in considering a practice theory of identities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998), it becomes apparent that students' identity development occurs throughout their tenure in schools. In every literacy practice, classroom activity, and curriculum decision, students' life trajectories and identity formations are impacted. If that simple idea can be incorporated into our research and subsequently our practice, it has the potential to change the ways in which we educate students and incorporate the various literacies of their lives.

Thus, the remainder of this chapter serves to offer focus and context to the study. I first outline the major concepts related to participants' formal schooling, and the framework of figured worlds (Holland, et al., 1998) as a contextualized means of studying identities and literacies as they relate to students' early college experiences. Next, I provide a brief sketch of the literature included in my theoretical framework. This is followed by snapshots of the setting and the methodology of the study.

## **Introduction**

This study began informally five years ago as I became a teacher at Roland High School (pseudonym)<sup>1</sup>. The choice of words "as I became a teacher" is not accidental. Although a teacher with five years experience when I started at Roland, it was there that I actually grew into my title. My experiences with Roland High School's students served to educate me in the ways that formal education could not. The student participants in this study were freshmen then—all of us were new to the school. As they continued each year

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<sup>1</sup> All names of schools and people in this study are pseudonyms.



to higher grade levels of English and with their AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) cohort, I moved with them, fortunate to be their English and AVID teacher for three consecutive years. The relationships we developed, along with the questions our experiences created, served as the impetus for my return to graduate school to pursue this study. In research, it is important to have a plan, but I have come to believe that equally important to research are an understanding of the opportunities thrust upon us by our life trajectories and a subsequent refusal to ignore those opportunities as they present themselves. I was privileged to continue my work with these individuals, even after they graduated from high school.

My former students finished their senior year and went on to university. A group of them were accepted to the same university where I was enrolled, and an opportunity to continue our relationship and to answer my research questions emerged. The research questions for this study were as follows:

- What identity (re)constructions do students identify as they negotiate multiple early college literacy experiences?
  - How are these identity constructions related to the acquisition of academic literacies?
  - In light of these constructions, how do students view their secondary schooling experiences?

The rationale and literature for the focus of these questions are outlined in this chapter and in Chapter 2.

## Major Concepts

Imperative to this study was a focus on broader definitions of literacy in which literacy or literacies are viewed as more than combinations of listening, writing, speaking, and reading. Therefore, I articulated a broader definition of literacy as it is evidenced in contemporary literacy scholarship. These student participants have negotiated adolescent literacies in the context of secondary school (Alvermann, 1998; Dillon & Moje, 1998; Phelps, 1998) and now have begun negotiating the various literacies of the university. Scholars who study connections between literacy and identity have found literacies and identities to be inextricably linked (Gee, 1996, 2000-2001; McCarthy, 2001; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2004). Thus, a framing of the study in terms of identity, and with the contextualized construct of figured worlds (Holland, et al., 1998), offered insight into the impact of literacy negotiations on students' lives. It is important to note that rather than a singular, stabilized view of identity, this study utilizes a theory of identity as "becoming, not being" (Urrieta, 2007), making the word identities more appropriate for highlighting the multiplicity of and fluid nature of identities in practice (Holland, et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2007).

While figured worlds provide a contextualized means for studying identity in practice, the literacies inherent in figured worlds, formed by discourses, serve as mediating devices or cultural artifacts, necessary for authoring and responsible (in large part) for positioning individuals in these worlds. Literacy researchers refer to discourses in a variety of ways and the connotations differ widely (Bartlett & Holland, 2002). For this study, it is imperative to note the inherent connection between discourses and

institutions; these educational discourses are powerful ones (Cary, 2006; Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1977; Gee, 1996; Usher & Edwards, 1994). This is evidenced in the academic literacies of the university (e.g. college writing), and the demand that students learn to correctly navigate them, as well as in the contextualized ways of speaking, writing, listening, reading, and being required to be successful in a university setting, as they are the discursive means by which one acquires power within the dominant discourses of society, and subsequently gain admittance to the figured world of the university. Figured worlds are not immune to issues of power (Holland, et al., 1998); discourses operate within and around various cultural worlds.

### **The Setting**

The setting of this study was two-part. Participants were situated in both past and present—as urban-schooled Latino/a youth who now attend university. The focus on students’ background was intentional. Contextualizing their school histories shed new light on research questions involving their current identity and literacy negotiations. In addition to descriptions of actual school sites, and the history of schooling for Latino/a youth, I attended briefly to my positionality as a part of the setting because in addition to being a White researcher working with students of color, I have relationships with these participants that date back to Roland High School and continue at State University.

#### **URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS**

Much has been written about urban schools and the inferior education students in urban settings receive (e.g. Anyon, 1997, Olsen, 1997, Valenzuela, 1999). These

researchers highlight the ways in which poor students, and in particular poor students of color, struggle for options in academic settings that offer few resources and opportunities for future academic planning. In addition to inadequate facilities and poorly trained teachers, often urban schools are either heavily tracked (Oakes, 1985, 2005; Rubin, 2006) or offer few program options for students wanting to achieve college readiness, in particular Advanced Placement courses. At the same time, students may not be aware of fundamental educational issues; for example, course credits for graduation and college acceptance are not necessarily equivalent (Valenzuela, 1999).

Urban schools also are forced to disproportionately deal with issues associated with mandatory state testing (Kohn, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Schools with large numbers of students who do not meet requirements outlined by the federal government (No Child Left Behind) and individual states' testing regiments (e.g. Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) are labeled low-performing and subjected to punitive measures such as transfer waivers that allow students to leave low-performing schools and attend other schools in the district.

Roland High School, a 4A high school in a mid-sized central Texas city, is just such a school. Rife with issues—racial tensions, teacher and administrator turnover, violence on campus, low test scores—the school has been a fixture in the local press for the better part of the last decade, portrayed as what a school should not be. Because of these issues, numerous reforms have been initiated at Roland in the last decade, including an implementation of the AVID program and other detracking reforms, such as open enrollment in all Advanced Placement classes. Roland offers a context to the discussions

of urban schools. It reflects many of the issues outlined in scholarship on urban schools, and also serves as a site where reform strategies have been attempted. While the participants in this study no longer attended Roland, it was important to highlight their educational backgrounds as the precursor to their current educational narratives.

### **DETRACKING EFFORTS**

In order to better understand a definition of detracking efforts, it is necessary to first define tracking. Tracking is the ubiquitous practice of dividing students within a school based on apparent ability. Included in this definition are ability groups for reading in elementary grades, as well as the grade level, honors and Advanced Placement distinctions in many secondary schools (Letendre, Hofer & Shimuzu, 2003).

Detracking is an alternative argued for by many scholars as an attempt to ameliorate the discrepancies in education among our nation's youth (Oakes, 2005; Rubin, 2006). Detracking takes on many forms, from the creation of public charter schools (e.g. The Preuss School) created in an effort to show the positive effects of detracking (Alvarez & Mehan, 2006), to subtle adjustments in open enrollment and curriculum options for all students (Welner & Burris, 2006). Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) remains one of the best-known detracking efforts in the United States (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard & Lintz, 1996). While this dissertation was not a study of AVID as a program, three of the current participants were enrolled in the AVID program, and the study began with AVID students, specifically in my AVID class at Roland, making the context of the program one that cannot be ignored or overlooked.

## **AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination)**

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) was founded in California in 1980 by Mary Catherine Swanson as a means to place African American and Latino/a students bused into Claremont High School in rigorous college-preparation courses rather than segregating students into tracks. Considered a detracking effort by many of its proponents, AVID's purpose is to offer assistance to students who choose to be a part of the program as they enroll in a rigorous high school curriculum (Mehan, et al., 1996).

The AVID mission, posted in AVID classrooms across the country reads:

The mission of AVID is to ensure that all students, and most especially students in the middle capable of completing a college preparatory path:

Will succeed in the most rigorous curriculum,

Will enter mainstream activities of the school,

Will increase their enrollment in four year colleges, and

Will become educated and responsible participants and leaders in a democratic society.<sup>2</sup>

Since AVID's inception, it has expanded into a nation-wide program, largely serving students who will be the first in their families to attend college.

The curriculum in the AVID class is articulated by the acronym WIC-R (Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration and Reading). All elements of the AVID elective class should revolve around these particular elements, while creating a college-going culture is highlighted as the basic tenet of the program (Mehan, et al., 1996). Even though the

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<sup>2</sup> Copied from AVID posters hanging in Roland High School AVID classrooms.

AVID elective teacher is given autonomy in the AVID class itself, the AVID weekly schedule is prescribed at AVID trainings. Mondays and Wednesdays are designated to focus on the AVID curriculum, with Tuesdays and Thursdays devoted to tutoring.<sup>3</sup>

### **AVID at Roland High School**

Roland High School provides a decidedly different context from Claremont High School. Predominately Latino/a and African American (less than 2% of the population is White and none are bused), the purpose of starting AVID at Roland was less about access and more about support for students willing to enroll in rigorous coursework. The AVID program at Roland began during the 1998-1999 school year, with the first class of AVID freshmen graduating in 2002, during my participants' freshmen year. It was common for seniors who had graduated to return to Roland and talk with under-classmen about their college experiences. In addition, our AVID faculty made it a point to schedule visits with former Roland graduates when touring college campuses. I was hired in 2002 to teach English, but also to begin with a freshman AVID class, as it is common for the same teacher to remain with a cohort of AVID students for three or four years.

The focus of the AVID classroom at Roland varied year to year. During participants' ninth grade year, key elements included organization, note-taking, and study skills. During sophomore year, test preparation for the PSAT and SAT took center stage. Junior year focused on college applications and essay writing, along with intense tutoring sessions for a heavy load of AP courses. Much of the senior year was devoted to

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<sup>3</sup> Knowledge of the AVID program is combined from numerous required AVID summer trainings and monthly inservices attended by the author from 2000-2005.

scholarship applications, the Federal Application for Student Aid and other elements of the post-acceptance process. Throughout the AVID program, no matter the year, there was an on-going focus on critical thinking skills, student-led discussions (Socratic Seminar), college and professional opportunities. In addition, as is outlined by the national AVID program, students were enrolled in the most rigorous program of study offered at Roland and received tutoring assistance two days a week as part of the AVID curriculum. At the same time, embedded in the curriculum were visits from business professionals and field trips to university campuses throughout the state.

### **Additional Detracking Efforts at Roland**

Along with other schools in the district, Roland received grant money intended to open enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) classes to all students. As such, AP teachers at Roland could not restrict entrance into their classes. Students could not be removed from AP classes because of low grades, reading levels, or any other criteria that might make the classes be perceived as elitist. Any student at Roland High School could self-select to participate in AP classes, thus a college-going culture was not as formally restrictive at Roland as it is in many high schools across the country—students could participate if they so chose. This effort was particularly important when considering issues of access to AP classes for Latino/a students. Valle (2007) found that schools who served low-income students of color continue to enroll the fewest number of Latino/a students in AP classes, making the benefits associated with these classes often unavailable to Latino/a students in our nation's poorest communities. However, when AP



programs are made available to Latino/a students and combined with financial aid counseling, students were more apt to consider entering college (Valle, 2007).

The participants in this study were all enrolled in Pre-AP and AP courses at Roland for the four years of their high school careers. At other schools, these students' admission to AP classes might have been blocked or based on test scores, but at Roland, students simply needed to sign up for the class. While there have been studies that demonstrate open enrollment does not necessarily equal access for students because of student and teacher perceptions of students and student success (Lotan, 2006; Watanabe, 2006; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006), as an AP faculty we met regularly to discuss these issues and attempt to alleviate these sorts of pressures on campus.

These detracking efforts at a public high school also highlight the importance of these students' stories. As human products of attempts at reform, their scholastic careers are emblematic of attempts at narrowing the achievement gap. It is important, simultaneously, to emphasize that their stories are highly contextualized and not meant to be viewed as generalizable.

## **LATINO/AS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

The history of Latino/as in our nation's public schools, and in particular in Texas public schools, is a tumultuous one. Texas history is predominately populated by individuals of Mexican descent; however, as a whole, the United States has a wide variety of Latino/a immigrants. In addition, Roland High School serves a predominately Latino/a population and the former Roland High students who have agreed to participate

in this study all identify as Latino/a, making imperative a brief mention of Latino/as in our nation's schools. Spring (2001) centered these issues historically:

The attitude of racial, religious and cultural superiority—which provided motivation for the United States to take over Mexican land and fueled hostilities between the two countries throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—was reflected in the treatment of Mexicans who remained after the U.S. conquest and of later Mexican immigrants. Segregated schools, housing, and discrimination in employment became the Mexican American heritage. Reflecting the attitude of the Mexican government toward the anti-Mexican feelings in the United States, the president of Mexico, General Porfirio Diaz, was reported to have remarked in the latter part of the nineteenth century: “Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States.” (p. 75)

For many families of the students in our nation's schools, the Mexican American heritage of “segregated schools, housing, and discrimination in employment” remains today (Spring, 2001).

This brief history that follows is based in large part on MacDonald's (2004) *Latino Education in the United States: A Narrated History from 1513-2000*, which is constructed from multiple primary source documents. As did MacDonald (2004), this study utilized the term Latino/a to refer to an extraordinarily diverse and varied group of individuals in the United States who trace their histories to Latin American countries, Spain, and Puerto Rico. However, I simultaneously recognized the problematic nature of the term because it is typically used in reference to those who speak Spanish, but many

groups arrive in the United States speaking indigenous languages, and the term Latino has its “origin in dreams of a Pan-American union” (Spring, 2001, p. 69). It does, however, attempt to break the tie with Spanish cultural imperialism associated with the term Hispanic (MacDonald, 2004; Spring, 2001), and therefore I used it in place of the term Hispanic when referencing the students in this study.

Since Texas was a Mexican state, the Constitution required schools in towns where there were enough people to warrant building one. Mexico encouraged immigration to Texas and there were laws (rarely adhered to) that required new immigrants to convert to Catholicism, learn Spanish, and obey Mexican law. The burgeoning slave trade was also overlooked by the government, and as a result, by 1830 Americans outnumbered Mexicans 25,000 to 4,000 in Texas. When Mexico was defeated and violations of various treaties resulted in large amounts of land lost, there was still much resistance to the marginalization of Mexican culture. However, in just a few decades, Texas ratified laws that required English to be the dominant language taught if schools wanted to receive funding. In spite of laws like these, initially dual language study and growth were encouraged in many of the settlements in Texas (MacDonald, 2004; Spring, 2001).

The early 1900s marked an increased move toward the segregation of Latino/as in Texas schools. Although not legislated like the segregation of African American students: Anglo school administrators utilized vague and often unwritten justifications to place Mexican children into separate classrooms or entirely separate schools from their Anglo peers. Administrators justified segregation based on the perception

that the children possessed deficient English language skills, scored low on intelligence tests, and/or practiced poor personal hygiene. (MacDonald, 2004, p. 118)

Additionally, the economy in the state of Texas relied heavily on migrant agricultural workers, and this was cited as a reason compulsory education was not enforced for Mexican-origin students. In the 1930s, a study of attendance in Texas revealed that 71%-96% of enrolled White students regularly attended school, as compared with 39%-89% of Mexican-origin children. At the same time, 85% of Mexican-origin students were attending strictly segregated schools (MacDonald, 2004). There were conflicting attitudes surrounding the education of immigrants' children working on farms. While farmers wanted Mexican-origin students "Americanized," they also wanted the children available to work in the fields (Spring, 2001). Additionally, Spring (2001) argued that the treatment of Latino/a immigrant farmers' children in the school system represented two methods of using education as a means of social control. The first was denying a population "the knowledge necessary to protect its political and economic rights to economically advance in society" (p. 79), and the second was the maintenance of White supremacy. As such, Mexican children were put through a deculturalization program known as "Americanization," which involved: segregation and isolation, a forced change of language, a curriculum that reflected only the culture of the dominant group, a refusal to let dominated groups express their own cultures and religions, and a use of teachers from only the dominate group (Spring, 2001). In addition, Spring (2001) argued:

It could be that deculturalization programs are self-defeating. When parents and children resist attempts to strip them of their cultural heritage, they might also resist other educational programs. In other words, deculturalization programs might turn both parents and children against all educational programs offered by schools. (p. 89)

Americanization continued as a dominant curricular activity until the 1930s. Educators stopped using the term, but elements of the program remained:

Language and culture continued to be major educational concerns, and the identification of the Spanish language and Mexican culture as contradictory to educational success lost no ground in conventional theory and practice.

Throughout the first half of the century, school policies treated the culture of the Mexican child as unworthy of equality with the dominant culture. (Gonzalez, 1997, p. 170)

Though continually subjected to racist schooling policies, the history of the Latino/a community is one in which individuals reacted with “agency, not passive acceptance” (p. 119). With the help of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), desegregation cases were initiated in Texas decades before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). For instance, in 1930, Del Rio Independent School District sued the government, arguing that Mexican-origin students had been denied the quality facilities utilized by “other White races” (p. 119). The case was lost, because segregation was deemed necessary due to the special language needs of native Spanish speakers. Similarly, in *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District* (1948), arguments also

indicated that Mexican students were “White,” and separate schools were unequal, though separate classes on the same campuses were allowed to remain.

Organizing continued well into the next few decades. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “El Movimiento” was born in large part because of the slow progress of equal education for Latino/as in U.S. public schools. In the 1960s, Latino/as averaged three to four years less schooling than Anglos. In addition, half of Mexican Americans over the age of twenty-five had not completed 8<sup>th</sup> grade and less than 6% had any college education. For Whites, college participation was four times greater than that of Latinos (MacDonald, 2004).

By 1970, in *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District*, it was no longer deemed valuable for Mexican-origin students in Texas to be classified as “White,” and they won the suit which argued for Latino/as in Texas to be classified as a separate minority group and therefore receive the same rights outlined in *Brown v. Board of Education*. It is agreed by many Latino/a historians that the 1960s and 1970s brought important opportunities to Latino/as, including the 1968 Bilingual Education Act. However, since then, there has been a decided backlash from the American public, what MacDonald (2004) calls “Un paso hacia adelante, y otro hacia atras” (p. 276)—“one step forward and one step back.” For example, Latino/a high school graduates attending college declined from 35.4% in 1975 to 29.9% in 1980. Despite changes in schooling in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, many scholars argue that education for Latino/as did not necessarily improve dramatically:

In the 1980s, assimilationism once again, as in the 1920s, resurfaced with a vengeance, owing to, in many respects, the growing number of individuals and groups, such as the U.S. English and English First, who are opposed to pluralist and egalitarian ideologies. They have successfully led efforts to repeal bilingual policies and have enacted English-only laws. Although Hispanics continue to support bilingualism in American institutional life, the forces of assimilation have become once again dominant in today's world, including the public schools. (Kanellos, 1993, p. 306).

It is important to note that between 1990-2000 the Latino/a population in the United States increased 58% from 22.4 million to 35.3 million, while the total U.S. population only experienced a 13.2% growth. Latino/as are by far the largest minority population in the United States. From 1968 (the first year Latino/a national data became available) to 1998, Latinos in public schools increased by 219%, from 2 million to 4.4 million while Anglo enrollment fell by 5.6 million. Latino/as are now basically disproportionately resegregated in urban high schools with few White pupils (MacDonald, 2004; Valle, 2007). In the city discussed in this proposed study, this pattern is demonstrated in school demographic data. Schools are highly (re)segregated by race.

The participants in this study all identify as Latino/a, and all decided to pursue a college education as early as their freshman year at Roland High School. They received their education at one of the resegregated urban high schools in central Texas, but this experience and negotiation of the numerous literacies in their adolescent lives is only the beginning of the tale.

## **LATINO/AS AND COLLEGE ATTENDANCE**

On average, 35% of students admitted to universities discontinue their studies after the first year of college work (Hjortshoj, 2001). For Latino/a students in the United States, the portrait painted by statistics is more dismal. For students aged 25-29 in 1998, 61% of Latino/a students graduated from high school, as compared to 93% of their Anglo counterparts and 86% of African Americans. 31% of Latino/as completed some college, with only 10% attaining bachelor's degrees. For White students, 62% completed some college, with 29% receiving bachelor's degrees (Kirst, 2004). Basically, for every 100 Latino/a elementary school student enrolled in the U.S. school system 48 drop out of high school and 52 graduate from high school. Of those 52 who graduate, 31 enroll in college, with 20 of those students going to a community college and 11 going to a four-year institution. Of the 31 Latino/as enrolled in college, only 10 graduate from college (Valle, 2007). Latino/as continue to drop out of college at high rates for largely financial reasons, and they remain clustered in two year colleges, while 40% of all college degrees earned by Latinos are in two-year colleges, compared with 25% of White students. In addition, it is predicted that Latino/as in the 18-24 year old range will be under-represented by 500,000 in our nation's universities by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (MacDonald, 2004).

At the same time, students from urban schools are often required to take remedial classes upon arriving at the university—classes that cost the equivalent in tuition but offer no actual course credit to students (Kirst, 2004). When students are required to take one or more remedial class at the university level, completion rates drop significantly. Between 1980 and 1993, only 34% of students who took a remedial reading course



completed either a two-year or a four-year degree, as opposed to 56% of students who did not take remedial courses. Latinos and African American students are disproportionately represented in remedial courses, due in large part to being disproportionately represented in large urban high schools with dubious college preparation programs (Kirst, 2004).

The students in this study were all accepted to State University, one of the largest universities in the country, and located in their hometown. Little is known about Latino/a participation in higher education in Texas before the 1920s, but records indicate that Manuel Garcia was the first Latino to graduate from State University in 1894. According to State University's online *Statistical Handbook*, for these participants' fall semester, the total campus enrollment was 49,697 students, with only 15% of those students identified as "Hispanic."

Now with participants' educational histories contextualized in a broader sociohistorical struggle, it is vital to study these students in their current locale. I feel it necessary to note that these categories of urban-schooled and Latino/a are simply that—categories determined by me, the researcher, in an attempt to paint a more complete portrait of my participants by drawing on notions and understandings of inequity in schooling. I caution that these categories are simply ways or rationales for how/why I choose to conduct research, and I need to be hyper-vigilant in attempts not to reinscribe labels and perpetuate the very issues critical theory attempts to eradicate (Ellsworth, 1989). Thus, these are contexts, not necessarily ways students self-identify. In spite of my need to identify my participants as urban-schooled Latino/as, and myself as a White researcher, the study itself allows for students to identify in multiple ways.

Many studies highlight Latino/a students' high school careers or students' post-secondary experiences. Few studies look at student post-secondary experiences as contextualized by their high school education. The continuity of participants' literacy and identity development in their early college experience contribute to the conversation surrounding urban-schooled Latino/a students, offering important information to both secondary and post-secondary educators.

### **POSITIONALITY: WHITENESS AND PRIVILEGE**

My position in this study was a complicated outsider one (Bettie, 2003; Tisdell, 2000). I was an outsider because my race, along with my social and economic capital, was different from the participants in my study. Mine mirrors that of the majority of teachers in Texas and in U. S. schools. According to the Texas Education Agency's 2005-2006 data, 69.4% of teachers in Texas are White, with 77.1% being female and most are middle class. In a report based on a 2003-2004 staffing survey, Tourkin, et. al (2006) found the teaching population in the country as a whole to be 83% White and predominately middle class. I am a White, middle-class woman who attended a large, 5A, high-performing suburban high school in Texas. Attempting to understand Whiteness and myself as a racialized text was imperative in this study (Frankenberg, 1993; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; McIntyre, 1997). Just as I have no firsthand knowledge of what it means to be a student in an urban, neighborhood high school, or to grow up in a low-income household, I also have lived my life in a privileged position as a White woman. As a White female researcher, I needed to "think through race" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 142), understanding that all of my present thinking about race "must take place in an

already constituted field of racialized relations, material and conceptual,” while recognizing that all of my thinking comes from “within a racially identified body, thinking as a self that is racially positioned in society” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 142).

My position as a White researcher was further complicated by the fact that I was a teacher at Roland High School for the majority of these students’ high school careers and they were my students, some of them for two class periods a day for three years. I was responsible in large part for these students’ academic development in English Language Arts and their college preparation as an AVID/Advanced Placement teacher. I witnessed the education these students received along with the intense media scrutiny they were subjected to. While writing this introduction, I searched the archives of the local newspaper for the four years these students attended Roland High School, looking for mentions of Roland in the headlines. I found 121 headlines, few of which were positive, most dealt with a murder that occurred on campus, the almost constant turnover of administration, and poor standardized test scores. We existed as students and teacher for a number of (often difficult) years on the same campus. We experienced Roland High School together, though through different lenses despite a brief shared history. Though we co-existed at Roland High School and maintained close relationships, I am and always will be an outsider with regards to these students’ life experiences.

At the same time, I am also a graduate student on the same campus these students are now attending. While my undergraduate experience took place on another campus in central Texas, I returned to school as a full-time student, just as my former students were entering the university as freshmen. Here at SU, our lives intersected in another unique

way, and I was reminded of this every time I saw one of them on campus between classes or waving at me from the campus shuttle as I was walking to one of my own classes. We were all students, but I was the researcher and they were the participants. Therefore, as with our past experiences at Roland High, what might first look like a possibility for insider positioning can never be that. The power inherent in our current relationship could not be denied, nor the power my place as teacher afforded me in their secondary school experiences. I can never fully represent another person's experience; my writings will always be partial, no matter how much I guard against "Othering" (Fine, 1994; Roman, 1993). In light of these issues, it was imperative that the various roles I inhabited throughout my research—teacher, learner, student, researcher—be interrogated and subsequently (re)negotiated throughout the research process (Roman, 1993; Villenas, 2000).

## **Methodology**

This research was a multiple case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1994, 1995) that highlighted five participants' early college experiences, with a focus on identity (re)constructions and literacy negotiations. Data sources included my research journal, focus group interviews, individual interviews, artifacts, and occasional observations (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005). In addition to multiple data sources, I utilized multiple analytical tools for analyzing my data (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006), including: the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1984), Curriculum Spaces Research Theory (Cary, 2006), and Fairclough's (1995,

2003) levels of discourse. A focus on validity ultimately mandates a goal of transferability rather than generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1984), and the tools of member-checking, triangulation of data, and peer debriefing (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005). At the same time, while recognizing my personal inability to fully represent or speak for my participants, I focused on my own positionality and epistemologies while studying the lives and literacies of my former students (Cary, 2006; Roman, 1993; Villenas, 2000).

### **Figured Worlds**

A study of identity and literacy needs a frame in which both can be scrutinized in context. One such framework for studying participation, activity, and agency, along with identity development, is the figured world as defined by Holland, et al. (1998). The construct of figured worlds allows for a contextualization of the previously mentioned categorical descriptions of participants. Participants exist in or have existed in the figured worlds of urban schools, Latino/a education, AVID, detracking efforts, and the university, among others. The construct of the figured world is particularly valuable because of its emphasis on agency; identity work could easily become nihilistic, but a focus on agency, even though human agency “may be frail” and happen “daily and mundanely” (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 126) is worth paying attention to.

Figured worlds are “socially produced, culturally constructed activities;” they are historical phenomena to which people enter or into which individuals are recruited (Holland, et al., 1998, pp. 40-41). Humans are simultaneously social products and social

producers. Thus, figured worlds develop through the participation of individuals just as individuals develop through their participation in figured worlds. Cultural (or figured) worlds are “processes or traditions of apprehension which gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect them” (p. 41). Social positions matter in figured worlds—individuals might be denied access or may deny access to others, while they might fully learn other cultural worlds. Holland, et al. (1998) explained:

Cultural worlds are populated by familiar social types and even identifiable persons, not simply differentiated by some abstract division of labor. The identities we gain within figured worlds are thus specifically historical developments, grown through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organization of those worlds’ activity. They are characteristic of humans and societies. (p. 41)

The authors offer a specific look at particular figured worlds, including the figured worlds of Alcoholics Anonymous and romance.

Identification with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and the figured world of a desire for romance are formulated in practice. For alcoholics, this occurs in large part through the stories told—personal narratives serve as mediating devices. At the same time, a desire for romance, while presented as a naturally formulated process, is really about recruitment and an identification with a particular figured world. Alcoholics are recruited into the figured world of AA, just as women are recruited into the figured world of the desire for romance. In both instances, participants develop and learn to personalize

particular aspects of figured worlds—as a non-drinking alcoholic or as a person with romantic desires.

Cultural knowledge is inherent in both AA and in the figured world of romance; upon recruitment participants either make the cultural knowledge offered into self-knowledge or resist it. Either reaction serves to determine an individual’s position in relation to a particular cultural world. As Holland and her colleagues (1998) stated:

[P]articipants develop an identification with a figured world in different degrees of engagement, and these “levels of identity” are products of people’s social histories, lived as “history-in-person.” These processes of identification are evident in the specialized world of AA and also in the more widespread activities of romance and attraction. (p. 98)

These two studies highlight the ways in which figured worlds function and emphasize identity construction in practice. The participants in this study participated in multiple figured worlds and recently entered a new one—the figured world of the university. However, it is imperative to conclude this brief introduction to figured worlds with a necessary caveat. Figured worlds are a part of a theory of identities in practice, the central element, but are not meant to be extricated from the other elements of the theory: positionality, space of authoring, and making worlds (Holland, et al., 1998). These aspects of identity formation and their connections to figured worlds are explained in detail in my review of the literature.

## **CHAPTER 2: *LITERATURE REVIEW***

This chapter outlines the literature used in the construction of the study. First is a discussion of broader definitions of literacies, drawing in large part on sociocultural theories of literacy (Gee, 1996; Moll, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962; Wells, 1999, 2001; Wertsch, 1991), with a specific focus on the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1995, 2003), adolescent literacies (Alvermann, 1998; Dillon & Moje, 1998; Phelps, 1998) and personal or out-of-school literacies (Dillon & Moje, 1998; Leu, 2002; Moje, 2004). The discussion of literacies in young adults' lives is followed by an emphasis on discourses and the production of power and knowledge (with)in and through the university (Cary, 2006; Foucault, 1977; Kress, 1989, McHoul & Grace, 1995; Usher & Edwards, 1994), as evidenced particularly in scholarship that exists in Rhetoric and Composition Studies (Bizzell, 2003; Bartholomae, 2003; Elbow, 1998; Kutz, 1998; McCarthy, 1987; Rose 1998; Zamel & Spack, 1998). In order to better explicate the connections between literacy, power and discourse, relationships between literacy and identity are highlighted (Bartlett, 2007; Bartlett & Holland, 2002; Blackburn, 2002; Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Gee, 2000-2001; Jimenez, 2000; Leander, 2002; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2004; Schultz, 1999), followed by a discussion of positioning (Lachicotte, 2002; Wortham, 2004) and a more in-depth look at identity in practice through the construct of the figured world (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Holland, et al., 1998; Jurow, 2005; Urrieta, 2007). As a connector between literature and method, identity and literacy, the chapter



concludes with a brief look at links between identity and narrative (Sloan, 2006; Somers and Gibson, 1994; Wortham, 2001, 2004).

## **Sociocultural Approaches to Literacy/Literacies**

According to Gee (1996), language and literacy are nonsensical outside of a sociocultural frame:

[W]e can turn literacy on its head, so to speak, and refer crucially to the social institutions and social groups that have these practices, rather than to the practices themselves. When we do this, something odd happens: the practices of such social groups are never just literacy practices. They also involve ways of talking, interacting, thinking, valuing and behaving. (p. 41)

Thus, for the purposes of this study, a definition of literacy/literacies is grounded in sociocultural theories of language and literacy practices—literacies are culturally, historically, and socially situated—they are uniquely contextual (Moll, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962; Wells, 1999, 2001; Wertsch, 1991). These theories do not situate literacy within the individual person, making it simply about reading and writing skills; instead, they situate literacy in society so as to emphasize connections between the interworkings of literacy and power (Gee, 1996). As such, many scholars focus on out-of-school literacies as an attempt to broaden a definition of literacy (e.g. Blackburn, 2002; Moje, 2004).

The term literacies has replaced literacy in many discussions in the field and a broader view of literacies encompasses much more than listening, speaking, reading and writing. This study will look to a definition of literacies as socially situated, and often

contested, ways of knowing, valuing and being in the world (Gee, 2000-2001; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995, 2003). Additionally, scholarship centered on literacy as contextualized, sociocultural practices and focused on the multiplicity of adolescent literacies adds strength to this broad definition of literacy.

### **NEW LITERACY STUDIES (NLS)**

Such a frame of reference for literacies is often referred to as the “New Literacy Studies” (NLS) (Bartlett, 2007; Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995, 2003). Bartlett and Holland (2002) argued that Street (1984) initiated a “paradigmatic revolution” (p. 11) by delineating literacy events and literacy practices, work that ultimately became the foundation for the NLS, and that NLS should be augmented with connections to cultural worlds and identities in practice. Literacy practices do not stand alone, but are fully integrated into broader practices like interacting, valuing, talking and believing (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983). Gee added:

People who take a sociocultural approach to literacy believe that the literacy myth—the idea that literacy leads inevitably to a long list of “good” things—is a myth because literacy in and of itself, abstracted from historical conditions and social practices, has no effects, or, at least, no predictable effects.... Rather effects are produced by historically and culturally situated social practices of which reading and writing are only bits, bits that are differently composed and situated in different social practices. (p. 42)

In this dissertation, a broader definition of literacy is highlighted, one that is centered in a sociocultural framework, as it will allow for connections to identity enactments and a discussion of power.

### **ADOLESCENT LITERACIES/YOUNG ADULT LITERACIES**

Similarly, adolescent literacies and literacy development cannot be separated from their sociocultural contexts: "...the literacies in adolescents' lives must always be read in relation to a world that shapes and is shaped by them" (Alvermann, 1998, p. 353). One of the difficulties in framing this study through literature is the differentiation that exists in literacy scholarship. Often, writers refer to children's literacy or adolescent literacy or adult literacy, but there is little with which to reference students who are somewhere in between—still adolescents, at times adults, but literacy learners nonetheless. Simply looking at literacy practices for college students uncovered much work in Rhetoric and Composition Studies (Bizzell, 2003; Bartholomae, 2003; Elbow, 1998; Kutz, 1998; McCarthy, 1987; Rose 1998; Zamel & Spack, 1998), along with quantitative studies on student success (Adan & Feiner, 1995; Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000; Choy, Horn, Nuñez & Chen, 2000), but there is little terminology in use that suits the purposes of this study.

Therefore, in this study participants are considered "young adults" with the literature on adolescent literacy used to center their identity development and literacy practices. After all, their identities as literacy students were formed in the context of adolescent development—most recently their secondary school experiences—which makes a focus on adolescent literacy one that helps situate their past, present, and future literacy development. As Phelps (1998) argued, "Literacy has an important function in

the development of individual, cultural, and social identities. Adolescents take cues on how to act, interact, and understand from their literate experiences and cues taken from past literate experiences influence new literate activity” (p. 2). Students’ past literacy experiences include both in-school and out-of-school literacies, and this will also be true of their university experiences.

In the last decade, researchers and scholars recognized a need for a more multifaceted definition of adolescent literacy, one that mirrored the literacies in adolescents’ lives, “multilayered, shifting, and relational” (Vacca, 1998, p. xv). Academic literacies are a part of this definition, but simply one part. Young adults’ literacy development cannot be confined to a single segment of their lives, but instead, should allow for the multiplicity of personal and academic literacies in existence in student lives, both in and out of school. Dillon and Moje (1998) argued this point:

Many who have studied literacy in secondary school settings over the last several years have constituted adolescents’ worlds in terms of our own, which tend to focus on academic uses of literacy. We have been so preoccupied with strategies, disciplinary concepts, teachers’ beliefs and practices and the structure of written texts that we have failed to listen to teenagers talking about their worlds. We have failed to understand adolescents’ talk in light of larger social, cultural and historical events and practices in their lives. (p. 193)

It is important to highlight students’ perceptions of academic literacy development, while not limiting the conversations of identity constructions strictly to the context of the

academics of school. The entirety of that experience, although namely an academic one, offers more options and contexts for student narratives.

### **PERSONAL LITERACIES/OUT-OF-SCHOOL LITERACIES**

In addition, Dillon and Moje (1998) argued in secondary literacy theory and research, even when scholars worked to situate literacy practices in a sociocultural framework, they still only looked at teacher and student talk, along with students' literacy uses in response. Now it is important to look through new lenses, to consider the multiple contexts and multiple literacies of student lives. Students' literacies (and identities) are not limited to those utilized in schools. Literacies, even in their most concrete form, are varied and include multiple variations from in school writing assignments to graffiti to internet use to text messaging (Dillon & Moje, 1998; Leu, 2002; Moje, 2004).

In response, Dillon and Moje (1998) studied adolescent literacies in broader contexts and focused specifically on how students were positioned by "asymmetrical power relations" (p. 194) and in turn, how students positioned themselves in light of these relations and how these students positioned others. These multiple positionings occurred through literacy practices as adolescents attempted the complex negotiations of their worlds. For example, "...adolescents may make choices about whether to be 'good' students or 'resistant' students within a set of discourses about what it means to be a student and what the consequences of resistance include" (Dillon & Moje, 1998, p. 194). According to the authors, literacy research must be more than simply hearing and valuing student voices. Researchers must analyze these voices for a reflection of dominant discourses and study how students are positioned to both resist and perpetuate these

discourses, while at the same time, teaching students to ask the same types of analytical questions.

Thus, within the figured worlds of high school and college, students author themselves in multiple ways, and in doing so utilize multiple literacies as mediating devices. Students' power and social status in figured worlds are mediated by *all* literacies, both in school and out-of-school. Thus, it is imperative not to exclude any form or possibility of literacy, recognizing that these literacies offer valuable insight into the multiple identities students negotiate as college students.

Although at times this section described aspects of literacies in seeming binaries (in-school and out-of-school), one must be cautious in doing so. Alvermann (1998) reminded educators of the importance of avoiding binaries and problematizing *all* definitions when conducting literacy research. While this dissertation works from a view of literacies in line with sociocultural theories of development, it is important to recognize the problematic nature of binaries and the need to focus on issues of power.

### **Discourses, Power and Knowledge**

Literacies and identities coexist and co-develop within sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts of schooling:

[T]he first step is to identify the objectives of the inherited dominant education.

Next, it is necessary to analyze how the methods used by the dominant schools function, legitimize the dominant values and meanings, and at the same time

negate the history, culture, and language practices of the majority of subordinate students. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 15)

Discourses are inherent in institutions, and a need for understanding the university as an institution that creates and recreates its own metanarratives of education is apparent (Cary, 2006; Foucault, 1977; Usher & Edwards, 1994).

In Foucault's approach, discourses are "bodies of knowledge" connected to disciplines, both in the scholarly sense (e.g. science, medicine, psychiatry, sociology) and as disciplinary institutions (e.g. prisons, hospitals) that contributed to social control. Thus, his concept of discourse demonstrated "historically specific relations between disciplines (defined as bodies of knowledge) and disciplinary practices (forms of social control and social possibility)" (McHoul & Grace, 1995, p. 26). Foucault argued for a reconsideration of the role of discourses and knowledge and power in modern institutions. He equated powerful discourses with "regimes of truth," therefore alerting us in no uncertain terms to the politics of discourse, which in turn offered a different view of knowledge—it is inextricably tied to politics and power. Foucault's negation of humanist metanarratives, bound in discourses, was a different take on truth: "For Foucault, it is what *counts* as true that is important" (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 87). As such, by Foucault's definition, the very "locus of power-knowledge formation" is discourse, and thus discourse is not necessarily a set of true statements, but instead the "means for statements to be assessed as true," so that certain people are authorized to speak while others are deemed less authoritative or silenced all together (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 87).

## **DISCOURSES, EXCLUSION AND THE UNIVERSITY**

By its very nature, a discourse is exclusionary, an “absent presence, yet a powerful one” (Usher & Edwards, p. 89), that validates and legitimizes and in turn creates labels of deviant (Cary, 2006). Power is always circulating while actively producing knowledge and ways of being (Foucault, 1977; Cary, 2006). As such, “Foucault (1977) directly challenges the notion that schools (or universities) can naturally or neutrally ‘create’ empowered and emancipated citizens,” because his “regimes of truth...regulate and reinscribe power relations...and thus regulate the behavior and ideological assumptions of the institution” (Cary, 2006, p. 8).

Kress (1989), drawing heavily on the work of Foucault, defined discourses as systematically organized statements that demonstrate the values of particular institutions. Discourses make that which is socially constructed appear obvious or natural, which subsequently delineates anything outside the obvious or normal as deviant. Individuals each have a particular discursive history, cobbled together from said individual’s participation in various social settings or various discourse communities throughout the course of his/her life. Therefore, discourses are non-neutral practices that often function as sorting mechanisms within institutions and society as a whole; schools are examples of sites where this sorting takes place (Cary, 2006; Foucault, 1977; Gee, 1996; Kress, 1989; Usher & Edwards, 1994).

A study of discourses can assist in an understanding of how they function in our lives and worlds. Kress (1989) continued:



The accounts provided within one discourse become not only unchallenged, but unchallengeable, as “common sense.” If the domination of a particular area by a discourse is successful, it provides an integrated and plausible account of that area, which allows no room for thought; the social will have been turned into the natural. At that stage it impossible to conceive of alternative modes of thought, or else alternative modes of thought will seem bizarre, outlandish, unnatural...Given this view of language (itself the product of the interplay of discourses) it can be seen how the speaking/writing and reading/listening of individuals is determined by their positions in institutions, by their place within certain discourses. It allows us to link speaking and writing, listening and reading to social place and to social/institutional meanings, without giving up a serious notion of the individual as social agent. (p. 10)

One way success is measured at the university level is by an acquisition and/or appropriation of the various academic literacies at the university. There are multiple academic literacies, created by discourses, or in Foucauldian terms, “regimes of truth” that students encounter and navigate on a daily basis. In turn, they are expected to appropriately acquire these academic literacies, which again highlights connections between knowledge and power (Foucault, 1977). Conversations in Rhetoric and Composition Studies over the last two decades emphasize this idea, particularly in college writing.

## ACADEMIC LITERACIES AND THE UNIVERSITY

Academic literacies are products of regimes of truth (Foucault, 1977), and as such are tied to the discourses of the university. They are semiotic mediating tools or cultural artifacts for individuals participating in a figured world (Holland, et al., 1998; Holquist, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). These academic literacies are a type of literacy practice, defined by Brandt and Clinton (2002) as “socially regulated, recurrent, and patterned things that people do with literacy as well as the cultural significance they ascribe to those doings” (p. 342). For students to survive or be deemed successful at the university level, they must learn the ins-and-outs of the university and the multiple discourses that encompass the cultural world of the university—discourses that change from class to class and group to group (Bizzell, 2003; Bartholomae, 2003; Elbow, 1998; Kutz, 1998; McCarthy, 1987; Rose 1998; Zamel & Spack, 1998). Arguably the navigation of these discourses at the university level can lead to a (re)negotiation of various identities, including, but not limited to, the identities associated with being a student.

Thus, a focus on the literature centered in apprenticing students to these discourses will assist in framing the identity negotiations in students’ lives as they make a perhaps previously unparalleled academic transition to the discourses of the university. According to Zamel & Spack (1998), academic literacies:

[O]nce denoted simply the ability to read and write college-level texts, now must embrace multiple approaches to knowledge....College classrooms have become sites where different languages and cultures intersect, including the various discourses of students, teachers, and researchers. In our experience, the result of

this interaction, even when (perhaps because) it involves struggle and conflict, is most often intellectual growth, for these different languages and cultures build on and give shape to one another. (p. ix)

They encouraged educators to re-envision academic discourses, particularly when students' writing does not fit the models the university demands: "Their texts and interpretations can challenge us to recognize our own rhetorical prejudices and to reconceptualize our perspectives on academic discourse. This is a mutually enriching process" (Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. xi). In addition, the authors (1998) argued for a focus on discourse practices—both the acquisition and reconstruction—as non-neutral enterprises. Students' ways with language are "inextricably linked with who they are" (Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. xi), thus while they are trying on new literacy practices, young adults are also trying on new identities, and it is only natural that those identities might initially be rather disorienting for students. Identity shifts are difficult.

These issues were also addressed in scholarly debates that occurred in the fields of Rhetoric and Composition in the 1980s and 1990s. Though arguably writing from a different definition of discourse than was previously outlined, these debates still serve to highlight a Foucauldian notion of discourses as regimes of truth. For example, Bizzell (2003) focused on the "writing problem" many were discussing in composition studies—the apparent need to remediate student thinking as well as their writing. She argued even the most benign or commonplace elements of discourse are socially constructed. As such, the writing problem in the university is actually a discourse issue. Her suggestion was to teach students to successfully navigate the writing discourses of the university while

being forthright with students that a multiplicity of discourses exist at the university level and that these discourses are connected to power.

Others in composition studies also wrote about the issue of discourses and university writing. Rose (1998) argued that professors refer to students as illiterate because of their apparent inability to “invent the university” (Bartholomae, 2003) for a particular assignment in a particular place in time. In actuality, this apparent illiteracy is an inability to successfully maneuver in and around the discourses of the university.

Elbow (1998) argued that a refusal to teach students the ins-and-outs of difference in the discourse community of the university leaves students who are the first in their families to go to college or who are poor in a “power vacuum.” Other students whose primary discourses closely mirror those of the university setting gain more power, and students who need more access to the structures of power are continuously denied access. Rather than attempting to teach students all of the writing they will encounter in the discourse communities of the university, we should instead teach students to recognize differences quickly and offer them strategies to deal with these differences (Elbow, 1998; Kutz, 1998). Additionally, McCarthy (1997) found students had real difficulty in recognizing commonalities across writing assignments, even when they were seemingly apparent. The differences in content areas and professors made a recognition of commonalities decidedly difficult for her participant. Thus, in addition to teaching students that differences do exist, it is important and valuable to teach students to locate commonalities in writing assignments.

Kutz (1998) argued against the primacy of academic discourses within the university and suggested that primary discourses be used as the vehicle for navigating all of the problems students have with various academic discourses. Then, and only then, will they be able to participate in the discussions taking place within the university, and ultimately to critique the discourse community as they see fit. All of the authors agree discourse communities exist and are difficult for students to navigate, that writing is a large part of the “identity kit” (Gee, 1996) to be used within the discourse community of the university, and that students need to be taught various elements, although through different strategies, in order to be able to participate successfully in the university.

Students face issues associated with power and knowledge as they attempt to author themselves within the figured world of the university. It is valuable to look at the negotiations they make, in particular in their own identity constructions, as they work to author themselves within this world (Holland, et al., 1998). Academic literacies are cultural artifacts of the figured world of the university; “[cultural artifacts] are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, grown into individually, and collectively developed” (Bartlett & Holland, 2002, p. 13). As artifacts, academic literacies function as tools for opening up figured worlds to participants (Bartlett & Holland, 2002). There are inherent connections between students’ literacy practices, identity development, discourses, and power.

## Linking Identities and Literacy

Scholars point to clear connections between studies of literacy and studies of identity:

Sociocultural approaches to literacy are integrating the concept of *identity* to think about the purposeful ways in which individuals endeavor to position themselves through (and/or in conjunction with) literacy practices in social and cultural fields. By “identity,” social scholars of literacy are *not* suggesting anything fixed or unified; instead, they are referring to the ongoing social process of self-making in conjunction with others through interaction... (Bartlett, 2007, p. 53)

For example, using their ethnographic study of literacy practices and programs in Brazil, Bartlett and Holland (2002) argued for an expansion of the concept of literacy practice, one that includes figured worlds, artifacts and identities. By using the concept of literacy practices (Street, 1984), researchers focused on the social, political and history contexts of literacy events, and as such, the “relations of social power that envelope them” (Bartlett & Holland, 2002, p. 11). This paved the way for the more recent development of scholars to link literacy practices to the discourses that frame them, and subsequently a study of identities (Bartlett & Holland, 2002).

Identities are enactments of self that have strong emotional resonance within an individual (Holland, et al., 1998). In addition, identities are multiple, fluid, and contingent, based in part on how individuals see themselves as well as how others view the individual; they are continuously being constructed and reconstructed. Identities are formed by how we view ourselves and how others view us (Gee, 2000-2001; Holland, et

al., 1998). There is a profoundly interconnected relationship between literacy and identity (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Gee, 2000-2001; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2004). It is essential to again emphasize a broader definition of literacy, one that is more than the acts of speaking, writing and listening. Connections between identities and literacies are best understood in the context of literacies as socially situated (and often contested) contextualized acts, ways of knowing, valuing and being in the world (Gee, 2000-2001; Lankshear, 1997; New London Group, 1996). This give-and-take contributes to the continuous formation and transformation and a constant (re)negotiation of identities; identity enactments are constantly being shaped by the practices of literacy (Moje, 2004).

Identities are not formed in a vacuum. They are self-understandings formed in collective activity, based on the ways people position themselves or find themselves positioned in socially constructed worlds, or figured worlds (Holland, et al., 1998). Identities are not removed from social hierarchies. Power structures exist in and around identities, due in large part to their construction as a part of cultural worlds. In addition, the connection of power makes the issue of agency vital to the approach of identity formation. Theories of identity that emphasize agency (even as a mundane, daily practice) are valuable frameworks (e.g. Holland, et al., 1998), and in turn, the chance for agency, for improvisation, highlights the fluid nature and the multiplicity of identities (Gee, 2000-2001; Holland, et al., 1998). As such, there are many scholars who emphasize connections between adolescents' literacies and identity enactments.

For example, Moje's (2004) study of the out-of-school literacy spaces of Latino/a youth highlighted the ways youth use literacies to claim, reclaim and construct various

identities. For Moje, written texts, as well as other forms of texts (e.g. dress, icons, or language) assist people in their navigation of space—spaces that are also simultaneously spaces of identity enactment shaped by literacy in practice. Their particular geographies or places of existence, both in and out of school, were distributed, were anything but neutral—not determined by the mere choices of students, but instead by race, class and gender issues within their communities. Additionally, they “were articulated to and reproductive of gendered, classed, raced and religious communities within the larger communities” (p. 18).

Moje’s (2004) work illustrated her participants’ abilities to access multiple spaces through a variety of literacies, which in turn, afforded them resources for re-positioning themselves and constructing hybrid identities that allowed them to maintain multiple affiliations. She made an important point, one she argued is often overlooked:

The access the youth had to particular kinds of space—most often to their ethnic community space—shaped the texts they consumed and produced, which in turn shaped the ways they chose to identify and were identified. The multiple spaces of their lives conjured up or enabled multiple ways of being, multiple tools...for enacting ways of being, and, ultimately, multiple identities to be enacted. (p. 30)

Her participants were aware of the possibilities in spaces—possibilities “to build, maintain, or reconstruct ethnic identities” (p. 31). They constructed multiple identities as they participated in multiple spaces and with multiple languages, while using a variety of texts to mediate these renderings.



Blackburn's (2002) study focused on the relationships between literacy performances and identity in the out-of-school lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered teens. In her study, students became empowered through the ability to critique dominant discourses by their participation in out-of-school literacies. Bartlett (2007) argued for connections between sociocultural definitions of literacy and work on identity. She studied the process of "doing literacy" and focused on the "centrality of cultural resources" in identity formation with her Brazilian participants (p. 51).

Classroom literacy studies also focus on the import of identity development. In their study of connections between students' school literacy practices and identity formation among middle-school-aged girls, Broughton and Fairbanks (2003) found that although a relationship exists between literacy development and identity enactments, schools do little to provide space for these negotiations. Jimenez (2000), in his yearlong study of four bilingual classrooms, discussed the integrated nature of bilingual students' identity formations and their stances toward literacy; students' literacy knowledge and their construction of biliterate identities had noticeable influence on one another.

In his close study of a high school English Language Arts classroom, Leander (2002) focused on the stabilization of identities through the production and configuration of identity artifacts and the subsequent use of those artifacts to project social space. Artifacts were defined as "any instrument (sign, material object, embodied practice, etc.) that interactions make use of to shape the identity of an individual or group" (p. 199). Numerous meanings are available to participants in time/space interactions; this study focused on how a particular focal identity might be "forged and stabilized" (p. 199)

through such interactions. Although data were collected over ten months and consisted of over eighty-five hours of audiotaped instruction, the interaction analyzed for this particular study was just under six minutes in duration. A student, Latanya, forged a “ghetto identity” in this classroom, and for Leander, it occurred not merely as a result of positioning by classmates and others, but was a “joint social accomplishment that involve[d] materials, bodies, talk, constructions of community, and institutional practices in the production and relation of memorable identity artifacts” (p. 240). Although positioning was important, the stabilization of an identity occurred, in large part, through the mediation of cultural artifacts.

Schultz (1999) reinforced connections between identity and literacy with her study of urban adolescent females’ transition from high school to university. Her work demonstrated her participants’ struggles with multiple and oftentimes conflicting identities. She discussed how the girls’ identity enactments simultaneously positioned them in and against school. Through their own identity negotiations, they fought against restrictive White, middle-class notions of success and exhibited agency in their schooling. As such, it is impossible for educators to predict success based on particular notions of failure. Her conclusions were not unlike those of other literacy researchers—it is imperative that schools pay attention to the myriad of shifting identities students bring with them to school (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Moje, 2004; Schultz, 1999).

Thus, identity matters to a study of literacies because identity and literacy are difficult (if not impossible) to separate. This relationship is important because students’ literacies shape their identities and their identities shape their literacies (McCarthy &

Moje, 2002). Thus, the literacies students learn and/or use in college (both in and out of the classroom) are going to shape their identities, and at the same time, these new identities may contradict former identities (e.g. those of student, family member or friend), which may in turn cause conflict or cause identities to be reevaluated or renegotiated.

### **Positioning and Identities: Addressing, Authoring and Answering**

Important to an understanding of a theory of identity in practice and the construct of a figured world are concepts related to positioning and answering: “Yet selves remain powers in return: as we answer to the world’s manifold address, so it must answer to ours” (Lachicotte, 2002, p. 62). Students at all levels of the educational system are positioned by schools, teachers, peers, and themselves. They are always answering the ways they are addressed and positioned (Leander, 2002; Wortham, 2004).

While a connection between identity and literacy has been established, outside the field of literacy, studies of identity have much to offer, particularly those studies that focus on the dialogic nature of language and identity construction (Bakhtin, 1986; Holquist, 1990). Undoubtedly, participants in this study will find themselves positioned in some way, and they will answer the manifold ways in which they will be addressed, because answering is not a choice (Holland, et al., 1998).

Wortham (2004) highlighted the stabilized identity of a student in a classroom context, in an attempt to focus on her apparent deviation from her original “trajectory of participation.” In particular, he concentrated on how Tyisha, an African American

adolescent participating in an Advanced Placement class, was positioned in the classroom, as well as how Tyisha positioned herself. At the same time, he focused on the concept of “thickening” identities, which ultimately define the ways people are viewed by others. Tyisha, over the course of a school year went from “typical girl to disruptive outcast” (p. 171), based, in large part, on how she was positioned by her teacher and classmates and how she positioned herself in response. As the school year progressed, her identity as a disruptive outcast thickened and became predominant.

Lachicotte (2002) focused on the space of authoring in identity development, also highlighting the idea of tools or mediating devices within this space. In a single case study of Roger, a psychiatric patient, Lachicotte argued that agency takes place in a “field of contest,” which in actuality, is the space of authoring (p. 61). He stated:

None of us is occupied singularly; we are not possessed by one identity, one discourse, one subject-position. Each act is simultaneously a social dynamic, social work, a set of identifications and negations, an orchestration or arrangement of voices. And our sense of self comes from the history or our arrangements...The freedom that Bakhtin calls authorship comes from the ways differing identifications can be juxtaposed, brought to work with and against one another, to create a position, our own voice, from which we respond to life’s tasks. (p. 61)

Lachicotte added the import of understanding that there is “no necessary integrity to self-understandings” and that in spite of the hegemonic discourses that constantly work to normalize versions of selves, people are not simply “surfaces of inscription,” but instead

are “social workshops” or “hybrids of relatedness among the partial selves... our multiple others” (p. 62).

It is important to study how one authors or positions himself/herself in figured worlds because it helps to understand why some people will become a part of a world (e.g. the figured world of college) while some will not. Students answer the ways in which they are addressed within the cultural world of the university in myriad ways, including remaining at the university or dropping out. This is particularly interesting when considering Latino/a youth and the ways in which they author themselves within the cultural world of the university. It is important to highlight what opens up this particular figured world to students and conversely, what might make it seemingly impenetrable. Situated in discourses, many academic worlds (especially the university) are relatively exclusive when it comes to urban-schooled students of color. Gaining official admittance into a university does not guarantee students’ authoring of self within the world.

### **Figured Worlds: A Theory of Identities in Practice**

As previously argued, the framework of a figured world or cultural world is a useful means for guiding a study of identities and literacies (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Holland, et al., 1998; Jurow, 2005; Urrieta, 2007). Thus it is necessary to offer a more in depth and detailed discussion of figured worlds and their location within a practice theory of identity.

The construct of the figured world is centered in a theory of identities in practice and is sociohistorically situated. Figured worlds are spaces of practice in which actors perform. Identities, within figured worlds, are double-sided. They are simultaneously social and personal phenomena (Bartlett & Holland, 2002). Holland, et al. (1998) argued:

Forms of personhood and forms of society are historical products, intimate and public, that situate the interactivity of social practices. It is in this doubly historical landscape that we place human identities. We take identity to be a central means by which selves, and the sets of actions they organize, form and reform over personal lifetimes and in the histories of social collectivities. (p. 270).

There are several contexts in which activity, and these practiced identities are contained: the figured world, positionality, space of authoring, and making worlds. Although listed as separate pieces of a theory of identity in practice, it is clear when explaining the framework as a whole that the parts cannot be neatly separated or extricated, they are meant to be understood in light of one another.

The notion of a world is not a unique one to the social sciences; they are often the frames of meaning used to understand or interpret human action (Holland, et al., 1998). Holland and her colleagues added to this notion, and coined the term *figured worlds*, by maintaining that worlds are also socially identified. Therefore speaking, gesturing, thinking or any sort of cultural exchange sends a message to ourselves and to others, it also places us in particular affiliation with or in opposition to others. *Positionality* is about more than division; it is about powers and hierarchies within figured worlds. People never inhabit just one figured world and certain positions, based on race, class and

gender, are apparent in many worlds. At the same time, positions (or particular positions) are more prominent in particular worlds. This positionality relies heavily on the symbolic capital of individual worlds. However, the form of that answer is not predetermined.

Authoring equals Bakhtin's idea of orchestration—how one chooses to arrange the social languages and practices made available to him/her. This *space of authoring* is where the theory of the figured world finds agency. Although there is truly no individual authorship because all authoring of self exists within collective contexts, improvisation is possible and individuals choose how to move back and forth between their private and public spaces. In order to understand the concept of *making worlds*, it is important to point out Vygotsky's construct of play in development. Children's play is necessary for the development of their various (but symbolic) competencies, just as social play for adults develops various social competencies from which new communities (imagined) can emerge. Once these new visions are publicized in some sense, and become habituated, a new world arises (Holland, et al., 1998).

In sum, individuals exist in figured worlds and they are positioned within these figured worlds. In turn, we must address these positionings—this is authorship. It is possible to create worlds not yet in existence through “serious play,” and play offers a means of possibility. As long as the possibility for making worlds exists, marginalized worlds may in fact become central or prominent worlds. While these definitions and explanations are important, there are numerous studies in educational research that are framed by the construct of the figured (or cultural) world, and a brief overview of these

studies offers a contextualized view of research in practice for a view of identities in practice.

Boaler and Greeno (2000) applied the concept of the figured world to mathematics classrooms, and focused particularly on the concepts of positioning and authoring within figured worlds. Their study consisted of 48 students from 6 schools, all enrolled in AP calculus classes in California. They reported mathematics classrooms to be “highly ritualized figured worlds” (p. 7). Students who participated in more discussion-based classrooms were positioned in ways that allowed for more progressive opinions of math as a discipline, while they also positioned themselves as active learners, not passive receivers of content knowledge. In addition, when students spoke of their mathematical ability, they often spoke in terms of what kind of people they perceived themselves to be, causing the authors to conclude that students choose not to pursue scholastic careers in math because of a refusal to author themselves in particular ways.

Jurow (2005), also studying the figured world of the mathematics classroom, focused on a classroom project centered in the “deliberately crafted figured world of Antarctic building design” (p. 40). Analysis centered on students’ engagement in two figured worlds—the familiar world of the classroom and the new world they were being invited in to through a project on Antarctica construction. She examined how the students were recruited to a figured world and how this figured world was mediated through student language, tools and other classroom artifacts. The cultural worlds within the classroom existed in tension—with students attempting to reconcile their understandings of a traditional classroom with the new, interactive figured world of the project, one in



which their decisions were important and consequential. Jurow encouraged educators to develop deep understandings and appreciations for the multiple figured worlds in which students participate and called for a combination of methods, such as ethnography and discourse analysis as means for studying these important interactions.

In his case study of three elementary teachers in an urban school in Texas, Sloan (2006) centered his discussion of Texas accountability systems in the context of figured worlds. Although he argued that the school is a figured world, he pointed out that the boundaries of figured worlds are “porous and overlapping” (p. 145) and that teachers are simultaneously participating in a number of figured worlds, including local and state politics. He found very different responses to accountability in the classrooms he studied, causing him to conclude that teachers exhibit different forms of agency when responding to accountability restrictions/requirements.

In his study of the identity productions of twenty-four Mexican Americans, Urrieta (2007) found it helpful to focus on both the conceptual and procedural identity production of his participants, because this highlighted the shift to a Chicano/a Activist identity as extraordinarily complex and fluid. He indicated a definition of identity as “becoming, not being” (p. 119) and highlighted the mediating effects of cultural artifacts. A conceptual shift in identity was defined as “a new figuration of the world that involves a change in how people view and act in the world” (p. 127), with History-in-Person as particularly important to identity construction, because “people with certain life experiences tend to be those drawn into, or easier to recruit into the figured worlds of Chicana/o activism” (p. 127). Procedural identity production “is premised on people’s

participation in group activities and the practice and enactment of cultural forms particular to that figured world” (p. 131), and these new forms of the figured world are often utilized as cultural mediators forming new conceptions of self and worlds. Urrieta (2007) stressed the important of studying identity formation within figured worlds from both the procedural and conceptual views of identity production “because identity production is not just about performing a new understanding of oneself, but also of believing that one is who one thinks one is” (p. 136), while clearly arguing that this will offer a more complex view of identity formation, but not necessarily a more complete one.

Lutrell and Parker (2001) conducted an ethnography in North Carolina high schools and looked at literacy as social practice within the figured world of high school. The authors focused on the institutional, school site, and individual contexts of literacy practices, hoping to “illustrate how deeply dialogic the relationship is between student identities and literacy practices” (p. 236). Participants in their study used literacy practices to form identities within the school, but also to form identities in opposition to the figured world of school. The students challenged school contexts—in particular the hierarchies and privilege within the school—using reading and writing to fashion their senses of self: “In short, as students fashion themselves through their daily literacy practices, they negotiate their place within the hierarchy of figured worlds” (p. 239). The study focused on Alice, a single case of a student who was participating in multiple literacy events outside of the school in an attempt to negotiate her own identities. Alice’s positioning within the contexts of literacy as defined by the school was an inadequate

addressing of who she was in terms of the various literacy practices she engaged in outside of school walls. Although a person who participated regularly in specific literacy practices such as reading and writing, Alice still felt a real sense of disconnect from school. The authors argued it is crucial for educators to understand "... students' *positions* within their figured worlds need not be created with their *dispositions*" (p. 245). Alice had a very different disposition than the context of the classroom allowed her to express. A narrow definition of literacy led to a confining space for Alice to exist within.

As evidenced in the previous studies, identities in practice are often studied in specific contexts, with observations and conversations with individuals serving as the focal point. Individuals' narratives allow researchers to glimpse their identities. Studying individuals' narratives highlights the connections between personal literacies and negotiations of identities.

## **Identity and Narrative**

Somers and Gibson (1994) highlighted the connection between identity and narrative, a vital connection to make in a qualitative study on identities:

More recently, however, scholars...are postulating something much more substantive about narrative, namely, that social life is itself *storied* and that narrative is an *ontological condition of social life*. Their research is showing us that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that "experience" is constituted through narratives; that people

make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives...(p. 38)

Connections between identity and narrative offer a segue between literature/theory and method. There are a number of researchers who discuss narratives as context for analyzing identity (Kidron, 2004; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Sloan, 2006; Somers & Gibson, 1994; Wortham, 2004); it is a helpful concept for understanding participants' thoughts on identity. An analysis of their narratives and the impact of the narratives of others will give insight into individual identity construction/s.

Somers and Gibson (1994), while arguing the proposition of narrative as tool for navigating identity research in sociological work stated: "Struggles over narrations are thus struggles over identity" (p. 75). Participants discuss identity as they look for ways to name themselves; social identities are constituted through narrativity and social processes are narratively mediated, again highlighting a clear connection between literacies as mediating tools or cultural artifacts and identity constructions. Studying individual narrativity in historical contexts assists in the disruption of typical binaries, and allows for a variety of ways of talking about selves. Participants are embedded in time/space relativity and relationships, and narrativity is provides a frame for looking at the multiplicity of identities in practice, in development, not bound by a singular (a)historical perspective (Somers & Gibson, 1994). They added:

Rather than by interests, narrative identities are constituted by a person's temporally and spatially variable "place" in cultural constructed stories comprised

of (breakable) rules, (variable) practices, binding (and unbinding) institutions, and the multiple plots of family, nation, or economic life. Most important, however, narratives are not incorporated into the self in any direct way; rather they are mediated through the enormous spectrum of social and political relations that constitute our social world. (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 67)

Scholars who focus on narrative and identity are purposively introducing narrative as a tool, while politically responding to the dismissal of narrative in research. As such, they have rejected the notion of normalizing categories, reintroducing time/space contexts into the study of identity, while focusing on people's abilities to create/recreate identities through the relationships they occupy in time/space—individuals are continuously responding, creating and recreating: "...social identities are constituted by the intricate interweaving of history, narrativity, social knowledge, and relationality, as well as institutional and cultural practices" (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 80). Narrative and identity are not separate, but instead are a complements.

Not every version of narrative in conjunction with identity resonates with the theoretical and methodological goals of this study. For example, in response to calls in social science research to consider identity in terms of replication and generalization, Sfar and Prusak (2005) made a bold, albeit misguided attempt to operationalize identity by equating it with narrative: "No, no mistake here: We did not say that identities were *finding their expression* in stories—we said they *were* stories" (p. 14). From the myriad of literature on identities it is a logical argument to state that identities are more than stories and should not be limited in this manner (Holland, et al., 1998; Sloan, 2006;

Wortham, 2001, 2004). Narrative is merely a conduit for understanding identity constructions and the position of narrative in this study should not be confused with the position argued by Sfard and Prusak. The narratives of participants can offer particularized and contextualized insights to the field of literacy and to education.

Clearly this study connects to a broad cross-section of literature. As educators struggle for a more equitable and just school system, studies that highlight the education of urban-schooled Latino/a youth are vital. Additionally, contextualizing participants in terms of their secondary school careers, while focusing on their early college experiences, provides more in depth and enriched data to be analyzed. It is logical to look at students' identity development in an attempt to understand the literacies of their lives. The converse is also logical; it makes sense to study students' literacies as ways of intimating the identity (re)negotiations that take place in their early college experiences. As such, figured worlds (as a central part of a larger theory of identity development) offer a means for studying participant narratives in context and in practice.

### **CHAPTER 3: *METHODOLOGY***

The purpose of this chapter is to describe my data collection activities and the analytic processes I utilized in my study in order to explore the identity constructions of young adults in early college. As a novice researcher, it was imperative to make defensible choices and to understand where those choices originated, who those choices might align my work with, and how my work might ultimately be received (Crotty, 2004). In general, the label of researcher and more specifically, the label of novice researcher, demanded I justify my work from start to finish—my methods, methodologies, theoretical framework and epistemology. A transparent process, one that can be supported and withstand criticism, is what makes a strong study (Crotty, 2004). Cary (2006) encouraged a move from mere positionality in research to an epistemological focus. Thus, based on my theoretical framework and my paradigmatic leanings, I determined that case study research, combined with the method of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1984), and the analytical tools of Fairclough's (1995, 2003) levels of discourse and Curriculum Spaces Research Theory (Cary, 2006) were valuable for investigating my particular questions.

This study focused on five students from Roland High School. I narrowed my participants to those students at State University who were interested in participating in on-going conversations about their myriad early college literacy experiences. My research questions will be:

- What identity (re)constructions do students identify as they negotiate multiple early college literacy experiences?

--How are these identity constructions related to the acquisition of academic literacies?

--In light of these constructions, how do students view their secondary schooling experiences?

My study was a multiple case study that incorporated elements of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1984)—narrowed to five student participants and used the analytical tools of Fairclough’s levels of discourse (1995, 2003) and Curriculum Spaces Research Theory (Cary, 2006).

## **Case Study Research**

There are many in academia who reference the on-going debate and conflict between qualitative and quantitative research (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005). However, Crotty (2004) deemed a division along methodological lines to be problematic. Instead, he argued for epistemological distinctions in research. In keeping with Crotty’s logic, case study research could technically occur within any paradigm, as long as there is no epistemological conflict, though the rationale for selecting the case and the methods incorporated within will differ dramatically (Stake, 1994). Case study is well-suited for a research framed by a constructionist epistemology, further complicated by issues of dominance and oppression.



In spite of an increasing amount of case study research in education, there is very little available on how to conduct case study research (Merriam, 1998). In addition, considerable debate exists over what constitutes a case study. Some equate case study research with qualitative research in general, ethnography, or naturalistic inquiry (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998), in contrast, argued case study is a type of qualitative research, defined by a selection of the case to be studied. The bounded nature of the object of study is ultimately its defining characteristic. Similarly, Stake (1994) argued against the reference to case study as a methodological choice. For Stake, a case study is the delineation of the object to be studied, and all paradigmatic distinctions and issues still exist within the researcher's use of the case. Choosing case study in research boils down to one important epistemological question, "What is to be learned from the single case?" (Stake, 1995, p.16).

Thus, if a case cannot be bounded in number and if data collection cannot be made finite, then a case study cannot exist; they are not open-ended. A case study is a specific, functioning and complex entity, and cannot be discussed in generalities (Merriam, 1998). Case study is best suited for phenomena that cannot be separated from its context—specific, contextualized, and not able to be understood without the inclusion of rich description of the context. In addition, case studies are meant to resonate with the reader's experience, and it is acknowledged that each reader will bring his/her own knowledge and generalizations to the reading of the case (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995).

I believe the data in this study offer an "answer" to Stake's (1995) question: What can be learned from the single case? The participants in this study each offered something

unique to our understandings of connections between literacies and identities in their early college lives. In addition, their relationships, forged in these unique time/space interactions (Cary, 2006; Moje, 2004) added depth and breadth to the individual cases, subsequently offering connections across cases as vital and unique as the data gleaned from their individual stories. Therefore, I argue that case study research allows for these individual stories to inform our research and practice case by case. Rubenstein-Avila (2003), in her work with middle school English Language Learners, offered individual portraits of individual Latino/a students as a means of demonstrating the uniqueness of students' experiences to educators, while simultaneously providing practical suggestions able to assist the majority of English Language Learners in middle school classrooms. Such portraits are imperative to individualizing the work we do.

At the same time, this study suggests that a use of case study, when analyzing connections between literacies and identities, can provide a powerful framework for researchers. Tenets of qualitative research including thick rich descriptions and deeply contextualized explications of data (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005) are easily demonstrated in case study research (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Case studies offer researchers a means of detailing participant journeys, highlighting their unique stories, while making beneficial connections for educators.

## **Research Setting**

Roland High School is a 4A high school on the Eastside of a mid-sized city in Texas. The city is viewed by many as economically and racially divided by a major highway. Though the highway in no way equally divides the city, residents often talk about the “Eastside” and “Westside.” Desegregated in the 1960s along with the rest of the schools in this mid-sized Texas city, it is now racially and economically resegregated like many urban schools in the country, due in large part to a return to neighborhood schools and an end to busing (Wilson & Segal, 2001).

According to the Texas Education Agency’s current online statistics, in addition to being labeled a Title I school, during my participants’ senior year the demographics at Roland High School were: 63% Latino/a, 34% African American, and 2% White. At the same time, 23% of the student body was deemed Limited English Proficient and 79% were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Roland has had little stable leadership over the years; the participants in this study had four different principals by the time they graduated. During the participants’ tenure at Roland, the school was labeled academically acceptable by the Texas Education Agency only once (their junior year), and was academically unacceptable all other years, including their senior year. Roland High School was named a “School in Need of Improvement, Year 3” at the start of the 2006-2007 school year, according to federal No Child Left Behind standards. As with all other years the participants were enrolled, Roland was a school of choice, giving parents the option to transfer their students to other schools in the district.

State University is located exactly 5.2 miles from Roland High School. The students in my study have literally grown up in the shadow of the university tower. Seen by many at Roland High School as a quintessential example of a college education, often the strongest students at Roland enroll at SU after graduation. SU was founded in 1883 and is a large 350 acre campus with 21,000 faculty and staff. 8,700 bachelors degrees are awarded annually in over 100 majors. The university's website states that it is one of the largest employers in the state, with over six billion dollars in business activity, more than 80,000 jobs, and more than two billion dollars in personal income annually.

One of the biggest universities in the country, the number of enrolled students at the start of the 2006/2007 school year was 49,697. According to the university's online *Statistical Handbook*, the number of enrolled Latino/as at State University increased by 433 students, or 6.2%, for the year. Thus, when participants enrolled at SU, 56.6% of the students were identified as White, .5% as American Indian, 14.4% Asian American, 8.9% Foreign, .7% Unknown, 3.9% African American and 15% "Hispanic," remarkably different demographics from those at Roland High School. SU's website touts it as a school that offers "high academic quality" at a "relatively low cost." At the same time, the school claims to have "one of the most diverse student populations in the country" and to be "a national leader in the number of undergraduate degrees awarded to minority students."

## Participants

These were my initial descriptions of participants. However, I asked the participants to describe themselves and each other as part of my data collection. I showed them samples of participant descriptions as a model and had them write descriptions of themselves and each other as data. Those descriptions are included as part of the findings of the study.

All were in the top 10% at Roland High School. All were considered to be good students by their teachers. Manuel, Alex, and Aurelio participated in the AVID program while at Roland. Monique and Idalia were in Advanced Placement courses, although neither of them were participants in the AVID program. With the exception of Alex, all are bilingual. Alex and Monique were both born in the United States, but all participants have Mexican heritages. Additionally, Manuel was required to take a remedial math course upon admission to SU and Aurelio was enrolled in developmental reading and math. None of the participants was admitted provisionally or under probationary status to SU, although they were invited to participate in bridge programs to assist in their transition. These bridge programs offer assistance to students selected because of their low-socioeconomic status and include services like peer tutoring, additional advising, and study skills classes. Monique was the only participant provided with a peer mentor, and Aurelio started the school year in a small cohort in computer science, meant to help freshmen with the transition to this difficult major.

## **MANUEL**

Manuel is an interesting combination of serious and easy-going. He is quick to laugh, but will be the first to tell you that he gets stressed out by the pressures of school. Of Mexican origin, but raised predominately in the United States, he (like most of the participants) switches easily between Spanish and English. Manuel lives with his mother and her husband, along with three younger brothers, the youngest of which is two years old. He commutes to State University by bus, but plans to move to campus for the following school year so that he might have access to available resources. Largely responsible for raising his younger siblings when his mom was forced to take on two jobs to make ends meet, he frequently speaks in terms of familial responsibility. He has his own room in the family's apartment where he is able to study. However, he does point to living at home as one of the great difficulties in college success. He looks forward to moving to campus for his sophomore year. Manuel talks freely about himself and his opinions, both in casual conversation and in preliminary conversations about my research.

## **ALEXANDRA (ALEX)**

Alex also cites living at home as a real obstacle to success in college. Currently, she lives at home with five adults—including her mother who has survived on dialysis for ten years. Alex often complains about her grandmother's refusal to let her shut her bedroom door and study because there is no central air-conditioning. Alex is one of two biracial members of the proposed research group, and readily admits she identifies more with her Latina heritage, rather than her African American identity. Her hyphenated last

name is indicative of both of these cultural heritages and she often jokes with me about not hyphenating my own children's names because of the pain it will be for them.

Through initial preliminary conversations, Alex appeared to be the most introverted of all students who agreed to participate in the study. In high school Alex also said little, but it appears to reflect a need to think carefully before speaking. She has a wickedly dry sense of humor in both conversation and her writing. The oldest of the group at twenty, she often takes up the role of the elder sibling in teasing the others. In particular, she enjoys making fun of Aurelio but insists, "He deserves it, Miss" while arguing her teasing does not bother him.

## **MONIQUE**

Monique lives on campus, but commutes frequently to her home on the Eastside of town. She plans to move home next semester, although the other students in the study frequently encourage her to remain on campus. Monique and the other students often refer to her "White" last name—indicative of her mixed heritage. She has had little contact with her father throughout her life, and her mother's Mexican heritage remains a predominant focus in Monique's life. She is bilingual and enjoys surprising people with the fact that she speaks Spanish better than English. She cites her blonde hair and light colored eyes as the main reason for people's confusion. In preliminary conversations, the other participants have discussed her ability to blend in to the university culture, because at first look, she is a "White girl." The first essay Monique wrote for me as a freshman in high school discussed these identity issues in the context of a tale of a Latina at her school who accused her of being White. She is talkative and quick with a joke or a laugh.

Monique is the designated social coordinator in the group—she decides when and where they will spend time together and calls the others.

### **IDALIA**

Perhaps the most serious of the group, Idalia was the high school valedictorian at Roland. At the university, she studies constantly and often refuses to go out with the others, citing her large workload. The others, in informal conversations, have told me that Idalia likes to go to Starbucks, but not many other places. Although she was not my student at Roland High School, we talked frequently throughout her school career—she was close to many students in my classes and it was a small campus. I helped her write her valedictory address, and we have remained in contact through email. When the study began, Idalia was the only participant to have already contacted me about helping with her papers. She sent me three art history papers and one rhetoric assignment to edit throughout the semester. Her classes are mostly math and science, although like the others, she is not quite sure what she wants to major in. For our preliminary meeting, she came with her younger brother and sister in tow because she was taking them to get passport photos done. This was indicative of Idalia's relationship to her family. In spite of her seriousness about school, she is also lighthearted with the others in the group, frequently laughing with and teasing them. Although very academically mature, Idalia often seemed younger than her years, and at times appeared naïve.



## **AURELIO**

Aurelio only recently agreed to be a participant in the study. We lost contact through the start of the school year, in large part because of his first semester struggles. He began his time at SU working nights, and subsequently his grades suffered. He dropped all of this first semester classes, but then registered for new ones and is still permanently enrolled in school (minus the job at a local restaurant). His mother worked as a custodian in my hall at Roland High School, I still talk with her about three times a month, and much of what I know about Aurelio comes from these visits with his mother. His older brother was in my first class at Roland, but later dropped out and had a child. His younger sister also has a child, but is finishing high school. Thus, Aurelio's family life is interesting—he constantly speaks about being an uncle and has since I met him. He is often teased by the other members of the group, in particular for the multiple organizations and activities he tries to integrate himself into. One day he claims to be vegetarian, the next vegan (after reading *Fast Food Nation*), and most recently has joined the Vietnamese student association. Also a native of Mexico, he frequently speaks in Spanish and English with friends and family. He is perhaps the most talkative of the group, and often the others have to talk over him to be heard.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected throughout participants' first year at State University. Focus group interviews along with shorter individual interviews took place throughout the school year. I conducted three focus group interviews during the fall semester (October,

November, December) and two in the spring semester (March, May). In depth individual interviews, highlighting the first year of their participation at SU, took place during the summer following their freshman year. What follows is a description of the data collection techniques I used in my study.

## **SAMPLING**

One of the tenets of naturalistic inquiry, purposive sampling, is encouraged as a part of case study work (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1994, 1995). As highlighted in my discussion of case study research, I was purposive in my sampling for this proposed project. The participants were carefully selected as “information rich cases” (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) and will be able to provide large amounts of data to be categorized and compared. The study initially began with more students at various campuses in the state, however narrowing my study to participants at SU was also a utilization of convenience sampling. Focus groups and individual interviews were not difficult to schedule because we all attended class on the same campus (Merriam, 1998).

Sample selection is imperative to the conducting of a case study. Case study researchers argue that sampling should first take into account a larger case. Specific criteria should be determined to help researcher narrow the case to a more finite result, and then the case is narrowed based on the selection criteria. This sampling is purposive in nature and requires information rich cases that are unique or atypical (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Again, in sample selection, we must ask ourselves, “What is to be learned from the single case?” (Stake, 1994).

The participants chosen were selected as specific cases because of their histories of participation in urban school detracking efforts, their Latino/a heritage, and subsequent acceptance to a university deemed prestigious by many students in their hometown. Additionally, each of the participants showed interest in being a part of the study and each hoped it would be helpful for them to reflect on their college experiences as they were occurring. Similarly, the participants spend a large amount of time together at SU; they are all a part of the same social circle, making their understandings of one another a possibility for adding richness to the data collected on them as individual cases.

## **Data Sources**

### **RESEARCH JOURNAL**

Throughout my study, I kept a research journal, similar to analytical memos (Guba and Lincoln, 1984; Merriam & Associates, 2002). It is imperative that a researcher be reflexive and reflective (Lather, 1991). For me, a valuable part of this process was this “reflexive reflection.” It was important that I recognize that my participants had the ability to theorize, and that their experiential knowledge made them the experts in these particular discussions. By reflecting on my own understandings and how the conversations I had with these students continually interrupted my preconceived notions of educational experience, I was able consistently challenge myself and to see the value in “collective theorizing” (Lather, 1991).

After both focus group and individual interviews, I sat with my notes and reflected on what I heard, connections I made, and questions I had. The research journal

was a place for all things personal—a way for me to process information throughout the data collection process. This assisted me in constant comparative analysis (Guba and Lincoln, 1984) and ultimately will help to pointed me to entry points for deeper data analysis using Fairclough’s (1995, 2003) levels of discourse (Rogers, 2004).

### **FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS**

In my initial conversations with future participants, I found that a phone call or an email to one student to schedule a preliminary meeting never turned out to be the one-on-one meeting I envisioned. Instead, an individual conversation often became a group meeting. They were excited to spend time with me and with one another. The students in this study created a very intense social network and cited a need to spend time with people who know where they came from (Roland High), as well as where they are now (State University). Rather than ignore this possibility and adhere to a predetermined plan, I believed it best for me to capitalize on the possibilities of group meetings.

After five years together, these students were accustomed to communicating with one another and accustomed to communicating with me, and I hoped this familiarity would produce richer, more intense conversations that lend credibility and insight to my study. These interviews were semi-structured in nature and functioned more like conversations (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005). I understood the need to facilitate them on some level—to make sure all students speak and that the conversations were not dominated by a single participant. However, I believed it to be imperative to allow conversations to take the least prescriptive course possible.

I transcribed the interviews (in their entirety) as soon after recording (digitally) as was possible. I then compared the transcripts to my notes and research journal, uncovering preliminary categories and emerging themes. These transcripts and notes provided a starting point for creating the next focus group's questions. I conducted three focus groups in the fall semester (October, November, December) and two focus groups in the spring semester (March, May).

### **INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

Also semi-structured, the process of individual interviews proceeded similarly to focus group interviews. However, they were staggered throughout the semester. In the earlier phases of data collection, I had fewer individual interviews, and I conducted longer, more intense individual interviews once we completed focus group interviews—during the summer months. It was necessary to have longer student narratives in order to have more possibility for student voice in my work (Appleman, 2003). I assumed that students' comfort level with the topics and my questions would increase over time, allowing for more intense individual interviews as data collection continues. This seemed to be true and lengthy individual interviews did not seem to be a problem for any of the five students. I had students take photographs that they felt identified “who they were”, and the final individual interview for each student, prior to member-checking, involved participants walking me through the rationale for taking these pictures.

## **ARTIFACTS**

I also collected student artifacts as an attempt at triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1984; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005). Students gave me their assignments from their classes, in particular assignments where they wrote and had teacher comments responding to their work. These comments were beneficial for demonstrating how professors communicated with participants, and in turn, demonstrating how the students responded to these suggestions.

Some of the participants kept journals and others did not. I needed a common method of talking with all of them about their identity constructions. In lieu of having the students keep research journals to serve as an artifact, I gave each of them a disposable camera and asked them to take identifying photos, ones that assisted them in describing their identities to me. The photos served as tools or talking points in individual interviews—a common artifact that all of the participants use to mediate their thinking on identities.

In addition, students gave their consent for me to utilize our interpersonal communication as data, including text messages, emails, and MySpace interactions. However, conversations considered personal to the students, those in which we talk but they do not want repeated, remained between us and were not used as data sources.

## **OCCASIONAL OBSERVATIONS**

I had permission to visit SU classrooms if professors give their consent. I asked the participants' teachers, in particular their rhetoric professors, if I could observe classes and interview them. Although not necessary for triangulation because I had multiple data

sources, the information gained from these few classroom interactions strengthened my understanding of participant experiences.

Similarly, the participants selected were often asked to speak on behalf of the AVID program at various high schools and middle schools in the district. In addition, at least one of the participants, Manuel, was asked to speak on behalf of the SPURS (Students Participating for Undergraduate Rhetorical Success) at SU, explaining to teachers and students the benefits of the program. This program is a partnership between rhetoric classes at university and urban high school junior level rhetoric courses, meant to assist students in their transition to academic writing upon entering the university. Manuel's rhetoric class was a SPURS class, which meant he was automatically partnered with a junior in an urban high school. If such events occurred during data collection, I planned to attend, take observation notes, and speak with participants about the experience afterwards. However, this did not happen and I did not have these observations to add to my data.

## **Data Analysis**

Van Sluys, Lewison, and Flint (2006), advocated a multiple methods approach to analyzing data. Although an explicit attempt to encourage the continued study of critical literacy through the analytical lenses of grounded theory, critical literacy frameworks, and critical discourse analysis, their "invitation to the literacy research community" is one that I considered in designing my own study:

- Consider using additional theoretical and methodological tools to analyze data.

- Consider the ways in which findings from various analyses corroborate or conflict with one another.
- Consider engaging in dialogue with colleagues regarding what your experiences with multiple analytic lenses mean for study participants as well as researcher practices. (p. 229)

The authors argued that multiple lenses allowed them to look past what might seem “natural or invisible” (p. 198). Additionally, Jurow (2005) determined a study of figured worlds can be strengthened by a combination of methods, such as discourse analysis and ethnography, while Cary (2006) cited life history coupled with Critical Discourse Analysis as possibilities for future research. Gutiérrez, Rymes and Larson (1995) found a combination of ethnographic methods and a microanalysis of language allowed them to study a “situated and dynamic notion of power” (p. 446). All of these scholars make compelling arguments for multiple tools of analysis, the most convincing of which is a type of checks and balances where a researcher might determine the credibility of his/her analysis by using more than one analytical tool. Therefore, this dissertation study drew on the analytical frameworks of the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1984), Fairclough’s (1995, 2003) levels of discourse, and Curriculum Spaces Research Theory (Cary, 2006).

In this study, as vital as member-checks, summary vignettes (Tisdell, 2000), and multiple data sources (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005) were, the use of multiple analytical tools as argued for by Van Sluys, Lewison, and Flint (2006) was equally valuable. Each analytical tool had something unique to offer my research and



each served, in its own way, to ensure my study was not single-faceted, but critical on multiple levels. Therefore, this study argues for a similar position to Van Sluys, Lewison, and Flint (2006). Though the authors were each utilizing a particular analytical tool and then compiling/comparing findings, I believe the concept is similar and worth highlighting: researchers can benefit from multiple analytical tools. Borrowing from different research theories in order to attempt an ethical study is a technique novice researchers in particular can utilize. The questions of a study should determine the method used (Crotty, 2004), but oftentimes our analysis needs to be as nuanced as our triangulation of data sources, especially when the study is one created by a single author with a singular purpose. We must work to create research that is “good enough” (Luttrell, 2000), and that strives to be both morally and ethically sound, and this study suggests that multiple analytical tools are one more possibility for achieving that goal.

#### **CONSTANT COMPARATIVE METHOD**

Moje, et al (2004) claimed that a use of the constant comparative method might lead readers to associate their study with grounded theory. Therefore, they made it clear that in spite of using techniques related to grounded theory, they did have guiding questions with which they approached data analysis. At the same time, while they did not change their questions during the study, their understandings and implications evolved over time. In keeping with this logic, the constant comparative method (based on naturalistic inquiry), was also suitable for my study.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1984) there are two important sub-processes involved in working with data: unitizing (coding) and categorizing, which is the

equivalent of the constant comparative method as it was defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). “Units” are sorted on the basis of propositional statements; these serve as the basis for inclusion or exclusion in the ultimate determination. These propositional statements (or rules) can be amended as the research process unfolds, but when the final categories or codes are determined, all data placed within those categories should match or be connected. Categories are defined by the data collected, rather than attempting to make data fit into pre-existing categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1984).

While I did not utilize the specific procedures outlined by Lincoln and Guba (e.g. notecards), the suggestions for research were generally applicable to my work. I created generally categories as I proceeded, my research was a reflexive process, one in which I was consistently analyzing and rethinking approaches and analysis based on data collected. Although it was centered in literature and harnessed by particular research questions, the categories and themes emerged as data were collected, not before.

### **CURRICULUM SPACES**

I also incorporated the analytical tool of Curriculum Spaces Research Theory, in which Cary (2006) called for an epistemological centering of all phases of a study, not merely in the literature review. At the same time, I recognize its place as a new and “vulgar theory” (p. 21) with few examples for a novice researcher to follow. Cary argued her theory as means of studying curriculum in new and innovative ways. As such, I do not claim my work to be a study of curriculum in the traditional sense, but more broadly, “as a discursively produced historically, socially, politically and economically inscribed epistemological space” (Cary, 2006, p. xi). Thus, I looked to study the epistemological

spaces participants existed and engaged in, while at the same time, I focused on the epistemological spaces I inhabited as a researcher.

Cary's (2006) question from her own dissertation study was an important one for this study:

[H]ow can I do justice to my participant's voice and life history as she presented it to me, situate it in a sociocultural context and also trouble the contemporaneity of the story as a sociocultural product—all the while as I try to respect her "voice"? (p. 29)

I took seriously Cary's (2006) charge for "a move to a place where *all* research takes into account the ways of knowing that shape a project—from nuts to bolts" (p. 53). I was able to confront the notion that innocent researchers and participants do not exist (Cary, 1999) by continuously (and critically) reflecting on my own positionality and my own epistemological stances. I constantly reminded myself that I was "talking about epistemological connections and considerations—not innocence" (Cary, 2006, p. 53). I focused on stories or portions of narratives that were uncomfortable, and allowed these to be the places of entry into data, "cruces," for specific analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Rogers, 2004).

#### **FAIRCLOUGH'S LEVELS OF DISCOURSE**

There are many opinions on what constitutes Critical Discourse Analysis in education. According to Rogers (2004):

Critical discourse analysts treat language differently than linguists, sociolinguists, or conversation analysts. Discourse within a CDA framework is not a reflection of

social contexts, but constructs and is constructed by contexts. Discourses are always socially, politically, racially and economically loaded. (p. 6)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been articulated as an analytical tool, both generally in educational research (Cary, 2006; Fairclough, 1995, 2003), and in more specific contexts, such as literacy research (Clarke, 2006; Gee, 2006; Van Sluys, Lewison & Flint, 2006). I did not conduct CDA as defined by Rogers (2004), but I did choose portions of participants' narratives and analyze them using Fairclough's (1995, 2003) levels of discourse in order to create the most complex analysis possible. I attempted to complicate my understandings gleaned from the constant comparative method—fleshing out details through more detailed analyses. I used Fairclough's (1992) suggestion of “cruces” (or moments of crisis) to determine my entrance points into data. These cruces are moments in participant discourse when normalized practices, typically difficult to notice, become visible (Rogers, 2004).

Once portions of participant narratives were selected, I used Fairclough's (1995) framework for CDA. He argued for an approach that included a three dimensional concept of discourse and a three dimensional method of discourse analysis. By Fairclough's (1995) definition, discourse (any single discursive practice) is simultaneously a spoken or written language text, a discourse practice, and a sociocultural practice. In addition, a piece of discourse is embedded sociocultural practices on a number of levels: the immediate or present situations, the wider institution/organization, and the societal level.

Thus, Fairclough's model is three-tiered on multiple levels: there is always description, interpretation and explanation of discourse and social practices at three domains of analysis—the local, institutional, and societal (Rogers, 2004). The local level may include a particular text, such as a newspaper, political speech, or a school board meeting. In my study, examples of the local included: conversations and interactions with peers, teachers, and counselors on SU's campus, along with the focus groups these students participated in. The institutional level includes societal institutions that can both enable and constrain the local domain, such as the political affiliations of organizations or companies. My participants encountered (and utilized) a number of institutionalized discourses, including those related to education as the great equalizer. The societal level is the last level of abstraction, and includes all policies and metanarratives that both shape and are shaped by the local and institutional domains. While at State University, students consistently encountered societal discourses related to race, class, and success. These domains do not exist separately but are constantly in conversation with the others (Fairclough, 1995; Rogers, 2004).

Therefore, my analyses of portions of student interviews, along with focus group interviews while contained within themes derived from the constant comparative method were also analyzed using Fairclough's (1995, 2003) levels of discourse in order to ensure a critical stance. This analysis ultimately provided a means for looking at power and knowledge in the institution of the university through the societal, local, and institutional discourses that were seemingly evident in participants' conversations. As a White researcher working with students of color, it would not be difficult to ignore the

power/knowledge relationships at work in the lives and languages of participants, making a critical level of analysis necessary if not mandatory for creating an ethical study (Frankenberg, 1993; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; McIntyre, 1997).

## **Validity**

As with all research methodologies, there are issues of validity when conducting case study research. For example, the case study might be too long, detailed or complex. In addition, the reader may view the researcher's portrayal of the case as determinate of the whole, rather than the contextualized aspect of life it is meant to convey (Merriam, 1998). The researcher is able to make very deliberate choices about instances to be portrayed, making the need for integrity and ethics even more vital (Stake, 1995).

Many of the arguments leveled against case study researchers return to the apparent divide between qualitative and quantitative research in education. As with all qualitative research, researchers are "guests in the private spaces of the world" and therefore need to act with all the integrity and morality that such a positioning requires (Stake, 1995, p. 135). Case study researchers need to be forthright, transparent, and careful to be specific about how data were collected, methods used, and ultimately how the information learned will be disseminated (Stake, 1995). Therefore, I worked to ensure my study was valid. I needed to continuously confront my own biases, discuss and problematize my own positionality as a White woman working with students of color (Appleman, 2003; Bloom, 2002; Fine, 1994; Tisdell, 2002; Villenas, 2000).

## **TRANSFERABILITY**

Rather than a goal of generalizability, a goal of transferability better suits qualitative research:

Thus the naturalist cannot specify the external validity of an inquiry; he or she can provide only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether a transfer can be contemplated as a possibility. (Lincoln & Guba, 1984, p. 316)

Case study researchers grapple with issues of generalizability and validity that date back to the domination of social science research by quantitative methodologies.

Generalizability and validity are tricky constructions for qualitative research, particularly research as contextualized as case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Thus, rather than an ultimate goal being one of generalizability, Guba and Lincoln (1984) argued instead for a goal of transferability. If cases are context-specific, than generalizability is not a logical goal for the case study researcher to have. A goal of transferability is better suited to case study research. It allows for the possibility that conclusions drawn from a very specific case might assist in work with other populations (Merriam, 1998).

Case study and naturalistic inquiry both require thick rich description and contextualized explications of data. As such, it is difficult to argue my study as one that can be generalizable (Merriam & Associates, 2002) or replicated by others. At the same time, that was not the goal of this project. Instead, I hoped for some element of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1984; Mertens, 2005) where the broader ideas would

contribute to an academic conversation and provide concepts for practitioners to consider in their own classrooms and lives.

### **MEMBER-CHECKING**

In addition, I attempted to be vigilant in member-checking (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 2005) and worked to intensify that process by adding Tisdell's (2000) methodological suggestion of "summary vignettes," (p. 91) which help guard against inaccurate portrayals of participants whose backgrounds are radically different from our own. I wrote up portions of the data and had participants read and comment on the vignettes that I felt summarized particular categories emerging from the data. I used their comments to mediate my own thoughts on emergent data. These conversations were recorded so I could refer back to participants' comments and concerns.

### **TRIANGULATION OF DATA**

Triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources to ensure the validity of a study. I triangulated my data by conducting interviews (both focus and individual), keeping a research journal, collecting student artifacts, and conducting observations and professor interviews when appropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1984; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005). Each of these elements provided unique opportunities for data and served to "check and balance" my emergent findings.



## **PEER DEBRIEFING**

Peer debriefing is a valuable strategy for those pursuing qualitative research studies. Thus, my work was also regularly evaluated by my peers who participate in my weekly writing group. They helped me locate inconsistencies and inaccurate portrayals in my work and offered suggestions for strengthening my analyses and discussions of analyses (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005).

## **Positionality**

Positionality is vital to a study of identity development, and who I am as a researcher was a necessary co-weaving of process, where my own identities served as more than a backdrop, almost as a parallel story to the stories of my participants. I was coming from the academy to research the “Other,” and the power imbedded in that relationship could not be disregarded.

As such, Roman (1993) articulated a need for ethnographic research that is neither objectivist, where a researcher’s subjectivities are treated as invisible, nor subjectivist, where all research is equally justifiable because objectivity is impossible. In addition, she highlighted to roles of ethnographers in the field. The first, “going native” was how she described the popular anthropological practice of adopting traits of the group being studied, such as dress, ways of speaking or acting. In the going native approach to research, participants’ subjective experiences are valorized and the power relations at work in research and fieldwork are never adequately addressed. The second she labeled “fly on the wall,” an approach to research in which anthropologists attempted a supposed

distance from their participants. She called her alternative, one in which she positioned herself more vulnerably as a learner and feminist researcher, “double exposure”:

I argue for a subject/object dualism, one that makes it possible to think of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity not as static, fixed, historically unknowable or unnameable. Rather, the relationship is conceived as dialectical and shifting, operating through multiple and conflicting sets of discourses and power relations. (p. 280)

In my study, I strove to be hyper-vigilant with regards to my positionality, while understanding the dialectical nature of the relationship between myself and participants. I can tell stories or articulate my perceptions of participant narratives, but I can never fully represent another.

Villenas (2000) discussed the complicity of anthropology in inventing a definition of culture that is inextricably tied to notions of the “exotic.” At the same time, she argued that anthropologists had reified numerous dichotomies in their work: East/West, exotic/normal, and self/Other. Seeing participants as exotic is to center them in the same dichotomies, where the self/Other is the rational Western man versus the primitive, exotic and colorful Other. She claimed researchers need to struggle through various ways and means to create an anthropology that “interrogates its complicity in domination” (p. 79).

In light of these arguments, there are a number of researchers who offer ways to re-evaluate positionality and conduct valid research that can exist under scrutiny. In contrast to the disconnected scientific voice, removed from context, that once was so prevalent in social science research, these researchers argue for a shift in our perspectives

on researcher and subject, and a self-reflective expression of the ways race, class and gender influence a researcher's understanding of what is being studied (Bloom, 2002).

Fine (1994) called this process "working the hyphen." The hyphen is the division between researcher and Other; a strong and definite separation that determines roles of power and powerlessness. Writing in contrast to social science texts that obscured and protected our own privilege, she argued we should embrace our entanglement with our participants—work it out, tease it out—engage in social struggles with those who have been exploited. Working the hyphen means we reveal much more about ourselves and attempt to renegotiate the structures of Othering. Categories become blurred; there are fewer distinctions between self and Other. Rather than ignoring the fact that as researchers we are in relation with our participants, she argued instead to probe more deeply into those relations. According to Fine, there are no innocent ethnographers, and many would argue no innocent participants in research at all (Cary, 1999). At the same time, Fine wrote that our work would never arrive but should instead be a struggle between—a struggle on both sides of the hyphen.

For me, working the hyphen and engaging in my participants' struggles was inescapable. This study was borne from a relationship with participants, to claim otherwise would be obscuring an important element of the study's conception. At the same time, to claim that relationship released me from issues of power and domination would be irresponsible if not reprehensible. Researchers are always present in our texts and power relations always exist, no matter how we try to suppress them (Richardson, 2000). When attempting to develop an element of reflexivity (Lather, 1986) in our

research, this task of working the hyphen becomes even more essential. Lather (1986) argued for a creation of theory “adequate to the task of changing the world,” (p. 262) and an element of reciprocity between the researcher and the researched—a give-and-take and mutual negotiation of meaning. With this added element of praxis, researcher and participants can find themselves in a mutually beneficial relationship (Lather, 1986). A mutually beneficial relationship was my goal.

All researchers are limited by our own lenses; our perspectives are clouded by issues of race, class, gender and experience. In addition, researchers are limited by the confines of academia, in particular academic language, a certain amount of positionality is required, but too much talk of self can lead to charges of self-absorption. However, researchers do offer practical suggestions to assist in this complex process.

Tisdell (2000), in her study of spirituality and adult emancipatory education, spoke openly of her best attempts not to project her own experience on to her participants, and her own subsequent failures. She offered Anna, an African American woman as an example, and was forthright about her own reading of a story Anna told. Tisdell remarked that she understood the story as one of “Catholic guilt.” Her participant responded vehemently that it was about being Black in a White space. Tisdell argued that as outsiders, we always take that risk when we attempt to reach across boundaries, making member-checking a vital component to transparent research. Because of that, she became vigilant in using summary vignettes as a methodological tool with participants whose backgrounds were decidedly different from her own. In this study, I used this tool as an attempt at reciprocity.

In the Afterword of *Making Race Visible*, Nieto (2003) discussed the importance of White educators and researchers working to eradicate racism. The majority of the authors in the volume are White, and Nieto argued that is how it should be. Rather than shying away from research and difficult conversations of race, White researchers should continue to participate in the discussion. Positionality is the major issue for White researchers attempting to study students of color, and a first step is interrogating our own sense of privilege in the research we conduct. We need to read our work and ourselves as racialized texts and not shy away from multiple identities as researchers, activists, and people (Frankenberg, 1993; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003).

For example, Appleman (2003) straightforwardly discussed her own complicity in the perpetuation of stereotypes of adolescent youth through her descriptions of participants. She looked back at her descriptions and despite the approval she received from the participants to write them as she did, she recognized her portrayals were unflattering and not useful to anyone but herself. She struggled with the fact that as a teacher she had treated the students with respect, but as a researcher, she focused on their deficiencies along race and class lines. When a student asked her if she would be making him famous or making him a fool, she could not give an honest response. She warned researchers to guard against creating qualitative versions of master narratives. Her most forthright suggestion was to rely on transcription as much as possible in order to create a more multi-vocal research, another practical suggestion I incorporated into my study.

As a qualitative researcher, I felt it was imperative to be hyper-vigilant in guarding against the Othering I am so often guilty of (Appleman, 2003; Fine, 1994;

Villenas, 2000). I felt if positionality (centered in an understanding of my own epistemologies) was at the forefront of my methodological choices and my analysis from the inception of a study, all would benefit—researcher, participants, and reader (Bloom, 2002). In her study on Latino/a parents, Worthy (2006) was frank about her outsider position and the economic, social and political capital she possessed that her participants did not, and then listed her qualification for conducting the study as a sincere respect for her participants. Simple and straightforward, these sorts of positioning are valuable examples to consider. Appleman (2003) wrote:

In order to interrupt the power relations that too frequently undermine the value of qualitative research, Lutrell (2000) argues for a “good enough” methodology, one that recognizes the impossibility of eradicating power relations but does name them and trace the degree to which those tensions and imbalances inform both the process of investigation and the resulting research. (p. 83)

Perfection is an impossible goal, but considering my positionality allowed me the opportunity to conduct this study. I was a White researcher working with students of color, and in spite of my previous relationships with them, I still needed to be reflexively vigilant in all of our interactions and in every aspect of this study.

## **CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANTS AS INDIVIDUALS**

### **Introduction**

In this study, I examined connections between student identity (re)constructions and the multiple literacies encountered in their early college lives. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a detailed description of these connections as demonstrated within the figured world of the university (Holland, et al., 1998) by presenting findings and analyses that effectively highlight these links. Because each student in this study is a unique individual with particular perceptions, I offer this chapter as a means of focusing on their individual narratives and outline findings that were unique to a particular participant. Therefore, I briefly present each participant as a case study, along with themes unique to the individual, with particular emphasis placed on connections between identity (re)constructions and early college literacies. These personal narratives, along with stories of one another, were powerful new literacies for mediating participants' participation in the figured world of the university and highlighted Holland et al.'s (1998) contention that individuals "tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (p. 3).

In Chapter 3, I provided a description of my participants based on my perceptions of them prior to beginning this study. However, I also felt it important to provide a more nuanced view of these students as individuals. Each participant, each unique case, has a different perspective, and therefore is individually valuable. As part of my data collection, I asked the participants in my focus group to provide individual descriptions

of one another, and they submitted them to me by email over the first month of summer vacation. Similarly, during their long individual interviews, I asked students to describe themselves, and I have also included excerpts from those transcripts. At the same time, as I conducted more in-depth interviews with participants, my understanding of them as individuals deepened, and I felt it important to include portions of their individual stories as findings.

Without a general understanding of how these students identify themselves and one another, it is difficult to answer questions of connections between literacies and identities. With each student, his/her personal descriptions of self varied greatly. Some responded wholeheartedly to questions, while others were less enthusiastic about describing themselves. However, all were enthusiastic about describing one another. Offering these personal descriptions, the descriptions created by friends, juxtaposed against my own analyses, offers particular insight into the ways these students choose to identify. Therefore, these portions of data, pieced together to provide more intimate individual portraits, assist in answering this study's central question: What identity (re)constructions do students identify as they negotiate multiple early college literacy experiences?

### **Monique: The Self-Appointed “Nerd”**

Throughout data collection, when asked to talk about herself in individual interviews and in focus groups, I could always count on Monique to talk (and talk a lot). Along with Manuel, her transcripts were always pages longer than the others. She tended



to be very reflective and was one of two participants that kept a personal journal for this purpose. Monique was usually quick to talk about her personal changes, often focusing on how much she had matured since arriving at college.

Monique's discussions of herself and her own college journey represented her identities as multiple and fluid, changing in direct result to the events in her life (Holland, et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2007). In the following section about Monique, this evolution is the predominant focus. Using data excerpts from conversations with Monique and her friends, first her position as a "social coordinator" for the focus group is outlined, followed by her conscious transformation into a young adult, which required some resistance to the social coordinator label as she strove to focus more on school. The section concludes with a focus on Monique's family connections because these have had a strong impact on her identity reconstructions.

### **SOCIAL COORDINATOR**

From the first focus group meeting, the others talked about Monique's ability to organize their social activities. I was told to check with her if I wanted to know when they would be available for focus group interviews. Not surprisingly, Idalia, her college roommate, said, "She likes events and likes to plan things, especially for friends. I guess we can call her the 'Friend Planner' because she used to love to plan our Friday night events" (personal communication, July 5, 2007). She added:

[Monique] is a very crazy girl, well not crazy insane but crazy as like she does so many crazy and funny things. Like whenever we used to be roommates sometimes all of a sudden she used to tell me that she was going to a party or to

the movies in the middle of the week and late at night. Although she came home or should I say the dorm late, she still went to school. You can say that she is responsible. Idalia (personal communication, July 5, 2007)

Idalia chose to concentrate on Monique's "crazy" side, even though she tempered it with an acknowledgement of her sense of responsibility. What might seem like tame college behavior to many people received a different label from Idalia, doubtless framed by her own pursuits and choices. Monique's identities, as evidenced in communication with her circle of friends, were centered on the social aspects of her personality. As she and her friends navigated the university together, it was Monique who carved out the time for them to be together and made sure their group was participating in social activities, usually on campus.

## **YOUNG ADULT**

Though she acknowledged her position as social coordinator, Monique's portrayal of herself often differed radically from other participants' descriptions. She chose to focus on different elements of self, ones her groupmates did not necessarily mention; she was conscious of the evolution of her identities.

Yeah and so I was like, wow, I can't believe I'm a nerd now, and even friends from Roland that I see they're going to college too, but they're not as serious about college how I am. They're like, "Wow Monique you're a nerd."

Monique (individual interview, June 11, 2007)

Her seriousness about college became an important facet of her identity at the university. She termed this her "nerd" identity. Because of the increasing frequency in her decline of

social offers, she claimed her friends began to view her differently: “They see me as the cool person, they still see me as a cool person but now they see me as a nerdy cool person. As in, I always think about homework, but not as much as Idalia does....” Monique (individual interview, June 11, 2007). The “friend planner” chose to describe herself as a “nerd,” defined by her choices to study first and spend time with friends second. Her changing identity was emphasized both by her personal opinions and the opinions of her friends.

Additionally, she described how living on campus, away from her family made her mature.

Living alone makes you mature a lot...And I remember crying to my mom...I was like, “I don’t know how to cook, I don’t know how to do this, and how am I gonna get money to pay this?” ...[B]ut I don’t want to come every weekend if I’m gonna have a test. You know I do want to study and...I was like, “Wow. I was like, I’m an adult now.” Yeah I was scared but I got used to it. Monique (individual interview, June 11, 2007)

Though she admitted her fears, Monique was quick to point out that she got past them. Part of being mature or an adult included: 1) not returning home every weekend, and 2) doing things for herself that her mother typically did for her. Maturation, in the ways Monique chose to define it, became a salient aspect of her personal identification as the semester progressed. When authoring herself in the figured world of the university, Monique found agency in exploring the new, emergent aspects of her young adult

identity (Holland, et. al, 1998), with a particular focus on her move away from her status as social coordinator for her friends.

### **STRONG FAMILY CONNECTIONS**

Throughout the data collection process, I spoke with members of Monique's family and was frequently invited to her house. Incidentally, Monique's home was the only one I was invited inside. During my first visit, her grandmother called Monique's younger brother from the back room and asked him (in Spanish) to see if I wanted any lemonade. When I turned to her and responded that I was fine, but thank you, I was immediately included in all conversations from that point on. She was thrilled I spoke Spanish, and we had long conversations about the family every time I visited Monique. Monique frequently apologized for her grandmother, claiming she was lonely because her grandfather was in Mexico. They held a baby shower for Monique's sister and I was invited, which I considered an honor, even though I was out of town and could not attend. These visits with Monique's family helped me connect to the stories she told and to better understand her ties with her family.

Monique's identities are strongly connected to her family. Her mother is Mexican and her father is Anglo and Monique described being "united" with the Mexican side of her family but disconnected from the White side because they are just "too White" (individual interview, June 11, 2007). The majority of her extended family lives on the same block in Mexico and she returns frequently to visit them. Rather than date a boy in her hometown, she made a conscious choice to date a young man who lives near her Mexican relatives.

Though closely connected to her Mexican family, issues with the White side of her family arose early in data collection because of a chance encounter with her father. The first time I saw Monique and the others for a preliminary discussion about my research, she asked if I remembered how much she wrote about her father when she was a freshman in high school. Her narrative writing in my class that year was focused on the fact that she had not seen her father in a number of years and did not know how to get in touch with him. Last August, she informed me that she had seen him and that it had been a difficult experience. The story is relevant to understanding the extent of Monique's freshman year journey at SU, and so I have excerpted and summarized her powerful narrative here.

It had been eight years since Monique had last seen her father. Then weeks after arriving at SU, while watching a football game at a campus hangout with Alex, Idalia, and Manuel, she noticed a homeless man waiting for scraps of pizza at the same location where she and her friends were eating. She thought his voice sounded familiar and that his mannerisms resembled her father's. Worried that this homeless man might in fact be her father, she called her mother on her cell phone and asked her to stay on the line while she confronted him. Then, "...some other guy came, who looked kind of homeless also, he came behind him and said, 'Sam, here's what you ordered.' And when he said, 'Sam, I'm like, that's my dad's name too'" (individual interview, June 11, 2007). She went on,

I went over there with Idalia and I had the phone beside me, not in my ear but beside me, and I told him, "Are you Sam Smith?" and he looked at me all weird and he said, "Yes." And he asked me, "Who are you?" and I said, "I'm Monique,

your daughter,” and he just looked at me like, “I don’t know what to tell you either.” He stood up and he gave me a hug but he really stinked....After seeing him like that I didn’t really cry because I was sad, I just stayed quiet, and I didn’t cry because I felt pity....I said, “Well, nice seeing you.” He said, “Nice seeing you too. I’ll be seeing you around.” I was like, “OK I’ll see you around too,” And that’s all, we didn’t really talk much. Monique (individual interview, June 11, 2007)

After this exchange, Monique returned to her friends and explained that the homeless man was her father. They bought him some pizza, and he ate it like “he had never eaten before” (individual interview, June 11, 2007). That was the last time she saw him.

She remarked:

Well that day I just thought it was like destiny...I mean I was excited to see him but at the same time I was depressed, and I felt pity for him. I just didn’t think he would be like that, and I felt sorry for myself, sorry that my mom had to marry a guy like that....So after that, my feelings towards him, like kind of dropped.

After that I felt he wasn’t my dad anymore.... Monique (individual interview, June 11, 2007)

This story, one in which Monique’s worlds came together in a rather surreal way, is symbolic of the ways in which identities, both her Anglo-Mexican identities, and her burgeoning identities connected to life at SU were reconstructed as early as her first month at the university. As she navigated the figured world of the university quite capably, ironically, she did so by identifying more as a Latina and finding little

connection with her Anglo ancestry. Throughout the school year, though she was often mistaken for “White” on the university campus, Monique’s identities had less and less to do with her Anglo family and her connections to the Mexican side of her family only deepened. Monique continued to participate in the figured world of her family and authored herself in new ways in relation to family positions, while simultaneously finding ways to author herself within the university (Holland, et al., 1998).

### **Idalia: The Girl Who Carries Books**

The following section highlighting Idalia’s identity constructions focuses primarily on her success as a student as a mitigating factor in her personal views of self, as well as others’ views of her identities. However, a portrayal of Idalia as single-faceted would not do her justice. Thus, the section also highlights her ability to think deeply and question, aspects of her identity that became more evident to me as the school year progressed.

Throughout focus group interviews, references to Idalia were always peppered with anecdotes about Idalia as a student. When we discussed success at SU, Idalia’s name was usually mentioned. Prior to data collection, I did not know Idalia as well as the other students in the study, though she often spent time in my classroom after school or asked for help with her writing. We were frequently in contact at Roland, but I was never her classroom teacher. I always perceived her as a serious girl who spent time with her friends, but always put school first. She was recruited by top colleges and participated in countless social activities at Roland. I imagined Idalia to be a student, someone who

traditionally did as she was told and followed the rules of school and life with little challenge or question.

The more time I spent with Idalia, however, the more I recognized developing identities, ones that altered my perception of her as a dutiful student to one who was willing to challenge the status quo. Interestingly, Idalia remained a young woman of few words throughout the study. Though there were many changes occurring in her life, when asked to talk about herself, I rarely received the extensive monologues offered by Monique and Manuel. The most exhaustive conversation we had about her own personality was when we looked at her identifying photos (individual interview, June 20, 2007).

#### **THE STRONG STUDENT (PART 1)**

However, Monique had plenty to say about her roommate. She described her as very religious, an idea that was reinforced by Idalia's choices of identifying photographs and in her own interviews. As most would say about Idalia, Monique stated:

Her number one priority is school more than anything else.... She works hard and overachieves at everything. Her overachievement has paid off though; she graduated high school being the valedictorian and president of the National Honor Society and student council. (personal communication, June 20, 2007)

Then, with a comment that was indicative of Monique's personality as Idalia's, her roommate was quick to point out that she loves to have fun and even though "Idalia does not have time for a relationship, but she sure does have a love in her life, a love for Cristiano Ronaldo (soccer player)" (personal communication, June 20, 2007). However,



it was the divergence of description from dutiful student that indemnified Idalia's transformation in college: "She is focused and determined to prove everyone wrong and always seeks to find the right answer and even questions the right answer at times" (personal communication, June 20, 2007). The portrayal of Idalia as a seeker and as one who questions the right answer showed the depth of her developing identities and her unique ways of authoring self in the figured world of the university (Holland, et al., 1998). She remained successful, all the while looking for her own answers. I cannot argue that this aspect of Idalia's personality did not exist prior to her time at SU, but instead, that it appeared to "thicken" as the year progressed (Holland & Lave, 2001; Wortham, 2003).

### **THE STRONG STUDENT (PART 2)**

Any time I needed a response through email or requested a meeting from Idalia, I received the response on time and an agreement to meet without hesitation. Always a student first, Idalia was never late and took her "assignments" for me very seriously. Interviewing Idalia was an interesting experience because personal questions were usually met with short, clipped responses. For example, when I asked her how she would describe herself to a stranger (a question that received ten minute uninterrupted responses from other group members), after a long, thoughtful pause she said: "I'm a persistent student. 'Cause if I don't have something I don't like to stop there, I like to keep going on until I get what I want. Hmm. I guess quiet, persistent, and working hard" (individual interview, July 5, 2007). Attempts to uncover more detail were unsuccessful. While this echoed how Monique chose to position Idalia (Holland, et al., 1998; Leander, 2002), it

also fit into my own portrayals of her, even though these were largely dictated by the stories she chose to tell.

The first comment she made during her final individual interview was that she had been accepted to the prestigious business school at SU. Clearly proud of this accomplishment and others, it was immediately evident that Idalia is fiercely competitive. She is driven and does not get distracted by friends, family, or activities. The others in the group frequently described Idalia as “stressed.” Additionally, she is from a family where neither of her parents went to high school, and despite the fact they are proud of her being in college, she claimed they do not understand where she is coming from. In particular, they do not understand the level of work required to complete the amount of homework she has. This disconnect with her family (in terms of school) is one that surfaced repeatedly throughout the school year. This disagreement with her family and continued choice to pursue her own goals, separate from theirs, is one of the reasons I shifted my perceptions of Idalia from student to scholar. In my mind, a scholar is one who seeks, who questions, who wonders. Idalia, while incredibly successful at “doing” school, developed a real ability to question the status quo. These questions, as much as her work in school, were a part of Idalia’s unique space of authoring self (Holland, et al., 1998; Holquist, 1990; Lachicotte, 2002; Wortham, 2004).

## **THE SCHOLAR**

In connection to Monique’s identification of Idalia, a large part of her self-description was shrouded in references to church, even though she disagreed with her

parents' "morality" when it came to traditional women's roles. She spoke about the church, Mexico, and traditions, clearly questioning what she had been taught.

Yeah 'cause supposedly it's not that bad if a guy is out late by himself more than a girl 'cause they have like different, well they think, I don't know what they think. Like in Mexico the kind tradition, that a girl is more like in the house and everything, doing everything like housework and I'm like no, that's not my view. I think a guy should be doing same thing as a girl....Like my little brother's talking about well he shouldn't be doing housework, and I'm like yes, it's the same thing. Like mopping and sweeping, he could do that too, it's not just....But like, my little brother, I sometimes tell him that he should be doing things like girls because you're equal. And I tell him that he should also cook, but he doesn't cook. (individual interview, July 5, 2007)

This conversation with Idalia connected neatly with Monique's description of her as a young woman who questions and does not always let others tell her what to do.

I was intrigued by this aspect of Idalia's identity, because with my identification of her as such a good student, I made the stereotypical assumption that she would always take direction from those in authority and not question the status quo. In getting to know Idalia, I realized how inaccurate that perception was. As she adapted to the university and learned the discourses of various classes, professors, and the school, she still remained a scholar—questioning and wondering. However, forever identifying as a student, Idalia's final description of herself was better stated than any I could create. Laughing as she reflected on her secondary school career she said, "I had like this big backpack and then

this other bag where I carried books. So I've been carrying books for a long time..."

(individual interview, July 5, 2007). I cannot imagine that will change in the near future.

### **Alexandra: "Still Learning"**

In the following section, the focus is on Alex's changing perceptions of her own identities, based on her past experiences as well as her current experiences at the university. Seen as one who talks little, but has much to offer, Manuel chose to portray Alex as a trustworthy and intelligent person. At the same time, in spite of apparent difficulties in school, Alex's identities as a student might have shifted, but have not disappeared. Alex, along with those around her, noted her focus on learning, both in school and in life. In spite of particular positionings, based on notions of grades and success, Alex chose to author herself in ways that mattered most to her and to her small circle of friends (Holland, et al., 1998; Leander, 2002).

As Alex's high school teacher, I always admired her wit and her skill with a pen. She wrote with voice and participated in school in ways that suited her. In class, her participation was limited to her writing and small group interactions. Socially, she participated as a member of ROTC. She rarely spoke up in class discussions, and she almost never asked for help. Spending time with her this school year, I began to understand that much of Alex's reticence to ask for help came from being a part of a military family (individual interview, June 12, 2007). She explained in great detail that asking for help was not what her family encouraged. However, she chose to help her

family whenever asked, and even when frustrated with her duties at home, she still considered them a part of her familial responsibility.

Her secondary school career included dropping out of high school for a year before she transferred to Roland. This was followed by a serious transformation into a “good student” which she credited to her involvement in ROTC. The past year at SU was tumultuous for Alex, though one would never know it from conversations with her. All comments were delivered with the same even tone, never with stress or worry. On probation for the upcoming fall semester, she spoke of her willingness to return in the spring. She felt the spring will be a new start, just as Roland was in her high school career (individual interview, June 12, 2007).

#### **TRUSTWORTHY AND WISE**

While Monique and Idalia were close friends throughout the school year, so were Manuel and Alexandra. They opted to write descriptions for one another. Manuel described Alex as a person who “appears to be very laid back not caring what people think” (personal communication, August 5, 2007). He considers Alex one of his best friends and claimed their friendship is unconditional. Though quiet, when she does decide to talk, she dispenses wise advice. He added:

Alexandra brightens up people’s days with her attitude of “saying it how it is,” and if she believes something is right she will back it up to the fullest to prove her point. Overall she is a shy person that has a lot to say, and that makes her one of my greatest friends. Manuel (personal communication, August 5, 2007)

At the end of the school year, Manuel explained to me that he had learned lessons about trust this year and in that lesson had come to trust Alex even more. The characteristics he identified in Alex outlined his reasons for trust.

Alex and Manuel were in similar situations throughout the school year. Both lived at home and dealt with issues related to balancing family and school. This, along with the fact that they took numerous classes together, seemed to bring them closer as the semester progressed, but as a unit, they seemed to pull further and further from the rest of the group. Manuel's positioning of Alex was important. For these two, wisdom appeared to be more than study skills and Manuel clearly pointed to Alex's strengths, especially in a year when she struggled handily with academics. Manuel's description added depth to her identities. She, along with Manuel, chose to author herself using more than the positions afforded her by grades and her scholastic record (Holland, et. al, 1998; Luttrell and Parker, 2001).

### **PERPETUAL STUDENT**

Alex, when talking about her adjustment to the university, claimed her problems were not with academics, but instead with "figuring out systems" (individual interview, June 12, 2007). Alex's personal description revolved around growth as a student:

I became a little bit more, just a little bit more independent. In high school classes, I got my work done but I still played a lot. I didn't do that at all in college, just because I guess maybe the atmosphere didn't call for it. It would be kind of out of character to do that....I'm still, I don't know I'm still learning. I think I'm always

gonna be a student somewhere, you know, whether it's in life or in college.

Alexandra (individual interview, June 12, 2007)

This description was important. The typical assumption about a student on academic probation might be that the student had not shown an appropriate amount of growth while adjusting to the literacies of university life. However, Alex negated this assumption, and in so doing, acted with agency (Holland, et al, 1998; Urrieta, 2007). She may have struggled, but she still learned. This was her improvisation (Holland, et al., 1998). Alex positioned herself as a learner and offered the example of learning school, in particular, the aspects of her new educational setting.

Knowing Alex in class for a number of years and seeing her interactions as a part of the focus group reinforced what both she and Manuel said about her identifying characteristics. Alex spoke least in the group, but when she did, it was usually clear that she had learned something new and deemed it worth sharing. In her individual interviews, she was able to point to how family and life events had influenced her and caused her to become the person she is today. She is highly reflective, but wary of asking anyone for help. Her struggles in school were major identifying factors for Alex this year. She struggled living at home with five adults, but felt guilty about these feelings, knowing that she should be willing to sacrifice for the “greater good” of her family’s well-being.

I live with my entire family, like I said, and I think it kind of put a damper on things because I was always involved in things related to that, not necessarily that I shouldn't have been involved in, but little things that I shouldn't have to worry

about. Like I'm always feeling obligated to take people to the store and stuff like that, and yeah I know I should just do it for the greater good, but I mean, sometimes I feel like why do I have to be the one? (individual interview, June 12, 2007).

These struggles were also imperative to understanding her identity constructions throughout the school year. She responded to these struggles with questions of self and wonderings about her future.

### **INITIAL STRUGGLES**

An interesting juxtaposition to the descriptions of Alex as wise and as a learner is the fact that she was placed on academic probation and asked to leave SU for the Fall 2007 semester. During our final focus group in May, there was no talk of probation or any difficulties with participants finishing out the year. They were glad to be done and proud to be finished, even if their grades were not as high as they had hoped. This is why, when I began meeting with students in June for in-depth individual interviews, I was surprised by the things I learned. In the car, on the way to lunch, Alex informed me that she and Manuel would not be returning to SU in the fall because the school had placed them both on probation. Once settled with the recorder, I asked Alex to explain this in more detail, because in all of our conversations they had never mentioned they anticipated academic penalties.

First Alex outlined particular difficulties for me by class. She struggled in her philosophy class: "I'm not like that. I don't like to think that far outside the box. So I decided to drop it" (individual interview, June 12, 2007). A visit to her counselor



convinced her to try a study group that was ultimately unsuccessful because she was intimidated by her peers' understandings of the material. After dropping the class, she was then penalized because she was under the 12 hour minimum requirement for her financial aid. This followed probation during the fall semester because of low grades. She was encouraged to withdraw after spring semester finals as a means of "saving" her GPA.

Her struggles warranted a visit to the school counselors, which occurred between the last focus group meeting in May and her individual interview in June.

Apparently for your scheduling classes and all the stuff that deals with academics there's one counselor you go to. Then when it's like non-academic issues there's a different one they send you to. And that one, I guess is in charge of your mental health, and apparently they thought that I needed to go see that one because I had emotional problems. I actually had both of them calling each other up, 'cause they were like...the academic was talking to the emotional and she's like, "I think this student is having problems adjusting to school," or whatever it was. So they sent me to see her and this lady's like, "Well ok, well yeah, you know, you're probably having some difficulty but it's OK, everybody has problems like that." She's like, "I think it's best for you if you go immediately to the, to the psychiatrist" or whatever it is, "on Monday morning." And she even called, to tell them that I was coming in and all that stuff. So they did that and I was like OK but I didn't go see him. I don't think, I'm not trying to kill people, you know, I don't think I have a problem. Maybe they meant I had problems transitioning

from high school to college or something. That's probably true but I don't think I needed to talk to a psychiatrist about it. (individual interview, June 12, 2007)

I then asked if she felt she had any more adjustment issues than other students. She responded:

Yeah I really don't, I mean yeah none whatsoever. Other than the fact that I'm, maybe, not living at home would help or something, but as far as anything else I don't think there's nothing, no more differences. All the people I've talked to they always have something wrong with them that's way deeper than my issues. (individual interview, June 12, 2007)

As a student who was reticent to ask for help, many of Alex's fears about doing so were rationalized by what occurred when she finally did ask for help from the university. She felt the advice offered (tutoring) did not meet her needs. At the same time, she was insulted by the counselor's suggestion that she talk to a mental health professional, an issue that also occurred with two other participants (Manuel and Aurelio) during the school year. Alex was positioned by authority figures and the grading system at SU as one who was unsuccessful in the university (Holland, et. al, 1998; Leander, 2002). She resisted these positionings through conversations, relationships, and learning. She opted to view herself as one who would overcome, just as she always had. She still viewed herself as a learner, and in the last email I received from her, she reminded me that she would figure things out and begin again in the spring.

## **Aurelio: A Smile that Makes Him Stand Out**

Aurelio came to be viewed as the perpetually positive member of the group, both by himself and others. He consistently attempted connections in our discussions, though his personal identifications often required subsequent explanations for the rest of the group. Through his year at SU, Aurelio remained positive and his enthusiasm for school and life did not seem to dampen. He continued to identify in many of the same ways as in high school, only more deeply and with more life experiences to offer as rationales. These identifications are highlighted in the following section.

As a high school student, Aurelio was always a willing participant in the classroom community. His assignments were completed on time, and he spent countless hours with me before and after school perfecting them and working on his English skills. He always seemed outside the traditional cliques and it was rare to hear him gossip or talk about another person. He chose to be involved in multiple organizations, a tendency that has continued into college. I knew Aurelio well, as a teacher to a student, but most of the personal information I knew about him came from my connections with his mother, not from Aurelio himself. I found it intriguing that even when he attempted to describe himself, Aurelio almost always did so by explaining how others positioned him (Holland, et al., 1998; Leander, 2002). This is evident in nearly every focus group transcript and in his individual interviews.

## **TALKATIVE AND KIND**

Because there was an odd number of participants, Alexandra agreed to write two descriptions for the study because she was not in summer school and “wasn’t doing anything anyway” (personal communication, July 15, 2007). Throughout the focus group interviews, Aurelio was frequently subjected to Alex’s teasing. Manuel usually followed Alex’s lead and teased Aurelio about the way he talked and the organizations in which he participated. He was good-natured about it, just as he is good-natured about most things. The relationship in the group interviews made me curious about what Alex might write about him. She explained that he was the most “talkative and outgoing of the group” and that his personality could be a “bit strong and overwhelming at first” (personal communication, August 3, 2007). She tempered this description with an explanation of Aurelio’s good intentions and claimed his “most noticeable feature” is “the smile he seems to wear year round, accompanied by kind brown eyes” Alexandra (personal communication, August 3, 2007). There are hints of their brother/sister relationship in Alex’s identifying statements. Adjectives like “overwhelming” and a “bit strong” were typical of her jokes about Aurelio.

An on-going joke throughout the school year was Aurelio’s inability to answer a question directly. Often after he would finish talking in a focus group setting, the others would say, “What? How does that connect?” Aurelio could always explain the connection, but it was one that was initially evident only to him. This tendency toward vague connections highlighted his unique ways of seeing the world and his own ways of identifying with the university. His participation in the figured world of the university

was unique—he improvised and found his own ways of coping and enjoying university life (Holland, et. al, 1998).

### **FULL OF VAGUE (BUT IMPORTANT) CONNECTIONS**

Often after I would ask a question during our focus groups, Aurelio was usually one of the first to answer, but after his example or statement, the rest of the group (myself included) were often bewildered by the connection. In his individual interview, I asked him to describe himself and he told the following story:

There was this one time when I went to the manager at our apartment complex. They didn't know who I was, so I told them I was my mom's son and went to pay the rent. The next month when my mom went to pay the rent, they told my mom I was preppy, that I wasn't anything like my brother, that I talked good Spanish [laughing]. Aurelio (individual interview, July 20, 2007)

From the best I could tease out of his answer, he refused to label himself as “preppy” but was happy to indicate that others viewed him as such because of his “good Spanish.” Aurelio was similarly vague with descriptions about himself and his explanations of school life.

In general, he seemed to identify himself largely by portrayals of other people and in relation to the groups he chose to be a part of. Early in the semester, he began to look outside the group for ways of identification, but ultimately came to be a part of our focus groups as he returned to his Roland roots. Even though he began spending more time with the group, he still chose to identify in many different ways, usually in relation to new friends he made on campus. He was involved in countless university organizations,

from the Mexican American Culture Committee, to the French club, to the Vietnamese Student Association. While others would give personal examples of school experiences, particularly when discussing issues of race and class, Aurelio typically chose to use examples of friends. Indeed, many of his examples started with, “My friend, she/he...”

### **SUNNY OUTLOOK**

When attempts to get Aurelio to talk about himself in direct terms failed, I tried to get a more detailed description by asking what people who have known him for a long time might say about him. He seemed to like to reference himself in relation to others, including family and friends. He responded,

I asked them, if they see any difference in me, and they say, “No, you’re still the same.” Take for instance my middle school friend, I saw him recently but I met him in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and he said I haven’t changed at all. I think my smile is what makes me stand out. It goes with my personality. Aurelio (individual interview, July 20, 2007)

It was particularly interesting that both Alex and Aurelio himself pointed to his smile as part of his identity. He is viewed by many as a particularly positive person. In his interview where he discussed his identifying photos, he included a photograph of his deceased father, because people viewed his father’s outlook on life as similar to his. As he showed me the photograph, he added that he and his father had the same smile (individual interview, August 5, 2007).

Aurelio moved to the United States in middle school, and did not feel comfortable in English until his sophomore year in high school (individual interview, July 20, 2007).

As his former teacher, I tended to view Aurelio in light of his family ties. My first year at Roland, I had his brother in my ESL class for about three months until he dropped out of school. I also knew Aurelio's sister because she attended Roland, and I have known his mother for a number of years. Similarly, the more I interviewed him for this project, the more clear it became that Aurelio also frequently positioned himself through his relationships with family. His father died when he was very young, and he is the only one of "his generation" who has completed high school. He described himself as a role model to his nieces because he is the only family member pursuing an education and cited his sister dropping out of high school because of a pregnancy his senior year as one of the most traumatic events of his adolescence. Like Alex, he also struggled with his transition to the university, but for different reasons. His first semester, he worked many hours at a local restaurant and was unable to stay caught up in his classes. He withdrew from school and spoke with his counselor, but with a different outlook, and subsequently a different result than Alex (individual interview, July 20, 2007).

When his university advisor noticed he was failing his psychology class, she called him in and wondered what was wrong and if anything in his life might be affecting his grades. He explained that he was working nights and that his sister had been in a car accident recently and was on her seventh surgery. He also told her about the problems he was having with friends and his struggles with classes like computer science. When she suggested he meet with a mental health professional in the Student Services Building, he went. The counselor outlined his options and Aurelio explained to me.

If I could withdraw with a medical reason instead of withdrawing “just because,” it would look better than just withdrawing. I withdrew with a medical reason.

They said my grades were not going to show. So I was going to start fresh. So I went and talked to her and because I talked to her I was able to withdraw because of a medical reason, a personal reason...because of all the stress. (individual interview, July 20, 2007)

Aurelio did not react negatively against the suggestion to see the school counselor. The suggestion to meet with her did not cause him to identify in particularly negative ways. Because of his willingness to meet with his counselor and take her advice, he was able to withdraw without penalty, unlike Alex and Manuel. He received the fresh start he was promised.

Ironically, in spite of withdrawing his first semester, it was Aurelio who first started using the language of his classes in focus group discussions. He may not have completely acclimated to the figured world of the university, but early on he began “trying on” the vocabulary of the university; he saw the relevance of academic discourses to his everyday life and would frequently discuss what he was learning in his psychology class or his developmental reading class (e.g. Focus Group, November, 2006).

### **Manuel: “I Want to be Somebody in Life”**

Manuel’s identities were forged through seemingly contentious relationships with various aspects of his life. The following explanations of Manuel highlight a developing



oppositional identity, one that consistently refused labels and refused to be satisfied with his present state of affairs.

Prior to data collection, I had the closest student/teacher relationship with Manuel. In high school we communicated frequently, and I knew details of his home life as well as his academic struggles and successes. Over the course of this research, I observed particular aspects of Manuel's identity "thicken" (Holland & Lave, 2001; Wortham, 2003). Even as he struggled with success at the university, he seemingly opted to position himself more defiantly as a college student, particularly with family and friends. Instead of claiming an outsider position at the university, he chose to remain committed to his identity as a student. However, at the university, after initial attempts to succeed did not result in the grades he wanted, he opted to use his resources less, sit at the back of classrooms, and exist quietly in his new figured world (Holland et al., 1998). Intensely reflective, his reasons for struggles were acknowledged and mostly involved his family responsibilities.

### **SHY BUT INTELLIGENT**

Alex agreed to write a description of Manuel. He told me she asked if he wanted to read it before she submitted it to me, but he responded no, that he trusted her. This trust was the cornerstone of their friendship. Alex, being a close friend of Manuel's, noted his changes as the year progressed. She wrote that at first glance, "Manuel looks the part of an average Hispanic male," but reminded the reader if one looked closely, "you are able to distinguish that all his stereotypical Mexican characteristics have recently been washed away by his new college lifestyle" (personal communication, June

11, 2007). She also argued that people might make assumptions about Manuel, but that none of them are accurate. In her eyes, “he is intelligent and has a lot of potential to do some good in the world” Alexandra (personal communication, June 11, 2007). Alex’s description was clearly borne of a friendship and noted Manuel’s identities as fluid. She noted the changes that occurred over the year as he was exposed to college life/literacies. Where I noted a thickening of Manuel’s oppositional identities (Holland & Lave, 2001; Wortham, 2003), Alex was able to point to Manuel’s changing identities within the space of authoring. They spoke about others’ perceptions and noted his attempts at improvisation within their cultural world (Holland, et al., 1998).

### **STRIVING FOR MORE**

When I asked Manuel how he would choose to describe his own identity, he began, “Hi my name’s Manuel and I don’t care what people think” (individual interview, July 30, 2007). He reminded me that he could not live his life by what other people think of him because they would not be paying his bills or comforting him when he was sick. People may judge, but ultimately he will support himself. This positioning of himself in relation to hypothetical people with hypothetical opinions was a fascinating way of seeing Manuel’s refusal to identify in ways others feel he should. He added,

I want to be somebody in life. I want to strive for more, other than what I’m just given. You know if they give me some nasty soup, I’m not gonna take it. I’m gonna be like give me the good kind, I want that. (individual interview, July 30, 2007)

He informed me that he would always be “striving for more,” because he was not content to just rely on what he had been handed. Over the course of the semester, Manuel adopted the discourse of achievement and as he attempted to locate his place in the figured world of the university, this discourse appeared more emphatic (Cary, 2006; Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1977; Holland, et al., 1998).

### **NOT YET LIVED (THE WAY HE WANTS TO)**

Manuel’s relationship with his family colored all descriptions of himself. He felt bound to his home and to his relationships with them, and his ability to identify was never really extricated from these relationships. Manuel described himself as someone who had not yet “really lived life”:

You know I have to take care of my brothers, and I don’t want to do it anymore. I haven’t like lived like the full experience of life. Like sometimes I’m tired, not of life itself, but it’s just like I want to be able to go to live life. Which I haven’t, you know. I was just feeling like I wanted to experience life on my own and I guess the mistake I made was not moving out.... [Mom] still expected me to take care of the kids and I didn’t do as good as I wanted to because I knew if my living situation was different I would have done better. (individual interview, July 30, 2007).

When Manuel was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, he was in my class for the third year in a row. In all the time I had known him, I had never seen him miss school or arrive tardy. All of a sudden, he started coming to my first period class late every day. When I asked him about it, he informed me that his mother’s husband had left her when she was nine months

pregnant, and now that the baby had been born, he was looking after the baby at night because his mom had taken on a second job to make ends meet. He could not take a job to help out because he did not have papers to work legally in the U.S. He was arriving at school after being up all night caring for an infant.

According to Manuel, the baby's attachment to him remained, another difficulty with living at home. As adamant as he was about moving out, he privately expressed his worries about doing so because he wonders who the baby will go to when he needs something. At the same time, he was frustrated by his role.

He sleeps in my room, the baby one and I hate it because, you know during the time I wanted to study, you know, he will get up when I was studying or reading something and he will start crying and he wants his bottle and I'm like, "Ughhh." And my studying habits were not good because I had to deal with that and because I was feeling too, too like stuck in my house. I felt like I couldn't do nothing else but just stay in my house and I just felt like that was getting to me, to a point where I couldn't do good in school and stuff. (individual interview, July 30, 2007)

Attending the university did not necessarily give Manuel the life he desired. After a year at SU, he equated the opportunity to move out with future possibilities for success. On probation like Alex, he was looking at another semester of living at home and baby-sitting. He had not yet received his papers to work legally in the U.S., though his lawyer had promised he would receive them by the start of the summer. Therefore, he cannot work during the fall semester, nor will be able to attend school. This means another few

months taking care of his siblings full-time. During our last conversation, he was concerned about how fall 2007 would turn out, but decided he would give SU “one more chance” in the spring, no matter what.

Manuel arrived in this country with papers borrowed from a cousin. He was not in school for Pre-Kindergarten or Kindergarten because his family did not know how to enroll him. He recalled his mother taking him to a local high school to enroll him in first grade, because she did not know that there was also an elementary school in their neighborhood. He discovered his identity as a “school boy” (individual interview, July 30, 2007) in high school, and clings tightly to that label now, in spite of his difficulties at SU. More than any other member of the focus group, Manuel was concerned about issues of race and class, and was typically the one to bring up those issues when spending time with me on campus.

In the figured world of the university, like Alex, Manuel was positioned by his struggles with academic success. In the figured world of his family, he was positioned as a member of the family with family responsibilities, no matter what decisions he made independently of the family structure. Attempts at improvisation, talking of moving out, refusing particular characterizations, demonstrated the changes occurring in his identities, though it doubtless is not occurring fast enough for Manuel (Holland, et. al, 1998).

## Summary

While providing portraits of individual participants offers an opportunity for more complex understandings as connections are made across cases, this process also serves to highlight one of the important aspects of this study. My choice to conduct case study research was not one I took lightly. Particular questions beg particular study constructions. Though at times those of us in the field of education might feel desperate in our attempts to reach under-served students in our secondary schools, I argue that we should avoid the temptation to generalize student experiences, even as we work to improve their educational opportunities. It is imperative that we look to individual student narratives as a means of understanding the individuality of student experiences, even students in seemingly similar circumstances. It perhaps inevitable that I would return to Stake's (1995) epistemological query: "What is to be learned from the single case?" (p. 16). I would argue in the cases of Monique, Idalia, Alex, Aurelio, and Manuel, that I have only scratched the surface of their stories and what these narratives have the potential to offer educators. Student voices, participant voices, Latino/a voices—each perspective as indemnified by each case—offers insight into early college literacies through this focus on identities.

These participants identified themselves and one another in many new ways as they participated in the myriad literacy experiences of early college. I found the task of summarizing the lessons gleaned from the individual cases difficult, as their experiences and responses to their experiences differed greatly. However, for all participants, it was apparent that the school year at SU impacted them in intense ways. Their personal

identifications, or ways of viewing self, were altered, sometimes dramatically and sometimes almost imperceptibly. This was why I chose to present their personal views of self, the group member perceptions, along with my perceptions as researcher together. I feel this allowed for a more multi-layered view of individuals' identity reconstructions as they attempted a multitude of new literacies in their early college careers. The figured world of the university is an interesting complexity, for just as individuals develop through their participation in figured worlds, figured worlds are developed by the participation of individuals (Holland, et al., 1998). The purpose of this chapter was to focus on this inherent complexity.

## **CHAPTER 5: *CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE GROUP***

### **Introduction**

This chapter further develops my examination of the connections between student identity (re)constructions and the multiple literacies they navigated in their early college careers. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight themes identified by participants throughout their first year at the university. As argued in the previous chapter, each participant had a uniquely contextualized experience in the figured world of the university and consequently identified uniquely individual identity constructions. However, these young adults also articulated patterns of experience, based in large part on their own perceptions of past schooling experiences as urban Latino/as, juxtaposed with their current perceptions of their university schooling. Additionally, upon arrival at SU, they gravitated to one another due to a personal need for relationships with people who shared their past and present educational experiences.

As participants spoke about identities and literacies in our focus group meetings, I identified particularly salient themes. These were articulated and developed by the group during our frequent conversations. For this chapter, I selected portions of these interviews as a means of highlighting the themes most often discussed by participants. I assumed a frequent return to these topics underscored the themes' relevance to student experiences. As such, these focus groups offered a picture of connections between students' myriad college literacy experiences and the continuous shifting and negotiation of identities



based on their participation in the figured world of the university. The central research question for this study was: What identity (re)constructions do students identify as they negotiate multiple early college literacy experiences? These themes expressed in answer to this question revolved around discussions of both a lack of diversity and an exposure to diversity, a focus on people who made participants comfortable, assumptions and conclusions about people with which they had little in common, along with an acknowledgement of a growing disconnect between themselves and their neighborhood friends and family.

#### **LACK OF DIVERSITY ON CAMPUS**

These students' urban educations were saturated with discussions of privilege, race, and class. Many of their high school teachers, particularly in the English department, practiced critical pedagogy using literature (both fiction and non-fiction) along with discussion and writing assignments to initiate these conversations. Manuel, Alex, and Aurelio were also exposed to these topics in their AVID classes. However, prior to admission at SU, it appears these topics remained somewhat hypothetical to students. They had little exposure to students who were not Latino/a or African American, and there was little variety in economic experience among the students in their high school. Roland High School remains a neighborhood school that graphically demonstrates the division in participants' hometown—a division of "Eastside" versus "Westside."

Thus, it was logical coming from a school with high numbers of Latino/a and African American students that when they entered SU, initially participants spoke

frequently about the lack of diversity at SU. Conversations like the following were common:

Monique: The thing that shocked me was, people said that SU was very diverse and all that.

Idalia: But not really.

Alex: Right, not really. There are no Mexicans or Blacks around.

Monique: They said, "Oh, there's lots of Hispanics."

Holly: Who said that? SU?

Alex: The counselors. And then you go there and there's all these blonde-haired kids.

Monique: I asked the admissions counselor, like can you give me the percentages? And he told me the percentages, but now I'm here and I don't agree.

Alex: Liar.

Manuel: We were reading the percentages somewhere.

Monique: In the campus newspaper it said the Hispanic population was raised .01%.

Alex: I think that's like all the minorities.

Holly: So how does that make you feel?

Alex: Lucky.

Manuel: I don't like it. (Focus Group, October, 2006)

Drawing on Fairclough's (1995) three-tiered model of discourse, this transcript excerpt highlighted all three levels of discourse. First, the local occurrence is the discussion with

the counselors, which participants have found to be incorrect based on their current experiences (also local happenings). At the same time, the conversation suggests that students saw counselors as the mouthpiece of the university and therefore voices of the institution; these utterances were deemed institutional because they were spoken by someone of authority. With Monique's disagreement with the admissions counselor, and Alex labeling of him as a "liar," it was seemingly apparent that students had begun to develop a mistrust of some of institutional discourses now that they were experiencing the institution of the university firsthand. Their responses to my last question indemnify societal discourses, but in two very different ways. Alex felt "lucky" with her role in that small minority percentage while Manuel did not "like it." Alex borrowed some of the societal discourse by recognizing or understanding her place in such an institution as one of a privileged few, but Manuel chose a more oppositional stance to the discourse.

Clearly, there were multiple issues brought up in this conversation. First of all, participants' initial definitions of diversity centered on "non-White" individuals. They saw few people who looked like them at the university and this was a cause for shock. Secondly, the purported lack of diversity appeared to cause them to re-evaluate what they had been told about percentages and to begin questioning some of the tactics of members of the university community. It is difficult to transcribe tone into data, but it was a rather ludic conversation in spite of the seriousness of the topic. However, this highlights how a seeming lack of diversity quickly became an important factor in their authoring of selves at SU (Holland, et al., 1998). It offered them cause to relate more closely to people with

whom they shared commonalities and to make dramatic comparisons between their life experiences and those of their new classmates at SU.

Upon entering SU, participants were immediately exposed to new literacies, to a variety of new ways of knowing, valuing, and being in this new cultural world (Gee, 2000-2001, Holland, et al., 1998; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995, 2003). In this particular transcript excerpt, data suggest a willingness to challenge these new understandings based on their own experiences. If I am to take seriously Alvermann's (1998) challenge to read the literacies of adolescents' lives "in relation to a world that shapes and is shaped by them" (p. 353), then this conversation centered in its context, was particularly valuable in my attempts to understand the profound and personal responses participants experienced upon exposure to new literacies at the university. Data highlight participants' unwillingness to participate in passive acceptance and their willingness to challenge concepts based on their own literacy experiences.

#### **SECURITY: "FRIENDS WHO SHOP AT WALMART"**

The university can be an intimidating space to enter. As such, participants then pointed to the aforementioned lack of diversity as a reason for spending so much time together as a group. They found comfort in one another. Though, when talking about their need to spend time together, this also seemed to be motivated by their differences with others, not simply their own similarities.

Monique: When I meet people they're always talking, "Oh yeah, I went to France and I bought a Prada purse."

[Everyone laughs and nods.]

Monique: I'm like uh, okay, let me go hang out with my friends who shop at Wal-Mart!

[Still laughing.]

Manuel: We all hang with each other and we all look different. She looks like mixed. [Points to Alex.] We look diverse!

All: Yeah, diverse! We look diverse!

Manuel: But then it's like, you know, people look at us when we speak Spanish to Monique; they just stare. (Focus Group, October 2006)

The idea of class and an inability to relate to students who flaunt their money was one that came up again and again throughout the school year, usually in conjunction with mimicking a “White student’s” voice and invoking the name of a designer label. The previous transcript illustrated the first instance of such a comparison. At the same time, a recognition that others might see them as diverse, even though they all relate to one another because they are from Roland and Latino/a, lent superiority to their initial definition of diversity. This makes me think that as others may have tried to position them in particular ways, they found strength in their own groupings—agency (Holland, et al., 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001; Urrieta, 2005, 2006). Agency, as argued by Holland, et al. (1998) is often found in the daily or the seemingly mundane, in these slight improvisations that occur in cultural worlds.

In looking at this transcript, I found Fairclough’s (1995) levels of discourse to again be useful for analysis. In articulating my attempts at analysis, it is also important to highlight the intricacy of the levels of discourse; although I talk about the three levels in

ways that appear to separate them, they always blur together and cannot be extricated from one another while attempting to achieve meaning from data. In these local occurrences, for example conversations with students that seemed impossible to relate to, participants chose to focus on examples of designer purses and trips out of the country as status symbols. These local instances occurred in an institution. However, they were also indicative of larger societal discourses. Particular labels were associated with status, as was the ability to travel. It was implied that the students who were privileged with these privileges did not understand these as such, but talked about them as if they were commonplace. In addition, societal ideologies concerning diversity appear to be based on surface features, and the constant focus on outward manifestations of culture equal a need to label people, placing them in groups for simplicity's sake. In this bit of conversation, participants attempted to disrupt the report of the discourse with a humorous reference to Wal-Mart and to interrupt the use of labels by claiming their own diversity. This local occurrence (our conversation), also serves an example of participants' ability to utilize literacies as the mediating devices of their new figured world as a means for questioning their new learning.

Interestingly, as a group they actually were more diverse than even they seemed to recognize. They often focused on similarities because of shared understandings, however Alex and Monique (as just two examples) have unique experiences as biracial students. In order to connect with this group, they have had to relate closely to their Latino/a heritages. However, their unique issues were not ignored or glossed over by the group. They were frequently integrated into discussion.

For instance, in a focus group where Alex admitted to identifying more with her Latino/a heritage than her African American ancestry, she spoke of particular instances where she needed to associate with African Americans instead of her Latino/a friends, “[T]hey’d speak in Spanish and I don’t speak Spanish. I understand it. I just have different issues” Alexandra (Focus Group, May 2007). Manuel then validated her concern, “Sometimes we talk in English and in Spanish sometimes so we don’t even realize it” (Focus Group, May 2007). While Alex explained that she has “different issues,” Monique also mentioned her difference. With an Anglo last name, fair-colored hair and light eyes, Monique often passes for White until she speaks: “I do get treated differently, but once people hear my accent, then they ask where I’m from. Once I tell them, they look confused and say, ‘Oh’ ” Monique (Focus Group, October 2006). Later in the fall semester, she elaborated on her experiences at SU, “People here, they say all the time, ‘Oh you’re White.’ And I’m like, no. When I’m here I don’t see myself as that Hispanic anymore, which is bad” (Focus Group, November 2006). The conflicts Monique experiences with the White side of her family and her deep connection to her Mexican family made these sorts of labels particularly troublesome for her when attempting to negotiate her own identities. These are just some examples of ways identities might be discursively produced through stories (Wortham, 2001). Participants’ individual stories, along with the stories they created as a group, worked locally in this process of identity construction.

Though the university was decidedly different from their secondary school context, throughout the first semester, participants still found comfort in spending time together and looked for fellow classmates who reminded them of themselves.

Monique: For me in high school, there was nothing but minorities, I mean Blacks and Mexicans. And in college, you would think I would be hanging around with more White people, but no, I'm actually hanging around more with Mexicans and Blacks still. I guess I'm so used to it. I mean, high school, elementary, middle school, I've always been with Blacks and Mexicans. And I feel more, I don't know, I feel safer, not safer, but I don't know the word.

Manuel: Secure.

Aurelio: More things in common.

Monique: Yeah, more secure. I think I have more, I relate more to them. (Focus Group, December 2006)

This interview excerpt solidified the rationale for spending time with people “like them.” At the same time, their ability to help one another find the right word for the right emotion was indicative of their connection throughout this shared experience. Spending time together was justified and necessary. The university was seemingly hostile at times, and they needed comfort in friends who knew both their past and present.

### **FIRST EXPOSURE TO DIVERSITY**

In an apparent contradiction, participants not only spoke of the lack of diversity at SU, but eventually admitted that their first exposure to real diversity occurred on this campus. Initially, diversity was what they came from—Roland High School. Diversity



was minority student populations, Latinos and African Americans. Eventually, their definition shifted beyond “people like us,” and this was a more linear progression than with other themes encountered in the data. As the school year continued, their definition of diversity began to include White and Asian middle and upper class students.

However, they were quick to acknowledge that even though there were countless groups represented on campus, they were still segregated:

Idalia: Well now that I’m at SU, I feel like I’ve experienced more culture than I did at Roland because back then, over there, we were stuck with like two cultures.

Aurelio: I have a lot of friends from every single culture.

Manuel: Don’t get me wrong, it feels separated.

Aurelio: Yeah, yeah.

Manuel: Like the fraternities and all that...

Monique: It’s like Hispanics only, Asians only. Yeah.

Aurelio: There’s only like a few mixed or coed or multi-race.

Manuel: It’s separated, it’s not over all...(Focus Group, November 2006)

Manuel offered a more detailed explanation later in the year:

When they have the Rush thing, you see all these fraternities and sororities and they are giving out fliers. But they are only giving their fliers to people who look like them. They are looking at appearances. They don’t look at much else like if you’re interested or not. It’s like, “Oh, you’re Chinese, well go over here.” “Oh, you’re Hispanic, so let’s give one to him.” They don’t necessarily want you to be

interested; they just give you the flier according to what you look like. It's just weird. (Focus Group, March 2007)

The conversation was then extended by the rest of the group:

Monique: I remember there was this cultural thing. Like a little festival and there were Asians and Hispanics, everything. So I went.

Idalia: I like SU because it's really diverse.

Monique: I went to every booth.

Manuel: I like it too, but the diversity stays within the diversity. You know?

Idalia: No.

Aurelio: Not really.

Manuel: You don't see a big crowd of Mexicans, Hispanics hanging out with a big crowd of Vietnamese. You do have that connection but not with a big crowd.

Monique: Like when you see people going to the club, catching the E Bus, you normally see their race.

Manuel: Yeah, sitting with each other. (Focus Group, March 2007)

There were a few local discourses outlined in this transcript excerpt, in the form of events like sorority and fraternity rush and cultural fairs put on by the university's various organizations. The institutional level of discourse was arguably that diversity is increasing on campus, as evidenced in the many cultures available to form student groups and participate in cultural fairs. However, these local levels of discourse showed a different perspective; there was a contradiction. For these participants, it might seem to be diverse, but it still remained separate. If separate, what does this say about diversity?

This conversation indemnified various societal discourses, in particular, those involving the concept of American society as a melting pot. The lack of integration of difference on campus and in these local events was quickly noted by participants (Fairclough, 1995).

In talking about the separation of students on campus, participants were simultaneously explaining their own choices. At the same time, this conversation indemnified a separation that began to occur within the group, towards the end of their spring semester. Idalia and Aurelio tended to attempt to spend more time learning other cultures and studying with people from different backgrounds. Because of these experiences, they often disagreed with the others about their perceptions of campus life. During one focus group, Manuel entertained us with a story of being taken to a meeting with Aurelio, one he thought would be a gathering of Mexican-American students. It turned out to be a meeting of the Vietnamese Student Association, of which Aurelio was a member! (Focus Group, March 2006). This transcript example demonstrated part of the emergent differences in their university experiences. Data suggest that Aurelio and Idalia paid less attention to the separation because they saw themselves as willing to cross racial lines (Focus Group, March 2007; Focus Group, May 2007).

Participants were able to think critically about diversity at the university. Initially, they were unable to see the university as diverse, but eventually were able to articulate the university as a more diverse place than their high school. At first, descriptions of self were situated in their alienation as Mexican-origin students at a predominately White school. However, their self-evaluations altered along with their definitions of diversity. There was a contrast to the White students they encountered. These evolving definitions

were strongly connected to evolving definitions of self and life at SU, again highlighting the import of focusing on discursive productions of identities (Wortham, 2003).

Dillon & Moje (1998) challenged educators to listen to adolescents as they talk about their worlds; they argued that a continual centering of adolescents' worlds in our own terms does them a disservice. They advocated a focus on adolescents' talk as it relates to the "larger social, cultural, and historical events and practices in their lives" (p. 193) as a means for better understanding both the literacies in their lives and their identity constructions as they exist in their own unique worlds. Through these excerpts of participant talk, I was able to heed this challenge. Identities are not stagnant (Urrieta, 2007), and as students are exposed to a myriad of literacies within their figured worlds, their own perceptions and definitions have the possibility to change, shift, and alter, along with their self-understandings (Holland, et al., 1998).

### **ISSUES OF RACE AND CLASS AT THE UNIVERSITY**

Over the course of the school year, our conversations were peppered with anecdotes related to class and race. Incidentally, these young adults tended to equate race and class. As highlighted previously, participants' exposure to middle to upper class White students was certainly lacking prior to SU. Upon arrival at SU, they were immediately inundated. As a result, there was some negotiation of identities in relation to this new firsthand knowledge of difference. For example, when I asked about study skills, they spoke about trying to learn new ones.

Manuel: I went to this session the other day.

Monique: Yeah, how to read faster.

Holly: Did it help?

Monique: A little bit. It said with your finger, go like this. [She mimics moving her finger on the page.]

Alex: For three hundred dollars more we can learn more!

Manuel: [laughing] Yeah, three hundred dollars!

Monique: That's for the rich kids. (Focus Group, October 2006)

Even activities that appeared to be available to the whole school provided access issues for these students. The previous excerpt suggests they were well aware of these issues and how they contributed to their positionings in college. Additionally, Manuel offered a personal example to the conversation,

I'm in a group, a study group with these three girls....We have to do summaries of the chapters for biology and they give me a lot of sections and they only have two or one. I argue. Sometimes they don't listen. They email me the summaries so I can email them to the TA, and I'm like, "It was not my turn, now it's your turn." And they're like, "Well can you please send them because I don't have time."

Holly: Why do they treat you that way?

Monique and Idalia [in a sing-song voice]: "Porque el es mexicano...porque el es mexicano" [Because he is Mexican].

Manuel: Yeah, I think so. I think that's why. (Focus Group, October 2006)

In the same discussion, issues of class and race were brought to the forefront. Previously, Manuel had spoken of these girls as the "rich White girls" in his study group (Focus Group, October 2006). His reference to the girls and their interactions with him suggest

that participants already recognized limits placed on them by their economic standing and wondered about their treatment at the hands of others. Through our discussions, assumptions that inconsiderate behaviors related to race were made plain.

Manuel's study group was an example of the local level of discourse (Fairclough, 1995). His conversations and interactions with these girls happened to him on a weekly basis. A continued use of study groups by a university with large freshmen classes highlights institutional discourses about fairness and ways of assisting students in the process of navigating the academic discourses of their classroom (Zamel & Spack, 1998). Manuel's study group was set up by his TA to assist him and to hopefully provide an equitable experience for students in the class. However, the societal level of discourse remained intact in the local interactions. As Manuel had spoken earlier about the girls being White and wealthy, because of assumed societal discourses about Mexicans, the girls in the focus group assumed the girls in the study group had a problem with Manuel "porque el es mexicano." Manuel did not disagree; his perception appeared to match their perception of the local instance. This excerpt highlighted the blurring of the levels of discourse. It was impossible to extract the local occurrence from the larger institutional and societal discourse that are indicators of power within participants' cultural worlds (Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1977; Holland, et al., 1998).

Similarly, when I asked about the major issues affecting Latinos at the university, they responded:

Manuel: We're viewed as not making it. Because of our race.

Monique: Discrimination.

Manuel: “Oh well you’ll drop out by the end of the semester.” (Focus Group, November 2006)

Monique elaborated, noting a personal experience:

I noticed last week, I went with my TA for math, and there was a Hispanic girl beside me. It was me, a Hispanic girl, and another Asian girl. And the TA didn’t really talk to the Hispanic girl. He talked mainly to me and the Asian girl and he ignored the Hispanic girl. But, I didn’t really think much of it until I got out....Was he not paying attention to her because she didn’t ask questions? Or was it because he didn’t think she would understand it because she doesn’t really know that much English? She knows more Spanish and when she talks you can hear her accent really bad. Maybe he didn’t really talk to her because of that?

(Focus Group, November 2006)

The wondering about others’ motives and perceptions was a part of their daily lives at SU. They developed a critical consciousness and seemingly innocuous incidents could no longer be thought of as neutral. However, the previous excerpt also suggests that participants unwittingly adopted some of the dominant discourses they seemed to be attempting to resist. Monique, in her assumption of what might be a racist practice, borrows that very language to discuss her thoughts.

Additionally, I asked what these sorts of issues and experiences did to them:

Monique: It makes you work harder.

Manuel: What it does to me is it makes me want to prove them wrong. Prove to them that I can make it. I can really make it like they can. You know, it's a way of me being pushed along.

Idalia: Well, supposedly in our sociology class, we're learning that it's basically society that puts all these things on you. This creates self-consciousness. Then you think you can't do it because of what other people, because of what society says.

Manuel: You're influenced basically.

Monique: Yeah, we're brainwashed.

Aurelo: Not only that but...

Idalia: It becomes a part of you supposedly. Like Tom's Theory or whatever...

(Focus Group, November, 2006)

This excerpt was a fascinating juxtaposition of what participants were personally learning from participating at the university and the language they were learning to help give their ideas credence and structure. Issues at the university were discussed in terms of the new academic literacies they were learning, including terminology from content area courses (Bizzell, 2003; Bartholomae, 2003; Elbow, 1998; McCarthy, 1987).

Looking at this conversation as a local level of discourse, there was mention of a need to prove people wrong. The group's assumption was that others have presuppositions about what they are capable of achieving because of their race and class. Participants felt this more deeply within the institution of the university; however, they chose to use the university's discourse to explain their own thoughts. They have



borrowed the language from the institution (academic literacies), to talk about the societal level of discourse they encounter. They clearly articulated what they believed to be the societal discourse at work when they said—“what society says” (Fairclough, 1995). Not surprisingly, repeated exposure to societal discourses of race, class, success, and failure was equated with brainwashing.

At times, the exposure to differences in class and race were particularly difficult for participants. One of the most salient examples was Manuel’s description of a classmate’s presentation over the Robinhood Law in Texas. The complicated formula, created to equalize funding for Texas public education is often broken down to a simplistic claim of “taking from property rich schools to give to the poor.” It was again under debate in the legislature during participants’ freshman year. For many, the inaccurate belief regarding Robinhood is that schools like Roland receive money from wealthier schools, when in fact, Roland is part of what the state considers to be a “property rich district.” Even Manuel, knowing he came from a high-poverty school, assumed money would be taken from other schools and given to Roland.

Manuel: Like this girl in my Rhetoric class. Her presentation was on the Robinhood laws...she was against it...She made me feel so... [long pause].

Holly: How did that make you feel? Can you put words with it?

Manuel: No not really. It’s just like, it’s just a feeling. It’s like, “What are you trying to say?” I mean...Well, some of her reasons were, “My parents are paying property taxes and it’s our money so why should you all get it.” (Focus Group, December 2006)

When talking about the presentation Manuel inadvertently switched his imitation of the girl's verbage to "you all," even though the girl speaking did not recognize that she might be talking to one of the "you all":

Holly: Do you think she thought she was talking to you?

Manuel: No. I mean, that's why I didn't feel as bad but you know some feelings still come out of it. And I was like you know... [long pause].

Holly: Did you speak up?

Manuel: No. I just didn't feel like it. (Focus Group, December 2006)

The assumption of his classmate, that in a class of twenty people at SU, she would doubtless be talking to people of her own class and background, is one that Manuel had a difficult time internalizing. Though visibly upset when talking about the moment, the local instance (Fairclough, 1995), he still lacked the words to give full meaning to his struggle, one saturated in both institutional and societal discourses while being made apparent in a local instance. Manuel's rhetoric class was a glaring example of participants' frequent exposure to difference. Their identities were impacted by this repeated exposure to new literacies or ways of looking at, thinking of, and being in the world (Gee 2000-2001; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995, 2003).

#### **ASSUMPTIONS/COMPARISONS ABOUT EDUCATION**

Exposure to students of a different class, especially those who had grown up in the same Central Texas town, led participants to articulate elaborate assumptions and comparisons about their secondary educations and those of their classmates at SU. For

instance, when asked what kind of a student they had become, participants had the following conversation:

Idalia: I don't know. I try my best, I guess.

Manuel: I try to. It's the same for me. I try to get good grades in my classes. Sometimes it doesn't work.

Holly: What do you use as the standard to decide?

Manuel: Competition.

Idalia: Yeah.

Manuel: It's so competitive.

Idalia: You have to like keep on track.

Manuel: I don't know their grades, but I assume they have better grades than me so I try to make better grades than they are. But I don't know their grades. I'm assuming they have better grades than me, but I don't actually know.

Holly: Why do you assume that?

Manuel: Because they look smarter.

Holly: What makes a kid look smarter?

Idalia: They are always reading.

Alex [laughing]: They are blonde-haired and blue-eyed. Nah, I'm just playing. No, I'm just saying you assume.

Manuel: Yeah, it's just like a stereotype I guess.

Holly: So the stereotype is that White kids will do better?

Manuel: Yes, and they usually do.

Alex: They look like they come from richer schools.

Idalia: And they have the background, better training, and more experience.

Manuel: Their educational backgrounds are more...

Alex: The curriculum they come from was more challenging.

Idalia: And their parents who can hire like... in high school they probably had like mentors or tutors or whatever. Tutors who taught them how to do things in college, like college work. (Focus Group, March 2007)

The conversation moved quickly from competition, to a light-hearted reference to race to stereotypes. Additionally, the participants verified the purported stereotypes, based on their ideas about those students' secondary educations. Participants drew conclusions about others' participation at the university based on the resources available to these students prior to attending SU. Because of wealth and location, these students were positioned to succeed at SU before ever arriving, and if that thought is taken to its logical completion, then conversely, students who did not attend those schools were not positioned to succeed at SU (Holland, et al., 1998; Leander, 2002). Data highlight that new academic literacies were initially difficult for participants to learn, and they assumed (under the guise of competition) that other students did not have the same difficulties (Zamel & Spack, 1998).

In the local discourse of this focus group, participants made assumptions about the local happenings on campus. Namely, that White students were performing better than they were academically. The institutional discourse of competition was mentioned and utilized by participants as they strove to succeed at the university. Incidentally, they

articulated a liberal societal discourse that stereotypes were wrong or incorrect, but at the same time, argued for the truth of certain stereotypes in their own local space, based on their experiences at the university (Fairclough, 1995).

At Roland, my own race and upbringing were frequently a topic of discussion with students. They often wanted my take on things, based on my past. When I was confused by what they were saying, students often said, “Hey, White lady from the suburbs. Somebody translate!” Therefore, I was not surprised with all our talks about race and class when my own Whiteness was brought up as a part of focus group discussions.

For instance, after an extended discussion on White stereotypes and White suburban schools, participants informed me that I talked with a “country accent,” but wanted me to know when they spoke about White people, they were not speaking about me. They explained that they had not had a lot of exposure to White people and White language prior to entering the university. I said, “Except for your teachers.” Manuel responded, “But we consider you a part of us” (Focus Group, March 2007). Though uncomfortable being singled out as different from other Whites, because of my own issues associated with Whiteness and power (Frankenberg, 1993; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; McIntyre, 1997), I understood what Manuel meant. I had been at Roland with them, so I had seen more of them and their lives than the individuals they were currently encountering at SU. I include this exchange because it reinforces my perception of their tendency to equate race and class with a value judgment. This also demonstrates their ways of positioning me and using comparisons to White, middle class students as a

means of authoring selves (Holland, et. al, 1998). It is imperative to mention I do not intend this example as a way of excluding me from my own positions of power and privilege or as a way of validating my tellings of their stories. Their “seeming absolution” does not remove me from my crisis of representation. I can never fully represent another’s story (Fine, 1994; Roman, 1993; Villenas, 2000). This piece of data highlighted my complicated insider/outsider (Roman, 1993) struggle, even as I struggled to complicate subject/researcher labels throughout my study (Fine, 1994).

### **TALKING WHITE/ACTING WHITE**

From the onset of interviews, differences with White middle-class students were pointed out. The participants did not talk about “acting White” (Ogbu, 1993) where academic success was considered a White behavior. Data suggest they had determined themselves to be students, good students, long before entering the university and that was not an issue or a contradiction of identity for them. However, in casual conversation and actual word choice, the participants did point to “White” behaviors that had unintentionally crept into their ways of talking:

Monique: Well, I started it first; I was like, “Bye dude,” and now Idalia says, “Bye dude.” Or dudette. Dudette.

Holly: So where does this language come from?

Idalia: From Monique! I don’t know.

Manuel [whispered]: I hang out with a lot of White people.

Holly: C’mon you can say it; you don’t have to whisper it.

Manuel [raising his voice]: They’re like, “Oh my God, dude, seriously. No way!”

Idalia: And we're like, "Seriously dude." And they say, "OMG." And every time we're like hanging out...

Monique: Yeah, they say, "O-M-G, ha ha ha"...and "L-O-L."

Manuel: And I'm like LOL, what's that? And I noticed every time we hang out, we say, "Oh my God dude, seriously."

Monique: And I was talking to some friend at Roland, and she was like, "Why are you saying 'dude?'"

[Whole group saying "Yeah" and laughing].

Idalia: And now I say, "Like yeah," and she looked at me and said, "Why are you saying, 'Like yeah?'" And I'm like, "I don't know. I just started."

Aurelio: They, well, like Alexandra she said, "Don't talk like that!"...(Focus Group, November 2006)

They recognized what was happening; part of the focus on difference made that inevitable. They appeared to want to resist White conversational norms, but found themselves using the language anyway. The conversations with White language happened locally for these participants. The language they argued was White was a part of what they were experiencing bodily at the university. They were exposed to White students' ways of talking and eventually acquired some of those language registers. It was not necessarily a formal institutional language. Instead, it was a way of talking used by a group of students these participants envisioned as having power (Fairclough, 1995).

This was an important example of the connections between literacies and identities (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). As these young adults, either intentionally or

unintentionally learned new ways of talking, acting, and being in the world, their identities were simultaneously impacted. Ways of talking and acting were labeled “White,” and all of the connotations associated with talking White could then be included in their identity development. A simultaneous refusal and utilization of particular discursive ways of being illustrates the tensions inherent in their exposure to an apparent culture of power at the university.

When Aurelio was absent from a focus group meeting, the others chose to talk about him talking White.

Manuel: These days, [Aurelio] talks sooooo White. He says “Whatever” and “LOL” and “Yaaaay” and “Oh my God!”

Idalia: Really? I haven’t seen him in a while.

Manuel: Everything he says is like, like, like. (Focus Group, March 2007)

Certain words and phrases were associated with talking White. When participants continually heard others using them, they took note. When Aurelio returned to the following focus group meeting, he added to the conversation:

It’s so funny because they already describe me as... I don’t even know this person and I was with my other friends from high school and I was talking to them and they were like, “Are we talking to White people now?” referring to me, looking at me. I was like, “Why are y’all looking at me?” They think I talk White.

The group responded:

Manuel: You do.

Holly: He does? What does it mean to talk White?



Manuel: Like Oh my God, like totally!

Aurelio: But I'm just playing around!

Manuel: He's like "LOL!"

Aurelio: That's from the movie *White Chicks*.

Manuel: Me and Alexandra say that, but not like that.

Alex: We're not serious.

Aurelio: I'm just playing around. I don't really talk like that. (Focus Group, May 2007)

When called out by others, talking White was explained away as a joke. There were elements of resistance to the language. Learning to talk White, recognizing the tendency as well as resisting it, were a part of the navigation of this new figured world (Holland, et al, 1998). In all of the exposure to Whiteness, the impacts and refusals of new cultural norms, participants identities were (re)forming. They were learning their new college identities even as they were learning new literacies.

### **EMERGENT COLLEGE IDENTITIES AND EMERGENT DISCONNECT**

All of the previous themes point to emergent college identities. Each participant began to develop unique identities within their new figured worlds, but some themes were more universal to group members. As these new identities started to develop, there was also a simultaneous emergent disconnect with family and friends:

Monique: High school friends who are not at SU, they're out of the picture.

Alex: It's like they're not relevant anymore....It's like, I mean, there's no high school drama, there's nothing we can talk about....It's like that odd, awkward

silence until you say, talk to you later. You try to make plans but things never go through.

Monique: In high school you used to talk to them for like two or three hours on the phone, and now, it's like a minute.

Alex: It's like silence.

Holly: What does that? Why do you all not have things in common with them anymore?

Idalia: We're at the university.

Monique: We think differently now. They're not in college, and they are just working. They don't understand why we are studying.

Manuel: They ask us, "Why don't you just start working?" And we're like, "No."

(Focus Group, October 2006)

From the onset, students pointed to a disconnect with old high school connections. Just months after entering SU, high school friends were already "irrelevant." Priorities related to work and school were so divergent that a separation was immediately articulated.

University life was equated with different ways of thinking, which in turn brought about new ways of acting and changing priorities. New literacies brought about changes in identities (Holland, et al., 1998; McCarthy & Moje, 2002). This resulted in an apparent disconnect from the Eastside. Yet, in spite of this emergent disconnect, the Eastside of town, in particular the Roland neighborhood was still "their side of town." SU, even though it was their new world and had become a new epistemological space for them

(Cary, 2006), was not yet claimed as theirs. The following transcript outlines their thoughts on this transition in more detail.

Manuel: When I go to my side of town I feel so different, you know. Not that many people know that I go to college. Sometimes they're like, "What high school do you go to?" I am like, "I don't go to high school. I go to SU." And they're like, you know, it surprises them because that side of town is basically Hispanics.

Monique: And when I talk to people from Roland, I talk differently with them. It seems like that, too.

Holly: So you're switching your voices and your conversation depending on who you're around?

All: Yeah.

Monique: And what we're saying also.

Aurelio: And not only that, but like I've been to some of the football games and they have told me that, "You've changed," or "You're not the same." And I'm like, "How can you tell me that?" I'm like, "I'm still the same." They're like, "No, you just look different," or, you know, "You talk different."

Holly: So this conversation we just had where you guys would be like, "That's what we were learning in sociology" and where you would say, "Well, in psychology," and you know, "My Korean friend" and all that, you wouldn't have that conversation with people back in the neighborhood?

Idalia: No.

Monique: No.

Manuel: No, because they wouldn't understand.

Idalia: It's you can see like at SU, it's more diverse and then when you go back it's like, you kind of feel weird.

Manuel: Yeah, me too. I feel so weird like when I go like right now--

Idalia: I feel different.

Manuel: I just feel weird that, you know, they think like, "Oh, he goes to college. He..." you know. Because they have it in their heads, "Oh, well he thinks he's better than me."

Monique: You don't know what to say. And then when you do try to talk to them about SU and the life at SU, they ignore you.

Manuel: Yeah. They're like, "Shut up, College Boy. You loser." Or "Why do you go to college for?" And it's like--

Idalia: It's sometimes they see you like, "You changed, like your face." And I'm like, "How can I change? I don't see myself..."

Aurelio: Yeah, that's what they tell me. Like, "You look different."

Idalia: Or "You talk differently." I'm like, "How different? What do you mean different? I don't see myself different."

Aurelio: Yeah, that's what I tell them. (Focus Group, November 2006)

Though participants reported their own feelings of disconnect and their own rationales for why this disconnect occurred, they also spoke about their perceptions of how others positioned them (Holland, et al., 1998; Leander, 2002). Though they "feel weird" when

they return to their side of town, they still refuse to admit that fundamentally they have changed. Instead, it is others' perceptions that they have changed and this enhanced the disconnect.

Similarly, Alex spoke about a growing disconnect between friends from the Eastside and companions in the neighborhood who were also attending SU:

But for me, it's a lot different because in one of my classes I have a lot of Black kids and it's kind of weird because they'll talk to me and they expect me to be one way and so I can't, you know, I can't do that. Like they want me to be ghetto and like I'm not ghetto. I'm really not and it's kind of hard to try and relate them. Even around like my neighborhood and stuff, I can't be like that because you know... There's some kids like some that I hung out with in elementary school and stuff. And when I... when I was a little kid, I was ghetto. You know, but now like when they talk to me they talk to you like in slang and all that and it's kind of hard to keep up with that because I'm not like that anymore... Like they'll be like, "What up dude?" And not just that but they're like, "Oh you want a...?" and "Whatta ya gonna do tonight? You want to go smoke a blunt?" and all this. And I'm like, "I don't do that anymore." I can't go do that anymore. It's like I...

Yeah, I'm not that anymore. (Focus Group, December 2006)

The changing of previous identities was necessary for success at the university, but not necessarily understood by individuals in participants' lives. Data suggest that even the fundamentals of conversation impacted identity perceptions—ways of talking were equated with ways of acting, making new uses of college literacies an issue in identity

production, even though an apparently discursive event (Wortham, 2001). Additionally, these excerpts again offered a rationale for why this particular group became a group, why they chose to spend so much time together as they adjusted to college life.

Besides pointing to a growing separation from neighborhood friends and former classmates, participants also pointed to an emerging disconnect with their families. They often found it impossible to talk with their parents about their most basic questions related to university life.

Aurelio: [I]f you're stuck and you don't really know like the resources that are here and you want to tell parents what you are struggling with, then all they will tell you not to give up.

Holly: So one of the struggles is knowing...

Aurelio: What's out there....

Manuel: I guess the hardest thing for me is that I have nobody in my family. No one in my family has gone to college. I can't go to my parents and ask for help.

Aurelio: I was telling my mom about what I was going through and she didn't understand. She just said, "Well, okay."

Manuel: Yeah, I tell my mom that I got a failing report. She just didn't understand. She doesn't understand the term. Right, she'll go back and say like, "Oh that's so good!"

[Everyone laughs.] (Focus Group, November 2006)

Participants struggled mightily with communicating with their families, and cited their family members' lack of exposure to the university as a reason for this difficulty. In the

following data excerpt, I asked them how communication was going at home and they argued for a mandatory separation of college and home lives:

Idalia: You can't talk to them about things in college. They won't understand. So you just try to keep everything at home, at home and everything at college, at college.

Manuel: Yeah right. I just keep everything separate. Sometimes it's hard.

Alex: You're at SU and you are kind of representing them in a way.

Manuel: When I'm at home. It gets boring. It's like, "God, I wish I was at school." School to me, it's important but I like being with my friends. My friends are important and I like being with them. My home is my parents and my brothers and they don't really relate to me because of the age difference. My brothers are small. My mom, she doesn't understand where I'm coming from at college. It's really hard for me to relate with them because it's really not the same, you know? It's weird.

Idalia: They don't understand your homework.

Manuel: They're like, "Can you babysit?" I'm like, "Mom, I have homework." But she's like, "But can you babysit?" And I'm like, "BUT I HAVE HOMEWORK!"

Idalia: They don't understand that homework is not easy, that it's a big overload of work. It's kind of hard to explain to them. They didn't go to college so they don't understand how much work you have and how much things you have to study for. (Focus Group, March 2007)

Data highlight that a perception of school as work or homework as work was frequently an issue with family members. Participants felt with little personal knowledge about the university system, parents often were unable to understand the demands and pressures they were facing. Because participants lived either close to home or at home, this became a reason behind the college/home disconnect. Time spent at home was often frustrating; it was difficult for participants to balance home responsibility and tasks for school. The age-old refrain that parents do not understand was magnified ten-fold when they attempted to explain their dilemmas or struggles to family members.

This exchange between Aurelio and Idalia further highlighted the disconnect outlined by the others in the previous data excerpt:

Aurelio: Yeah, it's like you had to act different in your house because they don't know what you're talking about. And then at school it's like, "Oh, yeah," you interact and talk about it.

Idalia: Yeah, it is weird because then you start talking this conversation.

Aurelio: And they're like, "What?"

Idalia: Yeah.

Aurelio: It's somewhat frustrating you know. (Focus Group, December 2006)

It is imperative to note that in spite of the apparent disconnect, families were generally proud of student achievement. According to participants, their families were thrilled by their admission to the university. Directly connected to the lack of understanding of the demands of college, students also reported persistent pressure from families to succeed. As such, in addition to not being able to communicate with their families about certain



aspects of life at SU, participants also cited pressure from family members as a common occurrence:

Idalia: You have a lot of pressure from everybody.

Aurelio: That is true.

Idalia: Yeah, you have a lot of pressure not just from your family, but everybody who knows you. They expect you to be getting like good grades and you're like, "Hello, college is not like high school."

Manuel: They don't understand that though.

Idalia: Yeah.

Holly: Who's "they?" Who is the "they" that you speak about?

Manuel: Parents, family, who have never been in college before...

Idalia: And then you get a bad grade and they're like, "What happened?" (Focus Group, December 2006)

Thus, home lives became increasingly difficult to negotiate. There was an inability to explain the daily issues they struggled with at SU, along with a pressure to succeed. The new literacies they were acquiring, while helping them to better mediate their new figured world (Bakhtin, 1986; Holquist, 1990), did not translate to new ways of explaining their lives to their families.

## **Summary**

Participants identified many identity (re)constructions throughout their first year at SU. As they negotiated their early college literacies, they began to view themselves

and one another in light of their new learning. They negotiated ever-changing definitions of diversity and these constant negotiations inadvertently let do (re)positionings of self and group based on their new, emergent understandings. At the same time, participants developed deep connections with one another. All of this culminated in new, emergent college identities and a subsequent disconnect from home and neighborhood.

### **Identities and Academic Literacies**

An important subquestion for this study was: How are students' identity constructions related to the acquisition of academic literacies? Data suggest that students' attempts at negotiating the figured world of the university brought about a need to grasp various academic literacies, as these are mediating devices in identity construction, as well as necessary tools for navigating the university itself (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland, et al., 1998; Holquist, 1990). Initially, the students were saturated with new, unfamiliar information. They reported feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of the university. When professors instructed them to buy "bluebooks" for their exams, Manuel and Monique said they just followed the crowd to the bookstore, while Alex had to "google it" to see what a bluebook was. Eventually they began to maneuver in and out of the day-to-day activities of the university and figured out the rudimentary workings of attending class, studying, and socializing.

## **PREDICTABLE CHALLENGES**

Some of participants' issues with acquiring the various literacies of the university seemed fairly predictable, based on my understandings of transition studies (Beronsky and Kuk, 2000; Choy, Horn, Nuñez, and Chen, 2000; Hjortshoj, 2001) studies of Latino/a college attendance (Kirst, 2004; MacDonald, 2004; Valle, 2007), and much of the literature on detracking (Mehan, et al., 1996; Oakes, 2005; Rubin, 2006; Welner & Burris, 2006). This conclusion was also based anecdotally on my own college experience, along with accounts of friends, family, former, and current students. These are the issues, more often than not, that are connected with adjusting to the figured world of the university. These are academic literacies that involve much more than reading and writing (Zamel & Spack, 1998). To learn to read and write "appropriately" for various content areas and to succeed in various subjects in various departments across campus requires a grasp of imbedded skills and discourses inherent in the university system (Bizzell, 2003; Elbow, 1998; Kutz, 1998; Rose, 1998). Additionally, these are the more predictable struggles—ones that high school faculty, college preparation programs, and university transition programs seek to teach students about.

Participants had started learning some of these literacies in high school in their Advanced Placement courses and as part of the AVID curriculum, and they were reinforced by similar programs and study skills courses offered to these students at SU because of their socioeconomic backgrounds. These literacies included: acquiring time management skills, learning the ways of TAs and professors, learning stress, and locating necessary resources.

## **Time Management and Studying Smarter**

From the onset of the school year, references to a need to learn time management were too numerous to count.

Idalia: Before I went to college, I thought high school was hard. But once you get to college you realize high school was easy.

Manuel: Yeah. It's more time management. You have a lot of free time.

Sometimes I don't feel like studying and I see students reading and studying during the passing periods... and I'm like, "Wow!"

Monique: I thought I would have so much free time and I'd find a job. But now the only reason I don't have a job is because of the work I do at school. (Focus Group, October 2006)

Time management was an on-going issue for students. They also had struggles learning to study more like college students. Monique ultimately termed this "studying smarter" (Focus Group, December 2006). This term was borne from discussions like the following:

Monique: Okay, how I studied, I would get portions and just read certain things that the teacher talked about most and just review that over and over. And the things that the teacher didn't talk about a lot, don't worry about it, but maybe just over it once or twice. But the things that she talked about most, review it over and over. I studied everything and no, it was too much and I got really low grade. I got like a 25...

Aurelio: Like what are you making now?

Monique: But I'm studying less time.

Manuel: So you're only like studying the stuff you need really.

Monique: Yeah. (Focus Group, December 2006)

Part of learning time management skills involved getting more from study time.

Participants learned how to have better quality study sessions, when initially some felt studying longer meant better retention. Many students encounter this same difficulty when they first begin navigating university life. These appeared to be learned through trial and error—in the daily navigations of the university's systems.

### **Understanding What Professors Want: “Crawl Before You Walk”**

Even with incredibly detailed syllabi and professors who attempted to lay out expectations, students still participated in the ritual of understanding what a professor wants based on the first assignment. To use Manuel's analogy, dealing with professor expectations is a gradual process.

I know what's expected of me and what's not, you know. I just...I had to do really bad at first. Well on my first test I didn't do so great. My second test, it showed improvements and, you know, I'm about to take my third test this coming week. And I just hope it shows more improvement, and that's how I basically deal with expectations because you have to learn to crawl before you learn how to walk. Manuel (Individual Interview, November 2006)

Professor expectations were new academic literacies, and participants knew how well they were acquiring them, based on the grades they received on assignments. Academic literacies are not uniform. They differ from discipline to discipline and classroom to

classroom (McCarthy, 1987). Participants quickly recognized that each professor, class and discipline was unique and required a unique understanding if they wanted to be successful.

Monique: I guess knowing more people and knowing the professor more and how he or she grades. It got us more comfortable.

Aurelio: Yeah, it got like I got my grade and I'd seen the grade after the first test and you see what you get. And you'll know what you need to study or improve on and what to do for example for studying groups or read more or analyze the chapter more. It's like, I think I based it on like the first test because I failed.

(Focus Group, December 2006)

In addition to learning from returned assignments and tests, participants attempted to determine what professors and TAs wanted, and thus, better navigate this new figured world, by communicating directly with them.

Manuel: Also the TAs help a lot. Some of the TAs don't care I don't think though. You go to office hours and they say, "I'm not going to give you the answers." Hey, I'm not asking for answers, I'm asking for help. They always think you are asking for answers.

Monique: I don't like going to TAs; I like going to the professor.

Manuel: Yeah, they know....

Holly: So do you notice that you have to communicate differently with professors at UT than you did with your teachers in high school?

All: Yeeeeesssssss.

Manuel: You can't just approach them like you know them.

Monique: If it's a small class, that's different.

Holly: So if you were to approach a professor? How do you do that?

Manuel: I shake their hand and introduce myself.

Idalia: I went to my chemistry professor again yesterday. I go almost every day.

And I told her, I need help on my chemistry. It's not really the same as you would in high school.

Manuel: In biology, we have a routine we have to follow when we need help. We have to say our last name, our first name, and bio 301. It's not like you can just say, "Help please!"

Monique: And you have to have your SU ID when you are setting up an appointment or asking for help so they will know who you are.

Alex: It's like we're numbers, not people.

Holly: So when you talk to your professors, how do you know how? Where did you learn that?

Alex: You just do it and learn. You just have to have guts. You get up and do it.

Idalia: That's how you learn. I just needed help, and I knew I needed it now, so I just went.

Manuel: My rhetoric teacher was a high school teacher for a while, and I know how to approach her because I know she was a high school teacher, but my other professors, it's different. (Focus Group, October 2006)

Communicating with professors and teaching assistants was a learned skill, though a necessary one. Like expectations for assignments, the appropriate expectations changed by professor or by course. Participants each had a unique individual approach for dealing with professors, but all recognized a need to behave and/or speak in a certain way when dealing with authority figures. This was an acquired academic literacy, just as academic reading and writing were (Bizzell, 2003; Zamel & Spack, 1998). In order to be able to identify as a successful student, participants must learn to use the appropriate tools for working with faculty. They were aware of their positions as students, and part of authorship in this space involved learning to deal with professors and TAs (Holland, et al., 1998; Holquist, 1990; Lachicotte, 2002; Lutrell and Parker, 2001; Wortham, 2004). Though participants often spoke about new academic literacies being difficult to acquire, in our conversations they did not appear to challenge this notion or point to any personal issues with the inherent power differential at the university.

### **Learning Stress**

All of this learning of new ways of doing and being led to another point. Participants appeared to be learning stress (how to be stressed and how to deal with stress) as they navigated the university. Talking about stress was a part of their new literacies. For instance, when I asked how they had changed since arriving at the university, they responded:

Monique: I'm more stressful.

Alex: More stressed out.

Monique: Right, stressed out. (Focus Group, October 2006)



This particular exchange was amusing because Monique knew she was stressed, but the concept was so new to her, she did not even have the “correct” phrasing to explain herself. Therefore, Alex felt the need to step in and assist her in the commentary. Additionally, when I asked if this was how they pictured the university prior to arrival, they explained:

Aurelio: I did see myself at a university but not like super-stressed. Like now, like everything together. Like all my classes.

Idalia: I saw myself as going to a university, but I really didn't see like the roles of the college student. I didn't know like what it takes to be a college student.

Aurelio: Just like last night, today, I went to sleep at six in the morning. Just working on a project in which I am going to turn in. It's like a project-slash-exam.

I am not going to turn it because I'm not finished. (Focus Group, November 2006)

In this excerpt, the details of stress and the stressful college lifestyle were laid out. Long hours, new values, and other issues associated with college led to new ways of knowing, being, and talking about oneself. College, infinitely more difficult than high school, led to a new ways of voicing new experiences associated with stress. Data highlight that learning new academic literacies was connected with their evolving personal identity constructions as students. Part of learning to deal with stress, of learning study skills, and of dealing with professor expectations was learning about the resources the university had to offer.

## Resources

Participants quickly learned what resources were available to them at the university, though not all were always willing to utilize them. At Roland, a fundamental part of their education had been learning about available resources, and as teachers, we sought to let them know they should always use what was available to them. As I spoke with them at length about the resources available to them at the university, the skill of locating resources appeared to translate well into university life. Participants even commented that some of their university resources reminded them of AVID and other tutoring services that were available to them at Roland. I asked them where they went for help when they needed it:

Manuel: There are a lot of places.

Monique: I go to the undergraduate writing center for writing. For math, I go to my professor.

Manuel: And the J-- Learning Center.

Monique: Oh yeah, I forgot about J--.

Idalia: Tutoring.

Monique: I'm in this program... They tell you if you go to J-- tutoring, that you have twenty five tutoring credits. That's twenty five hours of tutoring a semester. They tell us about study groups and other stuff too...

Alex: I don't like using any of it. Part of the way I was raised, was that if I need help, I am weak. In my family, you look weak, you're dead. Military.

Manuel: What I do is just like do it and give it to the teacher and my teacher always gives it back to us and we can revise it. That's when I go and get help.

Alex: I didn't even like people revising my paper. (Focus Group, October 2006)

With the exception of Alex (always contentious about using her resources), participants were able to point to numerous resources offered by the university. They also looked to people as resources. They spoke of talking to other students and peer advisors in order to learn the details of the university system. In addition, their close-knit group became a readily available resource, "Like Professor -----, I'm telling them she's a good teacher. And then I told Idalia, I'm going to take sociology so she's like, 'Oh you should get this professor.' Even between us, we help each other...." Manuel (Focus Group, December 2006).

Additionally, they were well-versed in the variety of resources available to them. The knowledge of available resources was an easily acquired academic literacy, but the use of resources was still only sketchily discussed in focus group conversations. It was not always clear how often resources were being used, or how efficiently. A knowledge of the existence of resources did not necessarily translate to academic success for all participants.

The predictable challenges of university life were generally met with good humor and a willingness to try and succeed. Students experienced the predictable evolution of student selves as they learned the differences in the figured world of high school and university (Holland, et al., 1998). Participants were exposed to a variety of new literacies, both academic and otherwise. These mediating devices, at work within the cultural world

of the university (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland, et al., 1998; Holquist, 1990), became necessities for constructing successful student identities at the university level. Data suggest that these predictable challenges were not difficult for students to identify and some had even been identified prior to entrance at SU. Preparation was possible and resources were available, though not always utilized. This makes me think that the unpredictable challenges participants faced at the university level might have overshadowed the predictable ones, making a construction of the “successful student identity,” a particularly difficult one for these young adults.

#### **UNPREDICTABLE CHALLENGES**

Not as typical as the resources outlined above, the students in this study pointed increasingly to a need to identify with more privileged individuals on the campus. Data suggest a need to find solidarity with students who were first viewed as very different from them. This solidarity, mentioned mainly in the ideas that a) all college students struggle with academics, and b) all college students are poor, became a necessary factor for survival at SU. For these students, at times it was as important as study skills for navigating this new world; their positionings at SU often seemed to hinge on how they chose to position others and conversely, how others chose to position them (Holland, et al., 1998; Leander, 2002).

Initially, as I began to collect data, conversations with these students regularly returned to a focus on difference between themselves and their classmates at SU. However, when I studied the conversations in order, data suggested that a continuous focus on difference was difficult for participants to maintain while struggling with their

both their emerging individual and group identities. For example, they chose at times to temper their portrayals of difference, in particular with White middle and upper class students, with instances of solidarity with these very students. They appeared to find it necessary to recognize that the cultural world of the university causes everyone to struggle, though struggle differently. As mentioned previously, there were classmates who were labeled as “better prepared” because of background; this was highlighted in great detail, but at times those details were strategically overlooked. Based on data collected, I have come to view this as a survival skill, along with their subsequent (but frequent) mentioning that college students, in spite of being from varying degrees of privilege all enter the university and become “poor students.” In this section, I have highlighted portions of data that demonstrate this concept. Data suggest, that when necessary, participants focused less on the money students were born into and more about the cash they physically had access to. At first, this seemed an apparent contradiction to all the participants had outlined about difference, but on deeper inspection, this data highlighted the fluid nature of their identities and the constant (re)negotiations they were engaged in as they learned their new cultural world (Holland, et. al, 1998; Urrieta, 2007).

### **Solidarity: All College Students Struggle**

The previous section outlined struggles I found to be more “typical” in early college experiences. Data appear to demonstrate that participants also found certain struggles to be more widespread and in conversation they often focused on these universal academic struggles. When I asked them if they thought other students were struggling too, they responded:

[Loud agreement from all]: Yeah, yeah! Everyone!

Holly: What makes y'all know that? How can you tell?

Monique: They tell us.

Manuel: We talk. We hear it.

Alex: You just see it on their faces.

Monique: You see people waking up at six in the morning to study before a test and you ask if they are ready and they're like "No."

[All pointing at Monique and laughing.]

Manuel: Idalia was like, "Monique woke up at six this morning and started studying and doing her homework!"

[Everyone laughing.]

Monique: Quuuuuuuuuuu! [Laughing] (Focus Group, October 2006)

In this conversation, there was a global reference to the people around campus and then a definite link to someone in the group. Similarities were reinforced. It appeared that, when necessary, they chose to gloss over differences. I noted this early in an analytic memo and chose to bring it up in discussion (Field Notes, November, 12, 2006). When I asked them why they sometimes chose to speak about difference and sometimes chose to look for commonalities, they answered:

Idalia: Because everybody doesn't know everything.

Manuel: Because we all go to the same school, same class.

Idalia: Yeah, and we're like if we made it here it must be okay. Then they don't know everything and sometimes they need something so they ask you. And sometimes you need something so you ask them. So you kind of help each other.  
(Focus Group, December 2006)

Thus, data suggest that students learned the institutional discourse of acceptance. They had earned their place at SU; they had been accepted so they belonged. Participants began placing themselves in the same situations as classmates, adopting the discourse of school as the great equalizer (Fairclough, 1995; Cary, 2006).

Part of their on-going identity transformations was a need to find their place at SU. Through connections with classmates, they began to carve out this place (position). While their group provided a figurative shelter when necessary, locating themselves in the larger figured world of SU was an acquired skill. By remembering that they were admitted to SU just like other students were, their positions as college students became firmer. It reminded them of their abilities and strengths, as did other students needing their assistance. There was agency in such remembrances; there were improvisations highlighted in these discursive productions (Holland, et al., 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001; Urrieta, 2007). Data highlight that through these discussions, students chose to figuratively situate themselves in close proximity to other students as a means of determining their own positions, not merely accepting the positions they assumed were afforded them by others; these improvisations can be viewed as agentic choices.

## **Solidarity: All College Students are Poor**

After reading through transcripts, I asked the students about class issues. I wondered about their seeming focus on economics. When they began talking about it, they erased some of the earlier distinctions: “It’s not war of economics because they’re like poor too and so it seems like we just hang...we’re more connected than other people” Manuel (Focus Group, December 2006). Additionally, they returned to their previous examples of issues of class:

Manuel: Well, you can if there’s like girls in class talking about, “Oh, I’m going to my dad’s yacht this weekend.”

Idalia: Yeah, see that’s what--

[Everyone talking at once].

Aurelio: One of my friends, she invited me over to Puerto Vallarta, because they have like a yacht too. They’re like, “Are you going to that party?” I’m like, “Uh.” (Focus Group, November 2006)

This suggests that conversations and difference worked to position them in particular ways. The cultural world of the university, not immune to positions of power, could have been the last word. However, this was a time when participants improvised—where they choose to look for similarities in spite of glaring difference (Holland, et al, 1998).

Monique: The thing I like about here is that everybody’s always like in pajamas or sweatpants--

Aurelio: And they don’t care.

Idalia: They don’t care what you wear here.



Aurelio: I mean like, they're here for a reason and it's to get educated...

Monique: I knew I was going to be running into like more rich people, but I didn't know... Yeah. I knew I wasn't rich.

Idalia: Oh really? I'm like, who cares.

Manuel: Yeah right. I mean we're going to the same schools, with the same education.

Idalia: Yeah. I'm like what matters is, because I mean maybe their parents might be rich or whatever, but they're not. So they have to gain it themselves. Or maybe they are because probably they have inheritance.

Monique: I just kept in my mind college people are poor. College students are poor. That's what I always kept in my mind. (Focus Group, November 2006)

There was an acknowledgement of class difference, highlighted in local discourse practices, but an institutional discourse of education as the great equalizer (Cary, 2006; Foucault, 1977) was apparent. The "same school" and the "same education" were equated with the same experience. Their backgrounds were left in the background while they chose to foreground their current experiences, ones in which they found connections to other students on campus.

Similarly, in light of disconnect with neighborhood and families, they felt a need to look for connections to people at SU. As their college identities thickened (Holland & Lave, 2001; Wortham, 2003), they turned to classmates for understanding:

Manuel: It's just my attitude because, you know, people like expect something from me here and totally different at SU.

Idalia: But sometimes like if you are with people who go to the same or like enter in the same school or something just in college or something. You can talk more to them than someone...they can understand you better because if you just talk to somebody they're like, "What are you talking about?" They don't understand you.

Manuel: Like my mom, I mean, she doesn't understand how like college works and stuff like that just because of the simple fact she didn't go to college or like have an education. So sometimes I try to explain to her and she's like, "Yeah." And this is a bad thing I'm trying to explain to her and she's like, "Oh good job." And I'm like, "It's not good, you know, it's I'm doing bad." (Focus Group, December 2007)

Earlier portions of data suggested an emergent disconnect with family and friends as participants participated more in the figured world of the university. In these conversations, it appeared that the proverbial flip side of the "emergent disconnect theory" coin was an "emergent connection" to classmates. These White or "blonde-haired" students with their "Prada purses" at times understood participants' newer identities and developing literacies better than their friends and family (Focus Group, October 2006).

Solidarity became a necessary part of their college experiences. Students improvised by locating these similarities. They chose to author themselves as students. A focus on commonalities, not differences, though a switch from the start of the school year, was an agentic choice (Holland, et al., 1998).

## **LIVING AT HOME VERSUS LIVING ON CAMPUS: “THEIR PRIORITIES AFFECTING YOURS”**

While many students who attend SU grew up in the same city as participants, these participants maintained exceptionally strong ties to home. Some went home weekly, others lived at home. These situations, while typical for members of the group, do not seem indicative of early college for a majority of students at SU. The only two in student housing, Idalia and Monique lived together on campus, but returned home at least once a week if not every weekend. Their families did not visit campus regularly. In the future, with the exception of Idalia, all hope to change their living arrangements. Idalia will be the only student on campus this fall. Monique will move back home because of financial constraints. Manuel and Alexandra will postpone decisions to move out until they return to SU in the spring. Aurelio will live at home in the fall but hopes to study abroad in the spring.

Early in the first semester, Manuel commented that the worst part of living off campus was a lack of access to resources at SU. The connection between predictable and unpredictable challenges is apparent in many conversations. This theme continued throughout the semester:

Idalia: I like living on campus. It's more convenient...

Alex: Yeah, my mom's not really that bad, it's just I think it would be better to be at school here.

Idalia: Yeah, I can't live at home.

Holly: I think with you two, you are in unique situations.

Manuel: That's what I told her, there are a lot of grownups in your house.

Alex: Yeah, I have unique issues. My grandmother has this thing. We don't have central air, so she says it [keeping the door open] helps the air circulate, even though it doesn't. Alright grandma, whatever.

Idalia: See, I can't live at home. It's just, like that...I just feel like in college I get more things done in my dorm room than at home. At home... I can't do things at home. I get distracted. (Focus Group, March 2007)

When I asked about their second semester, living at home versus living on campus was still a real issue for participants.

Monique: This semester was waaaay better.

Manuel: I'll be honest, not really. Living at home there were just too many distractions....I have small little brothers and it's such a distraction because my mom counts on me to take care of them and I hate that....

Alex: Kind of the same thing. I live at home and I don't have like little kids, but I do have everybody else....

Manuel: She was telling me about that. She says, "Yeah, I can't wait to move out!"

Alex: Yeah, I try to do my own thing, but at the same time, I'm the youngest in the house and so they kind of feel I'm younger and they make me do a lot more stuff than before. Every five minutes it's like, "Alex, go do this..."

Manuel: I hear that with babysitting.

Alex: And they just like interrupt when I'm trying to study. At that point I don't even want to study no more if they're just going to call me in five minutes.

Manuel: I think it would be better if you were with a group of people who were going to school with you and seeing them study would make you, like want to study more.

Aurelio: Sort of like their priorities affecting yours...

Manuel and Alex: Yeah, yeah. (Focus Group, May 2007)

Aurelio, though speaking about the priorities of other students positively affecting those who live on campus, eloquently phrased both sides and the difficulty with living at home. These participants have strong family ties and when at home, their families' priorities affect theirs. At times, it can be argued that their families' priorities are theirs. When on campus, Idalia was able to shift her priorities without receiving any sort of grief about it. Manuel and Alex were rarely on campus and their priorities were consistently affected by those around them. When I asked what changes they would make next year in order to improve their grades, Manuel did not hesitate, "Move out!" (Focus Group, May 2007)

Data highlight that at times these unpredictable challenges made for insurmountable academic hurdles. While there were means and methods that could possibly prepare participants for the predictable struggles of the university, the unpredictable struggles were individualized and perhaps impossible to predict.

## **Summary**

I chose to categorize the acquisition of academic literacies into predictable and unpredictable challenges at the university. Data suggest that both were part of participants' changing identity constructions—those related to self, school, and home.

Academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998), as mediating devices for identity development in the figured world of the university, became ways for students to be positioned at the university as well as position themselves. While at times difficult to maneuver, academic literacies were borrowed as tools of improvisation and authoring selves, and thus assisted participants in attempting agency (Holland, et al., 1998).

### **Reflections on Secondary Schooling**

Framed in a theory of identities in practice, it appears that participants' lives and literacies changed in dramatic ways as they entered and adapted to the figured world of the university. As such, I now highlight my analysis of a second subquestion: In light of students' identity constructions, how do they view their secondary schooling experiences? I found that with new exposure came new identity constructions; participants learned about new resources, adapted to new literacies, all in an attempt to navigate the figured world of the university (Holland, et al., 1998). Because their backgrounds as urban-schooled students of color were an important foundation for this study, I found it vital to look at students' perceptions of their previous schooling through their new perspectives as they participated in university life. It seemed that portrayals of their past changed as their (cultural) worldviews were altered by participation in this new figured world (Holland, et al., 1998).

#### **THE CONTRADICTION: PREPARED AND UNDER-PREPARED**

A seeming contradiction, as participants reflected on their secondary school experiences, they argued they were both under-prepared and prepared for the rigors of

university life. In some academic subjects they felt prepared; they felt they had a grasp on particular skills. However, there were also instances where they felt their secondary education to be sorely lacking.

Monique: I hear a lot of SU students say, “I’m not going to class tomorrow. I’m just going to go over here and drink.” I hear a lot of students saying that.

Alex: And they still pass!

Monique: Yeah, they still pass!

Manuel: Well, because they went to good schools, and they are prepared, and they know how to study. They know how to manage their time.

Alex: I think a Roland student is just unprepared.

Monique: That’s why I’m freaking out. I’m just like...

Alex: They know how to balance and have fun. They know what to expect so they know how far they can take it. (Focus Group, October 2006)

In this first focus group interview, data suggest that participants were still struggling with the initial adjustment to university. They felt overwhelmed by the requirements at the university and as a result, considered all of the ways in which their preparation had been lacking. They pointed to students who were having fun and learning, but did not seem to think they yet had the same time management skills those students did. The local occurrence of watching these students behave in particular ways was juxtaposed with institutional and societal discourses of preparedness (Fairclough, 1995). Participants viewed these classmates as having balanced lives, because of a perceived exposure to particular academic literacies at the high school level.

I asked students if they felt under-prepared in every subject area. They stated that in some subjects, they were more prepared than others.

Alex: Definitely the writing. I was prepared.

Manuel: Yeah, English, I was prepared.

Alex: And I think it shows because there are a lot more [Roland] people in remedial math and science classes than there are in writing. They focus more on writing than they do in math and science.

Monique: I never had a math and science teacher who was really good. (Focus Group, October 2006)

It was not surprising that participants pointed out a subject differentiation at Roland. They had upwards of nine science teachers before they left high school, and finished out physics with a permanent substitute. The math department experienced less fluctuation, but still more than many schools might encounter. In contrast the English and Social Studies departments had very little turnover and a strong commitment to vertical planning and preparing students for academic life after high school. Thus, an apparent contradiction was actually a multi-faceted explanation of their urban school experiences. Their current positions and ability to author themselves in this space was affected by their participation in other figured worlds, both past and present. Previous participation in the figured world of an urban high school shifted in light of current understandings, just as the students themselves were shifting from being Roland High School students to State University students (Holland, et al., 1998).



## NEW EXPERIENCES AND CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Participants pointed to their Roland High School experience as isolated; they frequently mentioned a lack of exposure to people who were not Latino/a or African American and who were not poor. SU eventually came to be viewed as more diverse than Roland:

Monique: I was always isolated at Roland. I didn't really know all the cultures, just Hispanic culture mainly. But here, I mean I'm learning about Arabian Night. They have like Arabian Night.

Aurelio: Oh, that was fun.

Monique: They have like Asian night. They have Tae Kwon Do and all these different foods, like every night at the dorm... It's the city within the city.

Manuel: Yeah. It's like SU is its own little city, you know, SU City. (Focus Group, November 2006)

The diversity at SU made it "really obvious that we are Hispanic" Alex (Focus Group, March 2007). New faces, cultures, and literacies highlighted how little they had been exposed to prior to attending SU, even though it was less than six miles from the campus.

Data suggest that participants' experiences at Roland were increasingly viewed as insulated. Because they had little exposure to difference, a somewhat mythical portrayal of a White suburban school arose as a standard for constant comparison. When students chose to give this school a name, they always said "Westforest," a school on the far Westside of town. None of the participants had ever been to Westforest, nor did they know anyone who had attended the school prior to their enrollment at SU. However,

Westforest would have been the yin to their yang in the local media. Stories of Westforest in the local paper and on the local TV news usually concerned high test scores, exemplary ratings, and championship football teams.

The conversations about Westforest began in high school. I distinctly remember students asking in AVID and AP English, “What are they learning at Westforest?” They would often comment that they wanted to learn what the “Westforest kids” were learning so that they would one day be able to compete. Though I remember these conversations as occasional, upon arrival at SU, they seemed to be very frequent, which is a logical conclusion considering the number of Westforest students at SU or the large numbers of students from predominately White, middle class suburban schools more generally.

The perceptions and conversations of schools like Westforest also impacted participant perceptions of Roland. Less than six months after graduating, they already noted dramatic changes in the atmosphere at Roland. In actuality, Roland probably had not changed much in that time, but instead it was the participants themselves who were experiencing dramatic changes:

Manuel: I think it’s because where Roland is. It’s such minorities. I went back to Roland and it’s all thuggish. It seems like we were the last class that were more mature and ready. When we went back, we were like, what happened? Now there are more thugs and gangs.

Monique: The population is different. There are more gangs.

Idalia: My little sister is in middle school and she has to be careful about what colors she wears.

Alex: I always thought Roland was in a nice part of town. I didn't know any different.

Monique: I just compare Roland to Westforest.

Manuel: Yeah, me too. I just don't... Roland is not a bad school because we wouldn't be at SU if it was an all-bad school.

Alex: If we had moved to Westforest, we wouldn't be at SU. Not with the way we studied.

Manuel: I guess at Roland, we focus too much on how to get students out of there, rather than on what we learn. (Focus Group, October 2006)

These participants had conversations about physically returning to their high school and their renewed perceptions of Roland based on their current local experiences. Through this conversation, it was apparent that the participants themselves had adopted some societal discourses about race, class, and inequity. They appeared to point to Roland being a "minority" school as the reason for its inadequacies, again highlighting the discursive reproduction of value judgments they often claimed to disagree with (Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1977).

This conversation highlighted their tendency to compare Roland to Westforest in spite of having never seen the school. They also acknowledged that their skills would not have gotten them as far in Westforest. The concept of a variety of cultures at SU, previously outlined, was brought up again, but connected to Westforest:

Idalia: Well now that I'm at SU I feel like I've experienced more culture than I did at Roland because back then, over there, we were stuck with like two cultures.

Monique: It's like I'm in the Westforest High School. (Focus Group, November 2006)

Aurelio: The one thing that I don't tell some of my friends, okay they did go to a private school right and they talk about it. But like they try to put public schools down and that's what I don't like. I came from one and I'm here, you know so why are you trying to put it down.

Alex: I think it's more competitive when you're high school because you kind of don't...you live where...you're with your group and then you see like these other kids from like Westforest and stuff and you're like, "Oh, I got to beat them"....

Idalia: I met a girl from Westforest. She doesn't know where Roland is. (Focus Group, December 2006)

Westforest was mentioned as one of the new cultures SU had exposed participants to. Monique went as far as to claim that her experiences at SU were equivalent to experiencing secondary school at Westforest because of the people she was now exposed to. At the same time, Westforest was also listed as a standard of competition. In sharp contrast, while they focused heavily on Westforest as a way to position themselves, the Westforest student Idalia met was not even aware of Roland's existence.

### **PERCEPTIONS, POSITIONINGS, AND THE INTERNALIZATION OF DISCOURSES**

One of the most difficult things for participants as they experienced identity changes at the university was the "common knowledge" of Roland High School. The constant coverage of the school's turmoil, sensationalized both locally and in the national media, often gave people a very specific (thought not necessarily well-informed) opinion

of Roland. Added to this was the fact that students were attending college less than six miles from Roland, which increased the probability of encountering people at SU who had heard of and/or read about the school. Though now at college, faculty, staff, and students at SU still had opinions about Roland High School, and as such, opinions of Roland students themselves:

Manuel: Yeah. Like they'll say, "Oh, what high school did you come from?"  
"Roland." "Oh I heard about that school."

Aurelio: Yeah, my friend in psychology...she said every time we had a football game she would have to walk with some other friends because she was afraid of us. And she's like, "You're from Roland?" She jumped, like a little bit she jumped. (Focus Group, November 2006)

Perhaps the most intense example of dealing with pre-existing perceptions came from an encounter between Manuel and his advisor. He explained it this way:

So I was in my advisor's office, you know, because I had to go in there. I had told him I was having problems with my Bio class. And he's like, "Oh well, I'm assuming you do since you're from Roland, right?" I was like, "Yeah, I'm from Roland, but..." I just didn't have the courage to say, "But what about if I'm from Roland or not?" I didn't say nothing. I wanted to punch the guy or something, but I can't do that. And he's like, "But don't get me wrong. There's plenty of help at SU that you can go to." I said, "I know that." He was talking to me like I was special ed. He gave me all of these brochures and information as if I didn't know. I was like, "Sir, I've been here for a semester. I think I know what I need to do."

Then he told me about something at the SSB, something for mental health. As if I have problems and stuff. I was like, “Do you think I’m crazy or something? I mean, what’s wrong with me?” He said, “Just in case you need it. We have problems at SU too and they can help you out a lot. It’s open 24 hours and there’s a phone line.” So, I was like, “Okay.” (Focus Group, March 2007)

Manuel approached his advisor, which demonstrated his comprehension of particular academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998). He was failing biology and chose to locate a resource. However, upon speaking with the man, Manuel was alarmed by the advisor’s view that he knew something about his education because of his secondhand knowledge of Roland High School. This advisor also explained to Manuel that he understood his situation because his own children attend school in the same district. However, Manuel was quick to inform me that the school the advisor’s children attend is also attended by the governor’s children and boasted having graduated two daughters of a President of the United States. The advisor being so insistent in his positioning of Manuel as a Roland student, coupled with his suggestion that Manuel needed help, was more than he was willing to digest at the time. The others in the group were in firm agreement with Manuel’s anger and offered him support throughout the discussion. Alex stated that the counselor “was lucky” he was not “her advisor” (Focus Group, March 2007).

In light of Manuel’s comments, I then asked about a previous conversation in which they had declared they were under-prepared for SU. I wondered why it bothered them when someone else suggested it. I wondered why Manuel opted to refuse the suggestions offered, though not forcefully or to the advisor himself.

Manuel: Because it's not always like that. Just because you come from that kind of school doesn't mean that you are not going to succeed at SU...They just assume that just because I come from Roland I don't know as much as if I come from Westforest or other good schools.

Idalia: I mean, we had some teachers who were, like, really good.

Holly: Do you think your entire education at Roland was inferior?

All: No.

Holly: Do you think other people see it that way?

All: Yes.

Alex: Because there were good classes and everything at Roland. And you had to pull some stuff out of it. I don't know why it's considered bad or like worse if you didn't go somewhere else.

Manuel: The curriculum I think is like the same in all schools, you know, the faculty and teachers try and teach us the same things. It's just that, I guess, the ethnicities, you know Black and Hispanic, the kind of school Roland is, so we don't strive. The teachers, they're there. They can teach you something. But we choose not to. I guess because all our lives we have been knowing, or I guess people have been telling us, you know, just because we are Hispanics, Mexicans or whatever and Blacks, we can't succeed. But we can be better than Westforest but I think we choose not to because of that.

Alex: Yeah, and they tell us to succeed even though we're minorities. But then again, they're like, "Well, we can help you." It's like, you want me to be

something, you say I can do it, but then what's the point if you say I need mental help?

Manuel: They make us feel inferior.

Alex: Yeah.

Idalia: Oh, that's bad. (Focus Group, March 2007)

Again, data suggest that a local instance brought out deep-rooted feelings of responding to societal discourses about race and success (Fairclough, 1995; Rogers, 2004). The counselor became an example of people who claimed they wanted Roland students to succeed but then did not help participants in ways they actually felt to be helpful. The conversation with the advisor was indicative of a widely held institutional and societal belief about urban-schooled students that participants have unwittingly internalized themselves—urban-schooled students are under-prepared for the rigors of university life.

Perhaps the most fascinating (and disturbing) portion of this transcript is the realization that on some level, these students have internalized these ideas even as they try to resist them. They spoke about themselves as minorities and their former classmates' refusals to be successful as related to race and class. As part of educational institutions and members of society, their exposure to such discourses has been intense. In spite of this, they still focused on authoring themselves in very specific ways at SU, but encountered great resistance in others' widely held beliefs about their previous education and its impact on their positions at SU (Holland, et al, 1998).



## **ROLAND STUDENTS WHO MAKE IT**

Through all of the conversations throughout the school year, a very concrete identity, explained as a goal, was at the forefront of Roland/SU discussions and comparisons. Participants, along with their former classmates from Roland, continued to see acceptance to SU as a tremendous accomplishment:

Holly: What do you think the perception was at Roland of the kids who go to SU? Was that the pinnacle?

Manuel: I looked up to them.

Monique: Yeah, it really was because now when I talk to a few people at Roland and I'm like, "I'm going to SU." They're like, "Wow! That's like the best school in Texas. It's like the Harvard of the South." And I think, "Yeah, it's pretty cool."

(Focus Group, May 2007)

Because of the school's place on a pedestal, participants were continually pointing out other Roland students who were attending SU. A sighting of another student from their high school was cause for discussion.

Manuel: Well, now that I notice, there's a lot of Roland students here at SU.

Monique: In BESO...I'm in the club BESO, the organization, and half of them are Roland students.

Idalia: And yesterday, or the day before yesterday, we were sitting at K---- and there was this guy who Monique said was from Roland.

Monique: Yeah, some guys that were sitting right beside us during cafeteria...yeah, he was Mexican...Yeah, he was from Roland. I knew him for sure. (Focus Group, November 2006)

On the heels of the lists of students still attending Roland, students were usually able to point to Roland students who had not succeeded and had dropped out. As a result, they spoke of a conscious choice to be a particular kind of Roland student:

Monique: I know with Roland, when we went to Roland today I felt weird. I'm like, "Wow, I know SU now and Roland..."

Manuel: But you know it's like we are going to be Roland students who make it or who don't. And I want to be one of the Roland students who does make it.

Monique: Yeah like Maria Santos's brother, he's going to make it and he was at Roland.

Idalia: I know!

Aurelio: Also, Carmona, Cassandra, and Roberta and some other people from Roland. (Focus Group, December 2006)

Through all of the exposure, changes and emerging identity constructions at the university, the identity of a "Roland student who makes it" became a goal for these participants. As they both struggled and succeeded in numerous endeavors, they sought examples for this identity and kept it at the forefront of discussions about their future.

Manuel explained:

Well, if you think about being Mexican origin or Hispanic or whatever you want to call it, there are always people telling us we can't make it. But I wanted to

show that we can. That was an identity I wanted to adopt. Well, I can make it, because I am Hispanic. (Focus Group, March 2007)

As so much of their lives were being refigured, it was logical that students would use their emergent identity reconstructions as a lens to reflect on their previous school experiences. Their perceptions of their lives prior to SU were colored by their new emergent identities. Their reflections on their backgrounds foregrounded their current experiences in unique ways.

### **Summary**

My findings indicated that students began to (re)construct identities based on learning the figured world of the university. As they participated, some peripherally and some more deeply, in the various literacy experiences of the university, new identity constructions emerged. It was apparent that the participants' changing definition of diversity had much to do with their own personal identifications. Initially, I noticed a focus on diversity caused them to focus on difference as well to cling tightly together as a group. However, it appeared that their exposure to diversity both deepened and broadened as they authored themselves, cognizant of multiple positionings, within the figured world of the university (Holland, et. al, 1998; Leander, 2002; Urrieta, 2007). As the school year progressed, their definitions of diversity began to alter and they recognized SU as a more diverse institution than their own high school, though a place where diverse groups remained separate.

At the same time, students began to position themselves in relation to White, middle and upper class students. These positionings also influenced personal views of self, neighborhood, and their previous educations (Holland et al., 1998; Leander, 2002; Urrieta, 2007). In light of the ways these White students acted and spoke, I found that participants attempted to refuse these ways of talking (in particular) and mercilessly teased those unable to keep the White language from their college dialects. However, in some ways, they all adopted some of these conversational norms when speaking in English. All of these themes together resulted in new, emerging college identities. Though, as these identities emerged and developed, so did an apparent disconnect among home, family, neighborhood, and university life. New ways of talking, acting, being—these new ways of knowing—appeared to lead to a growing chasm between “their side of town” and the university.

I discovered connections between these identity constructions clearly and the acquisition of academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998). Academic literacies are the mandatory mediating devices (Bahktin, 1986; Holquist, 1990) of the figured world of the university. They are necessary for survival, or at the very least, graduation. The initial struggles associated with learning the literacies of college included those that might seem predictable for many college students from many different walks of life. Participants began to grasp these and quickly became aware of resources available to them, even though this knowledge did not translate to immediate academic success for all of them.

There were also struggles unique to these urban-schooled Latino/a students. For instance, they felt the need to find solidarity among the students they encountered, in

spite of all the apparent differences and prejudice they perceived at the university level. At times, they felt the need to overlook it all and view students from those somewhat “mythical” suburban White schools as students who struggle and as students who are poor. These two identifying factors were equated with what a college student “is.” I noted that this assisted participants in locating and justifying their own position in the figured world of the university; this occasional improvisation was needed for survival (Holland, et. al, 1998). In contrast to the lives of many “traditional” university students, my participants pointed to financial and family responsibilities that kept them closely attached to home, some of them even living at home during their first year.

At the same time, students began to refigure their own secondary school experiences. In an apparent contradiction, participants claimed their schooling left them both prepared and unprepared for college literacies. The level of preparation depended on teacher, subject, and often their depth of participation as students. They argued that they were very isolated in their neighborhood school, an idea that did not occur to them until they entered the university. They were exposed, in large part, to African American and Latino/a students. Initially, they thought of Roland as diverse, but ultimately decided their exposure to predominately African American and Latino/a cultures did not qualify as diversity. At the same time, they constantly compared their schooling to an assumed suburban experience. When giving it a name, they often referred to a more affluent school in town, Westforest. The mythical educations of wealthy White students were often brought up in conversation as the measuring stick to their own educations. Though they were in attendance at SU with these very students, they still struggled to shake the

stigma of their own high school experiences. Participants looked for good in their former schooling experiences, but still struggled when others presumed to know what their lives were like prior to SU, primarily because of the negative media attention their school received. As such, participants were developing their own identities through improvisations and authorship, working to make their own worlds, wanting to be Roland students “who make it” (Focus Group, December 2006).

### **Unexpected Notions**

“Write what you are passionate about. And on occasion take the time to reflect on your writing, see where you have been, where you are going, and what you have learned, share it with others, and begin again.” Wanda S. Pillow

Wanting to make certain my relationship with these students was explained and problematized, I struggled to construct a dissertation that was about participants, not about me. At the same time, even though an acknowledgement of our relationship was necessary disclosure, I did not want our relationship to be the central focus of the study. I was, however, emotionally invested and some of my personal findings come from personal relationships and my history with these participants. As with any research study, there are always unexpected notions that rise up from the data collection process and the data itself. Knowing my participants as well as I did prior to data collection did not prevent me from experiencing these unexpected notions.

## **GROUP DYNAMICS**

The first unexpected twist happened early in the data collection process, namely before it actually began. I started making individual phone calls to possible participants, because I assumed I would begin with individual interviews and continue them throughout the school year. I envisioned separate case studies, beautifully intertwined but certainly separate—individual interviews, classroom observations, and artifacts. On my first scheduled meeting with Alex on SU’s campus, the rest of the future focus group showed up with her.

We had lunch and Alex explained to me that when she told the rest of the group we were, they all had to come. I had originally planned to interview former AVID students only—namely Aurelio, Alex, and Manuel. However, they appeared to be a “package deal” with Monique and Idalia, and I found it necessary to reconfigure my study. It was too difficult to explain to a group of young adults (who wanted to spend time with me) that speaking with them as a group was not in the cards. Also, I recognized that they were clinging together as a survival mechanism and that meeting with them as a unit might provide rich data. Thus, the focus group was born and the proposal amended, though not for the last time. At the conclusion of our first “official” meeting, they explained their closeness like this:

Monique: We thought about doing our own organization. All you need is ten dollars and three people. We are already an organization!

Manuel: Don’t you have to have a curriculum or something like that? It sounds like a lot of work.

Holly: Final comments?

Monique: We're free all the time! If you need us to talk or further explanation.

Manuel: The funny thing is we weren't like this in high school. We didn't hang out together in high school.

Monique: There's never a day we don't talk or call.

(Focus Group, October 2006)

They then told me I could save myself a number of phone calls by simply calling Monique, their social coordinator, for the times they would be together. They were not particularly close to one another in high school, so even the members of the group were surprising to me. By spending time together, they basically created my focus group.

As the focus groups progressed throughout the school year, I recognized a tendency toward particular roles within the group. They reminded me of their classroom/school roles. Alex was increasingly quiet and surly. Idalia always took on the role of perfect student. Monique was generally conversational and full of contributions. Aurelio typically played the part of rambling storyteller and Manuel was often the critical thinker. By the last time we met, participants were starting to contradict one another; the group dynamic seemed to be wearing thin. It actually helped me transition well into the long individual interviews, because participants were ready to talk about themselves without the interference of others. Prior to our last focus group, Monique called to tell me that a few of them were fighting because of a small issue they had not yet resolved. These sorts of tensions made for necessary and well-timed ending to the focus group meetings. Thus the "logical" order of the study—starting with individual interviews—was illogical



once I began interacting with participants amidst the interactions they were already having.

In reflecting on our last focus group, I learned valuable information about being a qualitative researcher. When the group dynamic ends and a point of saturation is reached (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Mertens, 2005), it is necessary as a researcher to recognize that. At the same time, I learned from the onset that participants can lend structure to a study, even surprising ones, and a certain amount of flexibility was key to my study being a strong qualitative research endeavor.

#### **PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION OF IDENTITY**

In October, after transcribing an initial discussion with my participants, in which I tried to explain the nuances of hybridity as articulated by Bhabha (1994) and third space as explained by Gutierrez, Rymes and Larson (1995), I recognized my explanations as particularly strained and painful, while it dawned on me that I did not feel prepared to talk about my research with my participants. At the same time, I was not sure they wanted to know much about how I would ultimately frame my study. They continued to query, wondering about where I was headed. Then in March, when they asked about my study at a focus group meeting, I decided to speak briefly about my focus on identity. I also explained that the focus on identity had organically risen from our early conversations—that *my* focus was created from *their* focus on their new identity constructions at the university. This began a discussion that fascinated me. I have excerpted their thoughts on identity below because they beautifully illustrate their abilities as participants, their critical thinking skills, their burgeoning thoughts on a topic,

directly related to new academic literacies, and our ease at communication with one another after years together.

Holly: Well, you might for example, have a student identity, right?

Manuel: Yeah, but it's only how you portray it. It's not necessarily who you are.

Alex: That's right. You're acting like a student. You don't have to actually be one....

Manuel: Your identity is Holly Hungerford. That's your identity. That's who you are.

Holly: What encompasses it? What are all the parts of me? Tell me what you think my identities consist of. I'm Holly Hungerford, but what else?

Manuel: White.

Holly: Yeah, I'm a White lady from Louisiana raised in Texas.

Manuel: Right.

Alex: You're somebody's kid.

Idalia: You're a wife.

Manuel: You're a sister. That's an identity.

Holly: I'm a parent to my dogs.

Manuel: That's a role....

Holly: Can you have more than one identity?

Manuel: Yeah, but you choose them. Do you?

Holly: Do you choose them or do people choose them for you?

Manuel: I guess people choose them. A little bit of both.

[All agree.] (Focus Group, March 2006).

They talked about race and class issues throughout the semester, but the following conversation was a surprise to me. It certainly reinforced my outsider position (Bettie, 2003; Tisdell, 2000). I had difficulty understanding both their personal choices and explanations.

Manuel: But I do think a lot of people choose them for you. A lot of people see me and they think, Oh you're a Mexican. And that's my identity.

Alex: Yeah.

Holly: Your only identity, whereas, how many things make up who you are? You also identify yourself differently?

Manuel: Yeah, I identify myself as very American. Not just Mexican, but Mexican American.

Manuel: I came from Mexico. And pretty soon I'm going to have kids and my kids are going to have kids their kids are going to have kids. There's not going to be a Mexican part anymore; it'll be a U.S. part but they'll still have Latino blood in them. The Mexican part dies out because... I know in me it does. I don't like speaking Spanish as much as I used to, but I know I'm from Mexico and I have Mexican blood in me. I think a generation advances and then the Mexican part is not going to be there anymore. It's going to be the American part because this is where they are, where they were born.

Holly: Will it be important to you for your kids to know, to remember, to retain their Mexican identities?

Manuel: Well, I know I was born in Mexico but not raised there. It's really not much of a Mexican identity. I just know I am Mexican. I was born in Mexico and I have Mexican blood. But I wasn't raised over there. I was raised here.

Idalia: I was raised here since I was little.

Holly: But it still defines a lot of who you are?

Idalia: Yeah.

Manuel: It does. It does.

Holly: When you talk about yourselves here, about your positionings here at the university, you are always talking about it.

Manuel: It does.

Holly: To you, it's not the defining thing?

Manuel: When people start talking about it, it's part of me. If they just leave it alone, it doesn't really matter.

Idalia: I guess it's part of me, but at the same time, I don't really know a lot about it. I don't know. Because some of the things they celebrate in Mexico, we don't really celebrate them, and I'm like okay. Like the sixth of September, I know that we celebrate it, but we don't really make a big celebration here.

Manuel: I know the 5<sup>th</sup> of May.

[Everyone laughs.]

Idalia: See! Yeah! Cinco de Mayo. We celebrate United States Independence Day, but we don't really celebrate the Mexican one. I don't know why. (Focus Group, March 2007)

It was difficult for me to listen to this interview and to revisit this transcript. This part of the conversation was one that enforced my positions as a White woman and my own issues/struggles with Whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; McIntyre, 1997). Even so-called liberal White women are outsiders, and in spite of relationships and developing understandings, that position does not change. I wanted participants to cling to their Mexican identities, and to understand and envision all of the complexities of raising bicultural children in the United States. Even my questions, on the fly, part of my semi-structured interview protocol, tried to get at what I was looking for. However, these students are who they are—changing, growing, experiencing the fluidity of their many identities. They are becoming.

Then they talked about their positionings as AVID and AP students, another unexpected notion for me. As part of their past, as both an AP and AVID teacher, I had not given much thought to how detracking efforts position students or about my own complicity in doing so through my leadership roles in these programs. When I asked about their educational histories in AVID and AP classes, they replied:

Alex: It makes you a kid who is going to college, whereas with a regular student, this is a high school graduate. I think, through your years at school you kind of achieve who you really are going to be, being that type of student that everybody says you are. You just become that person.

Holly: So because of how they position you, you strive to meet it?

Alex: Yeah.

Manuel: What I'm thinking of I guess is the way you get to an identity is what you went through to get to that level of identity. Because an identity has to be achieved, it's not something you can get and just be like, "Oh yeah, this is my identity." It has to be achieved through a certain amount of things.

Alex: Like trial and error.

Idalia: Right.

Alex: For me it was like, well she's a good student. Then you started going through all these classes and that's just what you were. Because I mean, they make those things work for you, because if you're not that good of a student, you're just an average person. They kind of weed you out when you are really young and you are either this or you are that.

Manuel: Once they start telling you that you are a good student, that you are a brain, well, then you start thinking, "Well maybe I am a good student and maybe I need to do more things to achieve that goal of you know, being... of giving myself an identity of a good student, not just a regular student."

Who is the "they"?

Manuel: Society.

Alex: Everybody.

Manuel: Just everybody in general. (Focus Group, March 2007)

Early in their secondary careers, they were positioned as good students and as a result, they learned to position themselves as such (Holland, et al., 1998; Leander, 2002).

Additionally, I was thrilled to hear them see the same connections to identities that I do. Their thoughts caused me to dig deeper into my own research questions and I became less hesitant about using particular terminology with them, especially terms related to identities and positionings at the university.

Holly: Well, part of what I am interested in is how much of that is decided for y'all because it positions you and how much do you push against that and position yourself here at SU. I wonder.

Manuel: God, I can't believe how all of this stuff is connected.

Alex: All things are connected to everything else.

Manuel: But it's really interesting though. Once you really get into it. That's why I was asking you about it. These are questions you don't really get into or think about. So I don't sit down at my house and think, "So how does this identity thing work, you know?"

Idalia: I guess you can't even, like here you can talk about them and think about things because we can relate. You know? Who are you going to tell these things to?

Manuel: Yeah, at home it's just one type of identity. (Focus Group, March 2007)

This study became one of identities and literacies because of the connections that emerged as I spent time with these students. They were talking about these concepts with increasing frequency, and I ultimately recognized a need to work with what they were already noticing, rather than some pre-conceived notion of what I wanted them to see.

## **THE POLITICS OF SCHOOLING**

It was surprising to me how much time I spent speaking with these participants about their educations, but how I knew little about what was going on behind the scenes. I refer specifically to Alex and Manuel in this instance, because I was not aware of the depth of their struggles until the end of our time together. As they struggled and found themselves in trouble academically at the university, they seemed to not grasp the enormity of their decisions until it was too late. They did not truly understand the systems they were navigating and did not know what they needed to share or how to ask for help for the bigger issues. I struggled knowing I was right there, able to help. I questioned whether my role as researcher had prevented these conversations from happening.

Navigating the figured world of the university includes all of the literacies associated with bureaucracy. The SU system is a difficult one to figure out; I remember being incredibly intimidated at SU, even as a master's student. It appeared, at least in the time I spent with these students, that much of navigating systems was asking the right questions. Even when I asked them about details after they had spoken with authority figures about their difficulties, they struggled to find the answers based on the conversations they had with counselors, advisors, and professors. They remained confused. These were local occurrences, happening to them as individuals, but they struggled to understand them in their wider institutional and social contexts (Fairclough, 1995). Through it all, participants remained curious and cautious, always willing to try harder and learn from their mistakes, a discourse itself—one related to success and achievement.



## Conclusion

To get at the heart of student literacy practices, I found identity work to be a valuable tool. A theory of identities in practice, though an anthropological framework, has much to offer literacy research. The university is a *figured world*, as defined by Holland, et. al (1998). Though the university is viewed as a system and is a recognizable entity to the majority of the population, it is also socially identified. There are cultural exchanges that happen within the university that send messages, both to ourselves and others. Similarly, due in large part to these cultural exchanges, participants of the figured world of the university find themselves placed in affiliation or in opposition to others. Holland et al. (1998) explained: “Figured worlds take shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances, and artifacts” (p. 51). I found this coproduction to be evident in the lives of participants throughout the school year. They were exposed to new ways of acting, speaking (e.g. classroom discourse, the social discourses of White peers), and were required to produce artifacts (e.g. essays, presentations, exams) that were unique to this new figured world they were learning to inhabit.

This figured world was not immune to issues of power; these powers and hierarchies were articulated by my participants even as they were quickly positioned based on race, class and gender, and quickly learned to position others in the same manner. Because of discursive practices related to grades and success, the *positionality* of participants was quickly identified. Participants argued that their own positionings within the university were determined by their race, socioeconomic status, and their education

prior to walking on campus. In addition, certain positions, like those determined by their past participation in the figured world of the urban high school, still decided the ways in which others chose to view them at the university. Manuel's experience with his counselor certainly served to highlight this point.

As such, they forged unique *spaces of authoring* selves. I also found answers to their positionings were not predetermined, nor did they necessarily remain stagnant throughout the school year. These young adults made choices and authored themselves in many different ways through a variety of literacies that were available to them. These included both mimicking and refusing ways of talking and acting, trying at times to be the successful student, and refusing positions forced upon them by their pasts. According to Holland, et al., (1998), answering the positions placed on them by their participation in a figured world is not a choice, but how they chose to answer was determined by a combination of activities, including the time they consistently spent with one another, and these were mediated by the various literacies they navigated at the university level. These young adults were inundated with new early college literacies related to academics, society, and culture. As they navigated the figured world of the university, these literacies were the mediating devices of their individual and collective experiences. In a new landscape such as the university, student identities morphed and reconstructed along with their own critical perceptions of life and society. As these young adults negotiated meanings, they also learned to author themselves in new ways in the various figured worlds of their lives, including the university.

*Making new worlds* involves social play, where new imagined communities can arise. For a new world to arise, these new visions of new communities must somehow be publicized and habituated. Through participants' improvisations, seemingly created in refusal to others' positionings, the possibility of a new world was evident. The group they created to survive the last year (the focus group of this study), was comprised of people who knew and understood both their past and present, and offered them shelter within the larger figured world of the university. Through this study, the grouping became publicized, but not necessarily completely habituated. I could, in fact, argue the group itself as a new world, created from adult "play" (Vygotsky, 1962). However, there were splinters in the grouping as the year progressed—student identities developed differently and though participants maintained contact, some of their values did not necessarily coincide as the school year finished. In light of these differing values, I simply suggest that there was possibility for a new world, or perhaps a world was temporarily created, but I cannot substantiate its creation or permanence, simply the possibility that it existed (Holland, et al., 1998).

In sum, a look at these participants' identity (re)constructions and connections to early college literacies highlights the ways in which discourses of success and failure and institutionalized practices impacted both the lives and epistemologies of these young Latino/as. Identities, like literacies, are not stagnant but are constantly in motion. A glimpse into this process offers a glimpse into the lives and struggles of a group of students who have been traditionally under-served by our nation's schools. Throughout their early college experiences, these participants personified the distinction of identity as

“becoming not being” (Urrieta, 2007) and literacies as more than communication, but ways of knowing, valuing, and being in the world (Gee, 2000-2001; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995; 2003).

## CHAPTER 6: *IMPLICATIONS*

As I argued at the start of this study, a foregrounding of these participants' urban high school experiences while studying their current college experiences provides a more in-depth look at the connections between literacies and identities. In turn, this complex picture offers valuable opportunities for educators to inform both their practice and their research. Urban-schooled students continue to be under-served in our nation's schools (Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999), making these intimate portraits of participants a necessity to the field of education.

The central question of this study focused on the identity (re)constructions that students identified as they participated in their early college literacy experiences. I drew on Holland, et al.'s (1998) theory of identities in practice so that I might consider the university a figured world. Through analysis, I looked at students' perceptions of their personal participation in the figured world of the university. In addition, I focused on literacies as the semiotic mediating tools of this cultural world (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland, et al., 1998), while I highlighted issues of discourse, power, and knowledge inherent in the university (Foucault, 1977; Usher & Edwards, 1994).

Issues of power and agency are often best understood in terms of a theory of identity in practice (Holland, et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2007, 2006). How participants choose to author themselves within particular figured worlds demonstrates intimate, individual portraits of power and agency in institutions. Literacies are the ways in which humans

mediate this process; they are necessary tools for surviving—navigating, negotiating—the spaces of various figured worlds. They also assist in determining positions of power and can serve as tools for exhibiting agency (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland, et. al, 1998; Holquist, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). Luttrell and Parker (2001) argued “...that there is a complex and dialogic relationship between students’ literacy practices and their evolving identities in the figured worlds in which they are recruited and participate” (p. 245). Therefore, this study of literacies and identities in the lives of participants offers a more nuanced portrait of student participation in the figured world of the university—a more complex picture than a study of literacy or identity individually might offer. This chapter will reiterate various conclusions I have drawn from my findings, while providing implications for both practice and research.

### **Implications for Practice**

As these students communicated their identity (re)constructions as part of the figured world of the university, important themes emerged—themes with potential to inform the pedagogy of both secondary and post-secondary educators alike. What follows is a brief reiteration of some of the thematic threads that ran throughout participants’ conversations this last year at SU. These include: a) the necessity of confronting and complicating issues of diversity, and b) students’ successes and struggles with the acquisition of academic literacies. Along with highlighting these threads, I have included possibilities for practice. Though the two cannot be neatly disentangled, for

organizational purposes, I have categorized these implications for practice into suggestions for secondary and post-secondary education.

### **CONFRONTING AND COMPLICATING DIVERSITY**

In the cases of these participants, the figured world of the university and the figured world of the urban high school were decidedly different. Through their early college literacy experiences, they learned to navigate the figured world of the university, a cultural world shared with the very (White, middle and upper class) students they had frequently wondered and constructed opinions about (Holland, et al, 1998). As such, participants' encounters with Whiteness as a theory (Frankenberg, 1993; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; McIntyre, 1997) and pedagogy centered in critical theories (Freire, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1993; Lewison, et al., 2002) during their secondary school literacy education remained relevant as they entered college, with participants frequently initiating these critical discussions as university students.

Additionally, students' theoretical comparisons to White suburban students began in high school, but continued at the university, due in large part to actual incidents and people with which to compare experiences. For the first time, they experienced prolonged exposure to students who were their age, but from middle to upper class White neighborhoods. The comparisons to these White middle and upper class students often included hypothesized notions of suburban high school experiences which, in turn, led to a reevaluation of participants' own high school experiences. The data from this study suggest that even if issues of diversity, race, and class are a part of student's adolescent

literacy development, the eventual, daily, face-to-face encounters with such differences have a profound impact on individuals' identity constructions.

In addition, the participants in this study could point to discourses (Foucault, 1977) they encountered in university life, including those of race, class, and Whiteness. They were able to see how their positions influenced their college careers. The semiotic mediators of the university "adopted by people to guide their behavior...serve to reproduce structures of privilege and the identities, dominant and subordinate defined within them" (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 143) were both underscored and utilized as improvisational tools in the experiences of these students. Their conversations frequently highlighted both their understanding of and disagreement with these issues.

However, in spite of this awareness, through the course of their educations they adopted some of the racist language and ideas they were arguing against. It was not uncommon for their conversations to be peppered with anti-Mexican or anti-urban school rhetoric, often subtly inserted into discussions of race and class. In addition to a critical awareness of the discourses that both surround and impact them, this study suggests that students would benefit from tools to analyze their *own* discourses. At times, it appeared they had internalized various societal discourses related to issues such as race and class. While they often seemed capable of recognizing these discourses in their encounters with others, they repeatedly failed recognize their own internalizations of discourses. It appeared they stopped short of recognizing their own unintentional utilizations of such language, though they were clearly able to point to society's perceptions of them as urban-schooled Latino/as. Again, an emancipatory pedagogy steeped in issues of critical



literacy (Freire, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1997; Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, 2002) would assist both students and teachers. Students would have the opportunity to learn to interrogate their own literacy practices as well as those of the people around them. A framework of critical pedagogy at both the high school and university levels could offer instruction to educators in how to incorporate critical discussions into multiple content areas and encourage critical questioning as a regular part of students' daily academic lives.

### **THE ACQUISITION OF ACADEMIC LITERACIES**

As previously mentioned, data suggest that many of the challenges associated with the acquisition of academic literacies at the university level are somewhat predictable. Many transition studies (e.g. Adan and Feiner, 1995; Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000; Choy, Horn, Nuñez, and Chen, 2000) focus entirely on these issues, though there are some that assume a sociolinguistic frame thus offer a more nuanced view of students as participants in the university system. Many new college students struggle with issues of time management, locating resources, and various study skills as they strive to become skillful at navigating the university. Data in this study suggest that the knowledge students gained in secondary schools, related to future academic literacies they might encounter at the university level were helpful and necessary to student success.

Similarly, early college literacy acquisition has a profound impact on identity (re)constructions. Data suggest that students' abilities at acquiring the various literacies of their early college experiences regularly figured in to their identity constructions. In this study, the figured world of the university, steeped in issues of power and knowledge,

quickly became a difficult cultural world for participants to navigate. As such, their unique perceptions of their own identities altered based on their positionings within the university. These positions were often connected to their perceived successes and failures with new academic literacies encountered at SU. Answering these positionings was not a choice (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland, et al, 1998), and participants' particular improvisations highlighted their attempts at agency, even in the seemingly mundane, daily interactions on campus (Holland, et al, 1998). They chose various ways of authoring selves as students, as Latino/as, as similar and/or different from their classmates, as they were exposed to the new literacies of SU. All of us, individually and collectively "are not just products of our culture, not just respondents to the situation, but also and critically appropriators of cultural artifacts that we and others produce" (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 17). Participant identities were also shaped by their on-going participation in the figured world of the university, just as the figured world of the university was shaped by this same participation. It is a two-sided struggle, where individuals are both products of culture and appropriators of culture; there is a continuous tugging on both sides. There was a constant battle between participant perceptions of self and the perceptions dictated by those in positions of power within the cultural world of the university. These were inextricably tied to academic literacies.

#### **IMPLICATIONS: SECONDARY SCHOOLING**

The data from this study suggest that exposing students to a variety of academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998), the mediating tools of the figured world of the university (Holland, et al., 1998), can be vital to student participation in this new cultural

world. Students who have little exposure to a college-going culture can benefit from instruction in and exposure to the culture of power (Delpit, 1995), even though all encounters with academic literacies are not predictable, and thus not always teachable. As Garcia (2001) argued:

The evidence points to the critical importance of interventions that are consistent, intensive, and well articulated from grade to grade and that provide consistent monitoring of students throughout the secondary years. There is no point at which it appears safe to let down one's guard (Datnow, et al., 1998). Students growing up in risky environments remain at risk throughout adolescence, even when they may appear to be on track. Sustaining gains requires that the intervention be sustained. (p. 217)

This instruction is crucial throughout Latino/a students' schooling, but seemingly more important throughout adolescence (Garcia, 2001). In a review of secondary education programs that increase success in the academic lives of Latino/a students, AVID and other detracking programs were cited as credible and particularly helpful for Latino/as and several implications for programs that seek to enhance Hispanic achievement and move them successfully up the educational ladder were highlighted (Garcia, 2001). These included elements that existed in my participants' secondary school experiences: 1) an adult in the school setting willing to take personal responsibility for the student, 2) a supportive peer group, 3) utilization of cooperative learning strategies in classroom settings, 4) a sensitivity to students' family circumstances and "strategic" places for families to interact with the school, all the while honoring both the cultural and linguistic

practices that exist in students' homes (Garcia, 2001). Thus, data suggest that these students did benefit from their participation in detracking programs that incorporated these elements. However, throughout the course of this study, I have come to recognize that adolescents' literacy exposure should not stop with instruction of predictable academic literacies (e.g. study skills and available resources). I believe some of the best preparation urban secondary schools can offer, in addition this preparedness, are the tools for critically tackling discourses of power— offering students the ability to practice recognizing these discourses as they exist in the various institutions of their lives (Freire, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1997).

Thus, in secondary education, as neighborhood schools become less and less ethnically and economically mixed (Kozol, 2006), it remains imperative to assist students in negotiations of race and class issues, even when these negotiations exist only as hypothetical situations. These critical thinking skills, along with critical lenses through which they can view the world, are an important piece of adolescent literacy development. Students' exposure to critical literacies provides them with opportunities to interrogate societal practices and positions afforded them within institutions (Freire, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1997; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006).

The experiences of these participants at State University suggest that college as we have come to “know” it is about more than academic achievement, it is also about issues of race, class, and disconnect, especially for students not of the dominant culture attempting to navigate and author themselves within this new figured world (Holland, et al., 1998). The curriculum spaces (Cary, 2006) of the high school, which are

epistemological spaces of the production of discourse, knowledge, and power, not merely places where students learn a particular value-free curriculum, offer a place where students might begin this initial exploration, an opportunity for them to develop into more critically-minded individuals before entering the university. While it appears that the discussions initiated at the high school level might never seem entirely adequate, as the dominant discourses perhaps can never fully be acknowledged or understood, an attempt should be made.

Additionally, I believe the field of adolescent literacy can be enhanced by educators' understanding of what students might encounter as they leave our high school classrooms to pursue post-secondary education. As teachers strive to co-construct valuable student literacy experiences and prepare them for their future endeavors, the knowledge of what students might encounter can only strengthen our practice. Often in detracking programs, like those initiated at Roland High School, the predictable issues associated with the acquisition of academic literacies are tackled (e.g. lack of knowledge of financial aid or college study skills), but the unpredictable ones as indemnified in these participants' discussions of race, class, and disconnect are difficult to predict and/or tackle, because they are as elusive as the discourses they serve to mediate (Usher & Edwards, 1994).

Thus, for secondary teachers, staff development programs reminiscent of Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys' (2002) critical literacy study with newcomers and novices would be highly beneficial for both secondary and university educators. The authors offer two case studies as a means for practically illustrating what critical pedagogy in

classrooms looks like. The elements of critical literacy in secondary classrooms: 1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice (p. 382), will never look identical in all teachers classrooms. Despite not being uniform, if these elements were incorporated into the pedagogies of educators, through classroom interactions with these teachers, students could begin to interrogate issues of power prior to entering the university.

In this study, there were clearly instances of critical literacy in the secondary educations of these participants, and these instances carried over to their subsequent experiences at the university. Thus, data reinforce the suggestion these pedagogical theories be incorporated into many aspects of secondary school curriculum as well as university practices and pedagogy, as a means of reaching our nation's under-served students of color. However, the implication that critical pedagogy is a valuable tool for educating students prior to entering university should not be confused as an implication that students are already receiving all they need prior to entering college. This data in this study suggest a definite impact on student participation at the university, but by no means suggest that the ideal program already exists. Thus, the field would benefit from more research that studies the implementation of critical pedagogy in teacher education classrooms and in on-going staff development practices. Additionally, research that highlights student responses to critical pedagogy would help to inform our practice.

## **IMPLICATIONS: POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION**

The university, as an institution, is steeped in issues of power. The discourses inherent in the daily functioning of the university system are deeply ingrained in the cultural world of the university (Cary, 2006; Foucault, 1977; Holland, et al, 1998; Usher & Edwards, 1994). Therefore, findings from this study remind educators to consider a shift in thought, a paradigmatic adjustment that refuses a one-dimensional explanation of students' apparent success or lack of success at the university, for the concept of academic success is a powerful discourse in and of itself (Foucault, 1977). When one views the university as its own cultural world or "collective 'as-if'" world that is a "sociohistoric, contrived interpretation or imagination that mediate[s] behavior" (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 52), while simultaneously noting issues of power and knowledge imbedded in those very worlds (Foucault, 1997), students' early college careers become multi-dimensional and their adjustment to the university a deeply complex process, steeped in issues of class, culture, race, power and knowledge.

At the same time, these case studies demonstrate that each person experiences the university, and subsequently the acquisition of early college literacies and (re)construction of identities, in different ways. Urban-schooled Latino/a students do not all have the same educational experiences or the same response to those experiences, and these case studies highlight this complexity. Without fail, participants highlighted the predictable issues associated with academic achievement as part of their early college literacy experiences. However, I must also emphasize the other challenges arose that were not as predictable, those that were unique to these students, their backgrounds, and

the university they chose to attend. The unpredictable challenges encountered by the participants in this study cannot be separated from their identities as Latino/a, urban-schooled students, and the fact that they are attending a prestigious university in their hometown. Students' lives are multi-dimensional, as are the myriad ways they choose to author themselves in the figured world of the university (Holland, et al, 1998).

Therefore, this study suggests that students, particularly those whose educational backgrounds differ dramatically from the majority of students enrolled at a university, could benefit from an educational philosophy that takes into account the impact college life has on students' personal development and the ways in which the daily interactions within the figured world of the university impact the identities of students (Holland, et al., 1998). This could be achieved partially through programs already in existence, such as the transition programs available to students at the university, as long as the philosophies of the programs were extended and grounded in a theory of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys, 2002; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006) or emancipatory education (Freire, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1997). The needs of students at the university are connected to issues associated with the culture of power (Delpit, 1995) and the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1990), but these need to be made more transparent to students and include practical techniques for assisting both students and educators in understanding the complexities of student identity transformations. We must rethink our understandings of how school, in particular the university, has always been done.

I believe for universities to recruit and maintain the diverse student populations suggested in our mission statements, understanding the individuality of student



experiences could lead to academic options for students—alternative class sizes, course offerings, and varied times for courses that fit into a variety of student lives and schedules, rather than those that appear to be strictly for students who follow the “traditional” path of living on campus, away from home. Additional options might include reduced course loads coupled with financial aid options, rather than financial aid being connected strictly to full-time student status. These are simply possible alternatives, but a consideration of alternatives can ultimately benefit our students. Often the onus is placed squarely on the shoulders of students—they are held liable for not learning the ways of navigating the university.

Therefore, data suggest the possibility of university programs similar to those suggested for secondary schools. In addition to tools for teaching academic literacies, university curricula could offer elements of a critical pedagogy throughout. This focus on university campuses would not just help urban-schooled students learn to navigate the new and difficult literacies of university life. Other students from more privileged backgrounds would also benefit from an on-going exposure to difference and a forthright conversation confronting and complicating understandings of diversity. The culture of the university could be greatly impacted by such exposure. At the same time, data suggest that professors and other university staff could benefit from similar staff development practices in critical pedagogy advocated for by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002).

## **Implications for Research**

In addition to implications for our practice, a focus on participants' experiences offers new pathways for research connecting identities and literacies. This study of the connections between literacies and identities in adolescents' early college lives highlights some of what research in the field has already demonstrated as a starting place, not a point of completion. The importance of highlighting what we have already learned offers a place to begin. It is imperative that we do not lose the knowledge we have already gained, but instead use that knowledge as a place to expand our current understandings and further advance the field of literacy. What follows is brief summary of the importance of studies that connect literacies and identities, followed by a deliberate focus on specific research implications for the field of literacy derived from this study and suggestions for future research.

### **LITERACIES AND IDENTITIES**

As this study focused on a practice theory of identities (Holland, et al., 1998), it became increasingly apparent that participants' identity (re)constructions occurred throughout their tenure in schools and were influenced by the various literacies of students' lives, particularly when a broader definition of literacies was highlighted (Gee, 2000-2001; Lankshear, 1997; New London Group, 1996). Participants frequently highlighted their own fluid identity enactments as they adapted to and utilized both the academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998) as well as the out-of-school-literacy practices (Moje, 2004) of the university. Students did not talk about new literacies without

discussing their impact on identity (re)constructions, highlighting the value in combining identity work and literacy work in qualitative research.

Data suggest that students' life trajectories and identity constructions were impacted by the literacy practices, classroom activities, and social experiences of the figured world of the university. The data served to reinforce Bartlett's (2007) contention:

Sociocultural approaches to literacy are integrating the concept of *identity* to think about the purposeful ways in which individuals endeavor to position themselves through (and/or in conjunction with) literacy practices in social and cultural fields. By "identity," social scholars of literacy are *not* suggesting anything fixed or unified; instead, they are referring to the ongoing social process of self-making in conjunction with others through interaction.... (p. 53)

These participant narratives reinforced theories of a profoundly interconnected relationship between literacy and identity (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Gee, 2000-2001; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2004). These connections between identities and literacies were best understood in the context of literacies as socially situated (and often contested) contextualized acts, ways of knowing, valuing and being in the world (Gee, 2000-2001; Lankshear, 1997; New London Group, 1996). Participation in the figured world of the university contributed to the continuous formation and transformation and a constant (re)negotiation of identities; identity enactments were constantly being mediated by literacies (Moje, 2004).

Thus, data highlight the importance of research on identity as it connects to literacies because identity and literacy are nearly impossible to separate. Identity

transformations occurred in the negotiations of a new figured world, they were mediated by the literacies of the university—those related to academics as well as those related to more social positionings in this cultural world (Holland, et al., 1998). The dialectical nature of this relationship (Bakhtin, 1986) is important because students' literacies shape their identities and their identities shape their literacies (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). Thus, as the literature suggests, the literacies participants learned at the university, both in and out of the classroom, functioned as semiotic mediators of their new figured world, resulting in (re)negotiated or (re)configured identities that were often in conflict with former identities or senses of self (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland et al., 1998; Vygotsky, 1962). Studies that highlight such relationships are beneficial to both researchers and practitioners, because ultimately our exposure to such understandings benefits our students.

### **THIS STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

While previous literacy research has demonstrated the importance of contextualized, complex accounts that highlight the deep connections between literacies and identities, data from this study suggest that the field would be enhanced by more studies that focus on this link after students' secondary school experiences and throughout the first two years of their college lives. Between research on students' secondary literacy experiences and the literature on adult literacy lies an untapped area of study—late adolescence. For many individuals, this time marks one of the most difficult transition periods in both the literacies of their lives and in the myriad identities negotiated in the various figured worlds in which they participate (Holland, et al., 1998).

Additionally, research has shown this to be a time when many minority students leave the university system (Kirst, 2004; Valle, 2007). This study maintains that a focus on student identity development, coupled with literacy development, as a way to deepen our understandings of what is typically understood as “transition” to the university, could help with retention as we learn more about what students face on a daily basis in the figured world of the university.

Thus, adolescent literacy research is expanded by this study, in large part because my inquiries extend past high school graduation. In addition to delving into a relatively untapped period in adolescents’ lives, this study also has the potential to simultaneously inform multiple fields of literacy research, beyond the field of adolescent literacy. For example, it offers focus to research on academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998) and the complex issues faced by students at the university level. However, by highlighting identity issues in conjunction with the negotiation of academic literacies, the field is moved beyond a discussion of the success of particular transition programs to a focus on what students might need in addition to preparation in academic literacies. Similarly, this study contextualizes Latino/a students’ identity (re)constructions in light of their urban-school experiences. As schools continue to become more segregated along race and class lines, (Kozol, 2006), the field will benefit from more studies that look at individual students’ experiences at college in light of their previous literacy experiences.

It is important to reemphasize that the desegregation of our nation’s schools often results in a lack of exposure to diversity—students’ high school careers are consistently spent with students of their own race and class. The importance of this context was

highlighted when participants pointed to the sudden and dramatic exposure to White middle to upper class students as a rationale for renegotiating their own student identities and reconfiguring their own literacy development in light of what they assumed about their new classmates. As such, findings suggest that students' perceptions of academic literacies, along with their perceived ability to navigate these literacies were greatly impacted by their previous understandings of race and class juxtaposed with their current experiences as Latino/a youth on a predominately White campus.

Findings such as these remind researchers of the importance of studies that demonstrate secondary teachers' ability to facilitate identity exploration as a part of literacy development, with an additional component—a focus on critical literacy (Freire, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1993; Lewison, et al., 2002). As such, a limitation of this study is the lack of non-anecdotal data from these students' secondary school careers. In future studies, I hope to begin data collection prior to participants' entrance into college as a means of learning what teachers do to foster critical literacy practices at the secondary level. More studies that offer glimpses into these classroom practices, as they are connected to various detracking efforts, are needed. Additionally, the context of these literacy studies could be extended by studies that focus on content areas other than English Language Arts. What do teachers in other areas of the school do to facilitate discussions of identity as a means of enhancing students' academic development and understanding? How might a consideration of these content area literacy practices strengthen our practices in the English Language Arts classroom and strengthen student preparation for university coursework? Such studies could make the carry over of critical

pedagogy to university life more evident and could offer concrete examples to teachers that explain how secondary teachers can assist in the preparation of diverse students for college education.

Data from this study suggest that participants from diverse backgrounds deal with unique issues once entering the university. Some difficulties were those related to the acquisition of various academic literacies (e.g. learning resources, communicating with professors, writing for content area classes). However, according to participants, even though it was difficult they often felt capable of learning these sorts of new literacies. These academic issues urban-schooled students are faced with are often discussed at the high school level and various detracking efforts (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard & Lintz, 1996; Oakes, 2005; Rubin, 2006) work to alleviate the added difficulties students encounter upon entering the university. Yet, data from this study suggest that there are many more reasons that students struggle at the university level, one of which is a sudden exposure to previously hypothetical situations and people (e.g. White, middle class students). Therefore, urban-schooled students would benefit from research that looks into these personal diversity issues more deeply and highlights best practices at the secondary level that work to deal with multiple aspects of students' late high school and early college literacy development. There is a need for studies that recognize the inherent complexity in these negotiations and identity work in the field of literacy offers a space for focusing on this complexity.

As previously highlighted, the stories of the participants in this study indicate that students benefit from a critical awareness prior to entering the university. At the same

time, even with this previous exposure, their stories also emphasized the difficulties with experiencing race and class differences upon entering the university. Therefore, studies of teachers in different contexts or more privileged locales would also be beneficial. Cases of students who also experienced segregated secondary schools in neighborhoods with few minority students and then are a part of the dominant culture of the university upon arrival would strengthen our knowledge of the connection between literacies and identities.

This study also suggests that these urban-schooled Latino/as, attending school in the same town where they grew up, experienced a widening disconnect with their family and their neighborhoods as they learned to better navigate the figured world of the university. Oftentimes they did not seem to feel adequately prepared to deal with the personal issues that arose as part of their schooling experiences. They struggled to balance responsibilities at home and concern for their families with the ever-present duties associated with college life. Participants frequently suggested that their families and friends could not be privy to the details of their university experience because they were incapable of understanding it. While many detracking initiatives focus on preparing parents and communities for students' upcoming college life experiences through workshops on financial aid and college applications, data suggest that many family/school partnerships do not necessarily prepare both students and families for the world of the university. The field would benefit from future research that studies a family's process as a student prepares for and subsequently attends college. Additionally, studies that look into the ways in which programs offer support and education to families



and students at the secondary and post-secondary levels would have much to offer the fields of family and community literacy, as well as the field of adolescent literacy.

The data in this study suggest that the figured world of State University was markedly different from the figured world of Roland High School. At the same time, the navigation of this new figured world was at times decidedly difficult for this group of students. Academic literacies are the mediating devices of identity development at the university (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland et al., 1998; Vygotsky, 1962). Data suggest that students' personal perceptions about how well they were acquiring these literacies directly impacted their own identity constructions. Similarly, their positionings of other students within this figured world and their responses to the ways in which they were positioned by others indicated a direct link between these literacies and their emergent identities. At times, participants acted with agency in a world where they frequently felt denied access to power. This was evidenced in their assumptions about the educations of their classmates and their continued explanations that wealthy suburban students were more prepared to handle access issues at the university because their secondary school experiences closely imitated the academic world of the university.

Identities are formed in collective activity (Holland, et al., 1998) and for the students in this study, participation in the figured world of the university marked the first time they were collectively experiencing any sort of continued societal interactions with White, upper to middle class students their own age. As previously highlighted, the university is not immune to issues of power and students are forced to navigate various "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1977) as they function within the university system.

Academic literacies, therefore, can function as sorting mechanisms within the university and lead to certain positionings within this particular figured world. The data suggest that these participants regularly improvised and attempted to act with personal agency when dealing with issues of power (Holland, et al., 1998). Therefore, I argue that the field of adolescent literacy would benefit from more studies that highlight apparent improvisations, as they can offer researchers into students' attempts at agency in response to powerful societal structures.

At the same time, data from this study suggest that what looks like improved access to universities for urban-schooled Latino/a youth needs to be redefined. The students in this study were admitted to the university, but whether or not their access to the benefits of higher education increased is still debatable. Ultimately, if participants were unable to identify as students within this figured world and equally unable to demonstrate this identification through the "correct" use of various academic literacies, was their access to the university's culture of power improved? In teaching and learning in secondary education, it would help to have future research that distinguishes between entrance and access for minority youth. Admission is merely a first step. After admission comes a complex negotiation of identities and literacies within the figured world of the university.

Similarly, findings suggest that students could benefit from a deeper understanding of access and places to negotiate issues of power at the university. While continually aware of the resources that were to assist them in their academic development, participants were not aware of forums in which they could discuss

identity/class/race issues at the university. This also highlights another limitation of this study—my inability to delve deeply into the transition services offered to low-income students at the university. Participants participated in a variety of these at various times throughout the school year. Further research is needed into the programs themselves, along with the rationales used for offering these programs to students. Analyses that consider programs created in reaction to deficit models and look intently at programs' possible commitments to critical pedagogy could deepen our understandings of students' identity and literacy development at the university.

Additionally, this study did not have the opportunity to offer any portraits of professors or organizations within the institution of the university that might be furthering the identity exploration and critical literacy practices initiated at the high school level. Occasionally, throughout data collection, there were brief discussions about teachers and classrooms where it appeared deeper study might illuminate professors who are already successful at these practices. Further investigation into the ways in which university professors and campus systems are successful at facilitating the identity exploration started in secondary schools as a way of acclimating students to the various academic literacies of the university could provide valuable information to literacy researchers. It would also offer the potential to inform university-high school partnerships that could have great impact on students' on-going adolescent literacy development at this difficult stage in their academic careers.

Similarly, a limitation of this study was that it focused on student experiences at one university—a large, public, competitive state school. While student experiences in

this particular context are valuable, they are still limited in perspective. Thus, the field would also benefit from studies that look at connections between identities and literacies for new college students on a variety of campuses. For example, individualized portraits of students at small private schools, historically Black colleges, or junior colleges would provide a more expansive breadth of knowledge for educators.

With our country's increasingly diversifying population and the incredibly complex needs of students in our public schools, Latino/a urban-schooled students continue to struggle in both secondary and post-secondary contexts. This study, through individual portraits, demonstrated some of the reasons these Latino/a students struggled and conversely, what they felt made them identify as successful students. As such, the field of literacy research would be strengthened by more studies that focus on how to prepare teachers at both the secondary and post-secondary level to meet the needs of these disenfranchised students. I argue for this research, but with an important caveat: I am not suggesting research that oversimplifies student experiences and gives us exact pedagogical fixes. Instead I am advocating for research that highlights the complexity of student experience while assisting teachers and professors in possible ways of negotiating these issues. The field needs it all: portraits of professors, studies of high school teachers and classrooms, work with pre-service teachers, and most importantly, voices of students existing in our current system. A focus on identity (re)constructions connected with literacy development from these multiple perspectives will continue to build on what we have already concluded while simultaneously complicating these very understandings—keeping us from complacency and encouraging us to move our research forward.

This study offers a complex portrait of urban-schooled Latino/as' identity productions and literacy experiences in their early university experiences. It makes student voices, at a particularly complicated time in their academic lives, available to educational researchers. It offers the field of adolescent literacy a new context for identity study, along with complicated, individualized portrayals of Latino/as' struggles and successes at navigating the figured world of the university. At times it highlights what educators do well—the critical pedagogies and detracking initiatives that are currently in place to offer assistance to under-served students in our nation's schools. However, it also demonstrates that we, in the field of education, have not yet arrived at a solution for assisting students in the intense negotiations associated with the powerful structures of our academic institutions. Though this study has ended, I continue to view it as a place to begin.

### **Conclusion: Coming Full Circle**

I introduced this study with the following poem, and as a means of concluding this research journey, I return to Tafolla's (2001) piece here:

#### **marked**

Never write with pencil,  
m'ija.

It is for those  
who would  
erase.

Make your mark proud  
and open,

Brave,

beauty folded into

its imperfection,  
Like a piece of turquoise  
marked.  
Never write  
with pencil,  
m'ija.  
Write with ink  
or mud,  
or berries grown in  
gardens never owned,  
or, sometimes,  
if necessary,  
blood. (p. 93)

Initially, I began this dissertation with this poem because of the intense connection I felt to the author and to the content. I had a history with this piece of text. As a master's student balancing a thesis deadline, an intense bout of pneumonia, and my own 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, a friend of Tafolla's presented me with an autographed copy of her book of poems and a note from the poet herself encouraging me to press on in my work with Latino/a youth, because I was a teacher who helped them "hear the melody of sonnets and taste the 'chispa' of salsa" (personal communication, April 5, 2001). Inspirational then, I found myself gravitating back to the text when I took on this enormous research endeavor. I wanted my mark on the field of education to be open and proud. At times, the dissertation process felt as if it required the letting of my own blood.

However, I chose to revisit the poem at the end of my dissertation because the more time I spent with my former students and the more time I spent engaged with my data—their stories, narratives, conversations, their lives—the more I recognized this poem as a metaphor for their journeys. Each of the participants in this study was

attempting to make a mark on the world, and even when imperfect, there was beauty in that imperfection. Their stories were like that piece of turquoise marked.

From these students, I learned about the intricacies involved in the navigation of the figured world of the university, particularly for those who are Latino/a and urban-schooled. Their willingness to spend time talking about these topics and the humor and grace with which they pursued their own academic goals will forever inspire me in my work. I learned that qualitative research, in spite of its apparent “messiness,” has transformative potential, for the researcher, and for the participants. Perhaps most importantly, I learned studies that explore the relationships between literacies and identities are vital in attempting to understand all of these figurative marks on the lives of these students, and imperative to appreciating the frequency with which student experiences are marked with their own blood.

## **Appendix A: Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Protocol (10/06)**

1. Have you had difficulties in school so far?
2. What's been a "breeze" for you? What's easy at school?
3. Describe differences between life as a high school student and academic life as a college student.
4. How do you view yourself—when thinking about yourself as a college student?
5. If you were to describe yourself to an outsider, how would you do that? What would you say to make sure they have a complete view of you as a transitioning student?
6. Have you needed help with things so far? If so, where did you go for help? If not, where would you go for help? How was your help received? How do you know your help would be received by the person/place you would go to?
7. Who do you spend time with? Why?
8. How do you structure your time/days?
9. How do you communicate with people both here at home and at school? Has your communication changed? (Think it terms of cell phones, computers, etc.)
10. What are your favorite classes now? Why?
11. Are there any classes you don't like? Any classes that are hard? Explain.
12. How much reading/writing are you doing in your classes right now?
13. Do you feel equipped to deal with the reading/writing load you have?
14. Is most of your reading/writing taking place in English classes or content area classes?
15. What are your teacher expectations for reading/writing?
16. Are you able to meet these expectations without problem?
17. Have you gotten any assignments back yet? What were your teacher comments like?
18. Have you had to ask teachers for help? How'd that go?
19. How's the workload? Overwhelming? Doable? Etc?
20. Do you notice any growth in your reading/writing abilities yet? Are the assignments different from high school? Similar?
21. What do you think about your instructors? How have your interactions been with them so far? Do you speak up in class? Talk to them outside of class?



## **Appendix B: Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Protocol (5/07)**

1. How did your grades/classes wind up?
2. How would you describe your semester?
3. What changes will you make before next semester? How? Why?
4. What didn't you know before you started college?
5. How did you learn this?
6. What couldn't you do before you started college? Now can you?
7. How did you learn this?
8. How have your impressions of SU changed since you have been here? What were they like before you were a student on the campus?
9. How have you negotiated the apparent differences between you and your peers?
10. How much do these differences matter?
11. What differences are most obvious?
12. Have your relationships with one another helped you in college? Hindered? Why?
13. Which relationships have come to matter most to you in college? Why?
14. After one year in college, who have you become?
15. Who will you be after the end of next year?
16. By the time you graduate, how will others define or describe you?
17. What advice would you give seniors coming to SU next fall?
18. What would you tell high school teachers and SU professors in order to help them assist urban-schooled Latino/a students in college?
19. You said previously that being a SU student was not yet an identity for you, but a role. Has that changed? How? Why?
20. Show examples of descriptions. Get them to write descriptions of self and one another. Take up cameras. Label them.

## **Appendix C: Semi-Structured Individual Interview Protocol (Monique)**

*This individual interview protocol is meant to provide the means for the most organic conversation possible with each individual student. I consider these individual interviews to be guided conversations. I will have particular questions outlined, but intend to listen to responses as closely and as carefully as possible and allow those responses to dictate follow-up questions.*

### **Family**

*I will begin by asking general questions about her family, allowing her to talk broadly about the ways she views her family life and the ways she might be positioned by her family..*

- Tell me about your family. Describe them in terms of personality, background, culture, etc.
- How do you view your own role or position in your family? How do you think others in your family view you?
- Tell me about a time when you have noticed yourself in opposition to your family.
- Tell me about a time when you have experienced a deep connection to your family.

*There are individual questions I will ask for each student, depending on who I am talking to. For example, Monique told me about seeing her (homeless) father on campus at the start of the school year.*

- Can you recount the story of seeing your father again after all these years? How have you dealt with his absence and subsequent return to your life?

\*\*\*\*\*

- Besides members of your family, who are the other influential figures in your life?
- Talk about the impact of other influential figures on your life.

### **Family and Educational History**

*Now that I have asked her about family more generally, I will segue to family and connections to education.*

- How does your family feel about education?
- How do you know this?

*If participant does not speak directly about parents, I will then ask the question specifically in regards to parents.*

- How much of your view on education comes directly from family?
- Can you tell me about ways your family has influenced your opinions of education? (your personal pursuit of education)

- Tell me about a time when your views on education have conflicted with a family member's.

### **Personal Educational Narrative**

*This is where I will allow for space to construct an individual educational narrative. Hopefully the broad questions will allow for each participant to express a unique narrative.*

- Talk generally about your school experiences prior to college. Tell me about your educational history/path.
- Tell me about a time in your educational history where you experienced conflict. How did you handle it?
- Now focusing specifically on high school, talk about:
  - Major influences
  - Family relationships
  - Teachers/Subjects
  - Dramatic or life-changing events
  - Reagan High School
- How would you describe your Reagan High School experience to someone who had never heard of the school?
- Tell me about a time in your high school education when a choice you made was an important one.

### **Education and Identities**

*This is where I intend to give students a time to discuss how they have come to be the students they are/were.*

- When did you first start to view yourself as a good student?
- How did you come to recognize yourself as a good student?
- How did your AVID/AP experience contribute to your understandings of yourself as a student?
- How do your friends and companions view education/school?
- What has most influenced your opinions and views on education?
- What has most impacted your educational history? How?
- What kind of student are you now?
- How do others view you?

### **Reflection on First Year of College**

*Now that I have foregrounded their backgrounds by having them focus on family and educational history, I want to come full circle, back to their current educational experiences at UT.*

- What changes have you noticed in your self as you came from Reagan to UT?
- How would you describe yourself to someone if you really wanted that person to understand who you are at this point in your life?
- What has happened this school year that has made you this person?

- Tell me about a time at UT when you have experienced conflict between parts of yourself.
- Tell me about a time when you noticed the ways people viewed you (e.g. good student) were different from your high school experience.
- Have you ever been reluctant to speak about where you came from? Why? Why not?
- How do you expect others to view your past?
- Tell me about a time when your “Reagan self” has conflicted with your “UT self.”

**Ask for:**

- Syllabi from classes
- Written correspondence from teachers
- Description of self
- Description of other member of group
- Photos to develop
- Summer schedule (classes, vacations, etc.)

**Remind her:**

- Next time we will go through photographs
- Following interview will be for member-checking

## **Appendix D: Excerpt from Research Journal (9/15/06)**

I made plans, through email, to meet Alexandra for lunch. When I met her on campus at the Student Union, she was with Manuel and I was happy to see him too! I thought my study might focus just on girls, but Manuel offers a nice insight to it all... and he hangs out with all of the girls! They asked if I wanted to go to C--, because that's where the others were hanging out. (Of course I did!) I told them as much and told them how much I miss seeing all of them.

At C--, we met up with Monique and Idalia. I know both girls well, but they were never AVID students. So, I wondered what that would do to my study—if they both became prominent parts—but then I figured I shouldn't look at anything as a complication, just more data! We had a great time talking....

I'm interested in a few things after talking with them. First of all, I'm interested in this little crew they have created for themselves. They came out of high school together, applied to school together, and they hang out almost daily. They told me they need it to make it. They meet every Friday and bowl and hang out. They told me all I have to do is call one of them and they all come running! One of the AVID kids, Aurelio, was discussed. They said he works crazy hours and he's busy making new friends, so he's kind of left the little group behind. I'm interested in this network they've created, almost as a survival strategy at SU. They were all talking about being so happy in college and really loving SU. I want to deepen these conversations to see how prepared they feel... how well the curriculum and strategies from high school prepared them for what they face. This also brought up the ideas of small focus groups and interviewing them together. I hadn't really considered it, but now I am.

## Appendix E: Sample Analytic Memo (8/24/07)

1. neighborhood/home and school disconnect
  - There is a lot of talk about “when they return” to the neighborhood that deals with how others perceive them and how they want to be perceived.
  - There’s an interesting juxtaposition of people being very impressed by the fact these students attend SU, but at the same time, not understanding the WHY of it all or being unaware of the difficulties and challenges these students are facing on a daily basis. This was mentioned with both friends and family.
  - These students maintain a very close connection to home—three of them live at home and two of them return home on a weekly basis. It can be particularly difficult to explain things to family and to keep up with family responsibilities in addition to being a full-time college student.
2. self-identification v. others’ identification
  - I think this can connect to the previous categories. There was some talk about them not being any smarter than others just because they attend SU—understanding that students at junior college are smart too.
  - There is the issue of counselors, professors and classmates having opinions of them because of their history at Roland. Manuel’s encounter with his counselor stands out as a pretty explicit example of this.
  - The issue that also comes up is being Mexican v. Mexican-American; wanting to be more American, but always seen as Mexican. They seem to want to embrace being Mexican at times, but at times rage against it.
  - Then there are issues of being considered White... particularly for Monique and Aurelio.
  - Alexandra has to deal with her biraciality and make choices about who she identifies the most with. There are limits to how much she can identify with the others. She doesn’t speak Spanish and sometimes they are “too Mexican” for her.
3. positionings in high school, because of high school, at SU
  - This, more than likely should be combined with the identification section. The counselor issues and the ways in which they view Roland and their own histories are important here.
  - Their positionings in Roland are also important. They reference AP and AVID and how it works when people already view you as smart and college bound. It makes a difference in school success.
  - They often talk about wanting to be a Roland kid who “makes it” not one who doesn’t.
4. “typical” college student struggles v. “atypical” struggles for these students
  - I’m not sure how I want to talk about this. I need to call it something other than typical and atypical. Some of their struggles are what I remember from my own college days—figuring out professors, learning to study, issues of

time management. These are all involved in learning the literacies of college. Talking, reading, writing, knowing and ways of being... all of these are things that students must learn to deal with when they enter college. But, for these students, there is a really large disconnect and very little familial history at the university. There are not many past examples to draw on.

- At the same time, some of their struggles are very unique. They must deal with family pressures, being urban schooled, etc. These are very unique to this particular group of kids and they talk openly about this.
5. race, class, diversity issues
- Talking White comes up a lot in conversation. Thinking that White kids are smarter and received a better high school education also comes up. Westforest High School is mentioned continuously as the counter-example to RHS.
  - Class issues also surface. In the beginning, students are very aware of differences, but try to cling to similarities... We're all college students and we are all poor, even while listening to stories of traveling abroad and experiences they do not share.
  - They talk frequently about a lack of exposure at RHS. They knew African Americans and they knew Latinos. At SU, there is much more of a variety, more people to get used to, even though they don't view the campus itself as diverse. In fact, they cite in accurate marketing techniques that really talked about the diversity at SU. They are quick to mention that in spite of there being more diversity, there is very little integration. People stick to their own.
  - Idalia and Aurelio try to integrate in spite of this. They are really drawn to folks who are not like them.
  - Manuel, Alexandra and Monique all feel drawn to Latinos, to what they know, to strengthening that bond... sometimes you just need someone who'll say "Que onda!"

Do I want to talk about each of them individually, based on their life history interviews? Or will those things fall into these categories? I want to talk about all of their unique family circumstances.

Manuel: Arrived illegally, waiting on papers, constantly babysitting

Alexandra: Living with adults, military family, mom on dialysis

Monique: Back and forth to Mexico, father's White family, encounter with her father

Aurelio: Father dead, example to his family, very different from the rest of them

Idalia: Attempt to distance herself from family, while being close to them; ashamed of brother

Where to insert their descriptions of one another?

My descriptions:

Aurelio: The Role Model

Idalia: The Fierce Competitor

Manuel: The (Proud) Schoolboy  
Alexandra: The Military Kid  
Monique: The White Mexicana

Part of the literacies of the figured world of the university can be figured out and students can still struggle. Why? (e.g. Reading, writing, study skills, resources and time management)

There is an emergent disconnect with parents/families/friends. What happens to a student with this disconnect is never really negotiated? e.g. Manuel and Alex?

They are learning to live in the epistemological space of school, while physically living in the epistemological spaces of home and neighborhood.

I probably need to make clear that it's not a matter of families not valuing education... don't want to be slamming on the families.

Could a possible emerging identity be the one of a college student who struggles?

What identity (re)constructions do students identify as they negotiate multiple early college literacy experiences?

- changing identities as students
- struggle to see themselves as students; more of a “role” they are playing
- a few of them leave this first year wondering how it will work out for them, while in the beginning, they just knew it would (This connects to that acquisition of academic literacies, because they start to get those things down, but stop short of the tools it needs to be completely successful.)
- other people constructing or refusing to reconstruct their identities based on their new positions or place at the university

--How do students (re)construct their secondary school experiences and identities based on their early college lives? OR—What are the implications of how they constructed their high school identities?

- look favorably on school experiences but have advice for teachers
- struggle with the disconnect b/w college professors and students; used to being close to teachers
- recognize that they were positioned to succeed, are in college because of how those in high school viewed them and in turn, how they learned to view themselves
- they are allowed to be critical of high school experience, but don't feel it's others' place to be a critic

--How are these identity constructions related to the acquisition of academic literacies? (Do I want to leave this like this or change it to literacies?)

- this is fluid and changes as year progresses
- look to other students, but perceptions change



- competition seems to exist (hypothetically or figuratively) for these students
- How do connections between literacies and identities assist in understanding students' early college experiences?
- all that they encounter affects their understandings of themselves
  - determines their desire to return
  - affects their familial and neighborhood connections
  - their experiences are unique and different from the “average” college student
- (See how 5 preliminary categories fit under the research questions.)  
(Go to Fairclough's levels and make sure I analyze those as well.)

Literacies, both academic and all the ways of knowing and being and participating in the university, are not easy to acquire or navigate, even when students have been exposed to a college prep program and have been given resources at the university to help in their adjustment. This navigation is tricky; students often lack exposure and start “behind.”

### **3 domains of analysis (Fairclough):**

1. the local (particular text; e.g. newspaper, political speech, school board meeting)  
syllabi  
(route to university?)
2. the institutional (societal institutions that can both enable and constrain the local;  
e.g. political affiliations organizations or companies)  
language professors use in syllabi  
the requirement of a syllabus  
all big processes, grade reports, etc.
3. the societal (all policies and metanarratives that both shape and are shaped by local  
and institutional domains)

Not separate—exist in conversation with one another

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## **Vita**

Holly Hungerford-Kresser was born Holly Rachele Hungerford in Lake Charles, Louisiana, on July 11, 1975 to John Glen Hungerford and Cheryl Canfield Hungerford. After completing her elementary and secondary education in Fort Worth, Texas, she attended Baylor University in Waco, Texas. She received her Bachelor of Science Degree in English and Social Studies Education in 1997. For the next two years, she taught high school Language Arts and Social Studies at Asunciòn Christian Academy in Asunciòn, Paraguay. After returning to the United States, she enrolled in the Master's program in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Texas at Austin. In addition, she continued her teaching career in Austin Independent School District at both Burnet Middle School and Reagan High School. She received her Master of Arts degree in 2000. As a doctoral student, she worked as a teaching assistant and assistant instructor at The University of Texas at Austin, and as an adjunct instructor at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas.

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